



# Prophecy and Modernist Modes of Narration: the war writings of Gertrude Stein

Chloé Thomas

## ► To cite this version:

Chloé Thomas. Prophecy and Modernist Modes of Narration: the war writings of Gertrude Stein. Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, Petronia Petrar. *Temporalities of Modernism*, Ledizioni, 2022, 978-88-5526-849-3. hal-03821739v2

**HAL Id: hal-03821739**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03821739v2>**

Submitted on 3 Apr 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

*Chloé Thomas*

PROPHECY AND MODERNIST MODES OF  
NARRATION: THE WAR WRITINGS  
OF GERTRUDE STEIN

*Introduction*

The Latin word *vates*, meaning both “poet” and “prophet”—“seers” by trade—reminds us of the historical interrelation of these two professions. The word made its way through Old Celtic into modern English, as *vates* or *ovate*, to designate ancient bards or their neo-druidic equivalents in modern times. Blind visionaries, from Homer to Milton, are often soothsayers, and they give their prophecies in verse. But after the Romantic reaction, one would have expected poetry to distance itself from the prophetic paradigm. In many respects, Modernism embraced the technological and scientific ethos of its time, which should have made it averse to the esotericism of an earlier time. Yet modernist poetry is full of prophets. In Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, there is a “Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante” (l. 43), and more importantly perhaps Tiresias, the blind prophet of Greek mythology, who speaks of his visions in the “unreal city” that is modern London. Tiresias also appears in Pound’s *Cantos*, redoubling “poor old Homer blind”<sup>1</sup> as Pound’s model and counter-model. For Eliot and Pound, these prophets are referential: they are one of the means to invite a certain, carefully chosen poetic tradition into their own productions. Homer and Tiresias, especially in Pound’s use of them, are symptoms of the conflation

---

1 Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, A New Directions Book (New York: New Directions, 1989), 124.

of literary history that is at work: a history which is no longer organised along a chronological line, but is rather a bottomless and chaotic well of references from which to pick up forebears. That they are prophets, to Pound and Eliot, does not mean so much that they are able to see and foretell the future, but that they partake, as historical and mythological characters, to the general reconsideration of historical linearity by Modernism, especially as far as cultural and literary history is concerned. Pound (in "Usura" most strikingly) also took up the tone and power of these forefathers to serve his own poetic and political discourse in which futurism ultimately met fascism. Other poets, Yeats and H.D. most famously, got interested in Spiritism. Their troubled relationship to modernity may explain their taste for a practice that is future-oriented but also reminiscent of ancient practices, stemming from idealised times. In *Trilogy*, written towards the end of the Second World War, H.D. kept identifying her own lyric "I" with the ancient voices of mythical prophets and, through them, to defend a temporality that is non-linear, alternative, and irrational. "This is the age of the new dimension"<sup>2</sup>: the line, followed by an explicit call to "surrender / sterile logic, trivial reason," is at odds with the dominant Cartesian paradigm of technological modernity; similarly, H.D., who underwent an analysis with Sigmund Freud in Vienna, was always adamant that her "visions" should be taken as gifts, not symptoms.

It is probably no accident that H.D.'s visions particularly developed during the war, at a time when the poet was living in London under the Blitz. A number of recent studies have endeavoured to consider the somewhat surprising, and, for a long time, glossed-over, relationship of Modernism towards Spiritism; in 1995, Timothy Materer published *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult*,

---

2 H. D., *Trilogy* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 40.

which drew on this connection to explore the dark side of poetry in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Devin Johnston analysed contemporary American poetry as an “occult practice,”<sup>4</sup> considering the influence of Modernism (in particular through the H.D.-Duncan connection) over later poets in this respect. In his chapter on H.D., Johnston shows that the Second World War was an essential context for the emergence of the poet’s interest in visions, séances, and spiritualism.

Gertrude Stein, another American poet of H.D.’s generation, also turned to prophecy during the Second World War. Yet she is little, if ever, mentioned in studies on occultism, and her take at spiritualism is an entirely different one. Stein, who was born in Pennsylvania in 1874, studied experimental psychology with William James and even started a degree in medicine. Her first prose writings, *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans*, display a continued faith in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century positivism which was paradigmatic to her scientific education. It is significant that her very first published text, an academic paper entitled “Normal Motor Automatism” which she co-authored with her classmate Leon Solomons in 1894, began by distancing the proposed experiment from any kind of spiritualistic leaning: “For these experiments a planchette was used. Both of us [Stein and Solomons] had previously tried in vain to “write planchette.” Neither of us has any aptitude for willing games, etc.”<sup>5</sup>

The planchette, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, consisted of a small board mounted on wheels and fitted with a pencil.

---

3 Timothy Materer, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

4 Devin Johnston, *Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

5 Gertrude Stein and Leon M. Solomons, “Normal Motor Automatism,” *Psychological Review*, 3.5 (1896), 494.

During séances, one would hold the pencil while letting the hand rest on the planchette and allow it to be guided by a spirit wishing to spell out a message. Here, it is explicitly transformed to serve a scientific experiment whose authors are adamant that, despite its forays into the limits of consciousness, it must not be mistaken for any sort of drawing-room game (“willing games” toy with telepathy) involving spirits and otherworldly voices.

It is all the more surprising, then, that half a century after this rather strong statement, Gertrude Stein turned to a series of occult sources to try and predict the outcome of the war. In the process, she completely reframed Modernism’s relationship to prophecy, by making of it not a mode of poetic inspiration, but a very particular narrative device.

*From poetry to prose: the war writings of Gertrude Stein*

Already in her novel *Ida*, which she began in the late 1930s, Stein had shown evidence of an interest in “signs” and superstitions. But it is really in her texts from the 1940s that she gave full sway to her so far repressed or absent occult tendencies. In an unpublished text from 1946 about the end of the Second World War, “Raoul Dufy is pleasure,” she wrote, retrospectively: “All through the war I had been superstitious.”<sup>6</sup> The use of the past perfect here might be apologetic; in any case, it makes clear the connection between the geopolitical context and Stein’s turn to prophecies. However, it must be noted that, although she had also spent the First World War in France, she had not felt the need at the time to turn to esoteric writings. The situation was different in the Second World War, even though her war writings used the same detached,

---

6 Gertrude Stein, “Epsom, Chantilly, Deauville Vus Par Raoul Dufy” (Paris, 1946), Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

casual tone. Maybe Stein and her partner Alice Toklas felt more endangered this time. Indeed, although they were American, of Jewish decent and overtly homosexual, they had decided to remain in France during the Second World War, despite many warnings from their friends. Stein and Toklas were convinced that they were under the protection of Bernard Faÿ, a prominent professor of English who had been Stein's friend and translator and had turned an ardent supporter and actor of the Vichy regime.<sup>7</sup> They spent the war in the Rhône valley, where Stein had her country home.

An easy way to account for Stein's interest in prophecy, then, is to suggest that the pervading fear with which she had to live made her more sensitive to non-standard discourses. But the contradiction with Stein's original positivistic faith remains. By looking at her war writings from the 1940s, one is led to the hypothesis that her use of prophecies is only superficially the symptom of a late interest in the occult, and that it is rather to be understood in the context of the broader conception of history that Stein had evolved throughout her long career.

My main sources are Stein's narratives *Paris France*, first published in April 1940, which she had begun before the outbreak of the war and which continued as a testimony

---

7 On Faÿ, see Antoine Compagnon, *Le cas Bernard Faÿ: du Collège de France à l'indignité nationale*, La suite des temps, (Paris: Gallimard, 2009); on Stein's war years, see the dossier edited by Charles Bernstein, "Gertrude Stein's War Years: Setting the Record Straight, a Dossier," *Jacket 2* <<http://jacket2.org/feature/gertrude-steins-war-years-setting-record-straight>> [accessed 5 August 2016]. In particular, in this dossier, Logan Esdale discusses Barbara Will's controversial book, *Unlikely Collaboration: Gertrude Stein, Bernard Faÿ, and the Vichy Dilemma*, Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

of the “*drôle de guerre*” before the French defeat<sup>8</sup>; “The Winner Loses: A Picture of Occupied France,” a piece she wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* in November, 1940, after the June armistice<sup>9</sup>; *Wars I Have Seen*, a sequel of sorts to *Paris France* which Stein began in early 1943; published in 1945, it accounts for Stein’s war years in the Rhône valley and her return to Paris after the Liberation.<sup>10</sup> In this period, Stein also wrote a novel, *Mrs Reynolds*,<sup>11</sup> published posthumously, about one Angel Harper and one Joseph Lane, two characters rather transparently standing for Hitler and Stalin. Finally, she wrote shortly after the war “Raoul Dufy is pleasure,” which remains unpublished to this day in English, but appeared in French translation early on. Stein died in 1946, and these are her last writings.

It must be noted that all these sources are prose ones. Stein had begun her literary career as a prose writer before turning to poetry and drama in the early 1910s, while continuing her experiments in narrative forms, mainly autobiographical by the mid-1930s. Contrary to the war poetry of H.D., then, the war writings of Gertrude Stein do not enact prophecy. They simply tell of how they make use of it; in so doing, they do not give themselves a prophetic voice, but account for the use of the prophecies of others. The essentially *narrative* quality of these texts is not

---

8 Gertrude Stein, *Paris France* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1940).

9 Gertrude Stein, “The Winner Loses,” *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1940; reprinted in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, edited by Carl Van Vechten (New York: Random House, 1946), 543-66.

10 Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (New York: Random House, 1945); here the text is quoted in the 1984, more easily accessible edition reedition Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (London: Brilliance Books, 1984).

11 Gertrude Stein, *Mrs Reynolds and Five Earlier Novelettes*, Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), vol. ii.

contingent: it is key to understanding the relationship between prophecy and Stein's literary search for a particular mode of narration.

*Signs and superstitions*

In these writings, Stein mentions a number of prophetic sources in which she found evidence that France was, in the end, going to win the war, and which provided some sort of solace to Toklas and her. These texts are of different natures. In "The Winner Loses," she first tells of an English family living nearby supplying her with books in English.

One of the books they had I called the Bible; it was an astrological book called *The Last Year of War*, written by one Leonardo Blake. I burnt my copy the day of the signing of the armistice, but it certainly had been an enormous comfort to us all in between.<sup>12</sup>

The book in question, fully entitled *The Last Year of the War and After*, was the work of an English astrologer, published in 1940.<sup>13</sup> Basing himself on horoscopes of the Nazi Party and other agents of the war, as well as on geopolitical considerations and mob psychology, Blake announced in 1940 the unfolding of the war up to the defeat of Nazi Germany.

In the same article, two other sources are mentioned, no longer astrological but esoterically Catholic.

Beside these astrological predictions there were others, and the ones they talked about most in the country were the predictions of the curé d'Ars. Ars is in this

---

12 Stein, "The Winner Loses," 544.

13 Leonardo Blake, *The Last Year of War and After* (London: A. Dakers, 1940).



department of the Ain, and the curé, who died about eighty years ago, became a saint; and he had predicted that this year there would be a war and the women would have to sow the grain alone, but that the war would be over in time for the men to get in the harvest; and so when Alice Toklas sometimes worried about how hot it would be all summer with the shutters closed all the evening I said, 'Do not worry, the war will be over before then; they cannot all be wrong.'<sup>14</sup>

The Curé of Ars,<sup>15</sup> also known as Saint Jean-Marie Vianney, or Saint John Vianney in English, was a Catholic preacher of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> His parish was located in the region where Stein had her country home and where she spent the war. As Stein writes here, his predictions were enjoying a large popularity in the country. Recognised as a saint by the Catholic Church in 1925, Jean-Marie Vianney was, according to the canonisation procedure, blessed with "intuition," and his sayings were highly regarded for their prescient quality even beyond the small geographical area where he used to be active as a priest. One finds here another reason which may explain this late interest in "prophecies": the fact that Stein found herself in the country, in a small village, and that she was more exposed to local superstitions.

Finally, "The Winner Loses" mentions, in passing, a last source, immediately followed by a personal addition:

---

14 Stein, "The Winner Loses," 545.

15 Jean-Marie Vianney, *Sermons du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney, curé d'Ars*, 4 vols (Lyon: Librairie générale catholique et classique, 1883).

16 For more on Vianney, see Philippe Boutry, *Prêtres et paroisses au pays du curé d'Ars*, Histoire (Paris: Éd. du Cerf, 1986).

[...] then there was Sainte Odile, who said that after her blood flowed in June, four months after, France would be more glorious than ever. Well, why not?  
I had my own private prediction, and that was that when I had cut all the box hedges in the garden the war would be all over. Well, the box hedge is all cut now today, the eighth of August, but the war is not all over yet.<sup>17</sup>

Sainte Odile was an Alsatian Saint from the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, no known prophecy was attributed to her until, in the midst of the First World War, one Georges Stoffler published a pamphlet entitled *La Prophétie de Sainte-Odile*, which he presented as a translation into French of a Latin manuscript.<sup>18</sup> In it, Sainte Odile announces the defeat of what she calls “Germanie” (in French, the word sounds archaic and medieval), and of its soldiers who, interestingly, are supposed to be wearing spiked helmets just like the Prussian army. Although there was no reason to believe in the authenticity of the booklet, it proved very successful in France during the First World War, and the ultimate defeat of Germany in 1918 added to its credit. Unsurprisingly, the text came again to be discussed during the Second World War.

These three sources are regularly mentioned in Stein’s other war writings. Before moving to their role in these texts, however, the addition of Stein’s “own private prediction” just after the mention of Sainte Odile must be commented on. This “private prediction” focuses on a “sign,” just like Sainte Odile’s: her point is to affect a meaning to a situation, to turn a state of facts into a prediction. It echoes the role given to signs and superstitions in “The Superstitions of Fred Anneday,” a short text from the late

---

17 Stein, “The Winner Loses,” 563.

18 Georges Stoffler, *La Prophétie de sainte Odile et la fin de la guerre, avec notes et commentaires, par Georges Stoffler* (Paris: Dorbon aîné, 1916).

1930s, later partly incorporated in the novel *Ida*: “What is superstition. Superstition is believing that something means anything and that anything means something and that each thing means a particular thing and will mean a particular thing is coming. Oh yes it does.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Ida* (published in 1941, but which Stein had begun in 1937), the main character keeps looking for signs and finding them; but although she recognises them, she never states what they mean: they are “empty” signs, that have no other value than to state there is some meaning somewhere, but never explicating that meaning. For example, “As she went she saw a nicely dressed little girl with a broken arm who threw a stone at a window. It was the little girl’s right arm that was broken. This was a sign.”<sup>20</sup> A sign of *what*? This is not told. But its mere existence seems soothing to *Ida*, as if it were enough to her that meanings existed. Signs are *meant* to be noticed, but they do not *mean* beyond their mere existence. This is to be compared to Stein’s chosen “own private prediction” here: a meaning (the end of the war) is associated to a sign (the box hedges in the garden being all pruned) and one just has to wait for the sign to occur—an occurrence which is, interestingly, tightly controlled by the prophetess herself, as she is the one gardening. This reversal, which appears as an ultimate rejection of Stein’s disdain of hermeneutics in *Ida* in favour of a hypersemanticism, must be read in the light of the war—and the fear it entails—but also in the light of the autobiographical quality of the war writings. *Ida* used autobiographical material but was subtitled “A Novel” and remained a third-person narrative. “The Winner Loses,” *Paris, France* and *Wars I Have Seen* are first-person testimonies, whose form is often very close to a diary. Their autobiographical quality is much less problematic than in

---

19 Qtd. in Gertrude Stein, *Ida: A Novel* (New Haven (Conn.): Yale University press, 2012), 243-44.

20 Stein, *Ida: A Novel*, 619.

*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (in which it is Toklas, not Stein, who says "I") and *Everybody's Autobiography*, whose title announces that the first person always verges on the impersonal. Stein's later texts are often regarded as less experimental; but, more importantly, the urgency of her war writings made them more direct and, very often, a rather straight-forward record of their daily life. In these works, signs and prophecies become a way to keep *faith* in the historical developments one wishes for. That Stein's "sign" was proven wrong, in the end, does not seem very important: what matters is that her little invention helped her while the time away. When Stein said to Toklas, about the predictions of the Curé of Ars and of Leonardo Blake, "They cannot all be wrong," the effect is quite similar. It suggests not a blind faith in the esoteric sources she consults, but rather a distanced, almost amused, use of them. Superstitions, in that light, have value only in that they are soothing in the present, not in that they are actually proven right in the future. Stein here is even below the level of what her former professor William James called "the will to believe,"<sup>21</sup> arguing that belief could and sometimes should predate proof and could even be a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. To Stein, the actual fulfilling is secondary. This is precisely because the writings under study, written not reflectively but in the course of the events, are concerned with the present, with daily life. Their narrative mode does not so much rely on interpreting signs but on noticing their presence, on making them up in order to find in them a soothing company.

---

21 William James, *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1897).

*Prophecies and repetition*

However, *Wars I Have Seen* in particular displays a secondary narrative mode which goes beyond the diary form and considers war as an abstract reality. Prophecies take on a quite different meaning in that case. When *Wars I Have Seen* was first published, its American publisher, Random House, presented it in an advertisement as a war testimony, almost as a journalistic text. It is true that, after the first few pages in which Stein ponders on the previous wars which she saw or heard of, the book is seemingly structured, at least partly, as a war chronicle. Stein accumulates local and daily anecdotes, focusing mostly on what they ate; and she regularly mentions a date as in passing (“and now here in June 1943...”) <sup>22</sup> although without strictly respecting the form of a diary. What matters here is that, even if the word “now” is often repeated, it remains hard to place exactly. This is partly due to the book’s exclusive focus on daily life; some major events of the war are mentioned (such as the Allied Invasion in Sicily) but they always appear secondary, and the effect produced is not that of a proper chronicle in which one may understand the progression of the war as an unfolding of events. It is rather a still life of sorts, in which the passing of time matters little.

This way of writing of food rather than politics is not, of course, politically neutral, and there would be much to say about Stein’s naivety and even ambiguities. One may suggest that the centrality given to habits, hence to everything that repeats itself, is a way for Stein to put the actual war at a distance. This, in particular, has been argued by feminist critics who were interested in war narrative by female writers. <sup>23</sup> Moreover, Stein’s interest in habit

---

22 Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, 39.

23 Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Liesl M. Olson,

can be traced back to her work with William James, the philosopher; and her relationship to repetition or, as she would rather have it, insistence, is well known. But this consideration of habit also leads her to consider war itself as something that repeats itself. The title she chose for this book, *Wars I Have Seen*, is telling: even though it becomes a narrative of the Second World War, it begins with a list of all the wars she has previously seen or, more importantly, heard of and read about. As any American writer would, she begins with the Civil War and to what her parents remembered of it; but she also mentions her readings: historical novels, Shakespeare's plays, and even a narrative of the Indian Mutiny in Jules Verne. It is through narrative, she explains, that war can become "real" to her. Of her childhood she writes: "During these years there was no war, and if there was, it was not any war of mine. But of course there was history, and there were novels, historical novels, and so there was, in a way, war all the time."<sup>24</sup>

By turning the war into a literary trope, Stein protects herself from it; it is something that belongs to books and stays in them. Her own war narrative can no longer be regarded as a chronicle: by writing about her war, she makes it a-temporal. It has reality as a narrative, not as an experience. But in so doing she also makes it abstract, in a way: all historical wars belong to the same general past, that of books, and being tropes they have hardly anything specific about them: "It is funny about wars, they ought to be different but they are not."<sup>25</sup> She goes so far as to write that "It is the soothing thing about history that it does repeat itself."<sup>26</sup> This can be related to what she writes of her as-

---

"Gertrude Stein, William James, and Habit in the Shadow of War," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 49.3 (2003): 328–59 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3175984>>.

24 Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, 7.

25 Ibid., 11.

26 Ibid., 96.

trological book: "the book of astrological predictions had predicted all these things, so we were all very satisfied."<sup>27</sup> Satisfaction comes from the confirmation that the book is right, not from the event itself (an allied victory); it is the "soothing" quality of history as a cycle.

In this light, one can reconsider Stein's use of prophecies. They are not so much meant to announce the future, but rather to claim that the future has always already happened, that it is going to be a mere re-writing of the past. "Re-writing," because the past repeats itself, and because it does so *in books*. Stein's understanding of history strangely reminisces of what is called the "typological reading" of the Scriptures: this mode of Biblical exegesis consisting in looking for "types" (archetypal figures or events) in the Old Testament, that are then repeated in the New Testament, and possibly afterwards. Typological reading was especially important for the Puritan founders of America, who related their own exile to that of the Hebrews and whose leaders compared themselves to Moses. Stemming from a Jewish family, Stein was not educated in Puritan theology, and there is no asserting that this parallelism was conscious on her part. However, as an American, she was out of necessity informed by this way of thinking and it is particularly striking that she comes to enact a similar narrative process as an American in exile. Through religious and non-religious sources, she secularises this particular reading of history, and it is probably no accident that she called the book by Leonardo Blake her "Bible."

As *Wars I Have Seen* progresses, the Biblical background becomes mythical: the reoccurrences of war times come to be presented as re-enactments of the story of Saint George slaying the dragon. By naming the saint, Stein refers to the Catholic version of an ancient myth, but by

---

27 Ibid., 177.

stating that Saint George can be replaced by any mythical hero, she eliminates the religious dimension. The myth is referred to in its barest form. "The dragon," she writes, is "the century," and each century has to be killed to let the new one be born. As for who slays the dragon, it does not really matter: Saint George, Siegfried, "anybody"; any myth will do, any hero; only types matter. "Saint George and the Dragon, Siegfried and the Dragon, anybody and the dragon, the dragon is always the century any century that anybody is trying to kill."<sup>28</sup> This fight against the dragon is the archetype of all wars, and wars have but one function, that of making modernity emerge. This is, once again, an endless cycle.

*Towards a philosophy of history*

There is, then, a contradictory movement: on the one hand, war is but the repetition of a pattern; on the other hand, it is what enables History to enter a linear progress towards an ever renewed modernity. In *Wars I Have Seen*, Stein defines war as a necessary part of each century, as a cyclical repetition that cannot be avoided. She personifies centuries and makes of each war the necessary "awkward age" of each of them, a crisis of sorts that marks the end of childhood and the entrance into adulthood, that is, modernity. That there were two major wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not seem to bother her. The first one proved insufficient to kill the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is why the second one was necessary: "The nineteenth century is taking from 1914 to 1943 to kill. It is hard to kill a century almost impossible."<sup>29</sup> That it can take two wars is a reminder that as soon as the dragon is slain, another one emerges, and that the fight for novelty is never to end. In a 1926 lecture given

---

28 Ibid., 16.

29 Ibid.



at Cambridge and Oxford, "Composition as Explanation," Stein stated that the First World War had been the catalyst for a decisive evolution of taste which had made possible the acceptance of her work.<sup>30</sup> In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932), however, she situates the actual emergence of literary modernity somewhat earlier, in her novella "Melanctha," the second story of *Three Lives*, her first published book, which appeared in 1906: "Gertrude Stein had written the story of Melanctha the negress, the second story of *Three Lives* which was the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature."<sup>31</sup> By 1946, it seems in *Wars I Have Seen*, she has come to consider that this "first definite step away" had not been enough to actually "kill" the nineteenth century. The metaphor has become more violent in the process: the point is no longer to walk smoothly from one era to the next, but to slay and to bear.

"Modernity is a fight": Henri Meschonnic's statement ("*la modernité est un combat*") could have been Stein's motto. By looking for signs—astrological signs, religious signs, signs of her own invention—Stein was actually making up types: tropes that repeat themselves from one era to the next. Prophecies do not actually announce the future: they are the making place of these types. Stein's use of them is presented as voluntarily naïve; but they are a *mise-en-abyme* of Stein's own way of abstracting herself from the war: arranging *signs* and *typing* them—the only daily life possible to her.

---

30 Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*, The Hogarth Essays (London: Hogarth Press, 1926).

31 Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1903-1932*, edited by Harriet Scott Chessman and Catharine R. Stimpson, Library of America (New York: Literary classics of the United States, 1998), 714.