

## Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 11 (2018)

Records of Contingency: Forms and Media



### Contingency as Medium in Gertrude Stein

*Christine Savinel*

doi: [10.12681/syn.20892](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.20892)

Copyright © 2019, Christine Savinel



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

## Contingency as Medium in Gertrude Stein

Christine Savinel

### Abstract

Gertrude Stein questions the event as an external and contingent accident, to be at least subsumed within the continuum of thinking —the untimely flux of interior meditation and creation. Throughout her prolific production, one of Stein's major attempts was to do away with the event in literature, to dispense with it, to play against it. Stein pointedly selected as her topic the contingency of life within historical time, in her several autobiographical texts from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) to *Wars I Have Seen* (1944). *Wars I Have Seen* proves to be a singular work which helps us realise the process through which Stein resists historical contingency. As this essay argues, *Wars I Have Seen* gives us a remarkable vision of Stein trying to resist the pressure of History, and a vision of literature trying to hold at bay the contingency of events.

During her tour of America in 1934-1935, Stein gave four lectures at the University of Chicago, which came to be published under the common title *Narration*. She never ascribed specific titles to any of them, but Alice Toklas mentioned that Stein had provisional titles in mind, of which, most interestingly, the one for the third lecture was "Is History Narrative," and for the fourth one "Is History Literature." Regarding narrative, Stein writes: "Narrative is what anybody has to say in any way about anything that can happen has happened will happen in any way." (*Narration* 31) In this definition, she carelessly or carefully mixes past and future events, as well as facts with possibility. There seem to concur here a touch of Nietzsche's criticism of historical time and Benjamin's questioning of the very possibility for a continuous narrative of history. In Stein, this questioning takes the form of a criticism of the event as an external and contingent accident, to be at least subsumed within the continuum of thinking —the untimely flux of interior meditation and creation.

Throughout her prolific production, one of Stein's major attempts was to do away with the event in literature, to dispense with it, to play against it. In her essay "What are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them" (1935), she writes:

“[...] what is happening is not really interesting, one knows it by radios cinemas newspapers biographies autobiographies until what is happening is not really interesting” (*Writings* 357). Thus events can prove eventually uninteresting, and all the more so since they are recorded in a temporality which can never coincide with the present time of their occurrence. We find a more general and still more Steinian phrasing of the same idea in *The Geographical History of America*: “The newspapers tell about events but what have events to do with anything nothing nothing I tell you nothing events have nothing to do with anything nothing [...]” (95). In this book, Stein differentiates human nature from the human mind, events having to do with human nature, with what happens, the outside, while creation, invention and literature pertain to the human mind. As to the genius, such as defined by Stein for herself —as well as for Picasso and a very few others—, he or she is the one who can still be listening to the murmur of events outside while being predominantly occupied with the telling inside. Thinking about the event led Stein to question the relation between history and literature:

You can see it is difficult very difficult that history can ever come to be literature. But it would be so very interesting if it could be so very interesting. [...] it is a more difficult thing to write history to make it anything than to make anything that is anything be anything because in history you have everything [...]” (*Narration* 54)

By “everything” Stein means everything that happens and which comes to us through multiple intermediate forms, hence a kind of saturation that cannot be translated into the creative work as “anything.” Further on in the same fourth lecture in *Narration*, she establishes a parallel between history and what she calls “detective stories,” an analogy which may somehow enlighten us on her conception of the event. Stein always felt a certain fascination for detective stories, and she herself wrote both crime fiction and essays on it. Her persistent interest has to do first with the possibility of a radical narrative disruption caused by the crime itself, as it brings historical time to a violent stop and suspension, to the benefit of a time of thinking (the investigation).<sup>1</sup> Most important to Stein, the crime occurs before the narration itself begins. She makes her point in “What are Master-pieces”:

[...] the only really modern novel form that has come into existence gets rid of human nature by having the man dead to begin with the hero is dead to begin with and so you have so to speak got rid of the event before the book begins. [...] In real life people are interested in the crime more than they are in detection [...] but in the story it is the detection that holds the interest [...] it is another function that has very little to do with human nature that makes the detection interesting. And so always it is true that the master-piece has nothing to do with human nature or with identity, it has to do with the human mind and the entity that is with a thing in itself and not in relation. (358)

For Stein, death at the beginning altogether eliminates the event, historical time, and human nature (including identity), to be replaced by detection, untimely speculation and the human mind (entity). We realise how that type of crime story structure may have presented itself as a sort of ready-made pattern for her own vision of a partition between human nature and the human mind, external event and the inner flow of thought. She merely had to move from the sequential order of event and speculation in the crime story to her own spatial representation of the creative gesture. This shift to her own writing, however, entails an inevitable return of life, that is of relation, and of external necessity—what she calls “the business of living,” which is quite adverse to her idea of what a master-piece should be:

[master-pieces] exist because they came to be as something that is an end in itself and in that respect it is opposed to the business of living which is relation and necessity. That is what a master-piece is not although it may easily be what a master-piece talks about.” (“What are Masterpieces” 359)

So for Stein, life comes back only as a possible topic which should never contaminate form. However, she repeatedly courted danger when pointedly selecting as her topic the contingency of life within historical time, as she did in her several autobiographical texts, from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) to *Wars I Have Seen* (1944). The latter work might prove particularly interesting in this respect, since it records how the contingency of history came back most dangerously in Stein’s life, to the point of even partly reinvesting the very form of the text. *Wars I Have Seen* is a late work, and her last autobiographical text. She started writing it in 1942 in their new country house in Culoz where she resided with Toklas until the end of the war; and she completed it at the moment when the American GIs arrived in the area in 1944. One of the most easy reads of Stein, it is also the only autobiographical work in which she adopts at times a kind of diary form, often mentioning the very date of her writing. In these diaristic passages, the reader gets the impression of a journalistic-like time relation to current events and news.

*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, published in 1933, deals with the three previous decades of her life, while *Everybody’s Autobiography*, published in 1937, covers the few years before the war. Even the short text *Paris, France*, published in 1940, was subtitled “Personal Recollections,” suggesting at least a minimal distance from recent events, through the mention of memory. But we find no such distance in *Wars I Have Seen*, which might seem then to be just the reverse of Stein’s definition of a master-piece. In fact, the 258-pages long text gives us a remarkable

vision of Stein trying to resist the pressure of History, and a vision of literature trying to hold at bay the contingency of events.

The book falls into three significant moments. Firstly, the reality of the Second World War tends to be subsumed into the recurrence of wars and the generality of war. This is achieved through an alternation of private memories from childhood (where war can even be privatised to become an adolescent's inside warfare), of meditations on death or fear, and of digressions about such notions as evolution or coincidence. Stein repeatedly fights off the anxiety of contingency through generality and relativism: "It is funny about wars, they ought to be different but they are not" (11). The very idea of repetition allows her to regain both an untimely perspective and the signature of her own literary voice, when she, for instance, writes: "It is extraordinary how having done a thing once you have to do it again, there is the pleasure of coincidence and there is the pleasure of repetition, and so there is the second world war" (72). Stein here sets up repetition as a principle of necessity thanks to which World War II takes the form of an inevitable avatar — inevitable but also pleasurable, as implied by the anaphoric structure "there is the pleasure of coincidence...there is the pleasure of repetition...there is the second world war," where pleasure is both missing and present in the last clause. The anaphora also includes that particular war in a series of general facts, making of it the abstract consequence of temporal and narrative systems. Indeed, bearing in mind how strategies of coincidence, and, even more, of repetition always characterised her writing, we may be under the impression that World War II in the passage quoted above comes to be the very product of the Steinese idiom; moreover, while the degree of irony usually proves so delicate to assess in her works, there clearly seems to be very little or none here. Still, in this first part of *Wars I Have Seen*, Stein often adopts the stance of an exterior spectator when, for instance, she writes "I do not like to fish in troubled waters but I do like to see the troubled water, the fish and the fishermen" (70). At such a relatively early moment in the war, she frankly disengages herself from historical contingencies, to enjoy the spectacle of confusion this war can offer, as being full of pleasurable complications: "[...] oh it is all so complicated and every day and in every way I like the complications being so complicated" (70). There is no denying that any contemporary reader will experience an uneasy feeling when reading about such delight which implies an abstraction from the moral dimension and a shift towards a formal realm, as Stein is enjoying the kaleidoscope of French stances and comments in a war that is so unlike the clear-cut oppositional map of World War I.<sup>2</sup> We may wonder, however, to what extent she might be trying hard not to place

herself among the possible “fish” in that confusing war, and wishing to palliate anguish behind ideas of form. Though judging solely from the grammar of the text, signs and symptoms of fear eventually come later. In this first part of the memoir, she also keeps resorting to literary analogies that come to frame the historical event. She can thus often de-realise the war as historical fact, and the event of death in it as well, through references to Shakespeare or to Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, for instance, or through the detective stories she says she loves to read more than ever. Crime stories indeed appear then as a way to displace or fictionalise contingency:

Oh dear me, when this you see, but after all, when this you see, and after all you would imagine that with all that I would not any longer want to read mystery stories and spy stories and all that but not at all I want to read them more than ever, to change one reality for another, one unreality for another [...].” (47)

One can feel in these lines her fighting off the constraint of history and the pressure of contingency through fiction. The possible twinge of conscience gets to be palliated anyway, since both real war and fiction come under the dual heading of reality and unreality —as when the same vague deictic “all that” refers first to all the pain or horror of the war (“when this you see [...] with all that”), and then to all types of crime stories (“to read mystery stories and spy stories and all that”). Nor can we help sensing some irony —but it is perhaps dramatic irony— when she sounds surprised at the discovery that death strikes more quickly in the real war than in fiction: “[...] you keep on thinking how quickly anybody can get killed, just as quickly just as very quickly, more quickly even than in a book even much more quickly than in any book [...]” (22).

However, sporadically in the first part of the book, and then gradually more and more as we enter its long second part, moments of implication get to be more numerous than those of disengagement. Stein will eventually admit being troubled by the confusion, and acknowledge the dark difference of this war, with its “troubled waters” —the war that finally killed the nineteenth century she says. In the course of the book, of the war too that is, we witness a return of (moral) implication, and still more of affect. Some rather poignant emergence of emotion even manifests itself under the form of a cheap lyricism, the “dear me,” “oh dear,” “oh dear me” punctuating her text at signs of fear —fear for the others mainly. There even comes a time when the pressure of events gets to have an effect on the form of the text, with more precise diary-like dated entries (though limited to year and month usually, on the pattern of “Today August 1943” 58); or with accounts of radio broadcasts that let the journalistic mode permeate the structure of her text.

In such instances, she seems to have been admitting the primacy of external time as never anywhere in her work. The text also comes to operate along human relations in an unprecedented way, when it becomes a narrative of physical and mental survival through relationships, of day-to-day food exchanges and conversations with a community of neighbors. At the same time, her current frustration regarding conversation and exchange of letters, in particular with her American friends and audience, leads her to give an epistolary twist to her diary-like text. It then often adopts a still more conversational rhythm than usual, and a more direct form of address to the reader or audience. Again, that goes against the grain for Stein, who certainly practiced a sophisticated form of orality, but generally discards the epistolary genre as being too loudly dependent on identity.

Yet still, even in that second movement of the memoir, under the most intense pressure of the event, we can find frequent reminders of the power of literature, most notably with the sudden flourishes of Steinian high style. One striking example is the moment when Stein has had a dream of Nathalie Barney asking a florist to take away her plants from her apartment to water them during the summer, and then getting them back in the winter: “[...] and now would she have them back again, would she, would the florist would there be a florist, would there be an apartment, would there be she” (127). We recognise the halting rhythm and sophisticated fake stammering of repetition and hesitation that characterise her literary experiments,<sup>3</sup> used here to create an effect of haunting absence and uncertain return.<sup>4</sup> Stein renounces neither her idiosyncratic strategies of digression, nor her systems of interruption, nor either the persistence of a plurality of genres, and of literary analogies —as seen earlier. Just before the Liberation of France, for instance, she compares the French *Résistance* to the situation in Fenimore Cooper’s *The Spy*: “[...] but that of course is the extraordinary thing about this war it is so historical not recent history but fairly ancient history, not I suppose where the armies are actually fighting but here where we are” (204). Not only does she reintroduce here the distance of commentary, but she also extends the scope of historical relativism, when she recognises some dark ages analogy in the confused situation of occupied France, thus ironically replacing historical contingency by the generality of history.

Towards the end of the book, that is of the war too, more and more space naturally comes to be devoted to the usual form of reconsidering and revisiting commentary. But the ending also brings a major twist, as Stein and Toklas discover how dramatically the GIs’ conversation has improved from one war to the other. The expected parallel between the two World Wars surprisingly leads to differential

conclusions regarding the evolution of the conversational capacity of young American boys. In that remarkable ending (as is always the case with Stein), the Epilogue effectuates an *a posteriori* radical detachment of the literary work from the sequence of events it has been dangerously close to all along. Instead of a narrative coinciding with the end of the war, the finale develops a meditation on the evolution of the American language as observed from one war to the other, and then historically at large. War as event comes to be instrumental to language, the contingency of history being used to the benefit of the history of language. We thus move from the historical Liberation of France to the liberation of the American language from the English model, that is from the question of political domination to that of the mastery of language—as can be seen in the concluding lines: “[... ] by shoving the language around until at last now the job is done, we use the same words as the English do but the words say an entirely different thing” (258). The book ends on the celebration of language making, through the discursive scope of conversation with the GIs, and also with the project of a poem Stein had wanted to write after WWI on the names of the American states, all so different and so similar.<sup>5</sup> Even in a moment of historical urgency, and in a work that adopts at times the immediacy of a diaristic temporality, Stein adamantly resists the event as narrative form. Thus *Wars I Have Seen* proves to be a singular work which helps us realise the process through which Stein resists historical contingency.

In fact, it seems she converts contingency from one acceptance to another, from inevitability of event to possibility of otherness. In the Steinian vision, such conversion can also be translated in terms of a passage from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. We might view it, then, as a shift from a metaphysical vision to a speculative perspective. Stein converts the (imposed) contingency of the event into a (chosen) creative possibility, passing from a view of contingency as dependence to a view of contingency as potential; from the befalling of the event to envisioning it as the possibility that anything could be different from itself or from what it seems to be—in Quentin Meillassoux’s terms: “knowing that worldly things could be otherwise”<sup>6</sup> (39). Such a proposition might actually prove to be the very principle of Stein’s writing stance. She does indeed portray objects, places or people as if they were something else, somewhere else or somebody else—hence the systematically unrecognisable elements in her portraits, as so many infinitely possible forms. Stein also treats the items and features of the real world as being perfectly contingent, and their identity as being entirely optional. That might for instance partly account for the profuse repetition of a non-ascribable pronoun “they” in *Stanzas in Meditation* (1932), suggesting infinite possibilities for the



others' identity. A similar form of contingency seems to be one of the issues at stake in the playful exchange of voices in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* —what if not-me could be me, what if “not-my-voice” could be my voice.

If her writing stance consists in considering and representing the other possibility or possibilities in or of anything, we can then understand better why openings and closures of books matter so much to her and are such accomplished and inventive moments in her works. She indeed dramatises openings and closures of texts as moments of tension between the two versions of contingency:

It is another one of the curious difficulties a master-piece has that it is to begin and end, because actually a master-piece does not do that it does not begin and end if it did it would be of necessity and in relation and that is just what a master-piece is not. [...] And yet after all like the subject of human nature master-pieces have to use beginning and ending to become existing. [...] in some way one does have to stop. I stop.” (“What are Master-pieces” 358-359)

The untimeliness and the internal continuity that characterise a master-piece belong to Stein's category of the human mind and collide with the necessity of time limits for the material text, as these limits pertain to “human nature.” Her extraordinary “I stop” dramatises the arbitrary suspension of possibility for the sake of a return to a contingent temporality that is obviously necessary to the retrospective actualisation of the masterpiece. Thus contingency holds the literary work in its double-bind: constraint and possibility as well as (historical) time and untimeliness both destroying and defining each other.

The crime story, as extreme form and even literary laboratory for Stein, proves enlightening once again. It represented for her the free wheel of speculation as we saw earlier, but, more precisely, it offered its infinite structure of any number of possibilities to the speculative narrative. Stein completed *Wars I Have Seen* in 1944. That same year, she wrote a five-page more or less farcical melodrama entitled “Three Sisters who are not Sisters,” in which she stages three sisters who are not sisters and two brothers who are brothers, and all five decide to play a murder game killing each other (“let us play a play and let it be a murder” 707). They all end up dead in the game and all alive on the stage (“It is very nice, very nice indeed not to be dead” 711) —or do they? Here Stein is playing out all the possible instances of crime (A kills B, or C kills A, etc.), as well as the possibility of the crime being either real, or a second inside play, or then a mere game. The play exhausts all the combinations of crime, including its fakeness. However fascinated she was by the genre, Stein only wrote one crime story, *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*, subtitled “A Murder Mystery” (1933). It was judged by herself and others as

a failed attempt at writing a detective story, but one can alternately view it as a crucial experience: having placed herself in a somehow pure structure of possibility, she could not resist experimenting with it far beyond the investigation system itself. She thus extended possibility to other crimes than the case being considered (“And how many possible crimes [...]” *Blood* 25), or to the complete suppression of crime (“Could any place be shut away in time. To prevent crime” 18). She also indulged in speculating on non-existent characters: “There is no Mary M. in this case, but if there were this is what she would do” (26). Thus extending the crime story principle of open alternatives, she brought it into play on the fictional edge, in order to dramatise the author’s power over the story and to present herself as master of possibilities. Bordering on a surrealist or fantastic treatment, such focus on extreme narrative control evokes Humpty Dumpty’s categorical conclusion regarding the author’s semantic authority in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*: “‘The question is,’ said Alice, whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master —that’s all’”<sup>7</sup> (196).

Such imperiously free play of possibility characterises one of her most remarkable books, *Four in America* (1933). The work might as well be subtitled “Contingent Biographies,” as it revisits the genre of the biography of great men through a structure of radical contingency, embracing the systematic possibility of otherness for each of the four great American men considered here —a pattern Ulla Dydo and Edward Burns sum up as “alternative vocations for great minds” (XIX). Here are the opening lines in the form of a prologue:

If Ulysses S. Grant had been a religious leader who was to become a saint what would he have done.  
If the Wright brothers had been artists that is painters what would they have done.  
If Henry James had been a general what would he have had to do.  
If General Washington had been a writer that is a novelist what would he do. (1)

So Ulysses Grant passes from General of the Union army in the Civil War to religious leader, and the Wright brothers from pioneers of early flying machines to painters, while Henry James is turned into a general and George Washington into a novelist.<sup>8</sup> All powerful again, the writer here literally “dwell[s] in possibility.”<sup>9</sup> Stein invents a form of alternative biography, based on historical relativism. She playfully disrupts personal history (interchanging vocations) and identity (playing on names). She is obviously less interested, as always, in structures of chance than in systems of possibilities, which are the province of literary creation. This is

evinced by the shift from “what would he have done” (speculation in the past) to “what would he have had to do” (playing on a surreal necessity), and finally to “what would he do” (supposition in the present, return to fiction speculation). Stein is experimenting in how to define or portray any historical figure through the narrative of his alternative lives, that is through fiction—as is well exemplified in this instance:

Who was Grant.  
Grant what he would be doing what would he be doing if instead of a general he had been a leader in religion.  
What would he be doing if instead of being a leader in religion he had been a general.  
(43)

By a masterly Steinman twist, Grant’s actual life comes to be presented as an alternative to his fantasised other life. Fiction contributes to biography in *Four in America*, which could be reformulated as ‘Four Possible Figures in America’, or ‘Four Fates and Their Others’, or still, crossing its title with another one, ‘The Geographical History of Infinite Biographical Possibility in America.’

For Stein, literature can revisit historical facts, fictionalise them, displace or replace them, to the point of over-determination. Such systems of possibility might even be the most idiosyncratic form of Steinian imagination. They also amount to a general mode of thinking, which enabled her to work out the most difficult and essential issues in her writer’s life. One of them was her own dual identity as an avant-garde or popular author, which she eventually solved through any number of shifting roles or parts as dramatised in so many different works.<sup>10</sup> Another central issue was the brother-sister dispute over the question of her own genius, as it was denied by Leo.<sup>11</sup> Twenty-five years after the rift between them, Stein was still narrating it again in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, and musing over the possibility that Leo and not herself might have been the genius in the family: “It is funny this thing of being a genius, there is no reason for it there is no reason that it should be you and should not have been him, no reason at all that it should have been you, no no reason at all” (79). Again, this is less a meditation on chance than a pondering over the potential otherness of everything and everybody—what if she had been “not-her,” what if she had been Leo and he had been her—, along the line of a rather Shakespearian form of causality without a cause.<sup>12</sup> Contingency as possibility proves a central practice in Stein’s thinking (and imagination which, for her, is not to be separated from thought), and it determines several of her narrative structures. There remains to be seen whether contingency can fully operate as a medium.<sup>13</sup>

Not only did Stein practice possibility as a formal structure, but she also worked out or invented a sort of grammar of contingency. This is part of what she brought to bear, as we saw, against the assault of historical events in *Wars I Have Seen*. Stein's grammar of contingency includes major stylistic choices and discursive features. Let us just briefly mention, for instance, her idiosyncratic practice of a general present, where Benjamin's instant of the past becomes in her writing a moment of the present in which all similar instants of all times are compacted, with an added effect of generalised possibility. Another main feature would be her constant use of markers of indetermination, her *any-* words, pure contingency markers, as best exemplified in this extreme instance: "What is the difference between anything and anything" (*Geographical* 78). More generally, we know from her essay "Poetry and Grammar" that she systematically prefers categories of words that are rich with possibility, poor words basically, mere tools, or words that open the broadest range of interpretation or error—error as possibility or accident of otherness. Robin Mackay in an analysis of Straub and Huillet's film *From the Clouds to Resistance* emphasises the link between poverty and contingency in a "[...] methodology where one employs closure and an ascesis of the most austere practice in order precisely to allow contingency to break into the work"<sup>14</sup> (65). While ascesis fails to characterise the structure of Stein's discourse in so far as she luxuriates in repetition and variation, it often applies to her lexical choices. In "Poetry and Grammar" she writes: "I like prepositions the best of all," they "have a greater possibility of being something" (*Lectures* 212). As to error, it is presented as the very motive behind some of her word choices: "Verbs and adverbs are more interesting [...]. It is wonderful the number of mistakes a verb can make and that is equally true of its adverb" (*Lectures* 211). On a still wider range, her practice of immediate repetition, or of multiple alternatives of sound and sense can also be read as equating or producing figures of possibility. And so does her inventing other possibilities for each literary genre: what if autobiography were written by somebody else (*Alice*), what if biography were a fiction (*Four*), what if fiction were autobiography (*Alice*)<sup>15</sup> and what if poetry and prose were indistinguishable (*Narration*). We definitely find in Stein's grammar the actualisation of many a poet's dream to invent a language and a form that might be as close as possible to possibility. She also elaborated its theatrical and rhythmic transcription through her dramatising of hesitation, the insistent stammer that evokes the search for alternative words or ideas, or a testing of possibilities—as for instance in "Oh dear does she does he does he does she know what the human mind is and if he does and if she does and if she does and if he does what is the human mind" (*Geographical*

59). Here the rhythm speaks the pleasurable drama of contingent identity and thought.

So it seems that in Stein literature can embrace contingency in order to create effects of something that could just as well be something else, or not be at all. And that applies equally to words and genres, actions or characters, and sometimes ideas. In fact, the whole enterprise of writing hints at the possibility of its being different from the one we know and practice. Likewise, the logic at work and the whole system of thinking give the reader the impression of a non-ascribable otherness. We then realise that Stein does indeed unsettle the whole Greek system of dialectics and paradigms as well as the Biblical pattern of questions and answers. Let us read her wondering in *The Geographical History of America*: “Has the human mind anything to do with question and answer. Perhaps no I do not think so.” (78); or again, her warning: “Be careful of analysis and analogy” (*Geographical* 93). In Stein, we sometimes feel we are entering a system where everything, including the modality of thinking itself, could be something else. Reading François Julian’s *Entrer dans une pensée (Entering a mode of thinking)* —a remarkable introduction into the Chinese modalities of thinking—, one feels that his central idea somehow applies to the impression one has when reading Stein: that of a modality slightly other, the point being not to seize nor define it, but just to experience the potential difference of “the thought before or the thought beside,” just to encounter “that strategic elsewhere that will lead us to break adrift from moorings we cannot even contemplate.”<sup>16</sup>

Such feeling of a possible otherness, that, as suggested, was the second type of contingency (the first being historical constraint), would thus extend the idea of a grammar of contingency to a discursive modality and to the very process of thinking. In *Wars I Have Seen*, contingency is at the same time the object of the narration and the topic for the ongoing commentary (both pertaining to contingency as historical constraint), but also a discursive grammar (as potential otherness, source of digression, generalisation). Contingency then comes closer to being the very practice and form of writing. *Four in America*, as we saw, proves a case in point, as it is entirely based on a system of biographical otherness. The language of literature is always characterised by its foreign or strange quality, in other words by its otherness; but foregrounding the contingent nature of the literary work or of the work of art rather pertains to contemporary practices, where contingency may become the medium itself. To investigate the vision of a twentieth century Stein (following Marjorie Perloff’s hypothesis),<sup>17</sup> we may confront it with

Mackay's questioning in *The Medium of Contingency*, as to what could define such contingent work:

[...] how to exhibit, within the work, its own contingent nature? How can the work deal with the fact that the artist operates within a practice founded not on necessity and autonomy, but on contingent conditions—not only those of the material support, but also historical, discursive, economic conditions, and the various contentions over the nature of the 'work of art' itself? (5)

We have seen how Stein does emphasise and sometimes dramatise the “contingent conditions” of her work, in language, in discourse, by using life material too, also through the form of hesitation, repetition or digression. But the difference from contemporary art—which is Mackay's object of enquiry—might be that while converting historical contingency into a discourse and thinking of possibilities, she still salvages a form of paradoxical autonomy and power, that of the thinking voice, the commentator. With Stein, the narrator of possibilities never forgets who is “master.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Stein seems to always refer to a basic whodunit type of crime story, essentially the clear-cut classical structure of a crime first, followed by an investigation to find out who the murderer was.

<sup>2</sup> This is not the place to really develop that vexed contextual and biographical point, but it needs to be said, however, that Stein, as we know, could unfortunately be talked by her friend Bernard Faÿ into translating some of Pétain's speeches, and that it also took her a long time before she wrote clear statements about taking sides in the war. The only clear thing perhaps is how genuinely she was confused, and could only reflect on the contradictions and complications in her conversations with French people then. At that time in the war, she was obviously not aware of the ambiguity of her aesthetic delight at such complications, nor would she be, later on, when she expressed equal anguish as the “collabos” in Culoz were sent miniature coffins or as the *Résistants*, whom she called “the mountain-boys,” were in deadly danger (*Wars I Have Seen*, see for instance p. 47, 147, 226). There is no knowing whether she was completely unaware of what was going on behind the scenes, nor whether or not she felt in danger as a Jew. But the end of *Wars I Have Seen* reveals how wholly American she had remained, as it dramatises her coming into her own at the arrival of the GIs, her compatriots. Now if we accept the limit of an author's meditation on war, it appears that the Second World War baffled Stein's original vision of war—as expressed in *Four in America* in 1933 for instance, where she asserts that everything is already over when a war begins: “The real fighting has all always been done before the war commences but as everybody likes explanations everybody likes everything proved everybody likes a war so there has to be the war” (26). World War II proved a contradiction in point, everything happening there and then, and most confusedly.

<sup>3</sup> As in “If I Told Him,” 1923: “Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would he like it.” *Portraits and Prayers* 21.

<sup>4</sup> One might hear in this passage a vague reminiscence of the second part of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) "Time Passes," and of Mrs. McNab's ghastly presence in the deserted house, mostly during World War I.

<sup>5</sup> Stein had already written several texts about the American States, such as "Wherein Iowa Differs from Kansas or Indiana" in *Useful Knowledge* (1928), or "American States and How They Differ From Each Other" (1935) in *How Writing is Written* (1974); in which she played on difference and repetition (also that of the sounds in the names of the States), even though those texts were not the poem she wanted to write but never did. In the short time that was left her before her death in 1946, she did take up an idea from the finale of *Wars I Have Seen*, but it was that of conversation, which turned out to be the project for her next text: in 1945 she wrote *Brewsie and Willie*, a prose text in 19 chapters, dedicated to the GIs and composed of their conversations, in which the very contingency of event turned out to be a frequent topic.

<sup>6</sup> In the original French phrase, "[...] savoir du pouvoir-être-autre de la chose mondaine" (Meillassoux 66), the *pouvoir-être-autre* conveys more powerfully the contingent condition of otherness (it could be translated more literally as "the potential otherness").

<sup>7</sup> Also quoted by Robin Mackay in his "Introduction" to *The Medium of Contingency*, in relation to "complicity with contingency" (9).

<sup>8</sup> If *Four in America* is among other things a displaced composite self-portrait, what needs to be noted is that Stein sees herself or projects herself primarily as a writer and as a general, then also as painter, aviator, religious leader and saint.

<sup>9</sup> Emily Dickinson, "I dwell in Possibility –/ A fairer House than Prose –" (Poem 657, Johnson, vol.2: 506).

<sup>10</sup> After her traumatic reaction to the popular success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein took to meditating on the potential otherness of her own self and dramatising her reflections; this line remained dominant in her works from 1933 to 1937, to reach its most elaborate form in *Everybody's Autobiography*, where she finally liberated herself from the constraint, or contingency of the audience's reaction.

<sup>11</sup> Stein obviously never accepted Leo's dismissive judgment on her work, over which they eventually broke off in 1913, never to reconcile. (Brenda Wineapple devoted a whole book to the subject, *Sisterbrother, Gertrude and Leo Stein*).

<sup>12</sup> The projected exchange of fates between sister and brother evokes the "otherness system" of *Four in America*, but with the major difference that in *Four* Stein operated a shift between geniuses, or at least major American figures, while here the point is to know which of the two siblings was to become "One in America."

<sup>13</sup> The title of this essay was inspired by a collective of essays on an exhibition of contemporary art entitled *The Medium of Contingency*, 2008 (comprising artists like Liz Deschines, Sam Lewitt, Hans Bellmer, Thomas Unggerer, all creating works that deal with and through possibility, precariousness, ambivalence or disappearance). The authors of the collection acknowledge their debt to the line of the speculative renewal of thinking contingency, in particular Quentin Meillassoux's important essay *Après la finitude, Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*, 2006; *After Finitude*, 2008—mentioned supra.

<sup>14</sup> Mackay, in the "Discussion" part of *The Medium of Contingency*.

<sup>15</sup> I am thinking here of the last lines of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, where Stein declares she is going to write the autobiography herself, and to “write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe” (913).

<sup>16</sup> My translation. “Pensée d’avant ou d’à côté”; “cet ailleurs stratégique qui nous fera rompre des amarres que nous n’envisageons pas” (Jullien 27, 12).

<sup>17</sup> See her chapter on “Gertrude Stein’s Differential Syntax” in *21st-Century Modernism*.

### Works Cited

- Carroll, Lewis. *Through the Looking-Glass. The Complete Works*. London: The Nonesuch Press, 1977.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems*. Vol.3. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1955.
- Dydo, Ulla, and Edward Burns. Introduction to *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder*. Ed. Edward Burns, Ulla Dydo, with William Rice. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1996.
- Jullien, François. *Entrer dans une pensée, ou des possibles de l’esprit*. Paris : Gallimard, 2012.
- Mackay, Robert. “Three Figures of Contingency.” “Discussion.” *The Medium of Contingency*. Ed. Robin Mackay. London: Thomas Dane Gallery, 2011.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *Après la finitude*. Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence. Paris: Seuil, 2006.
- . *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *21st-Century Modernism. The “New” Poetics*. Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
- Stein, Gertrude. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Vol. 1. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- . *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor* (1933). Mineola, NY.: Dover Press, (1948), 2008.
- . *Everybody’s Autobiography*. New York: Random House, 1937; Cambridge, Mass: Exact Change, 1993.
- . *Four in America* (1933). New Haven: Yale UP, 1947.
- . *The Geographical History of America, or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1936). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.



- . “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” (1923). *Portraits and Prayers*. New York: Random House, 1934.
  - . *Narration*. Chicago, Ill.: Chicago UP, 1935.
  - . “Poetry and Grammar.” *Lectures in America* (1935). London: Virago Press, 1988.
  - . *Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters* (1944). *Writings 1932-1946*.
  - . *Wars I Have Seen*. New York: Random House, 1945.
  - . “What are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them” (1935). *Writings 1932-1946*.
  - . *Writings 1932-1946*. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- Wineapple, Brenda. *Sisterbrother, Gertrude and Leo Stein*. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1996.