

Encounters with genius: Gertrude Stein and Alfred North Whitehead

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Notoriously, in her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Gertrude Stein assigns to her lifelong companion the repeated comment that she has met three geniuses in her life: Stein, Picasso, and Alfred North Whitehead. This remarkable statement, which functions as one of the main structural elements of the text, first appears at the end of the first chapter, in the context of Alice's initial encounter with the woman who was to become her friend and lover. In typical Steinian fashion, everyday observations are mixed with wry, audacious gravity as Toklas first sets eyes on her future partner in the Paris house of Stein's sister-in-law:

I had come to Paris. There I went to see Mrs Stein who had in the meantime returned to Paris, and there at her house I met Gertrude Stein. I was impressed by the coral brooch she wore and by her voice. I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken, and I may say in each case it was before there was any general recognition of them of the quality of genius in them. The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Alfred Whitehead. I have met many important people, I have met several great people but I have only known three first class geniuses and in each case on sight within me something rang. In no one of the three cases have I been mistaken. In this way my new full life began.¹

This famous, amusing passage is dense with various kinds of significance. Most importantly, it declares a judgment on whose work is important in the development of modernity with astonishing brevity and certainty. It offers a striking example of Stein's habit of deftly twitching traditional, even moribund, tropes in such a way as to make them serve fresh purposes (in this case, love at first sight is transformed into the activation of Toklas's innate genius-detector). It presents a view of genius which is not dependent on general recognition, which is a matter of degree, and which

changes the lives of at least some who come in contact with it. Finally, it intimately aligns Stein with two other contemporary figures, Picasso and Whitehead, who are linked as the sole clear possessors of genius of the highest quality whom Toklas has encountered. Stein emphasises this classificatory ranking of the quality of genius. As Toklas is later made to explain, her own function with regard to the geniuses she and Stein collected was to tend to their wives. This is so much the case that, during the time Toklas contemplated writing her autobiography herself, notes Stein, she thought of calling it ‘The wives of geniuses I have sat with’.

I have sat with so many. I have sat with wives who were not wives, of geniuses who were real geniuses. I have sat with real wives of geniuses who were not real geniuses. I have sat with wives of geniuses, of near geniuses, of would be geniuses, in short I have sat very often and very long with many wives and wives of many geniuses.²

What interests me here are Stein’s taxonomic categories of the genus genius: the real, the not real, the near, the would be. It is only herself, Picasso and Whitehead who are awarded the supreme accolade of being recognised as ‘first class geniuses’; only they ring Toklas’s bell. Further, the transnational, transcultural, transhistorical orientation of each of these figures forms an important part of their significance. For Stein, who regarded herself as the embodiment both of modernity and of its tendency to draw its features from an amalgamation of cultural sources, internationalism was an integral part of the true modern genius. And, as an American, which she saw as a national identity which, in its subsumption of many divergent origins, created the pattern for the modern, Stein’s choice of geniuses to flank her in this trio is especially revealing.

Given the combination of her sense of her own importance in the development of Modernist writing along with her failure to attract publishers and readers, it is scarcely surprising that Stein placed herself in the lead position of this famous triad. She needed all the recognition she could get, even if she had to generate it herself. And, besides, she seriously regarded herself in these terms. Toklas undoubtedly concurred. The inclusion of Picasso is also expected. By the early 1930s, when Stein wrote Alice’s *Autobiography*, Picasso’s international fame was secure. The mutually formative process of his painting Stein’s portrait shapes one of the most memorable anecdotes in the *Autobiography*. Stein’s part in her friend’s rise to international success is stressed in the text. It is Stein who first buys Picasso’s work, shows it to the many visitors to her home on the rue de Fleurus (when she and her brother, Leo, went their separate ways

and divided their astonishing collection of Modernist paintings, Stein kept the Picassos), befriends the impecunious Picasso before fame has secured his fortune. And, just as the Spaniard used Stein as the model for one of his most notable portraits, so Stein made Picasso the subject of a number of her writings.³ The links between the two were particularly strong early in both artists' careers when they were developing their techniques. It is a tantalising and important association and has been treated accordingly by critics and biographers.

Stein and Picasso complement each other beautifully in their personal flamboyance, their analytical intelligence in their respective arts, their adventurousness, their iconographic status in the annals of twentieth-century avant-garde practice and aesthetics, their fulfilment of the myth of the alien coming to artistic fruition in Modernist Paris. However, the inclusion of the third genius – Alfred North Whitehead – in Stein's triad seems altogether peculiar. In comparison to the swashbuckling and eccentric reputations of Stein and Picasso the choice of the mild, deeply respectable Cambridge mathematician (who was notably good in committees) as the third genius looks, at first glance, most peculiar. Of course, delight in startling is one of Stein's (and the twentieth-century avant-garde's) most cherished tactics. And, in the context of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the choice of the gentle, establishment figure of Whitehead as the third genius parallels exactly Stein's account of the role of the equally modest Henri Rousseau at the wild bohemian banquet given in his honour in Montmartre by Picasso. But, as always, Stein is also very serious when she makes categorical statements, offers judgements, or selects notable figures for attention. And the insistent entwining of herself, Picasso and Whitehead affords a telling clue as to Stein's personal, yet very American, view of the internationalist cast of the intellectual and artistic development of the tendencies which shaped what she very consciously analysed as the new, modern era.

The notion of genius has its own deeply interesting history.⁴ Stein's frequent evocation of this concept throughout her writing partakes of this history in that she characteristically links the title of genius with those she sees as outriders of the *Zeitgeist*, those who are most sensitively attuned to faint vibrations of coming historical shifts and who help to bring them to fruition. This usage links her, among writers in English, back through Emerson, Matthew Arnold and Coleridge and through them, to Hegel, that is, to a major strain in American and European romantic thought. But aside from her implicit acceptance of standard romantic usage, Stein inflects the concept of genius with kinds of emphasis which are particu-

larly her own. For example, in 'Portraits and Repetition', one of the lectures from her American tour of 1934, she comments:

Nothing makes any difference as long as some one is listening while they are talking. If the same person does the talking and the listening why so much the better there is just by so much the greater concentration. One may really indeed say that that is the essence of genius, of being most intensely alive, that is being one who is at the same time talking and listening. It is really that that makes one a genius.⁵

Again, several comments from Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography*, published in 1937, help to clarify her use of the term. 'It takes a lot of time to be a genius, you have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing'. Again, musing about the onset of her conviction of her own genius, during the composition of her massive novel, *The Making of Americans* (1925) and her brother, Leo's jealous unwillingness to admit it without the endorsement of public recognition which she did not then have:

It is funny this thing of being a genius, there is no reason for it, there is no reason 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.

'What is a genius', she asks later in the book:

If you are one how do you know you are one. It is not a conviction lots of people are convinced they are one sometime in the course of their living but they are not one and what is the difference between being one and not being one. There is of course a difference but what is it . . . being a genius is not a worrisome thing, because it is so occupying . . . and anyway a genius need not think, because if he does think he has to be wrong or right he has to argue or decide and after all he might just as well not do that, nor need he be himself inside him.⁶

The question of genius continues to trouble the text. And Stein continues to generate requirements and partial definitions of genius. 'After all a genius has to be made in a country which is forming itself to be what it is but is not yet that is what it is not yet common property. And so I do know what a genius is', she states, 'a genius is some one who does not have to remember the two hundred years that everybody else has to remember'. Or, most fulsomely, 'when one is completely wise that is when one is a genius the things that make you a genius make you live but have nothing to do with being living that is with the struggle for existence. Really genius that is the existing without any internal recognition of time has nothing

to do with the will to live'. For Stein, then, genius is not personal. It has nothing to do with identity or the struggle for survival. It is intensely located in a present to which it is preternaturally receptive in ways which override the determining influence of the past. It is enunciatory, almost oracularly ventriloquistic: it simultaneously listens to its time and speaks it. Finally, it is connected not so much with place but with the process of place-in-formation as complex entities available to consciousness. It is this last characteristic which at least partially leads Stein to add another (Jewish) genius to her roster in a series of remarks about 'the peaceful Oriental penetration into European culture' which she sees as characteristic of the twentieth century 'because perhaps Europe is finished'. And these are the grounds to which she appeals when she notes that 'Einstein was the creative philosophic mind of the century and I have been the creative literary mind of the century also with the Oriental mixing with the European.'⁷ It is not fixity but fluidity with regard to place that characterises the minds which will map the future.

Stein had good reason to gesture toward her innate internationalism, which she saw as a feature of her Americanness, a crucial part of her identity on which she always insisted. The modern, she believed, was antithetical to material fixities of any kind and characterised instead by the kaleidoscopic and often brutal flow of ideas in practice. For this reason, she saw America as the paradigmatic modern nation. 'America', she noted, 'created the twentieth century . . . America having begun the creation in the sixties of the nineteenth century is now the oldest country in the world'. The American Civil War marked the coalescence of the cruelty, disembodiedness, abstraction, and passion for sheer action which are the hallmarks both of modernity and of the American experience.⁸ For Stein, the governing qualities of abstraction and cruelty are ones which America shares with Spain. All this goes a long way toward explaining the theoretical principles behind Stein's high regard for Picasso as a Spaniard with profound internationalist interests. The modern, for Stein, involves the disintegration of exclusively European modes of thought, and the coalescence of a new intellectual formation which is a composite of the habitual casts of mind of diverse cultures, presided over by a tendency toward action and abstraction rather than rootedness and tradition.

With all this in mind, Stein's selection of Whitehead as Toklas's third genius becomes less mysterious. Before considering the ways in which Whitehead might have occupied intellectual territory which was particularly attractive to Stein, the intense circumstances of their personal encounter need to be noted.

Stein met Whitehead in 1914 when she and Toklas travelled from Paris to London with hopes of securing a contract with John Lane for the publication of *Three Lives*. At the time the forty-year-old Stein was immensely frustrated by her failure to secure publishers for her work (she paid for the initial publication of much of her writing herself). Most gallingly of all, the book which she regarded as her most important, *The Making of Americans*, on which she had laboured from 1902 to 1911, was still unpublished, and would not be published until 1925. Further, her personal life had been utterly transformed when her beloved brother, Leo, with whom she had lived since 1903, quarrelled with her and left Paris for Florence in April 1914. Stein's life was now allied firmly with that of Toklas, who was as at least as ambitious to promote Stein's fame and ensure the wide circulation of her work as Stein was herself. Late in the spring of 1914 the publisher, John Lane, visited Stein and Toklas in Paris, talked about bringing out an English edition of *Three Lives*, and asked them to come to London in July to discuss the contract. Delighted, the pair left for England on 5 July 1914, planning to stay for a few weeks, and found themselves in a London full of talk of the coming war. After inviting them to tea on the first Sunday of their trip, Lane told them he had to leave town for a week and made an appointment to see Stein at the end of the month, when the contract for *Three Lives* would be arranged. In high spirits, Stein and Toklas accepted an invitation by the mother of Hope Mirlees, a young woman they had met in Paris, to stay in Cambridge for ten days. The Mirlees were very hospitable. Stein and Toklas were shown around Cambridge and taken to lunch at Newnham College. At a dinner given by Mrs Mirlees they met A.E. Housman and Alfred North Whitehead and his wife, Evelyn. Stein and the Whiteheads took to each other immediately, and the Cambridge dinner was followed by an invitation for Stein and Toklas to join the Whiteheads for dinner at home in London and then to spend a weekend with them at their country house in Lockridge, just outside of Marlborough in Wiltshire. On 31 July Stein signed the contract with Lane for *Three Lives*. In the afternoon she and Toklas boarded the train for Marlborough, where Whitehead met them. While they were at Lockridge, war was declared. Stein and Toklas could not return to France and the Whiteheads insisted they extend their stay until they could go back to Paris. They remained with the Whiteheads until 17 October, when they left for France with Evelyn Whitehead who secured a military pass through her friend, Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of War, to take a coat to her son, North, who had secured an army commission at the outbreak of the war. The Whiteheads' other two children,

their daughter, Jessie, and their youngest son, Eric, were also to serve in the war. Eric was killed when his plane was shot down in 1918. For Whitehead, said Bertrand Russell, the loss of his son led to ‘appalling grief’, and ‘it was only by an immense effort of moral discipline that he was able to go on with his work. The pain of this loss had a great deal to do with turning his thoughts to philosophy and with causing him to seek ways of escaping from belief in a merely mechanistic universe.’⁹ During the summer of 1914 the grief the war would bring lay in the future. The emotions at Lockridge were those of Europe in general: fear, confusion, panic and dread. When Toklas told Stein that the Germans had retreated from what appeared to be their imminent invasion of Paris, the two women simply broke down and wept for relief, a relief which was their main reaction when they finally managed to return home to the rue de Fleurus in the autumn.¹⁰ Lane’s cancellation of the publication of *Three Lives* was a very minor casualty of the war.

If Stein’s life during her extended encounter with Whitehead had fallen into new patterns in 1914, Whitehead’s had also undergone a recent transformation. But if Stein’s life had been full of changes and movement – this was, after all, a paradigmatically cosmopolitan woman who had spent her early childhood in Vienna and Paris; her late childhood in Oakland, California; her early young adulthood in Baltimore and Cambridge, Massachusetts, before living with her brother in Paris after a good deal of European travel, taking in, along the way, the early deaths of both parents, the disintegration of her close Jewish family, the near-completion of a medical degree after study with some of the most distinguished minds in America, the assumption of a clear lesbian sexuality, a foundational role as patron of Modernist art, and the construction of a new theory of writing – Whitehead’s, at least externally, had been staid, quiet and eventless. Born in 1861 to a clerical family at Ramsgate on the Isle of Thanet, a locality to which he always remained inordinately attached, Whitehead’s life followed an entirely predictable English, middle-class pattern. After his childhood in Kent, he was sent at the age of fourteen to Sherborne in Dorset where he served as Head Boy and Captain of Games in his final year. Always mathematically talented, he was awarded a scholarship at Trinity College, Cambridge, which he entered in 1880. He stayed at Trinity until 1910, as a student, then a Fellow and Lecturer. Aside from his marriage in 1890 to a lively woman (whose passion for expensive household decorating led her to extract money secretly from Bertrand Russell), Whitehead’s life was superficially placid. He was a good teacher, a good husband, a good father, a good colleague, and a good mathematician,

whose work was of interest only to specialists. He seems to have been an amiable, if often abstracted, man whose character was known for its sweetness.

When Stein met Whitehead the predictable patterns which had governed his life had dissolved. His extraordinary collaboration with his former student, Bertrand Russell, had produced the monumental *Principia Mathematica*, with its magisterial project of subsuming mathematics into logic. The first three volumes of the work were published in 1910, 1912 and 1913. Their appearance was one of the great intellectual events of its era. Whitehead had moved from Cambridge to London in 1910, and his teaching at University College, London and a professorship in Applied Mathematics at Imperial College would lead him to the deanship of the Faculty of Science of the University of London in 1921 and a view of the radically new needs of modern education which undercut the classicism of his educational experience. His move to Harvard in the 1920s, which Whitehead saw as another act of embracing the modern, and his turn from mathematics to philosophy again transformed his life and refocused his thought. When Stein wrote the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in the early 1930s, the text which contains most of her remarks on Whitehead, Whitehead's great popular success with *Science and the Modern World*, the chapters of which were first given as the Lowell Lectures at Harvard in 1925, was behind him. He would spend the rest of his life as one of the most admired and beloved of international intellectual figures.

From the end of July to the middle of October in 1914, in the peace of the Wiltshire countryside and against a background of the growing war, Stein and Whitehead spent a great deal of time together. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* the comments about the nature of their intense discussions are meagre if tantalising, and marked by a portentous resonance.

Gertrude Stein and Doctor Whitehead walked endlessly around the country. They talked of philosophy and history, it was during these days that Gertrude Stein realised how completely it was Doctor Whitehead and not Russell who had had the ideas for their great book. Doctor Whitehead, the gentlest and most simply generous of human beings never claimed anything for himself and enormously admired anyone who was brilliant, and Russell undoubtedly was brilliant.¹¹

Amid the frantic conversations about the war and the parade of other guests at Lockridge, which included Russell and Lytton Strachey, the

Stein/Whitehead dialogue continued. ‘The long summer wore on. It was beautiful weather and beautiful country, and Doctor Whitehead and Gertrude Stein never ceased wandering around in it and talking about all things’. Precisely what the two talked about is not recorded, but a few instances of the nature of the more general discussions in the household are. For example, in order to divert Russell from arguing for his well-known principle of pacifism, which the Whiteheads felt they could not bear as their children prepared to go to war, Stein introduced the topic of education. Russell co-operated nicely and attacked the weaknesses of American education, concentrating particularly on its indifference to Greek. ‘Gertrude Stein replied that of course England which was an island needed Greece which was or might have been an island. At any rate greek was essentially an island culture, while America needed essentially the culture of a continent which was of necessity latin’. The psychology of the English and the Americans were quite different, and Stein spoke eloquently ‘on the disembodied abstract quality of the american character and cited examples, mingling automobiles with Emerson, and all proving that they did not need greek’. On another occasion, Stein ridiculed the notion of the potency of German organisation on the grounds that the Germans ‘are not modern’. Equally, she was certain that the United States would not back a ‘medieval’ country like Germany in the war. America’s political sympathies would be governed by the fact of its being a republic, ‘and a republic can have everything in common with France and a great deal in common with England but . . . nothing in common with Germany’.¹² Aside from her personal concern about the fate of Paris and her home, Stein’s own interest in the war tended toward the abstract, toward the ubiquitous and general experience of war which is part of the geography of the human mind, She speaks of this phenomenon in *Everybody’s Autobiography* in relation to her time at the Whiteheads’:

When we were in England when the nineteen fourteen war began after all we never did think it would be the only war anybody can remember just as they always do with any war. When I was very young it was the civil war and when they said long before the war they meant that war. And then there was the Spanish war. One always does mean the war they had and I suppose sooner or later everybody has had a war.

She recalls being puzzled by the Whiteheads’ altogether different view:

When we were in England before the nineteen fourteen war and just at its beginning the Whiteheads worried me they were so much more interested

in the destruction of libraries and buildings in Belgium than they were in the war and why not, now I understand why not.¹³

At this time the details of the ongoing destruction did not particularly interest Stein. She was almost solely concerned with war in the abstract, as a recurrent human activity. It took the onset of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s for Stein fully to comprehend concern about the specificities of destruction in individual wars as opposed to the general impact of the phenomenon of war as a part of the historical repertoire of typical human experience.

But if Stein's attitude toward war as a general rather than a specific phenomenon is somewhat chilling, her own actions during the First World War were admirable. She and Toklas equipped and drove an ambulance for the American Fund for the French Wounded. And the celebrations in Paris to mark the end of the war brought Stein and Toklas back into the Whitehead ambit. The members of the American Fund for the French War Wounded were to have seats on the benches on the Champs-Élysées for the grand defile under the Arc de Triomphe. But the benches were removed because they obscured the general view of the parade. Yet Stein and Toklas got their privileged seats after all. Jessie Whitehead, who was in Paris as secretary to one of the delegations to the peace commission, invited the pair to watch the procession from her hotel room overlooking the Arc de Triomphe. Stein and Toklas drove to the hotel in their soon-to-be-retired ambulance and joined in the general euphoria. Tracing a great coincidental circle, the war which had begun for them in the presence of the Whiteheads ended in the company of one of their number.¹⁴

The circumstances of Stein's personal contact with the Whiteheads were dramatic and altogether too memorable, inextricably mixed, as they were, with onset and conclusion of the war. Stein's own intellectual links with Alfred North Whitehead, along with the reasons for her proclamation of his genius, however, are left unaddressed in her texts. Of course, it is possible that there was no such affinity, and in pointing up Whitehead's genius Stein simply may have been making a judgement which had nothing to do with her own projects. However, this is unlikely. Stein tended to value most highly those whose work in some way validated or abutted on her own. Several critics have suggested possible links between Stein and Whitehead. For example, in *Favored Strangers*, her meticulously researched biography of Gertrude Stein, Linda Wagner-Martin states that when Stein met Whitehead she had 'long been intrigued with Whitehead's concept that all life – event, time, character – is interactive.'¹⁵

However, since Whitehead's publications prior to meeting Stein had been on mathematics or formal logic it is difficult to see how Stein would have known of his views on these topics as they belong to Whitehead's philosophical period which only started in the 1920s. Still, Wagner-Martin is undoubtedly correct in identifying these topics as of sustained mutual concern. And despite Russell's remark that it was his youngest son's death in 1918 that turned Whitehead to philosophy, when he and Stein took their walks in the Wiltshire countryside, Whitehead was a man in his fifties whose life had been spent in an academic environment in Cambridge which valued general discussion and humane thought. Whitehead, furthermore, had been a member of the Cambridge Apostles, the elite group noted for its intellectual quality and for the liveliness of its wide-ranging debates. Whitehead was never a narrow specialist in his private intellectual life, and if he was publicly still more exclusively a mathematician in 1914 than he was to be later in his life, his passionate interest in both process and exactitude could only have matched Stein's own.

In attempting to construe which elements of Whitehead's thought might have interested Stein, one can only speculate rather anachronistically, drawing on Whitehead's work subsequent to 1914. What becomes clear when this later work is considered is the fact that Whitehead and Stein demonstrate a pronounced intellectual affinity. Their sensibilities are attuned to many of the same questions. And the answers they give to these questions bear a striking resemblance in contour, though the manner of their expression could not diverge more widely, with Whitehead's writing serving as a model of approachable lucidity where Stein's is usually fairly obscure until its tenor is grasped. Further, the international switchbacks in the intellectual territory shared by Stein and Whitehead become even more complex when their shared precursors are considered. The major figures to note here are Stein's most important teacher – who Whitehead, in his own admiration, called 'that adorable genius, William James' – and the French philosopher revered by Stein, Whitehead and James alike: Henri Bergson.¹⁶ All four thinkers are deeply concerned with the nature of time and process and with their impact on personal and cultural identity. All are fascinated with the delineation of the modern. And all believed that their current world deviated from that which had gone before in significant, even epochal ways.

When considering Stein, it is wise to remember that her university education prepared her equally for careers in science and in philosophy. As an undergraduate at Radcliffe (then the Harvard Annex) she attended

classes taught by some of the most distinguished academics in America, including Josiah Royce, George Santayana and William Vaughm Moody. But her most significant lecturer was James, who became something of a mentor for her and who recommended that she continue her education in either philosophy or psychology, that is, in the disciplines in which he featured as one of the foundational figures in the articulation of American Pragmatism and as one of the pioneers in the new discipline of psychology. Stein regarded James as a great teacher whose thought underpinned her own.¹⁷ For example, Stein's fascination with a devising a method for fiction that could capture the types of 'bottom nature' possessed by humans derives directly from her work on psychology with James, who was himself concerned with this kind of human typology which provided a framework for some of his major productions such as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Stein also shares his interest in consciousness. Most significantly of all, she adopts wholesale his views on time, on the continuous present, on the thinness of experience as it is lived, and on the invalidity of tradition as the guide to behaviour amid the fundamental evanescence of the stream of life. Stein equally admired Henry James, who she thought 'was the first person in literature to find the way to the literary methods of the twentieth century'.¹⁸ Stein adopted and refined the younger James brother's narrative methods of hesitation, indirection, repetition, incompleteness, and the experience of the field of perception (as opposed to discourse) as the manner of intersubjective communication and used them as the basis for her own narrative practice. Stein owed immense debts both to William and Henry James: there is a good deal of justice in regarding her as the most complete Jamesian of her generation. And like both Henry and William James, Stein needs to be read as a radical empiricist, with an unswerving interest in life as it is lived, in the characteristic nature of humans as a species, and particularly in the human experience of mind and in the ways it intersects with time.

While Stein's characteristic concern is with the narrative and poetic representation of the fabric of modern human experience and Whitehead's is the place of science in the modern world, their points of agreement are startlingly common. Whitehead, like Stein, pointed both to the importance of repetition in human experience and to its impossibility.

It is unnecessary to labour the point, that in broad outline certain general states of nature recur, and that our very natures have adapted themselves to such repetitions.

But there is a complementary fact which is equally true and equally obvious: nothing ever really recurs in exact detail. No two days are identical, no two winters. What has gone has gone forever.¹⁹

Exactly. And Stein spent a lifetime trying to explain the significance of the literary tactics she devised to convey aspects of just this fact which Whitehead outlines so lucidly. For example, she addresses the topic directly in her lecture, 'Portraits and Repetition', in a characteristically Steinian prose which precisely and amusingly enacts the points she makes:

there is the important question of repetition and is there any such thing. Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be . . . every time one of the hundreds of times a newspaper man makes fun of my writing and of my repetition he always has the same theme, always having the same theme, that is, if you like, repetition, that is if you like the repeating that is the same thing, but once started expressing this thing, expressing any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis.²⁰

Stein's great work, *The Making of Americans*, is grounded on one facet of this principle. As Stein explains, when she left medical school, without her degree but with a growing interest in human 'types', she says

I then began again to think about the bottom nature in people, I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different.²¹

'Endlessly the same and endlessly different' might serve as a motto for both Whitehead and Stein. Recurrence and divergence as the twin determinants of human experience are seen by both of them as the starting points for analysing the variant questions which attract their interest. This basic premise as much informs the logical cast of Whitehead's work as it does Stein's experiments with narrative and with the prosody of her poetry.

Equally important for both Stein and Whitehead is a shared conception of process, of movement, as the universal feature of all that exists. As Whitehead puts it in *Adventures of Ideas*:

the very essence of real actuality – that is, of the completely real – is *process*. Thus each actual thing is only to be understood in terms of its becoming and perishing. There is no halt in which the actuality is just its static self, accidentally played upon by the qualifications derived from the shift of circumstances. The converse is the truth.²²

For Whitehead, actualities have no essences. Everything is spread out in a spatial-temporal field, everything is process. His idiosyncratic and central notion of ‘prehension’ is generated by this view of the real. The sense of the solid identity of any entity is the sum of its relations to all the other entities in the world which surround it. It is these relations, rather than any persistent qualities, which give entities their identities, identities which must, necessarily, shift as process works its way through space and time.

It is ideas akin to this that lead Stein to her experiments with the continuous present as the dominant mode of her prose and to her interest in the portrait as the way of capturing the evanescent intersection of the ever-changing fields of time and space between subject and object and subject and subject. ‘The business of Art’, she notes, ‘is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and completely express that complete actual present.’²³ Stein’s focus on the present in this radical way allies her not only to Whitehead, William James and Bergson, but is the reason for her sympathy with Cubism, with its attempt to capture minute shifts in the human perceptual field, and for her designation of America as the most modern of cultures with its dedication to transience and movement, which are, for Stein, the two distinguishing features of its culture that are also key features of its modernity.

With such wide areas of fundamental and shared intellectual sympathies, I think it does, after all, make a great deal of sense for Stein to have chosen Whitehead as one of Toklas’s bell-ringing, first-class geniuses. The more their ideas are compared, the more harmonious they appear. Whitehead came to agree with Stein on the place of America in the formation of modernity. He concurred with the notion that the Americans were ‘creating a world’. (He even seems to have agreed with Stein’s opinion that study of his beloved classical Greeks was unnecessary and perhaps even inappropriate for Americans.²⁴) His view of the social utility of the arts could have been written with Stein in mind: ‘that society prospers best which can provide the conditions necessary for artists to give freest scope to their capacities for novelty – not eccentricity, not the bizarre – but origination in the furtherance of an artistic tradition’. Stein, with Emerson, Whitman (who Whitehead thought was the greatest contributor to

American culture)²⁵ and Henry James quite consciously serving as her literary precursors, and Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, and Thornton Wilder primed as the next generation of her descendants, qualifies absolutely as an example of the kind of artist who fulfils the terms of Whitehead's definition. She also fits Whitehead's own definition of genius: 'I put it in the metaphor of a ship; the masses are the vessel and crew, genius is captain.'²⁶ The statement evokes an irresistible image: Captain Whitehead and Captain Stein sailing the ship of modernity into dangerous international waters, ringing bells.

Notes

- 1 Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, London, Penguin, 1966, p. 9. Toklas handles this moment rather differently in her own autobiography, *What is Remembered* (London, Sphere, 1989), which was first published in 1963. Biographical information throughout the essay is taken from Stein and Toklas's books and also from Bettina L. Knapp, *Gertrude Stein*, New York, Continuum, 1990; James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein & Company*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1974; Diana Souhami, *Gertrude and Alice*, London, Pandora, 1991; and Linda Wagner-Martin, 'Favored Strangers': *Gertrude Stein and Her Family*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- 2 Stein, *Toklas*, p. 18.
- 3 Picasso's portrait of Stein now hangs in a place of honour in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Stein wrote frequently on Picasso and her writing on her friend was gathered together in 1970 in a volume now available as Gertrude Stein, *Picasso: The Complete Writings*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1985.
- 4 For interesting and relevant discussions of the history of the notion of genius see Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, London, The Women's Press, 1989, and Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990.
- 5 Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America*, London, Virago, 1988, p. 170.
- 6 Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, New York, Cooper Square, 1971, pp. 70, 77, 85–6.
- 7 Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, pp. 92, 121, 243, 21, 21–2.
- 8 Stein, *Toklas*, pp. 87, 100.
- 9 Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872–1914*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1967, p. 188.
- 10 Stein, *Toklas*, pp. 162, 168–9.
- 11 Stein, *Toklas*, pp. 161–2. What Whitehead thought of his encounter with

- Stein is more uncertain. He rarely wrote letters, and his modest autobiography is a mere essay. This has left the record of his opinions of personal encounters somewhat sketchy. For Whitehead on Whitehead see 'Autobiographical Notes', in *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, *The Library of Living Philosopher*, New York, Tudor Publishing Company, 1951, pp. 1–14.
- 12 Stein, *Toklas*, pp. 167, 165, 166, 167.
 - 13 Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, p. 89.
 - 14 Stein, *Toklas*, pp. 206–8.
 - 15 Wagner-Martin, 'Favored Strangers', pp. 123.
 - 16 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, London, Macmillan, 1925, p. 10.
 - 17 Mellow, *Charmed Circle*, p. 34.
 - 18 Stein, *Toklas*, p. 87.
 - 19 Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 12.
 - 20 Stein, *Lectures in America*, p. 167.
 - 21 Stein, 'The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans', in *Lectures in America*, p. 138.
 - 23 Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, London, Collier-Macmillan, 1967, pp. 274–5.
 - 23 Stein, 'Plays', in *Lectures in America*, pp. 104–5.
 - 24 Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*, Boston, New American Library, 1954, p. 98.
 - 25 Price, *Dialogues*, p. 24.
 - 26 Price, *Dialogues*, p. 101.

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