From Habit to Maxim: Eccentric Models of Reality and Presence in the Writing of Gertrude Stein

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"Transcendence" stands for what subsists, stands behind, and provides a continuing reality to phenomena. The equivalent of "transcendence," for Gertrude Stein, was "continuous present," a term she used in various ways and used to produce many maxims of thinking, writing and art—maxims ranging from the seemingly obvious to the awkward and counter-intuitive. In "Plays," Stein writes "The business of Art . . . is to live in the actual present, that is the completely actual present, and to completely express that completely actual present" (*Lectures in America*, 104-5). She is referring us here to "Composition as Explanation," where she associates the "continuous present" with "beginning again" and "using everything." Stein seems to be aiming at a kind of pure horizontality here—without the vertical, everything is equally related to everything else, and each moment of composition completely different from the previous one—but at the same time, completely the same, except for the composition. The horizontality of the continuous present (perhaps it would be better, and even more Steinian, to say "continuous presencing") can replace the vertical because Stein's horizontality is not the horizontality of symmetrical desires in the confrontational stance prior to the deferral effected by the sign; rather, it is the horizontality of that instant on the originary scene prior to its closure, where the only thing sustaining the sign is the incalculable possibility that some next member will take it up. The symmetry of the participants at this instant is exactly the same as in the previous instant, when they were poised to annihilate themselves and each other, except for the composition, that slight rerouting of the gesture through its visibility. As Stein says, "The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything" (*Writings and Lectures* 24).

In other words, the continuous present doesn't exist outside of the activity of sustaining it, whereas transcendence implies an existence apart from that activity. I will explore this distinction by addressing Stein's maxims, or at least what I will read as her maxims. I take a maxim to be a statement on the boundary between the declarative and the imperative, a

generalizable claim which can only be grasped and assessed through some singular practice, a practice advised or urged by the maxim itself. So, in "Plays," Stein asserts that "The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience" (*Lectures* 93). Stein suggests that finding this out "makes one think endlessly about plays" (93), and one could see that the only way of making sense of such a maxim would be to inhabit oneself as a spectator in some play and hypothesize that moment in which one's emotions were "syncopated." The problem with the maxim is that the advice it would give us seems to skip a step—you will know that your emotion is, to continue with Stein's discussion, "always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening" once you have decided to make sense of your emotion during the play in precisely those terms: there is no difference between being syncopated and knowing you are syncopated. In other words, Stein's maxims do not posit a mode of "verification" that could be shared.

This direct route to the ostensive, bypassing a shared mode of verification is very well illustrated in the following anecdote:

> Ms. Stein, the story goes, was giving a lecture at a prestigious Eastern university. In the discussion period following her lecture, a young man and woman, college students, arose to ask a question. They were respectful. They were earnest. They were holding hands.
>
> "Miss Stein," the young man said, "you write books that are very hard to understand. Many of us have worked hard at trying to understand your writing, and we still find it a puzzle. Can you tell us please what you are trying to say?"
>
> "Well," said Ms. Stein after thinking a moment, "what I'm saying is that everything changes and everything stays the same."
>
> The young man and woman reddened and smiled nervously at each other.
>
> "Miss Stein," the young man said again, "if you will forgive us, that's just what we mean. Nothing changes and nothing stays the same. What does *that* mean?"
>
> "No," Ms. Stein said, "not nothing changes and nothing stays the same. *Everything* changes and *everything* stays the same."
>
> "But what does it mean"?
>
> "Well, take you two, for instance," Ms. Stein said. "You are a perfect example of this."

> And then she sat down.

Stein, first of all, corrects the students, insisting on the difference between "everything changes and everything stays the same" and "nothing changes and nothing stays the same," regardless of their reversibility, and then answers the students' request for meaning by "pointing" to them as a "perfect example of this." A perfect example, presumably, of what "everything changes and everything stays the same" means. In a sense, Stein complies with the normal grammar of the "example" here—presumably, we ask for examples when the declarative statement is insufficient. But the students have asked for a second declarative statement, not an example—they apparently don't understand the first statement well enough to know what would count as an example, or to use an example to supplement their understanding. The general statement, in other words, is too idiosyncratic to go right to an example from. But that, then, is what Stein is insisting upon—finding your way from the idiosyncratic statement to, not only an example, but yourself as an example, and yourself as an example insofar as you want to, but cannot yet, make sense of that idiosyncratic statement. That is, the students are a perfect example of "everything changes and everything stays the same" insofar as they are poised to find the right way to look at themselves as exemplary and thereby do everything differently by looking at what they are doing. And finding yourself—always finding yourself—to be a perfect example of everything changes and everything stays the same would be something you could think about endlessly.

To take another example: in "What are Masterpieces and why are there so few of them," Stein contends that "the essence of being a genius is to be able to talk and listen to listen while talking and talk while listening" (*Writings and Lectures* 148). Again, the problem is, what can one do with this? This is Stein's way of speaking about the difference between human nature, or identity, and the human mind, responsible for creation—masterpieces, products of the human mind, sustain the continuous present, there is no remembering or consideration of any audience: "If you do not remember while you are writing, it may seem confused to others but actually it is clear and eventually that clarity will be clear, that is what a masterpiece is, but if you remember while you are writing it will seem clear at the time to any one but the clarity will go out of it that is what a masterpiece is not" (Writings 152). So, a masterpiece is something one enters by stepping outside of everything else—when you are outside of the masterpiece it is not clear, even if it seems clear, but when you are inside the space or continuous present composed by the masterpiece it is clear. How this presumed unity of vision with the creator, where both will experience the same thing, but that same thing will be incommunicable to anyone outside of that space while not needing to be communicated to anyone in it, can't be explained any more than the way we recognize someone we know can, or needs to be, explained.

The argument makes sense, then, but the maxim—the essence of being a genius is to be able to talk and listen to listen while talking and talk while listening—may not. It's hard to

read it metaphorically because it's hard to get a sense of what it would mean literally. Even if the one talking is the same as the one listening—and that Stein is not merely referring to the process of thought here is made evident by her observation elsewhere that it is a very difficult thing "to listen to anything and everything in the same way any one is telling anything and at the same time while you are listening to be telling inside yourself and outside yourself anything that is happening everything that is anything" (*Narration* 34) —how could one talk *while* listening and listen *while* talking. The expression of simultaneity here makes enough sense for us to see that it can't make "complete" sense—you could try and listen while you are talking and talking while you are listening and by noticing that the listening always comes just after the talking, imagine the possibility of "catching up" and attaining what would be an originary experience of language: that is, an experience of language that is simultaneously ostensive and a model for other experiences. This possible experience would be known as such after the fact, in the internal balancing of the sentence that would be an event of knowing in itself: "And in knowing anything you know it as you know it, you know it at the time you are knowing it and in that way the way of knowing it" (20).

Stein's focus on grammar and the sentence enables us to make the distinction between transcendence and the continuous present on that level as well. A sentence effects transcendence if it makes us stand before a reality that is, at least until the end of the uttering of that sentence, beyond the power of any imperative to alter. I would propose calling this a sentence organized around a commanding name: a noun, a subject, that has its own substance to be unfolded in the predication—the name is commanding in the sense that the object world or field of semblances it opens up is invulnerable to our grasping, at least insofar as we "understand" the sentence. Reality is transcendence embodied, and it is in the grammatically correct sentence that this embodiment is registered. A sentence participates in continuous presence, on the other hand, insofar as it puts forth grammatical possibilities that it doesn't itself exhaust—in Stein's style, the grammar of presence includes, as has been often noted, rhythm, alliteration, internal dialogues regarding the composition of a sentence ("stage directions," so to speak),

> sentences repeated over and over again, sometimes with very slight modifications, the organization of patches of discourse around relative and demonstrative pronouns, sentences in which the same word can be both subject and direct object and subject of another sentence, and so on. The idea is to generate as many grammatical possibilities as possible, and to sustain the text by realizing as many of those possibilities as possible while not exhausting them and continuing to generate more.

Let's return to the vertical-less originary scene I posited earlier: rather than transcendence

embedded in but beyond and above the central object, we have the participants on the scene arrayed in relation to the central object. Instead of seeing or intuiting something through the object, each participant sees everyone else as equidistant from the object. Not literally equidistant, but equally likely, or unlikely, to abandon their equipoise and reverse the reversal of their adoption of the aborted gesture of appropriation—"meaning" is everyone stripped of every intention other than to convey their acceptance of the gesture with as much certainty as possible. We could call the resentment of the center this view of everyone dispossessing themselves of everything that might suggest a renewed striving toward the appropriation of the object—each participant takes on the resentment of the center by seeing everyone else as equidistant from that center, which is the way the center itself would have it.

In this equipoise and equidistance we can see a grammar of the scene—the gestures put forth by all members of the group would not be identical, even if they are all imitating the same gesture. This is because each not only imitates but inflects and accentuates from their own position on the scene: someone who was about to grab a chunk would have to sign differently than one who was engaged in the beginnings of combat with another, and a third member, who was lagging behind, would have yet another way of signing on. The scene is the articulation of all these gestures, and the transition into the sparagmos, towards consuming the object without renewing the mimetic crisis, would likewise require a continued articulation and calibration of this array of gestures. Even more, all the possible gestures and expressions in the pre-human repertoire of the group and of each member undergo a similar "abstraction"—that is, whatever any member could do "naturally" can now be broken down into a collection of gestures that can be combined in various ways. Continuous presencing, then, is sustaining the resentment of the center by maximally abstracting all elements of language, from the most elemental phonemes and morphemes to sheer grammatical connections devoid of meaning (for example, using a noun that rarely is used adjectivally as an adjective, and using it to modify a noun that is the nominalization of a adjective never used that way, and selecting for this operation two words without any discernable relation to each other in any combination, presents the articulation of noun and adjective without the interference of the "commanding name" embedded in an already shared and connoted reality).

I assume that Stein's practices have an esthetic value in themselves, but my interests here lie in the way they open up language so as to generate the idiosyncratic maxims that I have been looking at, maxims advising us to make our relation to language originary. So, let's work through a little of what we might call Stein's agrammatical writing and see how we might hypothesize a mode of thinking drawing upon this originary relation. This is from Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, Part 3, Stanza VII:

By it by which by it
As not which not which by it

For it it is in an accessible with it
But which will but which will not it
Come to be not made not made one of it
By that all can tell all call for in it
That they can better call add
Can in add none add it.
It is not why she asked that anger
In an anger can they be frightened
Because for it they will be which in not
Not now.
Who only is not now.
I can look at a landscape without describing it. (76)The first six lines all end with “it.” Not only that, but these lines are concerned throughout for “it.” The sixth line ends with “call for in it,” and then the seventh line ends with “call add”—so, “call” brings us from “it” to “add,” which dominates the next, eighth line: “can in add none add it.” The next two lines then concern “anger.” So, some “it” is at the center of these lines, and “it” had something to do with “calling,” “adding” and “anger”—perhaps the anger concerns adding and calling *it*, or not adding and calling *it*. We have a repetition in the first line, as “by it” precedes and follows “by which”—this might also be read as a dialogue, with “by it” answering the question “by which?” following the initial “by it.” “By it” recurs again in the second line, this time following what also could be a little dialogue by interlocutors with the objects in question close at hand—”as not” (as a response or qualification to “by it” from the first line), then “which not,” which could be either a question (“which is not”?) or an emphatic repetition (not just that it isn’t, but that it won’t be), and then “which by it” which we could divide into two pieces of speech (another question—”which?”—with the answer “by it”), or read the second *which* as emphasizing the “which not” relative to “as not,” with the concluding “by it” an insistence on the basic point here, which shouldn’t be confused with any other point. On this reading, the fragments would all work as gestures, questions and commands, to look, distinguish, negate, insist.

It is also possible to read the sentences as generating noun and adjectival phrases out of fragments: so, “Come to be not made not made one of it” could be parsed in terms of the phrase “come to be” (perhaps an imperative, even a prayer, perhaps abbreviated description)—”not made” is the direct object of “be” (come to be not made) and “not made one of it” either an adverbial modification of “not made” or an answer to an implied question (not made how? Or in what sense?—not made one of it). The focus is still on “it,” as something that in one way or another is not readily available. The next line, “By that all can tell all call for in it” begins with an intelligible phrase (By that all can tell—with the only problem being that we have no more idea of the “that” than the “it”); all call for… if we stop here, we can make sense of this as a collective demand for “it,” but the sentence then continues agrammatically—but if we can already anticipate the “it” why do we need it? The “in” interrupts here, but adds a couple of possibilities—if we break it up into questions,

commands and gestures, perhaps the possibility that the one calling, or those calling, are actually “in” it; or “in it” is working as a noun, and/or a new adverbial phrase is created—”for in it,” which would modify “called.” Again, though, there is some gathering around an object, and the fluidity of the grammatical possibilities can present the growing intensity of attention paid while deferring the closure of any representation of that object.

To jump to the last line, Stein here might be looking at a landscape without describing it, if we take description to comprise an articulation of commanding names that anchor transcendence in a sustained reality. “That they can better,” sets up the introduction of some preferable course of action, while “call add” suggests several possible courses—call some action “add,” perhaps all the references to “it” can be called adding, adding to the attention paid, the details noted; perhaps “add” modifies “call,” referring to a way of calling additively. “Can in add”—can something in adding…; or perhaps a verb phrase, with “in add” something one can do—and then “none add,” so the sequence of calling and adding seems to reject adding calling or calling adds. Then, to abbreviate, “anger” and “fright” take over the center of the stanza; anger seems to cut off some “asking,” and that anger leads to being frightened is either questioned or asserted—”In an anger can they be frightened.” Then, a return to “it,” linked insistently with “not”—the calling and adding which perhaps led to the anger and fear concludes with a negation of the “it” at the center—the description had been refused, but not necessarily the partial gestures that could be articulated into a description—the calling, adding, asking, pointing, even the anger and fear.

I have suggested two ways of making sense of Stein’s agrammaticality in passages such as the above—one, as declarative sentences interrupted by ostensive gestures (marked by deictics), imperatives and interrogatives; two, as the creation of novel verb, adjectival and adverbial phrases which create a liminal, evanescent reality—we could imagine, in the course of reading Stein’s text sympathetically, “calling… for in it,” with “for in it” representing some condition for which we could summon up a minimal sense of reality, but could not really remember. This liminal reality is only available to the extent one enters the continuous presence set up by the text. The same is true of another very characteristic Steinian move, setting up the trappings of an extended comparison but without the “substance,” that is, a background reality that would anchor the compared or contrasted items. The question then becomes how much the form of the comparison can generate that sense of “likeness” or “difference.” For example:

It is to be asked does he do it because he prefers country to country or does he do it because he prefers morning to afternoon. Does he do it because he prefers pieces to pieces or does he do it because he prefers one to one. Does he do it because he prefers smaller to larger or does he do it for the purpose of not yet. Does he do it because it is at least as well or does he do it because he is delighted…. (*A Novel of Thank You* 44)Here, we would have to acknowledge the possibility of sufficient semantic space within the words “country” and “one” to make it possible to prefer country to country and one to one; but not enough space

to allow for different words or even adjectives distinguishing one kind of country or one from another; we further need to imagine equivalences between the contrast between country and country, on the one hand, and morning and afternoon, on the other; between "smaller to larger" on the one hand and "the purpose of not yet," on the other. And some kind of continuity, due to the symmetrical placement, between morning to afternoon, one to one, the purpose of not yet, because he is delighted, and so on. However one composes these possible connections, the purpose seems to be to ensure their unsustainability outside of the work of composition.

So, what kind of contribution does this, what I am calling an originary relation to language, make to thinking? It keeps language on the threshold of feeling and sense and facilitates idiosyncratic observations, on the boundary between ultra-literalism and very stretched metaphoricity. For example, Stein keeps repeating in *Everybody's Autobiography* that there is "no sky" in America, "just air"—we can make some sense of this, sky is verticality whereas air is horizontality, and this would line up with much else Stein says about America in distinction from Europe; but there is an experiential immediacy to the phrase as well, which is used to describe her perception of New York in particular. And the idiosyncratic observations, to which we can give a paradoxical name like "literal allegories," generate eccentric maxims, like the definition of genius I opened the essay with. Within Stein's discourse we can posit a relation to language wherein language is both coming *from* and coming *to* us—we are listening and talking at the same time, on the condition that the subject doing the talking and listening is removed from the scene, and with her or him the anchor to transcendence in reality. The model of thinking that would result would be a marginalist, minimal one—thinking proceeding by subtracting or adding the smallest thing possible from or to a stream of habits and discourse, a subtraction or addition that insists that everything is the same by making everything different. Such thinking confers sacrality on language itself, as the means by which we sustain the infinite field of semblances, or reality, by modeling language on the sign/object complementarity constitutive of everything we see.

Stein's own most sustained instance of methodical thinking is *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*—it is here that we can see how Stein's thinking actually progresses and accumulates results. She focuses on what is a recognizable "philosophical" question, and one that even seems close to the relation between transcendence and immanence, noumena and phenomena, and other easily recalled metaphysical binaries. Here is how she sets up the question:

Let us not talk about disease but about death. If nobody had to die how would there be room enough for any of us who now live to have now lived. We never could have been if all the others had not died. There would have been no room.

> Now the relation of human nature to the human mind is this.

> Human nature does not know this.
>
> Human nature cannot know this.
>
> What is it that human nature does not know. Human nature does not know that if everyone did not die there would be no room for those of us who live now.
>
> Human nature cannot know this.
>
> Now the relation of human nature to the human mind is this.
>
> Human nature cannot know this.
>
> But the human mind can. It can know this. (53)

Right before this staging of the question, in the opening lines of the book, Stein wrote:

> In the month of February were born Washington Lincoln and I.
>
> These are ordinary ideas. If you please these are ordinary ideas.

And right after:

> In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is.
>
> This is what makes America what it is.

We have several loosely connected gestures here. Stein begins by signaling her historical importance and equivalence to other immortals like Washington and Lincoln—is she important like them because she was born in February like them, or will her importance come to be recognized by her being placed in the pantheon of important Americans born in February (it is easy to imagine pictures on a grade school classroom during February, with Stein's picture alongside Washington's and Lincoln's). Then she slips immediately into an informal, conversational tone, as if in the middle of a friendly argument over how arcane or accessible the ideas she is about to present are. The discussion seems to be emerging out of a Stein-centric private world, on the boundary between that private world and the public world she has recently been engaging (*The Geographical History* was written shortly after, and incorporated reflections upon, Stein's tour of America, including her lecture series and her enjoyment of her celebrity following the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*).

At any rate, we can reframe Stein's argument easily enough: human nature is that in us that can't see beyond our own death; the human mind is that of us which can see our own death as the creation of space for the ongoing renovation of human life. The repetitive form in

which the argument is presented is simply the process of thinking in writing—as Stein noted repeatedly, whenever we hear or think of a new idea we repeat it, and we enjoy repeating it. The repetition must be part of making it our idea. Moreover, there is a positive yield to the repetition, because the same sentences are repeated with "can" first of all replacing "does" and "does" then replacing "can"—so, each "faculty" is defined in terms of its capability. This is clearly a result of repetition in general—with successive repetitions different words stand out and suggest other possibilities.

Stein then proceeds by repeating the contrast between human nature and the human mind, each time with different attributes attached to each, and each time embedded in some local, biographical, momentary, often obscure context that is itself attached to the distinction. Once you have a new distinction, the question that follows is "what about…?"—that is, how do other distinctions and ideas take on new meanings as a result? Some of the distinctions are more certain: "identity," for example, and "remembering" are unequivocally associated with "human nature," as is "speaking," while "writing" is unquestionably "human mind." In other cases, things are unclear, and Stein's views sometimes change as the discussion goes on, without necessarily signaling the change. "Individualism that is human nature and the human mind communism that is human nature and the human mind and why do they go on saying so and not" (55). Early on, then, Stein is not sure where to catalogue "individualism" and "communism" (they are both later deposited in "human nature")—the discussion of them has not yet ended (they go on saying so and not).

Human mind is continuous presencing and human nature is sequenced presents—for the sequenced present the sign emitted on the previous scene completely encloses that scene, and so the sequenced present is representation: the representation of a prior, remembered scene from a later one. Representation, then, like transcendence, matches the scene up with the sign; presencing is interested in sustaining simultaneity across successive scenes—something on each scene co-exists with something on the next scene, and so on, so that if those somethings are articulated, regardless of their original scenic context, then no boundary separates one scene from another, at least from the standpoint of the scene upon which one continuously presences. So, a lot of Stein's repetitions can be seen as the carrying over of grammatical, semantic and even phonetic elements from one "scene," or in this case sentence or paragraph, to another. A phrase like "what is the use of being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man" keeps getting iterated in different contexts and in slightly different forms, as a way of distinguishing what the human mind can and does know and what human nature doesn't and can't.

Similarly, along with the repetition of "does x have anything to do with the relation between human nature and the human mind," human mind and human nature can be plugged into other opposites and it can be asked whether the relation between human mind and human nature has anything to do with them. This includes the features of writing and composition themselves, so the status of chapters, and whether one needs them, and whether they need

to follow each other if one does need them, and whether one has them follow each other even if they need not follow each other all are drawn into the discourse and, indeed, there are chapters but they don't follow each other in any conventional way. The process of writing then become a continuous presencing of the distinction between human mind and its continual abstractions and rearrangements, on the one hand, and the expectations, questions and habits of human nature, on the other hand.

Thinking as continuous presencing is also possible on the mimetic level of the normative grammatical sentence. Names, events, descriptions, and relations can be subjected to the same process of abstraction and articulation through iteration. In Stein's later work, carried out in more realist or representational forms, as in the novels *Ida* and *Mrs. Reynolds*, she constructs central characters for whom everything is essentially spread out or distanced equally, who are largely passive within broader movements, who are both attentive and oblivious, self-sufficient, attractive, and loving simultaneously—we might see them as delineations of human nature as seen by human mind, and it produces a kind of eventless narration and flattened prose style that paradoxically requires a whim to complete itself. Here's a fairly representative passage from *Mrs. Reynolds*:

Mrs. Reynolds said to Mr. Reynolds that there was no difference between slowly and quickly, if anything was done slowly then they were impatient that it was not happening more quickly and when it was being done quickly then they were impatient because it was being done too quickly. Yes said Mr. Reynolds perhaps Joseph Lane is right in not knowing the difference between being awake and asleep and if he is, Mr. Reynolds grunted. Yes said Mrs. Reynolds when I was young and I read that a man gave a grunt when somebody said something to him I did not believe that he really did grunt, but now said Mrs. Reynolds I do, and Mr. Reynolds gave a grunt and said it was time to go to bed and he was right it was time to go to bed. (208-9).So, there is no difference between slowly and quickly because there is impatience either way, and in this case impatience must refer to nothing more than anything that evades the orbit of habit; but habit wouldn't be habit without all these surrounding causes of impatience. Everything is the same while everything changes. Then we have what appears a kind of parallel observation within an incomplete sentence ("and if he is")—if all we have is impatience no matter what, why bother knowing the difference between being awake and asleep; presumably you can be either awake or asleep, or alternate between the states, without knowing it. That might make one oblivious, but at the same time it would be sheer "being." Mr. Reynolds grunts which reminds Mrs. Reynolds of something she read when she was young and it confirms what she had previously disbelieved—which, in turn, was a statement that can be read both singularly and generally: "a man gave a grunt when somebody said something to him" can apply equally to one man who grunted to one thing one other person said to him or to all men when anyone says anything to them (as in, "a man knows when he's had enough"). We can see Stein's love of the word "any" here, insofar as "any" both singularizes and universalizes: "anyone can see that" both singles out the one who will see and leaves that position open. And then it's time

to go to bed, at least according to Mr. Reynolds, who is right.

Stein's is a thinking of "anyness," then, and this articulation of singularity and universality is the space of love, which is what ultimately holds the abstracted grammatical elements together—as Mrs. Reynolds's seemingly arbitrary deference to Mr. Reynolds completes the passage I just examined. Love, on the grammatical level, is collocation, or the making of indivisible verbal units above the level of the word—the creation of idioms, in other words. It is the breakdown of grammatical, semantic, and phonemic articulations that makes idiomatic constructions possible—only in that way can words be unmoored from their habitual orbits and enter unanticipated connections. A good idiom, we might say, is an articulation of words that appear random to anyone outside the space of the idiom, and increasingly necessary, to the point of being self-evident, to the extent you have entered the space of its use and exchange, to the point of participating in its creation. In the idiomatic space we oscillate between strained, awkward, seemingly patched-together declaratives, and imperatives and ostensives that one either gets or doesn't.

There is a very specific kind of social and even political thinking yielded by the collocations of anyness. Stein's "Reflection on the Atom Bomb" is exemplary here:

They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it.I like to read detective and mystery stories. I never get enough of them but whenever one of them is or was about death rays and atomic bombs I never could read them. What is the use, if they are really as destructive as all that there is nothing left and if there is nothing there nobody to be interested and nothing to be interested about. If they are not as destructive as all that then they are just a little more or less destructive than other things and that means that in spite of all destruction there are always lots left on this earth to be interested or to be willing and the thing that destroys is just one of the things that concerns the people inventing it or the people starting it off, but really nobody else can do anything about it so you have to just live along like always, so you see the atomic [bomb] is not at all interesting, not any more interesting than any other machine, and machines are only interesting in being invented or in what they do, so why be interested. I never could take any interest in the atomic bomb, I just couldn't any more than in everybody's secret weapon. That it has to be secret makes it dull and meaningless. Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it's the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. Alright, that is the way I feel about it. They think they are interested about the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting.

Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural. This is a nice story.

Stein here makes a radical anti-millennial argument, regarding the event that, tied to the Holocaust, would herald a whole new secular millennialism in the post-war world. Stein likes to read detective stories that remain within the terms of human beings committing specific, limited acts upon other human beings—maybe that's why she likes to read them. Once something completely destructive enters, the story is no longer interesting. There is a fairly familiar narrative principle at work here—nothing in the story can be bigger than the story. It's an anti-metaphysical principle as well: no concept, whether it is some variation on "History," or "Progress," "Salvation," or the "Good" can be bigger than the story itself—once one of these concepts tells us how things have to turn out, how can the story be interesting?

Stein's rejection of utopian thinking reinforces this "anyness" mode of thinking:

I was then already skeptical about Utopias, naturally so, I liked habits but I did not like that habits should be known as mine. Habits like dogs dogs have habits but they do not like to be told about their habits, and the only way to have a utopia is not only to have habits but to be liked to be told about those habits and this I did not like. I can remember very well not liking to be told that I had habits. (*Wars I Have Seen* 12)Your habits and mine might intersect and overlap in all kinds of ways and we might create shared idioms out of all of that, but being told that one has habits by another assumes that attending to those habits through another's observations could lead to changes in those habits according to that observer's evaluation—and underneath every habit that is thereby noted, another one, even more deeply rooted, can be pointed to. Habits can change, and we can change one another's habits, but only by entering and participating in them through those intersections and overlappings with our own.

Those who find the atomic bomb interesting must do so because they are not interested in what is happening—or maybe they are only interested in the end of what is happening, in the possibility that the event will transcend itself. For Stein, it seems to be theoretically possible that something could be bigger than habits and happenings insofar as it could destroy the entire world. But what would there be to say about that? We can talk about how to make sure that doesn't happen, and it's not clear why Stein says that there's nothing anyone could do about that, but how could our language, which only addresses what human beings can do to each other, address something that would be bigger than that? Whatever arguments we can have about how to resolve violent and potentially violent situations will be incommensurable to the destruction of the situation as such—to the extent that we can reduce or control violence, we can do so, and can only do so, on terms that don't posit an event that would be beyond even violence. If we think about it in terms of the originary scene, the glimpse of the possibility of the destruction of the group must be what makes the emission of the sign possible, but by the time we would be in the midst of that cataclysm itself the sign would be of no use. We can use signs to defer that ultimate violence insofar as that ultimate violence lies beyond presentation or representation.

And the way to lessen the likelihood of that event that would end all events is, anyway, to get interested in is the "living"—both in its nominal and participial sense. Even in the event of an atomic war, I take Stein to be saying, there would be the living—they would find ways to survive, to go on, to reconstruct social life, and all of that would be interesting, not the destruction. To put it another way, our attraction to the ultimate violence is our attraction to a sacrifice that will end all sacrifices, and Stein's thinking is resolutely anti-sacrificial. There is always something you could add or subtract or recombine in any field of events to keep it going and proliferating—there is never a need to make the center present as such, because the presence of the center is precisely in the "grammatical" arrangements of the periphery. Find the smallest thing to change that will have the biggest effect, or the biggest change that will have the least effect.

The collapse of the global financial system we were encouraged to fear in the fall of 2008 would have been worse than the collapse of a single bank, if it had occurred; it would probably have been worse than the largest string of failures we have ever seen. But would it have been qualitatively different, a kind of unimaginable sublime, or an event we could model based on smaller and more familiar versions? I take Stein's answer to be the latter—the bigger the catastrophe the more quickly the human mind would get to work miniaturizing it, cushioning it, finding new places to build and create in its wake; at the same time, human nature would aggravate, exploit and unwittingly deepen it. But the living would outlast the apocalyptic; or it wouldn't. In the former case, the living is what would turn out to have been interesting all along. In the latter case, what would there be to talk about anyway?

The most powerful way of engaging the originary hypothesis, in this case, would be to forget the catastrophe that was narrowly averted, to transform every trace of its possibility into a sign of its unrepresentability, to abstract and articulate every gesture of deferral in as many ways as possible. Desires can be converted into happiness by turning objects of desire into means of personal ostentation, and this can be done by turning anyone's attention to the origins of desire in some (mistaken) gesture in which the model and object are inscribed and confused—that gesture can always be articulated with others in a new idiom, with its own generative resources. For this kind of practice and habit, this kind of ostensive gesture toward the ostensivity of the gesture and its strained inter-articulation with other gestures, Stein's continuous presencing within language will always be a model. Perhaps that is a relation between the Human Mind and Human Nature.

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