In his Introduction to *The Yale Gertrude Stein*, Richard Kostelanetz says that 'no other twentieth-century American author had as much influence as Stein' (YGS, p. xxx). However, outside the growing body of academic Stein criticism, Gertrude Stein’s public presence, her reputation in any segment of the culture which is aware of her at all, seems to have little to do with her work. Unlike the writers and artists with whom she is generally grouped, she is still perceived as not so much a writer as a ‘personality’, the centre of one of those nodes of celebrity which are equated with the avant-garde in highbrow mythology. Moreover, the most widely accepted myth of the history of Stein’s reputation is less interested in *her*, even as a personality, than in her association with important men: William James, Picasso, Matisse, Apollinaire, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Wilder, Anderson. This myth begins its narrative with Stein at Harvard, working under James and Hugo Münsterberg. It follows her as she follows brother Leo to Paris and to the early joint purchases of the famous post-impressionist paintings, then to her friendships with Matisse, Picasso, Gris, and the other great male modern painters (Marie Laurencin might also be included these days, last name on the list).

It is easy to imagine a Hollywood Life of Gertrude Stein. We should see her walking through the Paris streets to sit for Picasso in Montmartre, as he painted the famous portrait. She would look pensive, observing the low life of Pigalle, registering the details which she would weave that night into the story of Melanctha. We would see her writing late at night in the atelier at the rue de Fleurus, surrounded by The Paintings; the camera would pan to the Cézanne portrait on the wall and then down to the French schoolchild’s composition book in front of her, where the words of *Melanctha* would be scribbled rapidly by her so greatly inspired hand. Almost
every biography of Stein, including her own in the voice of Alice Toklas, from which so many of the rest derive, evokes these scenes—Great Moments of Modern Culture—aglow with the sheen of idealised memory.

The myth continues its narrative with the growing fame of the Steins’ paintings, the establishment of the Saturday Evenings at the atelier at 27 rue de Fleurus as the most important salon in Paris, the cultural centre of the Western world. As we move through time we see a new generation of post-war American expatriates flocking to Paris (somehow they always flock) and congregating around Gertrude and Alice. We see Gertrude influencing their writing and dubbing them, via Hemingway, ‘lost’. The myth jumps another ten years to 1932, when Gertrude writes Alice’s famous Autobiography—she has been writing steadily all this time but the myth doesn’t think it has amounted to much—goes home to America for the first time in thirty years and is a great success: now that she is famous, says the myth, she can drop the defensive posture of unintelligibility and make sense for a change.

In another ten years she dies, widely loved if not entirely respected, with her last words resuscitating the devotion of her post-1932 admirers: ‘What is the answer?’ she asks on her deathbed. ‘But then what is the question?’ she replies. That dying statement is an ideal summation and apotheosis of Gertrude Stein in the terms of an official myth, with its stoic courage and devotion to the pursuit of truth, its aphoristic abstraction and epistemological honesty. It has echoes of both William James and eternity, and is such a perfect climax to the Hollywood Life of Gertrude Stein that it is difficult to believe she actually said it, until one remembers her own late concern with public self-creation.

In spite of this myth, it is Stein’s work, much more importantly than her influential friendships, that one might think would locate her at the centre of modern literary and intellectual history. To survey the movements with which Stein’s work affiliates her is to survey twentieth-century Western culture. Her encoding of lesbian sexual feeling in her experimental work, her undoing of patriarchal portraiture in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the buried anger at female victimisation in *Three Lives*, and her overall, lifelong commitment to freeing language from the hierarchical grammars of patriarchy have made her profoundly important to contemporary feminist experimental writers, represented in journals such as *HOWever* in San Francisco, and to critics working from both