

Gertrude Stein's Lively Habits

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As the writer of *Three Lives*, Gertrude Stein tends to be excited by the material other novelists discard. Avoiding craftsmanlike values as well as stylishness, she goes about fashioning and then repeating crude, makeshift descriptions of people and their characters. When she has them talk, they produce an incessant and recurring palaver that most of us make our peace with in others but do not necessarily celebrate. Wyndham Lewis, no fan of Stein's, said of her work (he had read *Three Lives*), "Cut it at any point, it is the same thing; the same heavy, sticky, opaque mass all through. . . . It is mournful and monstrous, composed of dead and inanimate material. It is all fat without nerve" (59). Stein for her part simply does not accept the charge that the habits, the temperaments, the forms of decency that incline people toward their particular brand of unthinking sociability are dead. At her most confident, she seems impervious to such invective. For her, the inner movement of repetition is the very principle of liveliness: "And if this vitality [of movement within repetition] is lively enough is there in that clarity any confusion is there in that clarity any repetition?" ("Lectures in America" 292). Habit as Stein understands it is not a fixed, rigid, and permanent part of the person, and it never repeats in the same way twice. It certainly defines us, as much as anything does. But habits aren't an indication of a set character that lies beneath our behaviors. We don't have a preordained seed of personality that makes us consistent from the start. We are regular beings simply because we accumulate manners and behaviors, and because that accumulation has a history that allows us at once to recognize ourselves and to depart from ourselves.

Habits, in Stein's conception, aren't immune to change. And yet her adherence to them—her celebration of "simple firm ordinary middle class traditions . . . in a repeating, common, decent enough kind of living"

(*Making of Americans* 34)—is calculated to affront avant-garde theories of art that promote shock as a way of jolting people from staid, conventional patterns of perception and response.¹ Stein's refusal to admit repetition's deadening qualities has tended to addle critics who see habit's positive roles—its capacity to transmit and bind elements of experience and to limber up the higher faculties—invariably mixed up with inert and conservative social functions.² Liesl Olson and Lisi Schoenbach, for instance, follow Walter Benjamin in defining habit not as a dynamic and productive response but as a regularizing one. For Benjamin, habit offers a buffer against the “shock experience [that] has become the norm” (162) of modern life and threatens to obliterate psychic stability.

Stein, for her part, accords to habit a more active range of functions. In order to understand Steinian habit as a character-shaping force capable of emotional variety, one needs to turn to an intellectual lineage that cast a wide shadow over Stein's early life. Charles Darwin is perhaps the great arbiter standing behind her conception of habit. She picks up on an undercurrent of his argument—that repetition is a useful, indeed a necessary, part of human sociality—and explores its reach and consequence. Like him, she concentrates attention on microevents that reveal emergent changes from an earlier precedent. But as we shall see, because of her own sensitivity to questions of habit—and as a result of the vitalist optic she had developed under the influence of William James, her mentor at Harvard—she picks up on a side of Darwin that rarely receives attention: his claim that repetitions are not always arbitrary but sometimes involve choice. Stein learned from Darwin that habits arise out of and modify biological systems. Importantly, his late treatise *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* is less concerned with randomly inherited physiological variations than with behaviors at the vanishing point between psychology and biology. We are accustomed to treating the majority of human choices, when they are purposeful and novel, under the rubric of culture, whence all of our intellectual strivings are focused and where we generally locate the creative potential of human lives, which are otherwise restricted by genes and environment. We reserve biology for the more deterministic undercurrent of life. But Darwin's and Stein's fascination with the dynamic relation between repetitive processes and innovation rubs out any hard-and-fast dividing line between nature and culture. Not only does this mean that they understand culture to have biological determinants, as evolutionary psychologists have been telling us for the

last several decades. They also wish to import some of the characteristics of culture into the biological realm.

This essay will read biological discourses alongside literary and philosophical ones in order to stress the nonexclusivity of scientific models and to use humanistic frameworks to help recontextualize rather than simply apply scientific thought—and thus conceive biological concepts in a new way, as it were, in a non-native environment. Through Stein I aim to draw attention to strands of Darwin's thinking that do not feature prominently either in contemporary biological discourses or in the sociopolitical ones that initially succeeded in claiming his legacy. Indeed, her work brings us back to a moment when science was renegotiating its relations to culture and to cultural and humanistic endeavor, notoriously following in the wake of Darwin's own turbulent ideas. I will highlight in her work what appears to be a startling continuum between biology and culture that contests both concepts of biological essentialism and social constructivism. In this way I hope to carry on the task commenced by Steven Meyer of "examining the complex interweavings of writing and science in [Stein's] compositional practices" (*Irresistible Dictation* xvi).

For Stein, habit permits novel forms of attention to happen. Reiterations turn potential experiences—what we might call virtual impressions and tacit connections—into actual ones. In other words, recursive action consolidates possible behavioral responses, galvanizing or motivating them in a particular direction. This language of virtuality comes from Bergson, who, like James, wished to account for life processes through nondeterministic principles and to explain psychological phenomena by considering how thresholds of potentiality repercuss on behavior. I suggest that their vitalist collaboration might be a useful intellectual basis from which to understand her work and her relation to Darwinism. The vitalist camp shared in common an emphasis on the liveliness, malleability, and ever-changing nature of biological process. James and Bergson also used Darwinian theory as a point of entry into their own conceptual projects.³

Stein, like Darwin, is obsessed with patterns perpetuated across populations, which lay bare types of behaviors and of people, and the two start from the presumption that tendencies to similarity always coincide with processes of digressive variation. Innovation occurs as a result of small departures from previously assumed behaviors that build up over time and are the product, at least in part, of decisions carried out. Like him, she doesn't presume that type life is deterministic, even if it is broadly

normative. Despite her provocative and sometimes dubious handling of racial stereotypes, she shows no interest in treating biology as a regulative ceiling that restricts people's fundamental capacity to change.⁴ Indeed, it is fair to say that she mounts a challenge to some of the racist orthodoxies of her time.

I will establish in some detail how Stein put ideas inspired by Darwin into operation in her early fiction, specifically in "Melanctha," the longest and most complicated story in *Three Lives*. There she shows that long-standing habits sometimes reorder themselves when a default reaction is inadequate. By bringing to bear vitalist models of habit, which presuppose change within continuity, Stein presents a new modernist definition of character. She lays the ground for an avant-garde that sees no need to direct hostility at habituated existence. While critics deem her formal experiments in repetition to run at the expense of psychological development and even of characterization as such, Stein points attention to unpredictable deviations in response that are not necessarily the result of a conscious, deliberative subject.⁵ She aims in her early work to recast what one means by an individual by reconstructing the ensemble of forces that define it.

One way that Darwin understands animal expressions is as the product of "serviceable habits," ways in which members of a given species react to different kinds of situations. For instance, dogs stiffen, bare their teeth, and raise their head, hairs bristling, when they're in an attack mode or confronting an enemy, but sink curvaceously and flexuously when they're in a humble and affectionate frame of mind. Expressions are initiatory behaviors; they prepare an animal's reaction to a stimulus by allowing it to strike an attitude correlated to a specific bodily posture. Under Darwin's magnified attention, these responses, emotional in nature, reveal the interface between conscious or intentional activity and unconscious or innate nervous response. Some of the behaviors develop in offspring at an early age and are the result of imitative or "sympathetic" instincts. These mannerisms, at first learned, then performed "independently of the conscious will" (*Expression* 352), reveal an organism that enters into structured relationships by aligning itself with other bodies and executing a chain of interconnected responses. Expressions organize the body's sympathetic relation to other bodies.

Stein is aware that these patterns, brought about by repetition, are not inevitable or uniform. Sometimes two or more different tendencies enter

into conflict, one pattern of expression intersecting or interfering with another, causing sequences of repetition to unravel or veer in a new direction. Stein dramatizes a struggle not only between people but between specific behaviors, habits, and preferences, some of which correlate with vying racial, sexual, and class interests. The conflicts she depicts are subject concurrently to social and biological definition.⁶ Racial groupings and class pecking orders divide the human species not just into social identities but into biologically trackable populations, though neither as a social nor a biological matter is one set of interests intrinsically superior to or more important than another. By refusing to validate any set of interests in absolute terms, Stein implies that nature is to this degree open-ended, having different levels at which it works or organizes itself. Broadly we might say that the interests of individual members of a group may compete with species interests or the priorities of the social group to which they belong, whether as regards biological perpetuation of the gene or any other indirect biological advantage.

In "Melanctha" Stein stages an encounter between two lovers with different attitudes toward respectability. She explores their conflictual sympathies and patterns of response, which constitute the edifice of their relationship and in the course of time lead to its undoing. They square off and appease each other; they disengage their own wills to various degrees. But their passions, wound around their habits and inseparable from them, allow them no easy way of satisfying qualms they have about each other.⁷ Melanctha is the daughter of a black man and a mixed-race mother, and Jeff Campbell, the narrator tells us, is "a serious, earnest, good young joyous doctor" (*Three Lives* 77), the issue of a "sweet, little, pale brown, gentle" mother and an intelligent, brown-skinned father. For some critics, Stein's biological interests as they manifest in "Melanctha" raise a troubling hint of investment in impregnable personality, especially for characters with racially prescribed traits. Daylanne English suggests that they give evidence of her attraction to eugenics; like a crowd of other critics, she treats Melanctha as a stock tragic figure in *Three Lives*, a "mulatta" whose conflictual identifications, rooted in biology, are the cause of her demise (105). In the last section of this essay, I will suggest how Stein's comic impulses create a kind of narrative interference that undercuts the suggestion of tragic determinism underlying Melanctha's character. For Stein, life itself is surprising, and biology is simply not destiny. Plainly, as one of three "lives," the narrative raises the question of how life itself enters into nar-

rative structures and departs from them—or perhaps how narrative may be rehabilitated as a set of open-ended tendencies and variable units of organization rather than a predictable diagram. As Brian Massumi would put it, rather than putting “permutations on an overarching definitional framework” and thus pinpointing “a zero-point of stasis” (3), one needs to pay attention to the “field of emergence” (9) that defines life.⁸

Jeff Campbell continually asserts the need to be “living good and being regular” (*Three Lives* 87), dispatching these habitual clackings as accusations against Melanctha’s wandering tendencies, her “subtle movements and denials and vague distrusts” (62). His intensities are of a kind that build up slowly, and so, as he says, “I really certainly don’t ever like to get excited,” adding that “that kind of loving hard [“real, strong, hot”] does seem always to mean just getting all the time excited” (86). This slow-to-be-seduced lover continually holds forth on the value of a stable middle-class existence. He rejoices in his habits. However, it cannot be said of Melanctha that she is any less a creature of habit, though in some ways her sensibility contrasts with his: “she didn’t feel the same as he did about being good and regular in life, and not having excitements all the time” (81). She simply runs at a different speed and has different ways of processing her feelings. Melanctha has a tendency to wander and a sensibility geared to swiftness and immediacy. And yet for both, habits are proclivities and tendencies that help conduct them through an evolving relationship. For Stein, habits are never dispensable as a whole, but simply reveal themselves in different ways of disposing characters to change.

Stein follows Aristotle in granting the development and exercise of habit a character-defining function, but she refuses to raise constancy to a moral virtue.⁹ She insists on redefining morality by uncoupling it from a system of immemorial standards and showing how things ranked as good are subject to evolutionary alteration. She takes advantage of word properties that fail to secure the eternity they seem to promise. Jeff Campbell speaks of being “awful *good* and sorry” about giving Melanctha “so much trouble” with his preoccupations, with his “right way of thinking” (112; my italics). A “good” is variously an enduring, stable value and an emphatic expression, one that ever so slightly alters a fact.¹⁰ Her penchant for emphatic words like “good,” “certain / certainly,” and “real / really” focus on ritualized habits of speech, tics of a sort, whose function is not to designate a category of lasting distinction but to register changes of emphasis. Her language builds on ideals that change as the situation changes in the course of the story.

For Stein, repetitions of thought and behavior have a capacity to disclose or reveal new shades of feeling and new thought processes along with them. To tell the story of the habitual patterns she focuses on is exceptionally difficult. They follow no sequential course, and while they direct characters' responses to each other, they do so by plastic mechanisms that can't really be specified, only beheld in the slight pivots that allow people to move from one state to another. As Jeff becomes estranged from Melanctha, he tells her how much he has learned from her about loving (the act, not the state): "like really having everything together, new things, little pieces all different. . . . You see, Melanctha, it's certainly like that *you make me been seeing*" (112; my emphasis). Though he overcomes past resistance to this "one good big feeling," he continues to suffer a mistrust of her that will not go away. The odd grammar of the sentence embeds a slight grammatical irregularity into his statement (processing language, incidentally, also entails habits vital to listening and reading, which Stein relies on to pick up deviations). Jeff has been seeing something all the while, though only at this moment does his train of ideas coalesce. He doesn't say that Melanctha makes him see something now, nor that he has been seeing something from inception. To put his assertion another way, she makes him see what he has been seeing, or she makes him into someone who has been seeing something about his relationship. Repetition allows Jeff new angles on what he knows. The perception consolidates a habit-directed process and therefore changes it. But one may also say that habit enables this critical perception to happen in the first place. Only by repeating himself—hearing himself talk the same old talk—is he in a position to feel the changes in his relationship, the alterations of mood and understanding. Events don't definitively happen till they occur multiple times.

It is true that very few novelists would find any drama in pure habit, but that is because they tend to privilege sequences in which people depart from their routines of conduct. Stein thought that conventional narrative cannot capture the inner functioning of an event because it simply reports changes—how A wakes up to a new idea, or B falls into despair, or C hastens to do some drastic action. "Narrative," she contends,

concerns itself with what is happening all the time, history concerns itself with what happens from time to time. And that is perhaps what is the matter with history and that is what is perhaps the matter with narrative. (*Narration* 30)

The problem isn't that historical accounts are more exclusionary in focus than other narratives, but rather that they fall back on principles shared with all conventional narratives. By tracing "what is happening," narratives assume a trajectory of events by plotting out the components on an abstract grid line. Narrative, at least in its predictable guises, doesn't present the real time of happenings that have duration and therefore doesn't capture the transition that carries one thing into another. Like history, it is too concerned with logical sequences and ignores how actions emerge from a modification in a series of repetitive actions. While Stein thinks that narrative is in a manner inescapable, she insists on beginning again and in that way resisting teleological structures.¹¹ For Stein, consciousness doesn't spontaneously change. Our lives are not sequential but serial.

Stein's descriptions of people do not aim at essences. Habituation doesn't presume to solidify or perfect character. Nor does the gravitational direction of the repertoire of behaviors say something about the substantive prearrangement of the underlying personality. Her depictions attempt to diagram something like the syntax of a person, the odd contradictions, transitions, and repetitions that make variation possible, alongside a durable stylistic signature compatible with it. She derives from Darwin the idea that the changes living beings manifest individually or even as a species do not tend toward a specific ideal or outcome. As she recounts in *Everybody's Autobiography*, when she began as a writer, "evolution was still exciting very exciting" (249). Darwin's fundamental claim is that living creatures are adaptable. His ontology prizes what we might call plasticity in the face of changing circumstances.¹² William James clarifies what is at stake in the concept. He defines plasticity in *The Principles of Psychology* as "a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once" (1: 105). He insists from the start that a plastic trait involves change and adaptation to change, not a repetition in its pure form. Plasticity is the aspect of a thing that confers endurance. It positions anything—a trait, a body, a character, a person—between the twin dangers of unadaptability (an extreme rigidity that leaves it unfit for new circumstances) and self-dissolution (excessively rapid change). Stein, like James and Darwin, insists on a potentially endless number of incremental changes that take place within the individual as well as across populations.

Darwin's self-organizing habits

As a sophisticated reader of Darwin, Stein picks up on elements of his work that biologists tend to underrate and that expand biological definition to include more than just patterns of inheritance that reproduce fixed traits.¹³ While in many quarters Darwin is celebrated as an oracle who anticipated key insights of modern genetics, a number of his treatises take account of innovations in behavior that develop through voluntary action.¹⁴ His *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* zeroes in on physical reactions that have a somatic component but are not deterministic—and are influenced, Darwin thinks, by complex, intersecting social and psychological urgings. He examines phenomena such as blushes, trembles, and pupil dilations, which are hard to classify either as scripted, biological reactions or as unscripted, cultural ones. He recounts a story told to him of a worthy Victorian lady who, like the rest of her family, suffered from a marked propensity to blushing. At one point, while being examined by a doctor, her blush spread down her neck and onto her chest as she shed pieces of clothing. The blush followed the path of the doctor's gaze. Such sympathetic nervous events and others like them are triggered by psychological reactions, and the physiological structures of the body show themselves to be synchronized with and accountable to psychological and cultural cues, in this case the response or anticipated response of another person. The physical reactions, rarely under people's direct control, are nevertheless at the interface of biology and psychology, and they disrupt normal disciplinary alignments.

Darwin's ontology had important implications for different fields, and his way of crossing supposedly distinct spheres of organization fascinated Stein. In a letter to Robert Haas, she implies that she kept up interest in Darwin through a change of discipline:

I was at Radcliffe of course and I began specializing in science. I was awfully interested in biology but gradually it turned into philosophy and psychology. I do still think that Darwin is the great man of the period that formed my youth, and I often meditate about his expression of emotions in man and animals, aside from William James, Münsterberg and Santayana I did not work with anybody in particular. (qtd. in Bush 270)

The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, to which she alludes,

argues, among other things, that “some actions, which were at first performed consciously, have become through habit and association converted into reflex actions, and are now so firmly fixed and inherited, that they are performed even when not of the least use” (45). Expressions are behaviors that are reproduced over time and engrained on the nervous system. As Clive Bush suggests, “Darwin had claimed for behaviour the same kind of evolutionary pattern as he had claimed for physical characteristics” (270). It turns out that the distinction between expressive behavior and physical characteristics is not always easy to preserve in the treatise. The emotional reactions that interest Darwin have their impetus in hardwired response patterns. The book is thought to contradict his own putative refutation of Lamarck’s theory of acquired characteristics, since its thesis is that expressive actions, once subject to some degree of voluntary control and developed to cope with distinct situations, can be inherited.¹⁵ Emotional responses perceived as irrational are really holdovers—distinct survivals—of coping mechanisms that long outlast their causes. The idea has Lamarckian resonance, since it presupposes that organisms can incorporate changes over time by means of once-deliberate forms of striving.

Elizabeth Wilson, who sets out to rescue Darwin’s biological account from genetic reductionism, insists that his tenacious resistance to cordoning off cultural from biological spheres may not simply be the result of his ignorance of Mendelian genetics. According to her, Darwin insists on “reciprocally configured systems” and a “wide range of mechanisms of inheritance, transmission, and transformation” (69).¹⁶ She refers to Edwin Clarke and L. S. Jacyna, who point out that the term *sympathetic* as pertaining to a nervous system dates back to Galen and refers to forms of “rapport thought to exist between parts of the body, especially the organs, that were not anatomically connected” (Clarke and Jacyna 102). Originally, *sympathetic nervous response* alluded to unexpected lines of causation among distinct organs and among systems that appeared to have strange affinity. Wilson argues that even once the structure of the nervous system was discovered, its actions could not be entirely isolated. She shows how the neurophysiology of the nervous system, which is hardwired and involuntary, has surprising alliances with “psychological proclivities, preferences, and habits, and beyond that . . . other bodies and systems of inheritance and transmission” (74). These sympathetic responses are often unpredictable, though one may detect distinct organization in them once they manifest. She attempts to recuperate for modern biology the impli-

cations of an older notion of inventive nervous action. Intricate systems do not act on each other in defined and highly circumscribed ways but through unexpected coordinations or "sympathetic" reactions.

What evidently interested Stein in Darwin's account was his way of coupling discrepant assertions: repetitive emotional responses have a heritable biological signature, but one that is also capable of variation. Expressions have a supple, "nervy" character. Habits are not insentient, as Wyndham Lewis would have it. Stein's prose style tracks these habits, which react in small ways to the situation around them and fan out in a constant pattern of variation. The variations Darwin has in mind are not just the arbitrary products of genetic mutation. Neither should they be seen as salutary effects of cultural intervention understood as opposed to nature. For one of the most fundamental and far-reaching consequences of Darwin's view, subsequently distorted by discourses of Social Darwinism, is that cultural systems should be conceptualized in a manner continuous with nature.¹⁷ "Nurture" is not simply a disruptive—or, as it was often thought in the period, a degenerative—force that acts on natural processes.¹⁸ Variations arise, if not quite from willed behavior, then from a singular "liveliness" in the individual organism. This inventive principle emerges at the point where numerous systems intersect, some automatic and others voluntary, some innate and others situational and alterable. In this sense Darwinian thought is much closer to Bergsonian vitalism than is often acknowledged, even arguably by Bergson himself.¹⁹ While the vital impetus or *élan vital* that Bergson posited to account for the evolutionary adaptations of living things often strike modern biologists as a fanciful metaphysical shortcut, an effort to describe a spontaneous and unmotivated adaptation, his account of evolution as the product of tensions between overlapping systems, each of which has a tendency to self-organization, fits well with at least some of Darwin's ideas.²⁰

For Darwin, nervous reflexes—habits acquired and no longer subject to will—are themselves capable of adaptive, one might even say creative, responses. Darwin's famous example is of a decapitated frog, which despite having lost cerebral control of its body is still able to wipe away an irritant such as a drop of acid on its thigh with its foot. Astonishingly, if the frog's foot is then amputated, the creature continues to make an effort to complete the act, and after trying unavailingly for a short time, it finally uses the other foot to liberate itself of the irritant. Reflex reactions are, as Darwin was well aware, never simple; undirected by cerebral mechanism and

in the absence of consciousness or intentionality, the frog can still respond to stimuli and modify a sequence of movement. Darwin consistently seeks out neurophysiological events that do not separate discriminating action from biological mechanism. Depicting specific modifications in a train of repetitive responses, he may be said to erode the distinction between an aware, responsive organism and one passively reacting to its situation. Unconscious of what it is doing, the frog can still set in motion a modified sequence of reactions. Nature is dynamically self-directed.

An experimental episode

Before Stein wrote a word of *Three Lives*, she spent a number of her undergraduate years at Radcliffe conducting experimental research in Harvard's psychology laboratory. William James and Hugo Münsterberg, a young colleague of James's and her supervisor, were important intellectual influences, but they were not the only presiding spirits.²¹ The psychological models of habit to which Stein resorted bear special resemblance to Darwin's. Both see habit as a creative impetus toward self-organization, one that widens to include synchronies between anatomical organs and even other organisms or people. Both also consider the crossover between automatic and voluntary movement, behaviors that are partly innate and partly situation-specific.

Drawn to study the intricate role played by impulse in fashioning people's behavior, Stein created two experimental studies to gauge people's reactions by their automatic or unthinking responses to motor suggestion. The published results tend to discount any hypothesis that relies on a "secondary personality" to explain unconscious volition, targeting implicitly the French school of Pierre Janet and Jean-Martin Charcot, which associates strains of automatism with hysteria and psychological dissociation. Instead of seeing automatism as pathological, they tend to regard it as a normal element of reflexive or involuntary response. Stein and her colleague Leon M. Solomons set out, in however limited a fashion, to disprove that there is an unconscious agency determining behavior behind the scenes, an agency that requires separate explanation such as we might now find in psychoanalysis.²²

The pair employed a planchette of a type used in Ouija boards, which could be guided by the investigator. Diverting their subject's attention either by reading or conversing with him or her, they looked at his or her

arms' tendency to movement. In "Normal Motor Automatism" (1896), they relied on each other as experimental subjects, while in Stein's solo study, "Cultivated Motor Automatism" (1898), students from Radcliffe and Harvard were recruited. These students, subject to different levels of fatigue, could be made to learn and maintain certain kinds of movements while in a distracted state. The goal in each case was to devise ways of preventing them from being "conscious" of their activities, and specifically of their motor impulse. The more distracted the students were, the greater their tendency to keep "writing."

In her subject group, Stein carefully isolated their bodies' likely predispositions to movement, uncovering, as Clive Bush argues, a complicated relation between "automatic" writing and "associative" (279) behavior. The mind absenting itself leaves a hand which still picks up movement from surrounding influences and learns to repeat it. The hand, once started, moves on its own and takes on a particular rhythm. The pen it holds has a decided tendency to curve in a certain way and to a particular shape: "the figure eight, a long curve, or an m-figure" (Stein, "Cultivated Motor Automatism" 296). And if the hand fluctuates between movements more natural to it and newly acquired tendencies, then the body can be seen to enact tensions, alternating movements that suggest a struggle as "between two themes in a musical composition" (296). These "sympathetic" nervous responses on the part of her subjects were at once capable of guidance and recalcitrant to it.²³ Though the hand can learn new patterns, it is also subject to errancy. Patterns are transmitted from one person to another through complex coordinations and disengagements, creating a vacillating field of attraction and repulsion.

In the first series of experiments, Stein and Solomons treat the mind as a human motor, capable of action without the interference of reflection or judgment.²⁴ It would seem, however, that Stein differed from Solomons on the question of whether one can truly tell habit apart from higher-level functioning.²⁵ Indeed, years later, responding to an article by a young B. F. Skinner in the *Atlantic Monthly*,²⁶ she objected to his claim that she had treated the cases in her experiment as purely automatic writing—as rote, unthinking physical responses to stimuli.²⁷ A kind of "xtra [sic] consciousness—excess" (qtd. in Meyer, "Writing Psychology Over" 141), she thought, crept into the display of habits.²⁸ The mind absenting itself still leaves a remainder, a form of consciousness that crops up in the interstices of distracted attention (Stein and Solomons 506). At one point

in the experiment they describe consciousness as “extra personal,” blurring the distinction between the body’s own impetus and an influence that comes from without (494).

The continuum Stein insisted on between conscious and unconscious, creative and automatic response, betrays telltale vitalist preoccupations. The small-scale innovations in habits—or as Stein at one point calls them, innervations—coincide with relatively stable patterns.²⁹ In *The Principles of Psychology* James considers habit to be an “equilibrium point” in a plastic structure of change.³⁰ Habits are adaptive, forms of autoregulation, orchestrations of undirected dispositions that happen on the level of the body—or between bodies, for in many respects habits are social assemblages. They emerge through social interactions, and they regulate social life.³¹ If habits are incapable of putting a lock on the pattern, as I have suggested, they are also incapable of regulating and circumscribing the degree of deviation from it. At the intersection between nature and culture, habits don’t exhaustively determine behavior, and they shift the biological focus onto matters of inclination, where an agent can maneuver among an indeterminate number of different directions. Each potential inclination or tendency is equally “natural.” Nature may regulate life, but also unregulates it. Biology doesn’t put a fundamental limit on the capacity for inventiveness, and as regards habit, works in combination with choice.

The habitual unconscious

In *Three Lives*, begun some seven years after the publication of her second experiment, Stein assembles characters defined by their habits. But rather than indicating the fixity of temperament, she seems to understand their dispositions and distinguishing forms of personal preference as a collection of evolving tendencies, sometimes in conflict with each other, hence able to link up in diverse ways. These tendencies are amplified differently in different situations. With a nod to Darwin, she examines modifications of character-forming behavior ensuing sympathetic interactions or conflicts between people.

The repetitiousness of the prose in “Melanctha” mirrors the patterns and forms that habits acquire as they develop over time, as they gather duration and move in a progressive direction. Stein’s nonstandard use of the present progressive tense also encourages the sense of ongoing time.

Habits are constantly modified in the novel by present circumstances—by the exercise of will in characters or, more remarkably, by an unconscious shift effected in them. It is as though habit itself—the feeling of constraint and orderliness—is manifold, and made up of complex parts. These parts incessantly reorganize into new patterns. “Every day now,” we are told, “Jeff seemed to be coming nearer, to be really loving”:

Every day now, Melanctha poured it all out to him, with more freedom. . . . More and more every day now they seemed to know more really, what it was each other one was always feeling. More and more now every day Jeff found in himself, he felt more trusting. More and more every day now, he did not think anything in words about what he was always doing. Every day now more and more Melanctha would let out to Jeff her real, strong feeling. (109)

Melanctha and Jeff find ways to love each other for a time, though each stands in an anxious and somewhat compromised relation to the other's values. The phrase “more and more” captures the additive nature of events. Jeff is consistent not because he is identical with his past self but because his changes add to the attitudes and habits of mind that came before. His present self is constantly more than it was before, and this “more” is just the accretions of the past. Nevertheless, character is not simply aggregative. There is an opposed movement or tendency toward subtraction. All of Melanctha's ways of “forgetting” what she owes, what she has done, and what she feels are instances of a character by subtraction.

The additive and the subtractive movements combine to create a third: the recombinatorial. Repetitions in Stein are, as I mentioned, never exact replications of the past. Having once commenced, they diverge in numerous directions. The relation between “more and more” and “every day” in the preceding passage is variable. These phrases are also joined to new descriptions of a situation. Repetitions in Stein tend to split apart; individual sequences attach themselves to bits that were once free of them. Certain salient points modulate into other series as the point is prolonged in different directions with respect to other points. The departures that characters make from their customary repertoire of reactions do not come out of nowhere. They may be unprecedented, but they emerge as actions from a modification in a series of repetitive actions.

Attitudes in Stein tend, then, to accumulate up to a point and then

begin shifting course as people are left to react to their situations. Stein's frequently contradictory statements about her characters underscore not their inconsistency but their plasticity. For instance, the narrator remarks of Melanctha that she

never really lost her sense that it was Jane Harden who had taught her [world wisdom], but Jane did many things that Melanctha now no longer needed. And then, too, Melanctha never could remember right when it came to what she had done and what had happened. (74–75)

In the next paragraph, Stein's narrator effectively reverses course:

Melanctha began now to feel that she had always had world wisdom. She really knew of course, that it was Jane who had taught her, but all that began to be covered over by the trouble between them, that was now always getting stronger. (75)

Why does the narrator write “never” if it is so readily contradicted? Stein depicts Melanctha as apt to judge her past by what is immediately going on around her. Even so, the narrator arguably doesn't enter into perfect contradiction. Unconsciously Melanctha still knows her debt of gratitude to Jane. It is registered in feelings and habits of thought that, apart from any explicit sense that Melanctha has about herself, keep a running tally of her experience and help direct her choices.

Habit, as Henri Bergson understands it, is a form of memory created by repetition, one different in kind from the memory that records singular events, which are, as it were, stamped with a date and time. The former is like a lesson learned over a long period; it is “lived and acted, rather than represented” (*Matter and Memory* 81). In a habit, successive phases melt into each other as the movement or thought process becomes rote. It is still a memory, but one lodged in the body rather than recollected in the mind in the form of distinct images. Bergson was in fashion in Paris during the period when Stein was writing *Three Lives*, and his theories were from the earliest period of her public notice employed to explain her writing.³² Mabel Dodge, Stein's friend and compeer émigrée, wrote a review in 1913 of Stein's experimental writing, describing “perceptions, conditions, and states of being, never before quite consciously experienced” which she associated with Bergson's theory of intuition (28).

Bergson's work, together with James's, offers an illuminating foundation from which to understand Stein's presentation of habit. James sees habit as a groove or mental pathway of sequentially organized responses, and Bergson sees it as a pattern of reaction. Both see it as a genetic registry of movements or potential movements. While Bergson held habit in even less esteem than James did, both of their conceptions of psychic life reluctantly require it as a key compass point of experience. Stein, for her part, contested whatever stress they may have placed on its inertness, thus disentangling certain antinomies implicit in their conceptions.

By linking Bergson to James, I wish to do more than acknowledge the related perspectives and historical ties that bound their legacies together.³³ Most of the critics, Olson and Schoenbach included, who have examined the connection between Stein and James have done so under the banner of pragmatist philosophy, part of a general trend that Steven Meyer has pointed out (*Irresistible Dictation* xix). They have not generally used the vitalist context to describe her preoccupations—or James's either, for that matter.³⁴ Meyer, for his part, argues for the independent interest of James's psychology and his "radical empiricism"—crucial, he thinks, for understanding Stein's experimental impulses—though for philosophical reasons associated with his understanding of organic form, he does not connect James's late writings with vitalism (*Irresistible Dictation* 56). But by privileging a vitalist framework, we may be in a position to see how much Stein's ideas concern something beyond pragmatist social policy. Stein's well-known interest in repetition and time, along with her early fascination with Darwin, point in the direction of nonmechanistic "life" philosophies and an interest in the nature of psychic change.

For Bergson, habit is a kind of physical or mental disposition to act, but it doesn't necessarily require a corresponding mental image. It retains the past in the form of an inclination to do something. To this degree, it combines various conscious memories into something automatic which is not necessarily conscious. Stein's writing brings to the foreground certain ambiguities in Bergson's conception of habit. Like Darwin before her, Stein prefers to underscore the continuity between the unconscious and conscious activity of habit, or else to dissolve the distinction. For her, habit isn't entirely unconscious or automatic, since it is amenable to the purposive exertions of will and can integrate changes within it. And yet habit manages to retain aspects of the past in ways that people in conscious life

cannot necessarily grasp or represent to themselves, at least not cognitively.

James calls habit “the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent” (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 120). For Bergson too, habit is a petrified and lower function of the mind. It has an uncertain status born of its intermediary position between memory and perception. Without habit, perception is not possible. It allows one to digest and absorb the overwhelming data of experience by matching the images one takes in with memories of images from the past. But to the degree that one’s perceptions are overwhelmed by habit, new experiences are assimilated into ready-made responses. Bergson and James imply, then, that in some way habit impoverishes one’s daily life by treating the present as a mere instance of the past, thereby expressing an arrested development:

like every habitual bodily exercise, it is stored up in a mechanism which is set in motion as a whole by an initial impulse, in a closed system of automatic movements which succeed each other in the same order and, together, take the same length of time. (*Matter and Memory* 80)

Habit would seem from this angle to admit new material rarely, and then only on the impact of stimuli that remain on its fringes. These are minor shocks of experience left undigested.

But Bergson does not stay wholly within this static view. Habit on his account is capable, for instance, of reconnecting diverse bodily memories, guiding one’s choice on a more or less contracted plain of mental functioning. Habit “demands first a decomposition and then a recomposition of the whole action” (80) and in the process would seem to reorganize itself every time a person receives new perceptions. What goes by the name of habit is only one part of a multiply jointed process in which the details of our senses are ordered. Objects are recognized and tied to a memorial precedent, and the past is made use of in the present. The body navigates objects by sweeping them up into patterns of engagement and movement. Sensations that are not yet organized or methodically integrated into our perceptual schema are constantly being inputted, and they solicit new actions on the part of the body and petition it to make decisions.

Habits are necessary to higher functioning and creative activity. If one subtracts from the perception of an object the habit that allows the object to be recognized and therefore positioned in a context, one is left only with fugitive sensations and potentialities that overwhelm the

body's capacity to act. Without habit, objects have no way of slotting themselves into place in a form that the body understands. Habit is thus an assimilative process that makes a sensation and the potentiality it opens up meaningful or useful.³⁵ In the following sense, then, habit is in an open circuit with perception: its recognitions continually heighten or extend a person's capacity for thinking and perceiving, and the resulting thoughts and perceptions eventually enter into the habit mill. Habit conserves innovation. As James says, habits "fund and capitalize" (*Principles of Psychology* 1: 122) our investments in the world. By this metaphor we may conclude that it produces more than it starts out with. This is why it is misleading to imply, as both Bergson and James sometimes do, that in initiating regular sequences and pursuing a chain of reactions, habit puts a stop to choice. It might just as well be said that it prevents us from straying into the blind alleys of a decision-making process and additionally integrates new impulses into our routine actions.

Stein, as I have indicated, celebrates the constitutive impurity of habits. For her, they aren't straight repetitions, and they don't exist apart from the perceptions that redirect them. To the degree that habit stores elements of the past, it is for her a kind of unconscious routine, but the unconscious is not a deep structure underlying characters that voids their superficial inconsistency. She recounts humorously and offhandedly in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that James thought she "never had subconscious reactions" (79). Habits exist at the intersection between the past and the present. They may spawn mysterious behaviors, but only because they compress and blend many once-distinct tendencies. They are the result of long, multifaceted histories. They translate memories into movements and so are a practical engine of the unconscious, but they aren't coded messages or indications of repressed desires sent out from the psyche that require hermeneutic analysis. Rather than prompting us to peer into characters, Stein would have us witness the way people go about extending themselves in their situation, how they feel themselves modified by the occasion. To announce an attitude over and over again is to feel it change and accumulate duration.

Despite the small alterations of routine that Stein highlights in "Melanctha"—the lovers' fluid turnings toward and turnings away from each other—the larger story raises questions about the inexorable deterioration of the couple's relationship. Eventually Jeff comes to be on bad terms with Melanctha. In the process, Stein casts the two in a debate about

the nature of their commitment and consistency. Are we to understand the ending of their relationship, the separation, as fated from the start, since the characters stand for ill-assorted types? Jeff accuses Melanctha of always failing to remember her love, and Melanctha rejoins that “real feeling every moment when its [sic] needed . . . does seem to me like real remembering” (128). The couple’s long-standing dispute about memory is at the heart of their respective conceptions of consistency. Stein, however, doesn’t privilege one above the other. Both have habits of mind that, as she keeps showing us, maintain a form of memory rooted in disposition and feeling, whether conscious or unconscious. From Jeff’s point of view, Melanctha’s habits of restiveness leave no room for anything that isn’t bound to impulse, to what is immediate, direct, and urgent. On the other hand, he lays claim to the kind of memory that Bergson calls a memory image. It is associated with an intellectual removal from the world of everyday responses. He lauds a life lived deliberately, while she feels no need to square her habits with her representations of herself. Yet his precious memory and the feelings that surround it are, like hers, subject to a degree of automatism. Impulse and the will that drives it intertwine with habit. It may be true that the outcome of his relationship is to a degree predictable once Jeff and Melanctha show themselves to persist along a certain course, but simply to notice the large-scale uniformity of disposition over time is, for Stein, to take away all the drama of change—the gradual augmentations and revisions of feeling. To see constancy across time is to impress upon the situation an artificial focus. The author emphasizes continuity over abstract sameness.

The long aggregating process leaves Jeff wondering how it has come to happen that he has to ask Melanctha if she has time to see him, and soon after that, they part ways. Their willful compulsions and quarrels have made their relationship the stuff of slow defeat. As I have suggested, habit is a recording and playing instrument of the unconscious. It is a dynamic force rather than an archive, and one in many ways continuous with conscious life. It is therefore not the frozen, submerged mass of an iceberg that Freud imagined lurking unexposed to climatic change. Though Stein lived to see the increasing dominance of Freud’s conceptual enterprise, *Three Lives*, composed well before the influence of psychoanalysis spread abroad, engaged what I’ve been calling vitalist ideas.³⁶ Vitalism offered a more action-oriented conception of nondeliberate processes than did psychoanalysis as it came to be known. For psychoanalysis considered

the unconscious a repository of irrational beliefs and repressed wishes that needed penetrating interpretation to access. Vitalism is often used derisively to label metaphysicians who assume the existence of an extraphysical vital force that is without any defeasible explanatory power; it might more properly indicate figures like Bergson and James, whose conceptual models are based on changeable living systems and who give primacy to dwelling in the world and experiencing it in action rather than intellectual ways of cognizing or interpreting it.

The comedy of life and the fatalistic narrative

Below I suggest how this description of habit influenced the representation of types in "Melanctha." It is clear that Stein's character portraits draw in some manner on period stereotypes, raising the question of whether the racial interpretations she brings to bear in novelistic form overwrite the emphasis on change otherwise manifest in her work. Her racial typology seems at first blush to define the psychological characteristics of African Americans as rigid and ingrained. I argue that while social habits can force racialized bodies to conform, nature permits deviations from normative restrictions. Though Stein relies on racist clichés, her types are fundamentally not unchanging constructs. She sees the habits that underwrite them as, in essence, "lively."

Stein explores this liveliness through the literary form of comedy. While her brand of naturalist fiction plays with tragic pathos, it evokes an emotional constellation quite different from that of fatal grief, pity, or fear. It is true that the trajectory toward death in the "Melanctha" section, as in other sections of the novel on servants of the working class, draws attention to the fatalistic trajectory of the narrative. But Stein's use of subtle comic effects allows for a disruption, hindrance, or reversal that prevents comic bodies from simply playing out a tragic script, especially one that defines them by a flaw in the self. Stein's characters, beset by certain petrified habits, reveal strange forms of autonomy or esprit erupting out of an otherwise conditioned life. As Bergson sees it, comedy as a literary form spins off endless permutations on a rote pattern only to reclaim surprising moments of animation. His theory of comedy is finally, I suggest, a useful cynosure for thinking about the relation between repetition and novelty that characterizes the entire living world.

"Melanctha," as we've seen, is about a black woman of mixed-race

heritage whose courtship with various men, both black and white, fails to lead her to the safety and refuge she both craves and resists. Her ostensibly tragic nature comes of her resistance to receiving the “good advice and serious kindness” of men distinguished by “intelligence and sympathetic feeling” (69). Early in the story she wanders among the porters at the train tracks “who often told her exciting things that had happened” to them, but while she respects them, a “big, serious, melancholy, light brown porter” in particular, “she could never let [his advice] help her or affect her to change the ways that always made her keep herself in trouble.” Stein here flirts with a stereotypical and highly schematized ambivalence associated with mulatta characters, an identification with people who are intelligent and salubrious (linked to their white nature) counteracted by a seed of racial intransigence—or worse, degeneration—that prevents them from thriving.

In Stein’s hands, however, that predictable structure is pushed to a paradoxical point. The novel refuses to let its eponymous character slope toward a fated exhaustion or abjection. In other words, Stein declines to see repetition as a sign of a defect that unmasters the self, renders it more vulnerable to external impingements. But neither does she privilege the alternative narrative trajectory, the teleology mandated by the bildungsroman, which aims at human enlargement and maturation. The central mulatta figure may be, like others of her kind, a woman who straddles various arenas of social life and is therefore a symbolic instance of betweenness. In the first place, she is not a character especially marked by racial ambivalence. Melanctha is no programmatic venturer into illicit sexual territory. It is worth noting that her principal relationships are with black men. In the second place, recalcitrance doesn’t prove her inability to change, but exactly the reverse: the fixity of her character, by virtue of its very immobility and its defiance of hygienic logic, exposes her to new varieties of experience. Despite a number of assumptions, then, about the prevailing style or tendency of the race, Stein pays attention to small departures of outcome or tendency that modify conventional typologies and for her define all of human life.³⁷

The story does not correlate autonomy with knowledge but plays instead on the friction between Melanctha’s desired safety and her intrepidity. Characters in Stein’s novel often exercise personal power—a capacity to act or insist—in advance of their attaining knowledge. Melanctha’s

father intervenes when he suspects John, the Bishop's coachman, of having sexual designs on his young daughter:

Now when her father began fiercely to assail her, she did not really know what it was that he was so furious to force from her. In every way that he could think of in his anger, he tried to make her say a thing she did not really know. She held out and never answered anything he asked her, for Melanctha had break-neck courage. (66)

Melanctha remains evasive as a perpetual strategy for averting her own self-exposure, a fact captured compellingly in the claim that in her wanderings she "strayed and stood" (67). Her fixity—her repetitive nature—is necessary as an instrument of her self-extension.

Stein undercuts the expectation of failure by preventing pathos from being the guiding, sentimental formula of the story. Despite repeating that Melanctha is "awful blue" (167), the novel does not allow her to succumb to suicide. Indeed, the relentless obstinacy and inelasticity both of her character and Jeff's are pushed to the point of exaggeration. Their deportment creates, if anything, a kind of distance from their plight, a peculiar absence of feeling for them, which Bergson thinks is specific to comedy. "Indifference," he remarks in *Laughter*, "is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (63). Stein's repetitions can be terrifically boring, but even this has a faintly comic side to it. What passes as dialogue—the tottering syntax, malapropisms, and heaping asseverations—add equivocal buoyancy to the characterizations. The liability to fault—and the relentless script into which they are placed—typifies them. Stein's descriptions paint them in broad strokes, using the familiar language of everyday expression, roundabout descriptions that fit like an oversized costume. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein recalls her delight in "misfit clothes instead of the old classic costume" of the Cirque Médrano, which she visited weekly for a time. This outsized covering, which itself reminded her of Charlie Chaplin's outfits, offers an analogue in physical comedy for the moral "ragging" in "Melanctha." Indeed, Susan McCabe links Chaplin's spasmodic body—reflex action nervously playing itself out—with Stein's narrative propulsion that relapses, reverberates, in an endless comic circumnavigation (437).³⁸ The couple may be said to flop around in their dialogue, and their vaudevillian back and forth bears some resemblance to a Punch-and-Judy show. Though it has not often

been noted, even their behavior has a slapstick quality to it. Think of Jeff digesting his impressions of Melanctha's quality of mind: "He was very friendly with her in his laughing, and then he made his face get serious, and he rubbed his head to help him in his thinking. 'I know Miss Melanctha' he began" (84), and then he proceeds with his relentless anatomy of Melanctha to Melanctha.³⁹ Her rigid sensibility and the unsociable ends to which it leads her convey a quality, if not quite droll, then remote and unserious.

There is something almost comical as well about making Jeff Campbell, a figure who prides himself on his self-possession, unravel so completely while still insisting on the need to be "living regular." He too is a mulatto figure, albeit one who recovers the calmness he values in the story. Though we are told that "Jeff Campbell never could forget the sweetness in Melanctha Herbert," he trails off and out of the narrative as he recovers his strength and as the intensity of his attachment wanes. The promise of reversibility of fortunes sets the terms for Melanctha's sexual adventures.

The conversations between Melanctha and Jeff, their constant squabbles and clashes, seem to emerge out of something almost automatic within them, out of some reserve of their moral makeup. Stein's bemused representation stages a collision between the material gravity and the moral gravitas of their nature. In *Laughter* Bergson defines comedy as a "kind of *absentmindedness* on the part of life" (117), an improper but not very serious distance from life's contingencies. The "laughable element," he remarks, often consists of "a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of the human being" (67). Comedy constructs people not as individuals but as ready-made iterations: "Every comic character is a type" (156). But character comedy, which conjures up a dangerous automatism in personality, never strays very far from its opposite, an impression of suppleness and dexterity. A funny expression makes us think of "something rigid" in the "wonted mobility of the face," the cause of which is a "habit that has been contracted and maintained" (76). For Bergson as for Stein, the living throb or vibration is always ambiguously caught between a purely mechanical or formulaic existence and a perpetually mobile life.

Unfortunately, the antinomies Bergson identifies are themselves excessively rigid. Laughter, he thinks, is an all-too-human way of correcting the outward-seeming display of mechanism in the body. Comedy, on his account, points at a pathology, an incapacity to adapt, and laughter

is a way of healing a threatened inelasticity of character. In *Laughter* (a relatively early work), Bergson goes to some lengths to sever matter from life and to sever the life of the lower animals (shrunken and diminished by habits) from the life of people. In his conservative account, laughter inoculates life to its pathogenic susceptibility to unyielding matter.⁴⁰ It is a uniquely human response, one that can call up the unparalleled capacity for transformation and variation. Bergson presents life in its pure form as “evolution in time . . . a being ever growing older; it never goes backwards and never repeats itself” (118), while comedy arrives on scene only to denote a stumbling block or obstruction. He adheres throughout to the formula that comedy is “something mechanical encrusted on the living” (84) and therefore merely an outward vesture, a façade behind which may be detected a lithe and mobile inward stimulus.

Bergson's case is rather sentimentally overstated on the whole. He deems habits to be only a diminishment of life or a flight from it, even though, as Darwin makes clear, life exists nowhere without them. The living world is full of echoes and duplications, which give stability to living structures. Life wouldn't be possible without some degree of rigidity and transposability, which one may associate with repetitive mechanisms. In his later work Bergson increasingly comes to appreciate the continuity between life and matter.⁴¹ Yet even in his treatise on laughter, one has to wonder why the body so persistently inclines to repetition and error and revisits its own obstinate and resistant materiality.

The body is an apparatus that prepares and perpetuates certain processes and movements held in common among all people with similar corporeal structures. Bergson pictures healthy society as a tissue of singular and highly adaptable individuals capable of giving continuous attention to life, but there are indications that such elasticity cannot sustain itself without repetition. He claims that “Our laughter is always the laughter of a group”; “You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others” (64). Bergson aligns sociability with the subterranean wellsprings of habit that fashion us into types and side us with the interchangeable and reversible inclinations of the material world. The unseriousness of comedy gives a glimpse of something very real in life: a capacity to suspend or reverse the fatalistic accession to death. The rigid habits displayed by comic expression do not necessarily display “sickness and infirmity” but the playful collision of competing tendencies in life.⁴² Human life is suffused with repetition, sometimes applied in a merely

mechanical, disharmonious way, at other times maintaining efficacious routines. Sympathy, a feeling held in common among humans and social animals, is, Darwin maintains, “much strengthened by exercise or habit” (*Descent of Man* 681). Rather than separating life from matter, comedy, it would seem, resurrects for us, the living, the savor of our thingly origins. Perhaps, then, laughter does not separate us from our animal brethren but rather reminds us in a distinctively human way of our animal origins. It may be a special kind of awareness, but not a wholly separate kind of being.⁴³

Though Melanctha’s story has a roughly circular structure, in that it concludes by returning to her failed friendship with Rose Herbert, it does not imply a narrative of irresistible momentum whose end is simply contained in its beginnings. Stein carefully refuses to complete the circle. Melanctha dies by means of a perfunctory telescopic narrative. Though she thinks about suicide and even gets ill, we are informed mere moments from the finish that she “went into the hospital where they took good care of her and cured her” (167). Stein’s careless and comic contempt of novelistic convention reveals itself here. It is aimed at disrupting the predictable narrative declension itself, and the supposition behind it that characters must succumb to a fate provided for them by their racial or typological guiding trait. The momentary reversibility of the series reveals a lively interference in the fatalistic progression.

The imperturbable matter-of-factness about Melanctha’s lightning-quick offing only a paragraph later doesn’t change the fundamental exposition:

Melanctha went back to the hospital, and there the Doctor told her she had the consumption, and before long she would surely die. They sent her where she would be taken care of, a home for poor consumptives, and there Melanctha stayed until she died.

(167)

Life, Stein’s narrative seems to confide, is relentlessly repetitive; it might even partake of the brittleness of mechanism. Indeed, the one absolutely knowable aspect of life is that it leads to death; its organic machinery is impermanent. But life has an elusive ontology, and repetition is not inimical to adaptation. It might very well be necessary to it. There is no obvious prescription for what is detrimental to life. The only thing clear is that character as a living substrate offers a delay on the way to self-

dissolution, a dilatory moment of homeostasis. Stein undercuts the purely conservative impulse to eliminate the character who troubles the dogged separations of social life.

Here Stein may be said to make an original return to Darwin, who thinks that tendencies to variation coexist with niches of stability in the evolutionary line. While Bergson emphasizes unceasing change, the throbs of constant variation thumping through all things, making an enemy of any repetition that doesn't recrudescence, Darwin's evolutionary conception avoids programmatic judgments about the value or inevitability of self-transformation. He is content to observe intermissions and survivals from previous moments of evolutionary development and recognizes the productive—because sustaining—function of repetition. This is true not simply in such a case as the cockroach, which, as the notion goes, is poised to outlast a nuclear holocaust, but also in the behaviors and expressions of complex organisms. The dogs that fill the pages of *The Expression of the Emotions*, with their intelligible caresses, their bristling and barking, their eccentric scratching behavior (behavioral holdovers from their grass-dwelling ancestors) have social rituals in common with our kerfuffles and our yappings. To the degree that human language operates like the variety of animal expressions that Darwin explores, its vocal signs accompany a state of mind and embody it, rather than merely reporting on it: "Man not only uses inarticulate cries, gestures, and expressions, but has invented articulate language, if, indeed, the word *invented* can be applied to a process, completed by innumerable steps, half-consciously made" (*Expression* 63). Language too, Darwin would seem to suggest, begins as a habitual process of self-organization, a means of entering into sympathetic response networks.

Darwin gives vitality to vitalistic concepts and helps us understand the foundations and the distinctiveness of Stein's preoccupation with habits. For Darwin, organisms don't stand in the isolation of a predetermining genetic code. Heredity is not fate. Adaptability in higher organisms involves will, choice, and risk, but also unconscious self-organization. Most readings of Stein assume that her types spring from limitation, that they are a concession to determined lives. I have suggested, however, that they are based on routines and inheritances that are lively. These habits, as we see throughout her writing, are in evidence in characters' simplest reflexes and in their most complex intellectual tendencies. We might say that there is a dumbness—an unconscious repetitive force—in their most lively and

vital acts of intelligent adaptation, but also that there is an intelligence (Bergson would call it *élan vital*) in their most rote, most confirmed, and most regular of daily actions.

Notes

1. Lisi Schoenbach argues that Stein situates herself in opposition to a bellicose shock aesthetic whose claim to iconoclasm or originality is based on heroic opposition to convention. Stein, she thinks, establishes a pragmatic stream of modernism, producing work committed to “gradualism, accretion, continuity, and recontextualization” (240).

2. Liesl Olson thinks that while habits prevent psychic trauma, they do so at the cost of concealing from individuals the suffocating uncertainty and violence occurring around them: “habits, as defense, . . . enable a dangerous blindness to what, especially in retrospect, demanded action” (350). Habit would seem to prevent people from engaging in political resistance or assuming wider political agency. Because she understands it as a kind of pleasure principle—the sensuous enjoyment in maintaining constancy and resisting change—she is forced to jettison the conception of habit defined “in terms of productive action” (330). Lisi Schoenbach thinks habits “create an environment in which innovations can take place” (254) but tends to see their capacity to transmit important, sometimes unconscious, collective customs and dispositions of national life in a state of “push and pull” with the perceptive capacities of the mind, which alone distinguish novelty. Both Olson and Schoenbach think habits threaten the deadening of feeling and mindless, servile reproduction of behavioral response geared to the ideological interests of the Vichy occupier and the social engineer.

3. Bergson, for instance, engaged Darwin explicitly and at length in his most famous book, *Creative Evolution*, while James consistently used Darwin as a reference point and wrote early reviews of his work. See James, *Works* 231.

4. Critics have debated the relative balance of progressivist politics and racial determinism in Stein’s presentation of race. A great deal of critical ink has been spilled on the question of how the three portraits, and especially “Melanctha,” exploit or finesse racist modes of typologizing. Critics who see Stein in some form or another as racist include Richard Bridgman, Sonia Saldivar-Hull, Milton Cohen, and Laura Doyle. Paul Peppis, who emphasizes the inconclusiveness of the text’s approach to race, puts the matter this way: “Yet while the progressive model promises growth and liberation from determinism, the novella treats it as ambiguously as the determinist model it opposes” (387). A

number of critics emphasize the difficulty of mapping Stein's political views and give reasons that include the shifting vocabulary of racial description over the course of the novella; the use of elaborate masking techniques; the strange discrepancies between narrative voice and authorial perspective; and the complicated combinations of blood inheritance, white upbringing, and social identifications with race. See Corinne E. Blackmer and Jamie Hoovey.

5. Ann Charters, for instance, claims that Stein does away with psychological development: her method of composition "is also a reflection of her view of human character as static and unchanging, basically falling into one of two types, either aggressive or passive" (xiv).

6. Obviously some human groupings are more provisional and less universal than others across the spectrum of human societies, and biologists and anthropologists argue about the merits of treating race as a useful biological category. If, however, we don't treat social and biological definitions as radically distinct, then perhaps we can agree that even historically limited ways that people find to categorize each other have biological effects on such things as mating patterns and resource allocations. Darwin, for his part, thought that racial variation is, in evolutionary terms, the product of differentiated tastes or sexual preferences within the human species. See especially "On the Races of Man" in *The Descent of Man*.

7. Much of the discourse about the passions, since the earliest theorizing about them, has downplayed their connection to habits. It is true that habits, like passions, involve longstanding dispositions, but passions tend to erupt in "episodic moments of vehement feeling," as Philip Fisher notes (23–24). He argues that reliance on momentary experience, singular and often quite unprecedented, is what makes vehement passion distinctive and also makes literature central to the examination of it (22). In other respects, as Stein was certainly aware, habits overlap with passions. Neither of them renders one's actions quite involuntary, but in both cases one is being acted upon. This, indeed, is the etymological implication of *passion*. Stein makes a firm connection between habits and passions because she regards any state to be in moving relation to the states that came before it. The same mental dispositions that are formed by habits also allow us to see passionate departures from them; continuity works in concert with difference. Stein obviously insists that literature extend the scale in which it is willing to treat passionate experience.

8. Massumi is among the most trenchant critical voices today arguing for the "mutual involvement" and "dynamic unity" of nature and culture. His arguments are consistent with some of the vitalist implications of Darwinism:

The point is that the “natural” and the “cultural” feed forward and back into each other. They relay each other to such an extent that the distinction cannot be maintained in any strict sense. It is necessary to theorize a nature–culture continuum. (11)

9. Aristotle ranks habit as a “state of character” (1106a) whose virtue lies in its claim to being “firm and unchangeable” (1105a). His account reveals how much a particular interpretation of habit determines the models of character that one settles on. Stein too focuses on habit’s practical nature, which involves more than just knowing what should be done but actually doing it frequently and consistently.

10. Stein amuses herself with ordinary words that play on the distinction between durable designations and differences of stress. In her essay “Portraits and Repetitions” she dismisses repetition conceived as an exact reproduction: “Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition” (“Lectures in America” 288).

11. Narrative, Stein says, “is a thing that has to be done since any one since every one inevitably has to tell something” (*Narration* 31), but she distinguishes the repetitive act of telling, the narration that is the source of her interest, from the narrative content, the excitements of the thing told. For an explanation of her narrative strategy of “constant recurring and beginning,” see “Composition as Explanation” 498.

12. Darwin’s account of fitness, as laid out in his theory of natural selection, refuses to specify a specific goal for life, as Elizabeth Grosz points out:

Darwin describes natural selection as a “principle of preservation,” but this preservation is quite ambiguous and multilayered. . . . Fitness carries with it the notion of an openness to changing environments; it is not necessarily the best adapted to a fixed and unchanging context. (47)

13. The legacy of Darwin is constantly being reassessed as biological science advances. In recent decades biologists have concentrated with renewed appreciation on the complexity of his ideas. The rise of evolutionary psychology in the early 1970s and the dual-inheritance theory, which considers the interactions between genetic and cultural evolution, are clear examples. The reconsideration, inevitable with any paradigm-shifting theory, insures that Darwinists have an array of competing perspectives to present. Yet the remarkable tenacity with which a large number of scientists and cultural theorists have insisted on the mindless and inevitable results of natural selection is belied by many key Darwinian observations. For an example of an influential contemporary exponent of Darwinism who treats the biologist’s theory of evolution as speaking

to a blind, predictable mathematical algorithm of genetic variation, see Daniel Dennett.

14. See for example *The Descent of Man*, where Darwin puts forth his account of sexual selection, specifying biological changes that result at least in part from the unpredictable sexual preferences that individuals display rather than by biological inheritance alone.

15. Paul Ekman speculates that Darwin's acceptance of the Lamarckian "use-inheritance" model is a signal reason why *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* has been neglected (xxxii).

16. Wilson argues that Darwin didn't consider psychological modes of inheritance as radically distinct from biological (genetic) transmission: "Every one of Darwin's texts attests that the stuff of evolution is radically heterogeneous; certainly it is biological, but it is also psychological, cultural, geological, oceanic, and meteorological" (69).

17. Clive Bush faults Darwin for relying on a chauvinistic ideology that allies marginal subaltern subjects—representatives of "primitive" cultural phenomena—with the order of nature, thus blurring the difference between social constructions of power and natural forms of expression. He cites Darwin's example of workmen in the Botanical Gardens at Calcutta as evidence (273). Clearly, the discursive context for Darwin's use of decontextualized anthropological examples is important, but Bush neglects one surprising repercussion of Darwin's argument. One might just as well say that Darwin is providing an instance of acculturated nature as of the naturalization of a cultural network of power relations.

18. For an account of eugenics during the period and its entanglement with discourses of Social Darwinism, see Daylance English. She refers to the paradox, as the exponents of eugenics understood it, that the less fit succeed in reproducing more and therefore thriving better. This, for any number of figures she quotes, is "unnatural selection," the result of the perverse intrusion of misguided social institutions like the welfare state or the modern factory, which work against nature and lead to a degradation of the stock.

19. Bergson spends a fair amount of time distinguishing his position from Darwin's mechanistic interpretations. See especially *Creative Evolution* 56, 62–65.

20. Bergson emphasizes contradictory tendencies in evolution, not just harmonious forms of coordination:

In communicating itself, the impetus [of life] splits up more and more. Life, in proportion to its progress, is scattered in manifestations which

undoubtedly owe to their common origin the fact that they are complementary to each other in certain aspects, but which are none the less mutually incompatible and antagonistic. (*Creative Evolution* 103)

21. Stein spoke of her indebtedness to James's brand of thinking in numerous contexts, stating plainly that he was one of "the strongest scientific influences I had" (*Wars I Have Seen* 63–64).

22. The experiments do not specifically react against a psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious. Freud had not yet finished the *Interpretation of Dreams*, published in German in 1900. Stein was addressing the sources and antecedents from which psychoanalysis emerged. She directed her criticism at theories that hypothesized the existence of an irrational secondary personality susceptible to suggestion. Arguably she does not address central features of hysteria such as Freud understood them, which include the conflict of wishes, the repression of less-acceptable ones, and their somatic conversion. Her reference to "subconscious" response recalls turn-of-the-century models of hypnotic suggestion, which to a certain degree Freud set out to modify if not to challenge outright. Freud replaces the "magic, incantations, and hocus pocus" ("Lecture XXVII" 449) of suggestion with his conception of transference, which presupposes a theory of unconscious libidinal identifications. Nevertheless, by the time Stein had disavowed subconscious aims in her writing in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (published in 1933), she had already been introduced to Freudian theory by her brother and sometime housemate, Leo, who in 1909 developed an obsession with it. For an account of this see Lisa Ruddick. Therefore one presumes that her hostility to subconscious reactions eventually extended to psychoanalysis rather than limiting itself to her earlier sources.

23. While the experiments throw out a set of models that admit the potential for involuntary social conditioning—those of unconscious suggestibility—they open the door to other techniques of social control. Though psychologists were not prone to examining social conditioning per se until Frederick Winslow Taylor published his *Principles of Scientific Management* in 1905, this is at least one implicit undercurrent of Stein's analysis.

24. Following the connection made by Barbara Will, I apply the metaphor of the human motor to Stein's psychology experiment. For the nineteenth-century framework that gave rise to the study of the body as a machine that works apart from consciousness, see Anson Rabinbach. He cites interlaced discourses in physics, medicine, biology, and psychology directed at investigating the body's ideal working capacity. There are interesting parallels between the discourses that investigated the mechanical functioning of the body, which

Rabinbach explores, and the vitalistic discourses I have cited, which are concerned specifically with the plasticity of life processes.

25. Stein was, as she noted in *Everybody's Autobiography*, younger than Solomons, and he was a graduate student. She distinguished her own view of the experiment from that of her coauthor, suggesting that she believed the procedures they followed did not succeed in casting consciousness aside. A kind of consciousness, she thought, crept into the experiment by virtue of a familiarity that she and Solomons, as the two initial subjects of the study, had with the pragmatic operations and procedures of the laboratory (274–75). In her later comments she may have conveniently attempted to rewrite an experiment whose emphasis she came to regret, but it seems just as likely that her collaboration with Solomons was itself, like many of her later collaborations, the product of a sympathetic exchange. Her resistance may not have found an adequate avenue to express itself, being an intuitive resistance embedded in a habit of mind rather than an explicit and conscious difference of opinion.

26. In 1934 Skinner, who would become the most famous behaviorist psychologist of his generation, treated Stein's published experiments as methodological models for her "advanced" compositions, contending that they duplicated her later structure and style (54).

27. Stein contests the word *automatic*, associated as it was at this point with surrealist practice and Freudian thought. "I did not think it was automatic I do not think so now, I do not think any university student is likely certainly not under observation is likely to be able to do genuinely automatic writing" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 275).

28. In a letter to her friend Lindley Hubbel, Stein rebuffed Skinner's insinuation that she had a secret to keep about the origins of her writing practices (qtd. in Meyer, "Writing Psychology Over" 141). Barbara Will, in her account of the mechanics of Stein's automatic writing, argues that the extra consciousness to which Stein refers is bound up with the effort not to take charge of movement, "resembling something like *attentive inattentiveness*" (173; Will's italics). The exact nature of the "xtra consciousness" aside, Stein thinks that the boundary that separates habit from will and attention is difficult to specify. The processes involved in writing are heterogeneous, requiring inferences, motor impulses, and regulating memories set down through a long practice of repetition. The meaning or intelligibility of all speech and writing relies to some degree on patterns of thought, learning, and sedimented history.

29. Stein and Solomons speak of the motor impulse entailed in dictation as involving "a mélange of visual and kinaesthetic material—whatever ordinarily innervates our writing—as well as other elements not easily described" (498).

30. Habit in James's account tends to move one toward an increasingly determinate path, allowing one to overcome inertia more readily, to do the same thing with less effort and a lower level of excitation: "*habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue*" (*Principles* 1: 112; James's italics). However, habit itself is part of a changing constellation of behaviors. New neural paths may be formed "by the sort of *chances* that in nervous material are likely to occur" (1: 109; James's italics).

31. Stein even proposes that certain predominant biases in habit formation differentiate people according to types. "Cultivated Motor Automatism" classifies types of people according to their particular reactions to the planchette. Stein draws a direct line from this insight to her experimental writing (*Everybody's Autobiography* 274).

32. Bergson was giving weekly philosophical lectures at the Collège de France to packed crowds, including a fair number of modishly hatted ladies (Grogin 122–26). The link between Bergson and Stein was to be made more than once in the course of Stein's career. See Robert E. Rogers 31 and Wyndham Lewis 49–51.

33. In later life James was in correspondence with Bergson. In one of his letters he sent along a copy of his book *Pragmatism*, suggesting that while it is "jejune and inconsiderable," it is also so "congruent with parts of your system, fits so well into interstices thereof, that you will easily understand why I am so enthusiastic. I feel that at bottom we are fighting the same fight" (*Correspondence* 11: 377).

34. See also Joan Richardson and Jonathan Levin. Curiously, contemporaries like Wyndham Lewis were more likely to cite Stein as a "time-child" in the vitalist "time cult" (55). Innumerable studies have assessed James's distinctively American brand of philosophy, but not the internationalist theories he contributed to under the diffuse rubric of vitalism. Even those who examine the cosmopolitan climate of the period tend to adopt the disciplinary preoccupations of American Studies. See Ross Posnock and Bruce Kuklick. Joseph Riddell is an outlier; he considers Stein in the context of Bergson's time philosophy.

35. A number of critics have tended to accentuate a favorable rather than antagonistic attitude to habit on the part of James. Renée Tursi describes the "modernist paradox of James's richly processive and canny narrative of habit" (10), which gives a stabilizing consistency to the operations of spontaneous will so that experience will not overwhelm agents. Liesl Olson relies on Joseph Thomas's argument that James considers habit a way to make people feel "at home" in an experience that otherwise remains uncanny. The position that

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James stakes out is analogous to Bergson's. Their alternating valuation is probably typical of the larger discourse, which oscillates between a conservative and a critical relation to the concept.

36. Not all critics trump James's psychological influence on Stein over Freudian psychoanalysis. Lisa Ruddick, for example, argues that Stein discarded Jamesian pragmatism and submitted to Freud's intellectual influence, which she incorporated unconsciously. In my opinion, though, her evidence is sufficiently scant for one to be skeptical. Stein may have been resistant to certain of James's theoretical commitments, and her writing may have displayed preoccupations with Freudian themes such as childhood experience, sexuality, and parricide, but the preponderance of evidence suggests that Stein was searching for alternatives to Freudian psychological models throughout her long career as a writer.

37. In the beginning, the narrator provides a description of Melanctha's friend Rose: "the sullen, childish, cowardly, black Rosie grumbled and fussed and howled and made herself to be an abomination and like a simple beast" (59). Dark skin brings associations of stupidity and beastliness or aggressivity in Melanctha's especially dark-skinned father, who is described as virile and fierce. The baseline characteristics that Stein associates with African American racial types deserve scrutiny. Even determining that normative average, however, is not easily done, given her emphasis on the exception. The narrator frequently makes racial generalizations only to qualify or undermine them: "Rose was never joyous with the earth-born, boundless joy of negroes. Hers was just ordinary, any sort of woman laughter" (60).

38. McCabe recounts Chaplin's encounter with Stein in the 1930s, in which she lauded his early gestural films. This is Chaplin telling the story: "She would like to see me in a movie just walking up the street and turning a corner, then another corner, and another" (qtd. in Sitney 153). The remark shows how clearly Stein understood the connection between repetition and comedy.

39. It is worth acknowledging Stein's risky and disconcerting alignment between comic form and racial typology. There is more here than a hint of minstrelsy in what I am calling a comic representation. Indeed the story itself, based on an earlier autobiographical story about a lesbian triangle, is a symbolic form of blackface. For a larger context concerning modernist racial masquerade, see Michael North, Susanna Pavloska, and Marianne Torgovnick. As Sianne Ngai points out, the comedy at stake in depictions of racialized subjects has all too often conjoined expressions of animation with a correlative inference of the characters' automation. The trait or feeling that she names "animatedness," and defines as an "'agitation' that is quickly stilled" (90) serves

to empty out the black subject's agency, autonomy, and control. Clearly Stein doesn't simply abandon the racial stereotypes and clichés around animated bodies, but perhaps one can count her among Ngai's examples of writers and artists who "generate unanticipated social meanings and effects" (125), principally by recognizing a surplus of animation that undermines racist representations. I propose that expressions of animation on the part of Stein's characters present eruptions of "unaccounted-for autonomy" that emerge out of nature itself and modify existing power relations. For an account of the complexity and ambiguity of minstrelsy as a social form, see Eric Lott.

40. Bergsonian comedy, as Justus Nieland argues, corrects and normalizes eccentric or mildly deviant social behavior in order to preserve a "vitally human" social order over and against the "fixity, and slumbering habits" of animals (230). Nieland makes much of Bergson's assertion that "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human" (*Laughter* 62), which implies that any comic representation that impresses upon us a resemblance to animals or machines is merely apparent and illusory. Nieland refers to the work as "a sort of modernist biopolitics of comedy" (239) and casts Bergson as a sentinel of the humanist tradition. He suggests that like Aristotle, Bergson makes a claim for laughter as a sign of a distinctively human capacity for reflection, thus separating man as a political animal from the larger or more general ambit of life.

41. For a philosophical exposition that traces Bergson's evolution away from dualistic claims and toward monism in his late work, granting duration to both matter and life, see Deleuze 35.

42. In *Creative Evolution* Bergson clarifies that "individuality admits of any number of degrees and that it is not fully realized anywhere, even in man" (12). Life may tend toward variation without repetition, but this is just one aim or tendency, thwarted by an obverse necessity, to maintain and reproduce certain structures.

43. Darwin, incidentally, does not regard laughter as wholly distinct from animal behavior. See *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* 356. Of all the expressions, Darwin regards blushing "to be the most strictly human" (358) because it requires self-consciousness.

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