

## **an interview with Gertrude Stein**

Q: "How do you do."

A: "Very well I thank you."

Q: Would you care to make a statement?

A: Gladly. "If we say, Do not share, he will not bestow they can reiterate, I am going to do so, we have organised an irregular commonplace and we have made excess return to rambling."

Q: You will not mind if I ask what an irregular commonplace is?

A: Not at all, since the answer is anything. That is, anything is the answer. Or anything is an answer. But to back to the question. Anything is at once typical and unique. And so anything is what "everybody knows and nobody knows," an irregular commonplace, and Miss Stein was always writing the portrait of that, and of anything.

Q: Do go on.

A: I always do. It is just as well to ramble on about it after all. Anything, as I was saying, that comes before the normal mind in the normal life can be identified by name, and that aspect of it which has to do with our habitual practical purposes is obviously and clearly seen. But that same anything contains or involves a great many other aspects and qualities that everybody knows are there, even though everybody keeps his mind pretty well fixed on the single practical aspect and is only vaguely aware of the others, and strictly speaking does not know them.

Q: can you give an illustration?

A: Everything is an illustration, but take any piece of land. Let alone the farmer and the real estate agent or the picnicker, one painter will see it fiat, another painter will see it in depth, another as structure, another as fluffy, another as dark and light, another as spots and lines, another as still, another as changeable, another as full of



Gertrude Stein (photography by Carl Van Vechten)

its detail, another as a general expression or mood, and so on. But it is all the time the same commonplace piece of land. Likewise people and ideas are normally just as commonplace, but they are irregular since they do contain what is from the practical point of view an excess of aspects and qualities. If it were not for this excess nobody probably would go on living, because in it is all possibility and all novelty and all freedom. I think it was Voltaire who made that irregular commonplace, that paradox, that the superfluous is a very necessary thing. Which would remind me of the natural necessity of paradox, but it would be an excess to venture into it just now.

Q: Thank you very much. But why make excess return to rambling, as you say? Where has it been and what has it been doing?

A: It has been mainly in suggestion, exclaiming. As in, what a woman! What a piece of land! Ah, Paree! But there has been a more sustained and exhaustively organized way of giving simultaneously a fairly large number of aspects, giving the commonplace a particular iridescence and a sonority, a harmonics, and that was the method of symbolism and of the 19th century impressionists, of Proust and Joyce and Pound and T.S. Eliot.

Q: And Dante. And Virgil. And Milton. And so on. Can you really complain of them?

A: No, not unless for a change you like a hard focus, and simplicity, and seeing things all in one plane or singly. Even then one does not so much complain as get interested in something else. Impressionism is fine but after you have had a lot of it you suddenly want something like cubism.

Q: And after cubism something like impressionism.

A: Or like Francis Rose or Eugene MacCown or the neoromantics. No doubt at all. Not after fifty years or so of something like cubism. That pendulum has been swinging and

swinging since the caves of Altamira. Shall we return from rambling now and keep to the subject?

Q: Yes, though I am beginning to think any subject naturally rambles around by itself and to keep to it one has to ramble around after it. But we can return to the text. How does "Do not share, he will not bestow they can meditate, I am going to do so" organize an irregular commonplace? I appreciate that we had returned to rambling and excess, but what kind of organization is that?

A: Well, suppose you have a commonplace group of people before you and you wish to describe them, as a painter would wish to describe a piece of land in front of him. The painter can select out of it and isolate certain shapes or accents on which to arrange a composition in shapes or accents, rather than a composition in depths or effects of light and texture or as a setting for figures, and so on. Just so, out of your group of people you can select certain active attitudes to make a composition of them, rather than record the differences in the color of their eyes and hair, or in their political views, or tell a story involving all of them. You can say, Do not share, he will not bestow they can meditate, I am going to do so. Or you can apply the method to the universal and variable drama of grocers, and say:

First grocer. I am sincere.  
Second grocer. I believe in service.  
Third grocer. I love my mother.  
Fourth grocer. I am rich?

Or you can color the drama by giving the characters pleasant names and broaden it by making the objects of their attitudes anything at all, that is, "it," and say:

Harry. Should it be known.  
Ashley. Could it have come  
Amelia. Would it be known  
Nuna. Or would it have come

And there you are.

Q: Where? Let us ramble back to the first example. It could have been done in the way you say, and I see that we have a set of statements abstracted from a reality, but all I see in it is a loose set of abstractions. Oh I do see that the postures, the dispositions and relations of the characters of four people in one moment have been "tenuously" conceived, and registered in an irreducible outline, as if Picabia were drawing. That much I can see and I think I like it. But I don't recognize, in that much, an organization.

A: But any sentence is in itself an organization of experience, and in that little passage there is also the pictorial organization of simple juxtaposition, the verbal situation changes from the imperative to the third person singular to the third person plural to the first

person singular. We have rhythm and rhyme, we have a style that is compact, simple, decisive. It is all, both in the manner and the literal sense, full of a vital tension. This tension is stabilized by the fact that Do not share, he will not bestow, they can meditate, I am going to do so, all, as sentences, express a relation between the present and the future, a relation that is modulated from sentence to sentence through several degrees of immediacy and closes in its highest degree of immediacy, its major or tonal center, so to say: I am going to do so. It is, to be bright about it, a tension of tenses. Also, the vocabulary is harmonized to the tenses: the laxer "bestow" and "meditate" to the negative and potential futures, the sharper and monosyllabic "share" and "do so" to the more present futures. All the aspects of the passage are informed with a single intention, or, if you like, sustain a continuing vibration. As a verbal plastic one might almost say it is overorganized.

Q: Yes, but it is not very organized toward telling me anything about the group of people. As a vehicular organization I question it.

A: How much do you want conveyed? Actually the passage conveys enough, like an outline drawing or silhouette or X-ray or snapshot. Yet from the point of view of its intrinsic organization, its internal coherence and entity, the very small percentage of information it carries is mere courtesy, like the eggs and apples in arithmetic or the rubber balls in topology.

Q: Then it is not really about people, that is, some four actual people once?

A: Not quite. Four people once did, by being together, bring into being, for Gertrude Stein, that thing.

Q: So, as a matter of fact, it is about people?

A: It was once, in a way. But it is now complete in itself. Its "about" relationship, which was never essential, is now cut off or atrophied. Even the original relationship of these abstractions and the quality of their organization to the actual people was more a matter of "ahere" and "out of" than "about." If it were "about" anything still and essentially, if its meaning depended on that relationship, it would not be complete. The completeness of "two plus two equals four" does not now depend on being about apples or dinosaurs or whatever originally led to it as an observation.

Q: But "two plus two" can be applied in many cases of quantity, even if its completeness is in itself.

A: Of course. Literature is not quite arithmetic but it comes close to it in proverbs and some poetry, particularly quotable poetry. One counts apples by referring them to numbers, and one can count the quality of a situation or of what not by referring it to proverbs or a quotation or for that matter a word. But these have a reality of their own which does not depend on their occasional use of being referred to or on the experience that first occasioned them. Nursery rhymes, advertising slogans, the declensions and conjugations in grammar books, all have to some degree this disconnected reality. The

four sentences quoted can- not be universally applied, but often enough to make them a commonplace a group of people will demonstrate them. A group will present variously the peremptory, the reserved, the competent, and the determined together, and just barely outside the central focus of what they consider they are there for. The four sentences moreover reproduce exactly the tension and animation produced by several different personal intentions together. It is what everybody knows, since the way one sits, the tone of one's voice, all of one's behavior in such a group is qualified by one's apprehension of it. But nobody knows it articulately or in isolation because it has not been put directly into words that are more than a historical account of a particular occasion or a contribution to the academic study of group dynamics. This little passage does put it in durable words.

Q: Does it really imply all that? Is art that long? I mean, am I, in reading some four short sentences, to read all that and more into them?

A: No, not unless you care to. All that or something like it goes into making the sentences solid and complete and possessed of themselves, into sustaining their quality to the utmost. Just as a great deal of climatology and aeronautics goes into the simplest flight. But that is nothing, or need be nothing, to you as a passenger.

Q: If you wish to call the passage a flight, I follow the parallel, but how can I personally tell, while reading the passage, while in it, that we are off the ground?

A: You will know you are up by the look of things they will be very familiar and all there but very strange and simpler. Like proverbs or declensions or titles. You can also tell by the intensity of movement combined with not seeming to be getting anywhere.

Q: But actually by this time I am tired of airplanes, real or metaphorical. If left to myself I think I prefer to walk.

A: To ramble? If so you will be moving without getting anywhere except where you are from moment to moment. But you may be intensely there, and in that case you are making a Stein composition of your time. You are in a state of perpetual discovery and quite within the commonplace. It is all clear and you are not lost. And nothing is worse in such a situation than to have somebody telling you step by step where you are on the map. It vitiates your being where you are. And in rambling around in a Stein composition one can very well feel that explanation and criticism are a gross intrusion, especially since Gertrude Stein herself eminently left you alone with her work. Even after she had indulged in explanation she asked, "Do you know because I tell you so, or do you know, do you know."

Q: And the answer?

A: After the question there is a stage direction: "(Silence)." Which in its way is a hopeful answer, at least a prayer, because if you are really busy knowing and not learning you do not answer questions.



A: Because it cannot be completely exciting any more. You are not really living your life when you amuse yourself with horses. And art should be an intense and real way of living one's life, actually and not retrospectively....

Q: But what was that "of course" late in the passage?

A: The motor missed.

Q: I think it missed the horse.

A: Yes, it is human. When it abandons its own energy of choice and says "of course" to anything, either it is coasting or it is letting a natural thing do the moving. But I confess it is a pleasure and refreshing to have it happen, at least in the proportion in which the passage has it happen. It saves us from making a mechanical necessity of choice.

Q: Let us not abuse the example.

A: An example of an event. If it is an event just by itself is there a question. Tulips is there a question. Pets is there a question. Furs is there a question. Folds is there a question. Is there anything in question.

Q: Internal-combustion or horse-drawn, where is this getting us?

A: Here.

Q: I beg your pardon?

A: "...all words furnish here."

Q: If you insist.

A: Only if one insists. Here is not so easily reached.

A: "I think the reason I am important is that I know everything."

Q: I may giggle?

A: Of course. But after your natural moment, and mine, and hers, it is worth saying that the remark is true too. She did not know everything in the sense of erudition, although her erudition was vast. She knew everything in the sense that she was almost constantly "here," she did directly know everything that came before her, instead of remembering its history or its purposes or its connections. She let it be "here." It amounts to a special discipline, this special concentration and act of presence, and her mastery of it was a genuine importance. Most of us develop another sort of efficiency, which suppresses everything that is not purpose and connection, or we develop an erudition which drowns the object in its history, purposes, connections. We rarely know an object directly with its immediate qualities, which are most actually and really it. In this way Gertrude Stein did know everything. She even contrived to know a good deal of what she remembered.

A: "Lilacs lilies vases Voltaire and Basket. It would be easy to imagine a conversation."

Q: Surely not too easy?

A: She didn't write the conversation.

Q: Why not?

A: I wonder. She could have done it. She could perfectly write it in the character of lilies, in the character of vases, in the character of lilacs, in the character of Voltaire, and most certainly in the character of her dog Basket. Her knowledge of the immediate qualities of lilies and the rest was vivid enough to allow her to imagine what they would say about anything and how they would say it. Suppose all the characters got together to explain to Basket the meaning of roundabout or of Thursday. It would be, if not easy, at least not impossibly difficult, and it would have been enchanting.

Q: Fragrant, at least.

A: And delicate. The trouble would be in having it all constantly depend on its likenesses to lilies, lilacs, vases, Voltaire, and Basket, so that the writer and the reader would have to be forever remembering and recognizing lilacs and Voltaire and so on in every little bit. But to use the character as a "tuning fork" or a key signature for any subject at all would be more exciting if less delectable. Once started in a key and time one does not remember B-flat or six-eighths, one just goes on with it and keeps creating it, but as the locale of more exciting events.

A: I have never at any time expressed a part.

Q: But she must have. Any whole composition is composed of parts, even a sentence is composed of parts.

A: Yes, but as to expression, not its articulation, one may, and Gertrude Stein did, write as if every instant of writing were complete in itself, as if in the act of writing something were continuously coming true and completing itself, not as if it were leading to something, or only coming there to go to make up something else, or to pave the way for something else not yet arrived. This is one of the reasons for her wild numbering of chapters, pages, volumes, etc., and for the prodigious stage direction in *Four Saints*: "Repeat first act."

Q: So we get something like a random list or a dictionary that has renounced the alphabet, or an inventory? Something like a charm bracelet or a necklace of odd stones or the visual composition in a painter like Bosch? Is it composition?

A: Well yes, even if that were all. The mere tenuity of connection could be a sufficiently exciting thing in itself, especially in a time of disaggregation. But while the materials of a Stein composition are often practically and historically disparate, there is a sustaining

continuity, not only by the saturation of stylistic quality generally but of intensity. Intensity is really the last question, however it is reached. The familiar methods of causal structure, of analytical or reportorial exhaustion, of the vehement moral message, of lyrical emotion, and so on, succeed with anybody only insofar as they produce an intensely existing and absorbing thing. The props and external articulations of the intensity can be almost anything, but with Gertrude Stein they are mainly movements and relations and qualities, both named and reproduced. Let me spare us a list of the devices, such as repetition, alternation, isolation, compression, collision, departure, etc., which generate, out of discontinuous materials and forms materials and forms which have "parts" and are "composed" a continuum of intensity, which is not a sum of parts. She was "expressing" a continuum of present movement, making it intrinsic to the work itself, and this inner thing is complete, not as a construction but as a continuum.

Q: I am uneasy again. It was a strain thinking in terms of internal combustion and now we are getting into something like magnetic fields and we are not far from higher mathematics and metaphysics. Are we still talking about literature? Even if we had the knowledge to talk professionally about mathematics and metaphysics would we be talking about literature?

A: No, or only indirectly. But the realities we are talking about have been made clear and articulate in other than literary terms, and we lack a specific terminology for the literary forms of those realities. Sooner or later criticism will have to get used to thinking in terms of forces, tensions, movements, speeds, attractions, etc., as well as in terms of constructs and animals not because science says so or philosophy says so at all but because life is conducted more and more in those terms and it is the way life is conducted in a time that is the prime source of steady energy and solid reality in a work that outlasts its time. This kind of composition is getting to be more and more the composition of reality as everyone sees it. It amused Gertrude Stein to find that her early arrangements and abstractions, which had seemed to be highly acrobatic and gratuitous if refined formal exercises, were turning out to be literal transcriptions of the most evident realities, that is the same abstractions and arrangements on which life is more and more consciously conducted by people at large. It is true that we are more comfortable in the composition of 19th century life and literature, in which an actual or a mentioned cup of tea was part of an hour which was part of a day which was part of a week, month, season, or year, which was part of say the annals of Britain, which were part of the general onward evolution of something that was part of a cosmic order. A sentence was part of a paragraph which was part of a chapter which was part of a book which was part of a shelf of books which was part of England or America or France and so on. Something belonged to everything automatically. But nothing now is really convincingly a part of anything else; anything stands by itself if at all and its connections are chance encounters.

Q: If it is true, it sounds scary. Do you mean to make it sound exhilarating?

A: Officially of course it is scary. But it is a godsend to an artist. It leaves everything open, and so many realities can still be made. Not dreamed, if you please, but made.

