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“*They are here for eternity*, Korin explained to the woman in the kitchen, while she stood at the stove in her usual position with her back to him, stirring something in a pan, and not giving the slightest sign of having understood or given any heed to what she was hearing, and he didn’t go back to his room for the dictionary as he often had done, but abandoning the hope of explaining the notion of *eternity* and *here-ness*, tried to move the conversation on instead by pointing to the pan in confusion, asking: *Something delicious . . . as usual?*”

László Krasznahorkai, *War & War*

## Irreversible Councils, or Continuous Portraits

Some Attitudes on What is Necessary

### I. ☀ UM DIA PARAREI PEDIR DESCULPA.

I hope I will be forgiven for taking some liberties with style, with mechanics, and with format—all that in addition to the lenience I have thus far already been granted with regard to matters including: punctuality, fitness of work for stated purpose, and relevance. It is late in the evening now, and I am acutely aware that I have done little so far this semester, in way of contribution, other than test the patience of my classmates with obsessive tirade, with halting, strained illustrations of the minute behavior of objects which seem to have neither palpable reality nor clear salience to anyone else. In keeping with this increasing tendency to wanton self-indulgence, and my immediate, actual desire to more fully embrace it—*l'appel de l'onanisme*—in an endeavor to do *something* generative, something genuine, to somehow stave off the creeping alienation, the sapping of motivational salience, all this worsened these past few days by a rich diet of Huysmans and too little self-awareness—all this and the dextroamphetamine tablets I’ve taken to splitting with my teeth in public, which produces a conspicuous, mortifying snapping sound—I’m going to let myself wander and take what may come of it. I’m going to desperately hope that the relevance of this impulse to the subject-matter, and the earnestness with which I’m trying not to be too earnest, will all be charmingly adolescent enough (and I *do* despise myself for hedging, for stepping back<sup>1</sup>) to prompt further forgiveness. I got away with far too much in high school, and I have far fewer friends here in every sense of the phrase, but at least if someone has the decency to give me poor marks I’ll then see the collective veil, of *les pontifes d’un abominable avenir*, slip a bit—rearranged enough to, for once, demarcate and discern, to let me know precisely what’s gone wrong. Perhaps you’ll tell me—personally, sternly—why I go wrong, thinking of rightness. Perhaps, instead, I’ll offer up a little rightness, to excuse this hell. I think, at some level, I probably *can* see myself.

*Lessl, dear Lessl, hear me out. I rise from my seat. I am contorting my face—Lessl, my dear—look at the shape of it, look at my face—describe my face*

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<sup>1</sup> I adore Wallace and often judge myself against his New Sincerity—I am desperate for *something* very serious, but I am far too fearful of falling short and as a consequence achieve nothing, could never even *begin* to say something, to speak.

*to me, please do. I want to see it, what I am doing—I make it, I don't know it myself, I don't have the sense of it.*

At some level, I think I know exactly what I am, and either it's perfectly palatable—in which case I have no excuse—or far less acceptable than my conditioned and continuing obsession with propriety would ever permit me to fully acknowledge.

So, let's return to frame. I've taken another 5 milligrams—now free to apply incisors (*crack!*) with aplomb, in the comfort between two couch-backs, sprawled still-timidly, drawn inward, cautious, in the vanishing hyper-familiar environs of my boyfriend's suite lounge, which he shares with another mutual friend of ours whose production of *Spring Awakening* (the musical) I neglected to attend tonight. He plays Hanschen. I said I would come along. I promised another friend of mine, who is just now having a mysterious quiet conversation with my boyfriend in the other room, that if he attended I would as well. Well, he did, and I didn't—and this is because I was in the library reading *The Awakening of Spring*. I rather enjoyed it, and, look—

**“THE MASKED MAN.** Your friend is a charlatan... The sublime humorist is the most miserable, most pitiable crea— *wait!* That's the wrong quote!

This is an essay, lest I forget. This is for a class where we endeavor to discuss Modernism, a literary movement. No, rather—a referent which we employ to denote a much wider group of sensibilities and attitudes. 'Modernist' is not a demonym, and hardly could be, I think—I'll get into this later (excuse me if I happen to forget), but when a work becomes what Stein might call 'classical', when it is placed in the course of things such that it is cordoned off from the ambient, from its participatory role in the momentary gestalt, by a word like 'modernist'—well, then you become analytic. The object is delineated, limned within; all this by processes open to inspection, to *interpretation*. I'm angrier than Sontag—or at least younger, and more male<sup>2</sup>—but I (thank God) don't have her credibility, so I'm holding things back, standing on a Caspar David Friedrich precipice of restrained 中二病 rage. "Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art," she says. "It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world," she says. I came back and added this sentence, to give her some room to breathe.

Now, I've got an excuse to twist my own arm—I need to follow through on my promises, before I forget—and enough space that the following indentation, after this paragraph began with the start of this sentence, will feel balanced, proportionate, following the block of borrowed bitterness further above. Also, let me be very clear. I wish to leave the work of art alone (generally speaking). I do not wish to do violence to beautiful things. I am excessively stupid, excessively brutish, and excessively *mercantile*, and maintaining coherence is for me something like the exquisitely delicate labor of pruning a *bonsai*, only the stunting shock was self-inflicted and forewarned. But, I've been positively *feasting* recently, glutting myself, and *À rebours* filters through the lead-glass of my rough spirit with enough soaring lightness to compel me to forget where I'm going again and oh *bother* just have the quote—

**“THE MASKED MAN.** At the end everyone has his part—You the consoling consciousness of having nothing—you an enervating doubt of everything.”

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<sup>2</sup> I clawed my way back. That I need to say it, like this, proves I'm not done yet.

## II. ☀ O FAMILIAR NÃO PRECISA DO VÉU.

When I was in high school, I was escorted to a psychiatric hospital by the local police force—twice. Did you know that, in the state of California, law enforcement officers can place you first on a 72-hour mandatory hold, then a 14-day mandatory hold? This is involuntary, and at least in my experience there's not much due process involved. I'm not complaining, though—I deserved it. When I was in high school, I also read *Tender Buttons*. That was my introduction to Stein, and that was where I then left things with her. I'm not going to say something useful or insightful about *Tender Buttons*—I could, and I'd probably get an A, and the last year I spent in my St. Petersburg garrett (or, rather, miserable corner room of an aging Albany<sup>3</sup> opera-lover), where I was haphazardly (re-)discovering the social theories of ANT<sup>4</sup>, independently, only so that oppositional passage points were termed “narrow conceptual necks”<sup>5</sup> &c—all this I could bring to bear. But, look—*c'est l'ennui, mon semblable*. Instead, this is what you get.

When I read Stein then, I don't think I had much clue what to do with her. This was around when I encountered Eliot for the first time as well, who I was fond of—but all of this was filtered through a thick fog—missing school for months at a time, and when I was around at all I was invariably glued—to distraction—to some harebrained scheme in the march of *ad nauseam* hair-splitting that led eventually to the sort of abstracted advent of my time as a μεσσίας. A true suppliant. Holy geometry in an internal halo, cutting outward. Inside-out trepanation by the incomparably, unshakeably beautiful. I read *Tender Buttons* again more recently, of course, and as far as I'm concerned, it's the Image as *musique concrète* or *cinéma pur*, but when I listen to Lansky (go listen to *Mild und Leise*! There's a good chance you'll recognize it!) I'm reminded that—just the same—what Stein does is dispense with the instrument, the narrative, but the Image is *played* by a phenomenon, and *that's* what gets cut. It's impressive, but it's inhumane. Noumenal poetry. *Art d'objet*. That's some *détournement*<sup>6</sup> for you.

Lansky makes me feel something. So does *Tender Buttons*, but you got a sense of *that* just now, I hope. However, I'm not too interested in *Tender Buttons* other than as an immanent mechanism of the universe handed down to narratively shanghai my rotisserie-crisped brain into thinking about Stein again. In high school, my cultivated, dripping, oblivious insecurity was the sort which compelled me to conspicuously demonstrate that I liked the things which discerning people were presumed to like, and

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<sup>3</sup> In California, mind you. Twice-Bostonian parentage has left me with a veneer of crude, sneering disdain for plagiarized West-coast city names (*O NOVO MUNDO NOVO*) and the same disdain, only *more* reprehensibly vulgar, for the pizza thereof. My teeth don't mesh right tonight and sometimes as I bite down, trying to get them to fit together, there are little crunching sounds.

<sup>4</sup> Like, cf. Latour. Discovery, or development? Courtesy of the initialism, I taste formic acid, from a homemade aspirator mishap in my youthful, abortive, amateur entomologist phase.

<sup>5</sup> Because I'm retarded, and I have no idea how to communicate.

<sup>6</sup> We'll come back to that. And, out of compassion—and in fear of pastiche—let's take a footnote tolerance break.

disliked those things which they didn't. It so happens that Gertrude Stein is rather liked by office-park dissemblers of the sort which *les utopistes*, as the *Comte de Falloux* (to whom my dear Des Esseintes graciously introduced me) terms them, have provided in their infinite wisdom to encourage your appreciation of the arts, the same being instrumental as they are to the continued encouragement<sup>7</sup> of our ailing world. Thankfully, caught up as they are in exultation, caught up in self-congratulation, proud of their good sense—they are thankfully too fixed on their respective navels, on the engorged member of their neighbor to one side and the hand of the other, to read with comprehension the work of the master herself. Let me check—*nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis* confirms I can say whatever I want in good taste as long as I develop the level of confidence required to unflinchingly call myself a 'polemicist' in *genuinely* discerning company. Um, *simulare, donec te facere*. "What do you do?" I make it.

### III. ☀ CONTROLE-O. CONTROLE-SE.

So, the deal with Stein is that she's one of the most important political theorists ever to write on the subject of the general, inarguable<sup>8</sup> decay of reality, death of the body of God, and—let me breathe, God, let me breathe! Let me speak!

*Estamos em desfile com o povo comum. They're pulling a train out of the station, painted in blue enamel—a coarse chalk surface—sou a unha em um quadro-negro. Run your fingers along the main-line, down branches, off sidings to the country-side. Where—onde, diga-me onde?*

*O FIM DA LINHA. É HORA DE SAIR.*

I'm chewing on my own teeth. Everything is an opportunity. Everything is a drop of sugar-water, drinking 水飴 to satiate the dull burn in my brain-pan. I wonder if the people who I used to talk to online, some of my favorite people in the world, who are the sole reason I'll sometimes go to call someone a 'kike' under my breath, always forestalled—when I see the air-loom, and the long tail of the glowing ARTICHOKE, prodding at their nucleus accumbens. And, don't worry, all this?—I know better. I'm Ashkenazi, and understand our racial disease<sup>9</sup> well enough to know this isn't Zion. And I wonder if these JQ-obsessed 日本かぶれ think millet jelly is part of the plan, part of the program. Is it all the same, all the sugar-water? Or is it just us, this half-savage country, origin of Elvis Presley and the terror of isoglucose in everything. Enmired in syrup. Looking this up I've discovered that D-xylose isomerase was invented in the '60s at 産業技術総合研究所. Wild. Did I mention I don't speak Japanese? I used to. I should again.

<sup>7</sup> To encourage is to make braver, is it not? I'm genuinely sorry—for the broken promise (on typesetting) and otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> Fuck off. Go suck Steven Pinker's Godless, empiricist, irresponsible, kerosene-on-the-pyre-of-the-present dick. Faggot.

<sup>9</sup> It's like Tolstoy said, in *The Messenger*. The magazine. *Anna* in serials, all cut up, with a comment on families you've surely heard. Mine? Kicked me out when I was 18. I deserved it. My boyfriend wants me to hate my parents, and he's worryingly persuasive. I'm a nice guy.

Before I start saying idiotic, foreign, grasping, naive things about 日本人論 and the end of it all, when I haven't even read the Mishima on my shelf, when I was last in Japan when I was fourteen years old and realized I was—and I apologize for the obscenity—a homosexual. Non-exhaustively. Part of the proof of me, by case-splitting. My boyfriend is sitting across from me right now, and he's beautiful. I think I love him very much, and I want more things with him, more stability, more certainty—I have more self-respect, with him—than I ever have before. He's reading *Catcher in the Rye*, a book I felt guilty for adoring so much in high school—out of adolescent rebellion, I quietly, privately rejected the anesthetic, sedative interpretive device of imposed satire, the superior sneer—it eventually turned into genuine appreciation for the same earnestness I now think I value above all else, couched as it may be in alteration, in distortion, here and elsewhere. His fixation on that titular phrase, how it buoys him, carries him—this illusory aspiration, carried wholly in a snatch of misheard lyric that is turned over, overturned, massaged, like a worn stone carried for comfort, or fixed, parasitic—all this is familiar. Language gets stuck with me like that. I have hardly anything else. My substructure is this tangled conceit, couched in errors and misattributions. “I miss the comfort of being insane.”<sup>10</sup> I quote song lyrics.

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her “I love you madly”, because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still there is a solution. He can say “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly”. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly it is no longer possible to talk innocently, he will nevertheless say what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence.

Umberto Eco

You're all phonies. Present company excepted<sup>11</sup>. And since we're thereby on the subject of Marxism<sup>12</sup> and pieces, let's get back to our scheduled programming, or side-show, our justifying, legitimating, all-excusing road travel over a more beaten path amidst *hic sunt dracones* all about, say, per Simmons<sup>13</sup>, with all the latitude that granted him and his

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<sup>10</sup> Every alluring aspect of madness, every enticing esoteric truth—all of it is accessible to the peaceful mind of the thus-predisposed. I am a schizophrenic when I embrace rot, when I carve myself dead, desperate to feed the sewn jaws of impersonal, unworthy masters. That is done, *GRACIAS A DEUS*. The mythology of tortured glory is a phantasm, a misguided conflation. Martyrs are murderers. Pretend I'm quoting Dylan Thomas here.

<sup>11</sup> Except the worst.

<sup>12</sup> I wonder if James is related to the war hero. Apparently there's an exercise routine named after him. After the war hero. Okay—I thought better of this—and of the allusion that brought you here to my humble page-final abode this particular time. Come here often? But I'm making commitment a terminal value—this is an exercise, so I'm not asking for forgiveness. Go listen to some good music and ritually snap your phone in half with your bare hands. Dance yourself clean.

<sup>13</sup> Per Chaucer, but I chose again.

more esteemed forebear. I'm still a show of indignation when someone compares me to Caulfield, but—but, he's in me, in my at least somewhat voluntary<sup>14</sup> decision to dance off the rails. *Comme mon ami français*, Gardner, but quicker, quick enough, since I need *both* feet to dance, and to love you by the *Zuiderzee*—mind you, I'm probably not talking to *you*. Gertrude Stein wrote novels, poems, plays—stepping back—Gertrude Stein wrote portraits. She had a particular idea of what that is—the endeavor of portraiture—and this is an idea I've adopted, since I think it does much in the manner of “a step toward making the modern world possible for art”<sup>15</sup>, the importance of which extends significantly further than even that heroically presumptuous statement suggests. Now, thankfully for you all, possessed not of the genius of Picasso or Matisse, or that of *elle aussi*, of course—I suppose deprived of the maleness that, Stein tells us, belongs to genius—for the rest, she produced a wondrously accessible essay, in the clearest, plainest language. This she presented to the best and brightest of the ancient, venerable Oxbridge binitary. The literary and critical public then, of course, proceeded to wildly, interpretively butcher this cogent, cleanly expository essay—which explains how time works, and how true art is made, and—it would not be unfair to say—explains the workings of reality. You'll see what I mean—or perhaps not, since, after all, you can't tell people anything<sup>16</sup>. Regardless, in the process, Stein adequately describes the problem at hand, which anyone without the blessing of totally ostrich-like<sup>17</sup> predilections is at least sort of desperately, reachingly aware of. Tangential awareness. The occupation government. The air loom. Strings—you feel them. On you. On me. We reach for the wrong things. SBX-1 staring at me over the horizon, picking me apart with 10 Ghz fingers, and I'm lost in my confusion. And, since you're waiting on the tide, I have to ask. What if they stop the moon?

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<sup>14</sup> Thus, for which I am accountable—what a sickening Enlightenment. At least have the decency of getting out the ὄστρακα and making a firm commitment to the betterment of your world. If you'd caught me a year ago, less—here I consider the value of commitment—I would have drank the hemlock willingly. I would have begged for it. I did—can you say שְׁפִילָה? How about—how about, how many veterinary supply stores are there in Tijuana? Oh, and the hesitation? This isn't about the too-familiar WIC § 5150, it's about the melodrama. Someday I'll say it without pausing. “Eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue”, saith He. Once I know with full confidence you lot couldn't possibly feel bad for me anymore, only then. Look at me—nothing ventured, now and forever. Don't you fucking dare feel sorry for me—I'm doing all of this because I want to, because I'm finally able to *want* again. I'm a work in progress, like those Roman coffins half-carved before transit and finished on-site, but unlike those ornate death-boxes, unlike *your* ornate, fragile death-boxes, the process is toward an enduring vibrance and durability, a lasting and indefatigable motive force of human spirit. Trust. I'm so fucking proud of myself.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot, *Ulysses, Order, and Myth*. In *The Dial*. In 1923. Look—dear Prufrock, you grow old indeed. Time is in parcels, and is dispatched in intermodal containers. Wealth bends the light, and bends other things too.

<sup>16</sup> Morningstar follows (another) Murphy. I confuse him with Moore, which feels appropriate.

<sup>17</sup> I've been there. To escape: read *fin de siècle* novels. Say things like “if only you knew how bad things really are.” If only. See, I'm not going to indulge that. I'm *not* going to imagine you screaming in the streets, face upturned and radiant *cornutam*, alone with your brother beside you and your other brother beside you. I am *not* alone, and I make the air fall apart around me. I make the air fall apart around me. Look!

#### IV. ☀ O QUE ENTÃO, SIBILA?

Alright—brief aside, then we'll get back to our exegesis. My present concern is that we are in somewhat immediate danger of killing the plowman. So, with regard to the lavender on this little farm, a farm hardly meriting the distinction of that name—to be clear, this is a folly, undertaken by some aging extended family of mine, somewhere in Oregon. They migrated up the coast to survive the eternal summer and, well, *c'est l'ennui*—they bought a lavender farm. It would be endearing at any other time. Now it's eternal September, sooner, and this won't do. So, it's a sign. It's on demand, *in vivo*, in the flesh. But, as I was saying—like the lavender here, your philosophy is perennial—work with me. Here on the farm you understand the course of history. And now? Of iron, yes—*Kali Yuga* if you must. Debasement of specie. Debasement of flesh, and most of all spirit. But, you take comfort, because that *ends*—in blessed return.

“People, I've talked about hell, and if there is a place that, uh, there's burning, and is seven times hotter than fire, and that there is no air, eternal torment, and you can't die. That's the way I felt. I was in hell . . . hell, on earth.”

I am expecting from you an unusual cooperation. I am expecting a deviation from Whig-histories into something positively sensible. So, on those grounds, the immediate state becomes a lot less frightening, no matter how dire. Impermanence does a fair amount to assuage the horror of a moment. Babylon falls. I bend down—we're still in the lavender-field, now out front by the road, before the house. I pluck a stem. Cradled in my hands, it rots and flourishes alternately, it recapitulates the whole process of its development in temporal miniature over and over. You watch this—you know it is not new, no miracle. As *la fleur du monde* flowers and decays, I guide you inside. In the kitchen, little one in hand, little eternal return in purple. Another pause, this time during a wilted moment, blue-graying flowers clinging to a delicate stem—hush. I place it on a baking sheet, I mix and pour. Two-part epoxy, pre-coated tray, preparations all seen to. Nothing easier, let it set, band-saw, sander, and buffing wheel, low-grit to high. Here, I give you this. This is your translucent, glossy parallelepiped of static despair. I hand you fear—that's it. No dust. This is the best I can do. You can *ask* the dust—

“She said: Give me your peace and your reason! And he was only sorry she did not ask for his life.”

Yes, so it is—darling *Liberté* stands tall on the shore, pointing us to *l'abominable avenir*. She is the wayfinder, and she holds up the sickly poison crystal of cross-linked oxiranes—she tells me in her slot-machine voice that I've won. She casts me, unprotesting, in Durcupan. I'm microsectioned. I'm an open book, a catastrophic illuminated quarto—I'm the last State of the Union, I'm a perfect love song, I'm dissolving in the sea, and I feel everything. I feel everything. I feel everything. I feel everything. I feel everything I feel everything I feel everything I feel everything.

You made a likeness. *You*, you broken-photocopier God—going at it with pruning-shears, so crude. Confused. And—there is the final threat, too. There are things like this. There is the eternal, near at hand, so you sicken me. Well, have the *decency* to weep, since forever is near at hand. I am so very afraid—it is *right* to be afraid. I see the face of God *the face of God alone asleep*, forever. I am doing my very best.



## V. ☀ DE VOLTA AO CONE DE LUZ

I'm horribly dehydrated. I've been thinking about my worsening dehydration—as I write, as I edit—for the past couple hours. My mouth is dry. My boyfriend went off to bed some time ago. I'm surveying my domain of fatigue and exhaustion. Lately, I'm working through a minor dispute with some of the more troublesome patrons of this illustrious and exclusive theater. Now, though, it's late and mercifully quiet. Now and again my respite is disturbed—black-clad techs tripping over cords and cables, so I feel little tugs, a little strain. These taut cables are unforgiving. They are unyielding. Each black-clad figure is periodically sent sprawling, where he lies briefly before collecting himself, rising, dusting himself off. Harsh tutelage. Thankfully, nobody else is here to see. So, mercifully, nobody laughs. The theater is closed. The curtains are drawn. Maybe, tomorrow, I'll feel differently. Maybe I'll throw up my hands and start again entirely, disgusted with myself, for no reason more specific than another, familiar failure, an inability to enter into lightness. An inability to enter into speech not thick-tongued and laborious, not tripping, not stumbling.

“**POZZO.** That's how it is on this bitch of an earth.”

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

## ☀ FIM DO PRIMEIRO DIA

Thank you for your patronage. My work relies on your spleen, your vomit, your bile, on your sickly, deformed body and your crude, misshapen spirit. Yes, all these things and more. Consequently, without the continued support of my generous clientele—you!—everything would be impossible. Everyone would die. The sun would cease to rise, and the stars would burn out. I would wake to a barren earth and, you see, I'd be so very, terribly bored. I think you'll all agree that's best avoided.  
O TEATRO RECOMEÇA A MANHÃ

## I. ☀☀ AÍ VEM O SOL

It's the afternoon, nearly evening, and I'm awake again. I've got the headache of the year and, after begging my boyfriend to refill my water-bottle for me—to avoid being seen in public in my current state—I've already emptied it. I'd feel guilty asking him to get up and refill it again, and, regardless, I desperately need to do laundry. And, moving on from my inexpert attempts to grapple with *la terreur*, I have promises to keep. I don't think I could handle going outside right now. I think the sun would take up residence in the back of my eyeballs and beat out some obscene, pulsing rhythm in my vitreous humor. Hardening the hyaloid canal, maybe, and puncturing my retina with it.

So—what happens with *Composition as Explanation*, the aforementioned wondrous Stein essay, is that she gives it as a lecture in '25 and '26 before she's widely recognized as an artist, which instead happens later, in the '30s. Stein then re-publishes it in '40, in an essay collection entitled *What are Masterpieces*. I've got a copy of a later

printing, from the '70s. It has a handwritten note on the inside of the cover, to 'Vicky', a gift from her mother for her 18th birthday. I tracked down everyone I could find named 'Vicky' in the small town in Kentucky where my copy was shipped from. I went through this exhaustive list and sent them all e-mails. Unsurprisingly, I received no response, but it was worth trying.

I need to copy down a quote but I left my books in the other room and just speaking—plaintively, “Ian?”, in a desperate attempt to have my boyfriend fetch them for me, has exacerbated my headache to the point where it is once again a palpable, throbbing mass pushing against the inside of my skull. I wonder how much I’ve still got in my bloodstream and how much worse things will get when it departs. Oh—some consolation. I’ve just remembered that, of course, the quote I’m looking for isn’t in *What are Masterpieces* at all, but in the *Selected Writings* I’ve got instead—which is on my bedroom bookshelf, but mercifully also easily accessible in PDF form. “This is one of many attempts Stein has made to explain her “difficult” manner of writing,” the verso before the start of the piece tells us. Therein lies the problem with the attitude taken toward this essay—yes, it does an admirable job of explaining Stein’s motivation for her particular stylistic conventions, but if we enmire ourselves in the interpretive project, applying this as just some *verbum dei* toward that end, then I think we lose track entirely of the much more broadly applicable framework that it presents.

Since I’m too exhausted and sore to uphold yesterday’s bravado, I’m going to make this easy for myself. Some 40 years later, in 1967, the French philosopher and critic Guy Debord released a book entitled, in translation, *The Society of the Spectacle*. This short book, a series of little numbered aphoristic paragraphs, lays out with astounding perspicacity a framework for understanding the modern world. That is, a world in which human experience and the act of *being* has been replaced with representations—with mere simulacra, let’s say. This eponymous ‘spectacle’ is a materialized informational object which is something like a generalization of capital, the commodification of not just the individual as a unit of alienated labor, but instead a totalizing alienated *experience* in all respects. This is very important, because it is an understanding which recognizes that the conflict is not between man and man, but instead between man and a sort of unrestrained informational apex predator which, by its nature—self-universalizing, propagative, alive—is wildly successful in the wider cultural ecology.

“ . . . In a society where no one can any longer be recognized by others, each individual becomes incapable of recognizing his own reality. Ideology is at home; separation has built its own world.”

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 217

Our contemporary cultural practice of doing our very best to strip out natural defense-mechanisms against this sort of thing is frightening, and I am *deeply* concerned, but I presume you’ve had enough of my concerns for now. Debord says we’re all schizophrenic now, in a sense, but I have some obligation to be palatable and self-consistent, at least some such obligation to myself. So, let’s continue. Let’s consider “Time and History”, as the 5th chapter of Debord’s opus is entitled.

## II. ☀️ A CONDIÇÃO AGORA

izzy

[20:03] i think on withdrawal days i should ease my discomfort by imagining that im a brave young enlistee in the wermacht

[20:03] shivering in a ditch on the front the day after i took my last tablet of pervitin

[20:04] pushing through the hollow feeling because i know im playing my part in holding back the tide of degeneracy that pushes its immense sickly bulk up against the fragile walls of the great project of my beloved nation

rats

[20:07] i refuse to believe you when you say that embarrassment/humiliation is not a goal of this

[20:07] because you say shit like this

izzy

[20:07] i like to imagine that its endearing

## III. ☀️ HISTÓRIA E TEMPO

“... even when such a society has developed a technology and a language and is already a product of its own history, it is conscious only of a perpetual present. . . Time remains motionless, like an enclosed space. When a more complex society finally becomes conscious of time, it tries to negate it, for it views time not as something that passes, but as something that returns. This static type of society organizes time in a *cyclical* manner, in accordance with its own direct experience of nature.”

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 126

To be clear, what we are concerned with is not the empirical, physicalist ‘reality’ of time—the pursuit of a robust, predictive model of its behavior when subjected to measurement is an entirely orthogonal concern. Instead, our object is the phenomenal experience of time as it is produced by the experiential and social context of a group of men. Debord begins his typology of these experiences of time with the introduction of the *cyclical* mode of time, which is characterized by a sort of fungibility of instants and a fractal recurrence. The migrations of nomads through an everywhere-uniform environment, or the explicit seasonal cycle of labor in an agrarian society—these things demarcate and *produce* time as it is experienced, and are at each level engaged in a process of eternal return, where nothing is new and the past has a pervasive present-ness. Note Debord’s initial use of the language of a “perpetual present”, which he dispenses with in favor of the term ‘cyclical’. Now—indulge me once more. Permit me this page break, *mon ami*.

#### IV. ☀️ PARA MINHA SURPRESA

“In the beginning there was the time in the composition that naturally was in the composition but time in the composition comes now and this is what is now troubling every one the time in the composition is now a part of distribution and equilibration. In the beginning there was confusion there was a continuous present and later there was romanticism which was not a confusion but an extrication and now there is either succeeding or failing there must be distribution and equilibration there must be time that is distributed and equilibrated.”

Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*

In the beginning<sup>18</sup>, there was a sense of time, or rather, there was time itself, in the composition. This time was present in such a manner as is natural to the composition, in that it arises naturally. Note that Stein’s syntactic approach makes the mechanics of discussing things like this *much* easier, but if I were to permit myself that flexibility I’d have nothing to offer—her work is right there, but that doesn’t seem to have helped.

Right—prerequisites. What’s a composition? If this is a statement on Stein’s style and its motivations, then I suppose she’s making a claim just about how the literary experience of time arises therein, and while that’d be *interesting*, sure, I don’t think it’s shocking. Let’s motivate our connection a little better, and unpack some of her language.

“There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations and this is what makes everything different otherwise they are all alike and everybody knows it because everybody says it.”

Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*

There is, after all, nothing that makes a difference—except that each generation has something different, at which they are all looking. This difference—which distinguishes them from other generations—is a ‘composition’. Call it material conditions. Call it a moment. Make your art, your portraits—and call it a situation. We’ll get back to that<sup>19</sup>.

Do note that this is the opening paragraph, and it tells us right there, explicitly, what composition is. Stein tells us “so simply that anybody knows it.” Now that we’ve established the nature of composition, that being the time-evolution of the social, material conditions, it’s very clear that Stein’s claim is *precisely* the same as Debord’s. Debord observes that a society is initially conscious only of a “perpetual present”, which arises naturally. Stein notes that a composition—a society, mind you—begins with the time that is naturally therein—a “continuous present”. Consequently, Debord’s ‘cyclical time’ was anticipated some 40 years earlier. What does Stein say about the rest of his project?

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<sup>18</sup> בְּרֵאשִׁית

<sup>19</sup> I’m making an awful lot of promises.

## V. ☀☀☀ QUAL É A SITUAÇÃO?

In order that we might draw further correspondences between Stein and Debord, toward the eventual aim of demonstrating that their respective modes of analysis are one and the same, it first seems appropriate to provide more clarity on the subject of the ‘situation’. This is the wider tradition in which Debord was working, which motivated his writings on the spectacle. The more explicit statement of artistic motivation given by the Situationist movement also aids in illustrating Stein’s objective, and why her proposed solutions to the overarching problem differ from those proposed by Debord and his contemporaries.

The Situationist International was a socialist organization operating from the late ‘50s through the early ‘70s, which was essentially founded in consideration of the same notion of the ‘spectacle’ that Debord discusses in *The Society*. This movement identified a change in the nature of human experience, from authentic qualitative *being* to, then, a participation in the world solely through the mediation of commodities—an experience of the passive man, acted upon by objects, his own life entirely lacking in immediate substance. Situationism understood that the ontology of the industrial base, of labor, which in the first order produces alienation as seen in other, more conventional Marxist analyses, eventually becomes a more totalizing mechanism. A more general alienation. A more complete separation of man from the base of the immanent and un-interpretable—all such things are trivialized, they are *recuperated* back into the spectacle, retaining no trace of the true self or experience except in name, whereby that name replaces the thing and the human ceases to exist.

So, when Debord talks about *cyclical* time, he refers to a more natural, primitive experience of time, which is essentially pre-industrial—it does not end with the advent of industry, nor is the industrial proletariat necessarily non-cyclical prior to the advent of a spectacle, but industry and the technological society permit the advent of the *pseudo-cycle*, which we will consider later—this, then, is the time of the spectacle.

However, Debord presents three such subdivisions, and in the remaining third is where he finds his conclusion as to what is necessary, as to what ends are desirable. Stein disagrees with him on this—she believes in the value of the cyclical, of the—recall her language—“continuous present.” I am far more amenable to Stein’s perspective in this particular way—my chief issue with Debord’s frame, which is up to the point of conclusion wildly incisive, is that it is fundamentally populist, fundamentally egalitarian, and therefore fundamentally *progressive*, aspirational, in a way that produces internal inconsistency—it is effectively millenarian, and when describing ends it must consequently beg the question to some extent. Stein has the advantage of working toward a demonstrated condition with known properties, and while I am convinced those properties are more desirable *regardless* of other concerns, I need not demonstrate that to justify my preference. Debord understands the value of the experience of cyclical man, and that value persists regardless of one’s assessment of the alternative he proposes. Keep in mind, for now, that I think what Stein achieves is something like a ‘right situationism’, or a ‘situationist reaction’.

Right. Beginning with the cyclical mode of time, once enough stratification arises in a society, once the society advances in the course of scale enough for natural differentiation to *necessarily* produce such a stratification—at that point a new mode of existence arises, though not one which is universal. This new mode is the ‘irreversible time’ of power, in that

there are some individuals who can enact such sweeping, significant change that the overarching conditions occupied by all individuals are then altered by their actions.

“The owners of this historical surplus value are the only ones in a position to know and enjoy real events. Separated from the collective organization of time associated with the repetitive production at the base of social life, this historical time flows independently above its own static community. This is the time of adventure and war, the time in which the masters of cyclical society pursue their personal histories”

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 128

Now—I think there’s an implicit value judgment here, or maybe not so implicit—to say someone is deprived of the ability to “know and enjoy real events” sounds altogether dismal, I think. Debord notes that “cyclical time is a time without conflict”, and describes the “static society” which, by institutional means, maintains its own historical homeostasis to a maximally cyclical degree. He notes that, in an industrial society, “kinship ties begin to dissolve”, and as a consequence the experience of the individual, *even the proletarian individual*, becomes a linear succession of events produced by powers. Now, *this* is somewhat terrifying, but the issue isn’t at all with the cyclical experience, as Debord makes quite clear—the problem is instead that the cyclical experience is erased, leaving only alienated participation in the historical, irreversible time generated by a group in which one has no membership. Consequently, one is entirely deprived of one’s own time. Debord’s division is perceptive, but he sometimes falters, since the claim that a universalization of the historical person is desirable is a *prior* one over which he develops his framework. Stein has no such burden of intellectual heritage and, in fact, her cultural milieu was far from supportive of the sort of noxious unwavering egalitarianism that Debord is obligated to uphold.

Stein only briefly touches on the other modes of time, for her commitment to the cyclical is nearly absolute. However, she gives a direct statement of the progression—

“In the beginning there was confusion there was a continuous present and later there was romanticism which was not a confusion but an extrication and now there is either succeeding or failing there must be distribution and equilibration there must be time that is distributed and equilibrated. This is the thing that is at present the most troubling . . .”

Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*

First, we begin with the cyclical, then we progress to an awareness of time as historical, the “extrication” of time from experience, delineating it. Then—then, there is succeeding or failing. There is distribution and equilibration. And, Stein tells us, this is, at present, the most troubling. The Situationists pursued *détournement*, a sort of general culture-jamming or hijacking intended to insert oneself into historicity and upend the spectacle. This manifests itself in writing, for example, as a practice of taking conventional aphorisms and inverting subject-object relationships, then following those statements through to their conclusions. Naturally, this is basically ineffectual. The Situationists themselves understand the power

relationships and the presence of the process of ‘recuperation’ that makes this a hopeless endeavor. Stein instead pursues portraiture, in service of the cyclical.

“In making these portraits I naturally made a continuous present an including everything and a beginning again and again within a very small thing. That started me into composing anything into one thing.”

Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation*

This is how she describes *Three Lives*, and how she describes *The Making of Americans*. I was especially impressed with the story from the former, entitled *The Good Anna*, which illustrates the day-to-day life of a working woman employed as a servant in the households of a series of individuals. It effectively, compassionately presents the unchanging richness of her internal experience—purely cyclical aside from the intervention of those individuals around who her are imbued with a more irreversible mode of action. The cyclic eternity is this—the “beginning again and again”. Repetition, conceit, the forcing-together, achievement of the missing human piece by removes—this is portraiture. Despite the passivity with which she participates in the world, her depth of feeling and perception is rich and undeniably, especially human, in a way that I think makes a clear, motivated case for the value of the cyclical. Note that this is not a thesis, on her part, on the subject of class—while Debord correctly recognizes that irreversible time is aligned with power exchange, Stein avoids the associated fallacy of assuming that conflict is necessary. Egalitarianism, and concomitant entitlement, produces a jealousy—if one believes one is of the same substance as other estates of a stratification, and if one operates under a presupposition of a fair world, then an enmity arises. It is not a ‘false consciousness’ to avoid that enmity, for the materialization and naturalization of class that upholds it in, for example, a manorial society, has as much reality as anything else.

As the industrial society progresses, time becomes more and more irreversible, as economic processes operated by a mercantile class are used to enact constant overturn. There is a “general movement”, Debord notes, which herds individuals along its entropic arrow, trampling their internal lives. Now, there is a mechanized fate which no-one controls, a history governed by no-one, lived by no-one. Earlier, I mentioned a ‘fungibility of instants’—this is the final component of the development of time, both in Debord and Stein, respectively the pseudo-cycle, or the mode of time which is characterized by ‘distribution and equilibration’. Every moment is interchangeable with every other, and this is both irreversible (and, consequently, is imposed by the experience of another) but also *pseudo*-cyclical, in that each moment is observationally equivalent, since this is a history which is lived by *no-one* other than the overarching informational object itself, the spectacle.

“This general time of human nondevelopment also has a complementary aspect—a consumable form of time based on the present mode of production and manifesting itself in everyday life as a pseudocyclical time.”

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 148

So, there it is. Time starts out human and humane, lived by all, eternally returning and unchanging. This is the perennial intuition, and the natural environment of men. Eventually, congregation occurs, an accumulation of humanity and a separation of production from consumption—this division of labor produces the irreversible, and generates the course of history therein. Eventually, industrialization occurs, and the principle of informational life, embodied in the ideas which obtain success in the cultural ecology, is separated therefrom. It is detached from the interests of those who guide it, who are only able to comprehend their own culture when it remains at a scale compatible with human intuition. This ballooning idea, *O VERME VITAL*, is something like pure life itself, and it grows and grows. Fungibility is the key property of the optimal substrate. Like a monoculture, the parasite grows everywhere—and the soil is all the same, convergent, ever-narrowing, ever-shrinking. It makes it so. It shapes it so. Time is transformed by industry, and industry materializes its own principle into this *creature* with no body, no spirit, a pure Ideal. Only the worm is alive. All of the exchange, all of the action and interaction—all of this is beside the point, now. All of humanity is beside the point, now. Imagine yourselves as a series of petri dishes, every one of you the same rich agarose base, the same nutrient-broth slurry inside your skull—and imagine, all of you, one dead-white flesh net, one cold living snare, pulled taut. Pulling you together. Pulling you close. The single, sickly, almighty worm. There’s your division of labor—cleansed of being, stuffed with appearances, a shapeless, indeterminate unit beneath a fine decorative layer of rich paints, you are a factory for the experience of an unliving thing. Debord notes that the ‘authentic communism’ he seeks “abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals.” Well, look—there’s the enemy. The inhuman. The other. This is *always* the other. To *everyone* this is the other. Herein lies a statement of the value of sincerity, the *necessity*, even—a moment of real, human experience, said unabashedly, said with innocence, a proof that speech in innocence is still, is *always* possible—this is uninterpretable. This is only in itself. This is, therefore, being. It is more than its appearance. Discernment, identification, lines in the sand, drawing one from another—all this is a weapon. Elitism, the anti-egalitarian, the hateful—all this too. Before the worm, you’re all equal. So, to paint an uninterpretable portrait, to do violence with language and draw together unlike things *sincerely*, not in senseless opposition but in traditional fervor—this is the situation which the problem truly demands. An actionism, or a conceit, whatever it may be—any hostile idea ringed in spears. Make yourself inhospitable.

“Whoever becomes the ruler of a city that is accustomed to freedom and does not destroy it can expect to be destroyed by it, for it can always find a pretext for rebellion in the name of its former freedom and age-old customs, which are never forgotten despite the passage of time or any benefits it has received. No matter what the ruler does or what precautions he takes, the inhabitants will never forget that freedom or those customs—unless they are separated or dispersed . . .”

Machiavelli, *The Prince*

☼☼ AND IT’S TIME, TIME, TIME