

**'there was nothing
to say and
nobody said it'** | *Silence, Disconnection and Interruptions
of Gertrude Stein's Writing Voice
during World War II*
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In this part of the world they have another thing, they say taisez-vous, or shut up, or shut it, and they say it as they are talking, they are talking along about something and they say, oh shut it, and it is not to themselves, nor to you, it is of the facts of which they are speaking, sometimes they say taisez-vous, taisez-vous, and the sentence goes on, it is rather delightful, I do not quite know why, they may say and the war is long and the Germans might be coming this way again oh shut up oh shut up and do you think it is possible that they will.

Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, 1945¹

At the outset of World War II Gertrude Stein chose to retreat to her country house in the foothills of the French Alps, only re-emerging to the public arena years later as the American journalists who accompanied advancing Allied forces competed for the story of her 'liberation'. Although strongly advised to return to the United States at the start of the war, Stein had hesitated to do so, saying that 'it would be awfully uncomfortable and I am fussy about my food'.² She eventually decided that 'we are alright just staying here, I have had a radio put in and I get America on it',³ little realising how prolonged the war was to be, or how isolated and out of contact she and her partner Alice B. Toklas would become. Stein's experience during this period is traced through *Wars I Have Seen* (1945), a fascinating eyewitness chronicle of everyday life in occupied France that was cautiously maintained in her notoriously illegible handwriting in order to prevent exposure to any curious but potentially hostile readers. This experimental account is not particularly historically accurate, although Stein famously said 'I always wanted to be historical, from almost a baby on'.⁴ Nor

does it follow a conventional war narrative, where an event-driven account of heroism, tragedy or political intrigue might be expected. Instead, her narrative is striking for the banality of the details recounted, threading together personal reminiscences, historical declarations and digressions about domestic discomforts. It paints a picture of Toklas and Stein, like their French neighbours in the isolated village, 'tremendously occupied with the business of daily living' (191). Stein, however, was unsettled by the unreliability of outside information: 'it is a queer state living as we are all doing, you have no news except for the radio because there are no newspapers any more and no trains no mail no telephone' (131). It was in response to this mediated uncertainty of authorised accounts of the larger war and her inability to find a reliable communication channel to her American reading public that Stein determined to write a more immediate, subjective and experimental narrative. The resulting autobiographical text demonstrates her uneasy position on the periphery of the theatre of war, where she found herself interrupted and disconnected both geopolitically and medialogically.

Wars I Have Seen has not previously received a sustained analysis from a communications and cultural studies perspective, yet it offers an intriguing snapshot of the impact of media technologies on a peculiarly isolated social group at a period in the early twentieth century when acoustic media had only relatively recently become everyday. While emphasis is frequently placed on Stein's more visual modernity,⁵ *Wars I Have Seen* is quite remarkable for its attention to acoustic communication technologies. In this text, Stein reveals herself to have been preoccupied during the war years with intermittently disconnected telephone lines and increasingly addictive radio, with its various channels, competing discourses and worryingly alluring propaganda. She describes herself and Toklas as struggling to interpret unreliable sound-bites that often seemed unsynchronised with the local experience they interrupted. *Wars I Have Seen* is also significant for its early scrutiny of the impact of these acoustic media technologies on the genre of war writing. The closest contemporary equivalent to Stein's *Wars I Have Seen* might well be a blog from an expatriate resident of Iraq, while one of the most striking recent representations of war is the unauthorised release of images of Abu Ghraib, notoriously first leaked via mobile phone technology. Presciently, Stein had explored how already fraught wartime experience is made more difficult by the unreliability and slipperiness of media communications. She not only modelled her writing on competing war propaganda and noise but also experimented with linguistic patterns that incorporated the cognitive stutters that occur when media is interrupted, disconnected or censored.

Stein's interest in the mechanics of conversation, a dialogue increasingly mediated by new acoustic technologies like the telephone, is evident throughout her work. Avital Ronell has said that 'the telephone splices a party line stretching through history',⁶ and Stein's career as an experimental modernist was marked by her appropriation of the telephone line to pick up on an increasingly organised network of celebrity and success. Her 'conversation' in the

bestselling *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) and *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937) is a coordination of reminiscences, sound-bites and quotations from a cacophony of now historically famous voices. This textually recorded conversation strategically placed Stein in a dialogue first with the image-based coterie of the Paris salons where she established her reputation between the wars, and then against the anticipated American public readership and consumption of her 'genius'. That Stein was in demand throughout her later career for interviews and speaking engagements reflects the allure of her testimony as an active avant-garde practitioner, with the promise of insider gossip. Stein's everyday chattiness is amplified in her writings, articulating and avowing her celebrity in the public domain through the medium of mass communication while uneasily negotiating the troubling divide between public and private reception.

Eventually, both Stein's legendary Parisian salon and her country house were modernised with telephones in the early 1930s, adding another media dimension to a world already criss-crossed with letters, telegrams and the exchange of photographs and manuscripts. Installing a telephone primarily to keep in contact with her new agent, Stein recalls: 'I had to have a telephone put in first at twenty-seven rue de Fleurus and then here at Bilignin. I had always before that not had a telephone but now that I was going to be an author whose agent could place something I had of course to have a telephone'.⁷ Mark Gobel points out that the telephone in this pre-war period represents a system of communication that reflects a larger network of exchange, making each transmission a commercialisation of mediated language. For Gobel, then, the telephone is a symbolic technology in several senses: 'it is not only a means of communication but also a metonymic figure for deeper historical and economic remakings of Stein's world'.⁸ The avant-garde coterie, with its rarified exchange in journals, editing groups, exhibitions and literary salons, was no longer enough to contain Stein, whose world was opened up by the communicative possibilities that arrived with the publication and reception of her bestsellers. At the beginning of *Everybody's Autobiography*, for instance, in which Stein presents herself as an avant-garde media magnet, she immediately picks up the phone: 'the first thing I did was to telephone to Pablo Picasso and tell him what I had done'.⁹ Picasso, now on call himself with a newly installed line, gratifyingly responded 'I want to hear it'.

Later isolated during World War II in the so-called 'free zone' of occupied France, Stein may well have queried who would listen to her, as her opportunities for celebrity networking were curtailed when communications became progressively limited: her mail was censored, cables completely stopped, telephone lines cut, and radio sets stolen or appropriated by the Germans. In the early stages of the war Stein noted her increasing disconnection from the outside world: 'It is the third time that we have been deprived of the telephones but this time fortunately they have left us electricity and the radio, which is a pleasure' (128). The

disorientation brought about by a reliance on politicised radio broadcasts quickly became frustrating. Previously, it had seemed to Stein that modernity came with a constant stream of noise, and that the acoustic technologies could comfortably be incorporated into the background of everyday life: in *Everybody's Autobiography* she 'had taken it for granted that every room in any hotel would have a radio in it and that the radio would be going every minute and that even if the one in our rooms was not going we would hear all the others'.¹⁰ During the war years, however, Stein was not only reliant on media communications for connection to the world outside the French village, but was also compelled to consider what happened when this media was adulterated. Although there may have been a steady stream of radio noise during the war, its authority and reliability was questionable, particularly when it disseminated propagandist news she didn't want to hear. For instance, Stein wrote that she immediately doubted the truth of the broadcast relating to the shocking fall of Amiens, and by implication France, when she and Toklas overheard it on a café radio. When the news was confirmed, she was so outraged she declared: 'I have never listened to the radio since' (178–9). Stein went on to insist 'I said I would not hear any more news—Alice Toklas could listen to the wireless, but as for me I was going to cut box hedges and forget the war' (181). This claim, to 'never' again listen to the radio, is almost immediately contradicted in *Wars I Have Seen*, as the narrative continually refers to Stein's almost obsessive radio listening.¹¹ This contradiction highlights not only Stein's struggle to account for both the importance and instability of communication networks, but also her unease about the loss of her own discursive power. Certainly, the ambivalence that Stein felt about the sudden collapse of her own identity in the public spotlight is evident in the ambiguities and disavowals that frame her many references to media technologies in her later writing.

Scholarly consideration has been given to Stein's war writing only relatively recently, as previous attention has been focused on an evaluation of her political position, centring around the uneasy question of how she, as an American Jewish lesbian, survived under the Nazi-sympathetic Vichy regime that controlled occupied France. Critics have been divided on this question, with some convinced that Stein's own political opinions were 'ludicrous, illogical, specious and inconsistent'.¹² Shari Benstock goes so far as to suggest that it was Stein's conflicted 'self-hatred' that allowed her, without being overtly sympathetic to Nazi politics, to 'turn a blind eye' to what was happening to other Jews in Europe, although she acknowledges that 'it remains unclear whether [Stein] ever understood what was at stake in this war, what had led to it, or what her own position was in it'.¹³ A rare eyewitness account of Stein's experience during World War II was given by French-American journalist Thérèse Bonney in an article published in *Vogue* in 1942, which describes Stein's precarious position cut off from her public readership and friends. Bonney notes, 'She is completely detached from the ephemeral politics of France today'.¹⁴ This assertion of Stein's neutrality or indifference was

presaged by an earlier comment in which Stein presents herself as impervious to the danger she and Toklas were in: 'Writers only think they are interested in politics, they are not really, it gives them a chance to talk and writers like to talk but really no real writer is really interested in politics.'¹⁵ Stein's wilful or involuntary blindness is most evident in *Wars I Have Seen* with the advice she gave to the young men of the village, whose mothers consulted her about whether their sons should go as ordered to the work camps in Germany, or evade capture and hide in the mountains with the Maquis. Stein's advice to go where directed by the occupying force was optimistic and non-confrontational but, in retrospect, distressingly naïve: 'try to study them and learn their language and get to know their literature, think of yourselves as a tourist and not as a prisoner' (25).

It was Wanda Van Dusen's discovery and analysis of Stein's 'Introduction' to the broadcast speeches of Maréchal Pétain, which had been hidden away by her disconcerted American publishers, that reanimated the recent lively discussion of Stein's politics. The previously unpublished manuscript of Stein's translation of Pétain's pro-Vichy radio propaganda was discovered annotated with a comment handwritten by her publisher: 'For the records. This disgusting piece was mailed from Belley on Jan. 19, 1942'.¹⁶ Van Dusen suggests that Stein's recounting of Pétain's 'moving' story in the introduction could actually be interpreted as a strategy designed to protect herself and Toklas in an increasingly uncomfortable political situation; in this reading, the introduction acts as 'a redemptive fetishistic ritual' even as it denies the existence of racism in the so-called *zone libre* administered by Pétain while obscuring the policies that would reveal him as racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic and openly hostile to America. Stein's disquieting celebration of Pétain as a political saviour is then intriguingly read by Van Dusen as a manifestation of the intoxication that is a by-product of fetishisation, which, as Theodor Adorno has argued, is fundamental to both fascism and mass-cultural forms like radio propaganda.¹⁷

Despite the claims that Stein had isolated herself during the war years, she was not completely disconnected from the cultural and political landscape. At the same time that she wrote the piece supporting Pétain, she was apparently also contributing to several subversive little magazines, which were circulated surreptitiously. In 1942, for example, an article by Stein appeared in the monthly magazine *Confluences*, just as it was officially denounced by a collaborationist daily paper in Paris. Stein was directly targeted in this denunciation as it accused: 'to write for this magazine it is sufficient to be an American Jewess, without talent, like Gertrude Stein'.¹⁸ Her contribution had been published alongside those of key members of the intellectual resistance, for instance Albert Camus, Robert Desnos, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Debu-Bridel. Wagner-Martin points out that equivocal negotiations of allegiances under the occupation were not atypical, citing how Simone de Beauvoir worked for Pétain's *Radio Nationale* in Paris while simultaneously and without contradiction claiming

after the war that ‘everybody resisted’.¹⁹ Following this argument, Stein’s own writing output should therefore not be used to judge Stein as either particularly strategic or unduly naïve.

Pheobe Stein Davis attempts to redeem Stein’s apparently compromised political leanings by arguing that the text of her most extensive war writing, *Wars I Have Seen*, is focused on storytelling strategies,²⁰ drawing attention to Stein’s repeated asides that ‘there are so many stories so many stories and so much confusion’ (170). John Whittier Ferguson also goes beyond discussions of the historical questions of collaboration to an appreciation that war, for Stein, was a manifestation of modernity, and therefore her record of ‘these excitements and horrors are as much aesthetic and ontological as they were socio-political and military’.²¹ He takes the position that Stein’s *Wars I Have Seen* is more concerned with the often confusing and ambiguous stories of everyday life, than any attempt to recount an objective history of World War II. Jean Gallagher pursues a similar line of argument, pointing out that *Wars I Have Seen* is remarkable for its inscription and participation in the conflicting and changing discourses of French public opinion, with its equivocation between collaboration and resistance. Gallagher goes on to argue that, in its gradual turn from occupation to liberation, Stein’s text shifts from the deferral of interpretive certainty about visual evidence concerning political activity, to the fragmentation of both political subjectivity and the possibility of the unified subject, even as it enacts the way the occupation itself suspended interpretation. She suggests that Stein’s wartime writing actively undermined or deflected interpretation of visual evidence in response to the difficult and dangerous political situation Stein found herself in: a strategy of deferment that promoted a state of *attentisme*—the political attitude of ‘wait and see’—common among French citizens during the occupation.²² But by concentrating on a narrowing of the visual field during this period, Gallagher neglects the aural: Stein’s controversial ‘Introduction to the Speeches of Maréchal Pétain’ was, after all, triggered by his radio propaganda on the French *Radio Nationale*,²³ and while Stein may well have been frustrated throughout her ‘eyewitness’ account of the war, the multiple voices and viewpoints in *Wars I Have Seen* would seem to be more directly modelled on the broadcasts, telephone conversations, gossip and rumour-mongering that framed her experience during World War II. Sarah Wilson picks up on this omission, recalling Frantz Fanon’s request that his readers ‘conceive of the radio not as an instrument but “as a technique”’,²⁴ as she argues that radio, in particular, acted as a powerful model for Stein’s later writing.

I would argue, however, that Stein did not simply adapt techniques for multiple voices or overlapping storylines learnt from radio in her writing, but actively experimented with the interruptions, equivocations and unexpected disconnections of acoustic media. Stein’s troubled response to the silencing of her own public voice can also be traced throughout *Wars I Have Seen*, a text that is unusually preoccupied with interrupted conversations and

frustrated storytelling. I would argue that Stein's silenced state in the war years is comparable to that which Emanuel Schlegoff, in his discourse analysis of telephone conversations, refers to as 'a continuing state of incipient talk'.²⁵ According to Schlegoff, silences or interruptions are created by gaps of topic or sequence boundaries, and do not necessarily indicate to the participants that a conversation is over. The duration of these silences is marked out by contextual contingencies, such as the departure and arrival times that bracket extended periods of silence in conversations during long car rides. Following this model, Stein's war years were framed by her refrain 'Listen to me' in the work following her success in America, and the radio broadcast she was persuaded to give within days of her liberation at the end of World War II. In the meantime, *Wars I Have Seen* traces Stein's negotiation of local gossip, rumour and denunciation, in such a way that her reliance on modern technologies was gradually and inextricably entangled with the condition of 'incipient talk'. Despite her earlier disgust with the propagandist delivery of radio broadcasters that led her to falsely claim that she 'never listened to the radio again' (128), Stein underscores the broadcasts' increasingly pivotal role in the village:

We are in the very thick of it now, rumours and rumours but some of them are true, they have suppressed the use of the telephone and all through the region, nobody can go anywhere ... we have the terror of the Germans all about us, we have no telephone, we hear stories and do not know whether they are true, we do not know what is happening to our friends in Belley, except for the life of this village of Culoz we seem separated from everything, we have our dog, we have the radio, we have electricity, we have plenty to eat, and are comfortable but we are completely isolated and rumour follows rumour. (94–5)

Radio might have seemed to be the one of the few stable elements in the village, but 'rumour follows rumour', replicating and even superseding the unreliable acoustic media. Although they were not local, the incoming radio voices were available to all, but while they absorbed attention, they were not necessarily to be believed. Radio called for a diffused un-individuated audience, but this was a role that Stein and her neighbours were no longer prepared to perform. The diverted or divided consciousness invited by the communications technologies, where one is physically present but absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere, no longer seemed relevant to the cultural life of the isolated and harried villagers. Instead, gossip replaced and replicated the missing or unreliable media:

what makes it so extraordinary, everybody listens to the radio, they listen all day long because almost everyone has one and if not there is their neighbour's and they listen to the voice from any country and yet what they really believe is not what they hear but the rumours

in the town, by word of mouth is always the most convincing, they do not believe the newspapers nor the radio but they do believe what they tell each other and that is natural enough, all official news is so deceiving, so why not believe all the rumours, and even when they know they are not true they believe them, at any rate they have a chance of being true rumours have but official news has no chance of being true none at all of course not. (105)

While gossip, as an exchange of points of view, is not necessarily about accurate information, it is telling that the villagers chose to 'believe what they tell each other' and not the official communiqués, which everyone agreed had 'no chance of being true'.

From an open communication pattern in the village, where 'we all talked and we all explained so much and we all talked to anybody' (57), developments in the war affected Stein's perceptions, while presenting her with an opportunity to experiment with the impact of media networks on the genres of autobiography, history and war writing. Stein recounts how the danger of being precise with details or telling too much to the wrong person was brought home as denunciations ran rife through the village and collaborating French authorities were arresting their fellow Frenchmen, so that 'everybody is ashamed, everybody is crying, everybody is listening to everything' (93). Kenneth Gergson points out how a focus on 'absent' monologic technologies like radio can lead to just such a curtailing of local meaning: 'when we are listening to voices from afar we are no longer building the realities and moralities of the local together'.²⁶ While new clusters of meaning from these distant sources may be compatible, they may also function independently or antagonistically to the local, and this leads to the breakdown of communal trust: 'friendship, intimacy, family and neighbours cease to be the primary sources of meaning, and become the objects of deliberation from another domain of reality'. While Gergson was meditating on the inherent dangers of the current cyber-community, his theory of 'absent presence' is peculiarly applicable to the situation of the French radio listening public under the occupation, who were conscious of the wider war but whose community ethics were compromised by conflicting claims of collaboration or resistance. Similarly, it could be argued that Stein's attention to the local conditions of war was distracted by an imagined conversation with her American public, regularly updated in the manuscript of *Wars I Have Seen*.

The idiosyncratic language tick of Stein's village, with its conversational aside of 'taisez vous' or 'shut up' quoted at the beginning of this essay, then, became an apposite and urgent proscription to counter the excessive storytelling about the war and uncertainty about the trustworthiness of the media. People learnt to guard their tongues:

There was nothing to say and nobody said it, and then the Germans took Sudan.

That gave us all so bad a turn that nobody said anything: they just said how do you do, and talked about the weather, and that was all—there was nothing to say. (178)

As the action in the region heated up and the military presence became more conspicuous, the local villagers attempted to maintain a fantasy of distance and disconnection, treating the war and the Germans as if they were remote and artificial; Stein notes, for example, that ‘the younger generation made a cult of not knowing that there were any Germans existing’ (122), ignoring them on the street and treating them as if they were ghosts or film characters who were ‘exactly like their photographs’ (187). Comparing the hostile occupying forces to static photographic stills served to distance the villagers from the uncomfortable reality of their presence, although such detachment would prove itself more difficult at an acoustic level.

Stein draws attention to the contradictory pressures for either engagement or detachment that were in circulation with an unsatisfactorily explained story about what seems an abortive attempt to implicate her in surreptitious information exchange. This strange anecdote is striking for the way it is unpursued in the text of *Wars I Have Seen*, and so delineates for the reader the local tensions that led to the shutting down of conversation in order to survive the war:

We had a friend whose name was Gilbert and he was gone away and his wife followed him and the little girl Christine was left behind with some neighbours, we did not know them and one day a red-haired and active young fellow asked for me and I saw him and I said what and he said I have a message to you from Gilbert, ah I said is the little girl not well, oh yes he said she is all right she is staying with us, ah yes I said, do you need anything for her, I said and he said no she was all right and he was fiddling with a match box and I said well and he said the message is in here and I said you had better go, and he said are you afraid of me and I said no and you had better go and don't you want the message he said and I said no you had better go and he said I will go and he had tears in his eyes and he went out and told the servant that we had not received his message and a friend said were you not curious and I said no not.

There are so many ends to stories these days so many ends that it is not like it was there is nothing to be curious about except small things, food and the weather. (68)

Stein shows here how she has moved from telling ‘everything’ to doing nothing but listening and repressing conversation that might eventually implicate her. The reader never finds out what happens to the little girl Christine, what was in the matchbox, and whether the red-haired man was trying to deliver a message from the missing parents, the Maquis hiding in the hills, or was himself a member of the French militia attempting to trick her into exposing her identity and affiliations. There are other similarly peculiar and unresolved anecdotes in *Wars I Have Seen*, for instance the story about a retrospectively ominous train that passed through the station filled with people ‘all naked except a little trouser nothing on their heads and sitting there and the train went on slowly and all the French people were as if they were

at a theatre that was not interesting' (30) with no further speculation or discussion about who exactly was in the train, why, and where they were heading. Stein's renunciation of speculation is intriguing not only for the way that it elides her decision to take a side in the war, as either pro-collaborationist or sympathetic to the Resistance, but also for the way it reveals her adherence to the village's proscription to 'shut up'. Just as radio and telephone networks failed, so did the ordinary conversation patterns and expectations within the village, replaced with surreptitious codes that could mean anything or nothing, such as the matchbox Gilbert's friend fiddled with so meaningfully. Stein takes the disconnection still further, to its logical conclusion, and refuses to receive any communication at all. Effectively, both the narrator and the text disconnect, in a deliberate suspension of both communication and interpretation.

Stein's later delight at decoding clues garnered from the occupying forces' behaviour and the radio broadcasts to work out that the allies were approaching was simultaneously tempered by her awareness of possible technological surveillance 'listening in'. She recalls that one day on the radio,

we heard Eisenhower tell us he was here they were here and just yesterday a man sold us a ten packages of Camel cigarettes, glory be, and we are singing glory hallelujah, and feeling very nicely, and everybody has been telephoning to us congratulatory messages upon my birthday which it isn't but we know what they mean. And I said in return I hoped their hair was curling nicely. (127)

Although the telephone lines were back up, Stein and her friends were careful to encrypt their glee at the news of approaching Americans, a propaganda broadcast confirmed more practically by the sudden availability of cigarettes after a long period of rationing. Interestingly enough, the coded response chosen by Stein may well reveal her carefully equivocal politics. What sounds like a surrealist comment, 'I hoped their hair was curling nicely', can be deciphered as a rather pointed pro-Resistance aspiration, as she later recounts the punishment meted out to the local women who overtly liaised with the Germans was that their curls were brutally shaven off in what Stein mocks as 'the coiffeur of 1944' (160). The interruptions and interpretive uncertainty at the heart of *Wars I Have Seen* mirrors the profound impact that the sudden instability and withdrawal of communication technologies had on a local community who had hitherto relied on them.

Coming out of her enforced isolation during the war, Stein was thrust back into the public arena as suddenly as she had been after *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was first published in 1933. This time, moreover, her first public event was a radio broadcast, quickly organised by journalists who had heard rumours of her survival from the American GIs. Eric Severied,

a war correspondent for CBS and part of a group of embedded journalists who had landed with the allied forces, tracked down Stein, who had not been seen out of the village of Culoz for two years and who had lost touch with even her closest friends. Stein happily agreed to do a radio broadcast for Severied and gave his colleague Frank Gervasi the freshly typed manuscript of *Wars I Have Seen* on the spot.²⁷ Stein was then driven to Voiron where she made a broadcast to America. Although this recording is lost, Severied transcribed at least part of Stein's euphoric speech in his autobiography:

What a day is today that is what a day it was day before yesterday, what a day! ... First we saw three Americans in a military car and we said are you Americans and they said yes and we choked and we talked ... And then four newspaper men turned up, naturally you don't count newspaper men but how they and we talked we and they asked me to come to Voiron with them to broadcast and here I am.²⁸

This broadcast was internationally disseminated and many friends and fans in America reported themselves astonished to hear her voice for the first time in several years. Her prolonged silence had led them to fear the worst, but they were thrilled that the end of the war meant the return of her voice to the public domain. While Stein noted in an aside during this radio speech that 'naturally you don't count newspaper men', it was their role as representatives of the media networks that made 'true' the rumour of Stein's liberation. By broadcasting her story under the army's aegis, Stein had effectively let herself become not only a symbol of liberation to her international listening public, but also part of the military propaganda machine. She would not have been unconscious of this effect; as John Whittier Ferguson points out, Stein 'measures that publicity and the consequences of victory every bit as thoughtfully as she weighed the success and the effects of her own prose in the mid-1930s'.²⁹

Stein's subsequent celebratory article 'Off We All Went To See Germany', published in *Life* magazine in August 1945, presents Stein in an even more emphatic return to her mass audience as an official witness of the allied victory. This chatty article, and the photographs that accompanied it, marked Stein's return to the public gaze, and broke her enforced pre-occupation with acoustic technologies of communication. The most striking image is that of Stein, accompanied by American soldiers, visiting Hitler's retreat in the Alpine town of Berchtesgaden, where 'we all got together and pointed as Hitler had pointed'³⁰ in a pose that either provocatively or playfully mimics the Sieg Heil salute.

What makes this photograph resonate is the incongruity of Stein's presence in this particular pose and place: as a Jewish lesbian reviled by the Nazi regime, it was incredible that she had not only survived under their noses in occupied France, but then ended up playing



Gertrude Stein with US troops on Hitler's balcony, 1945.

Courtesy of Time and Life Pictures, Getty Images, as well as the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

one of the first postwar tourists to Hitler's headquarters. Jean Gallagher argues that this gesture displays 'an impulse toward mimetic and iconographic outrage' towards the defeated Nazis, but adds that, even as Stein aligns herself visually with the victorious American soldiers and their 'stance of victory', her own eye-witness account 'is effectively absorbed into the

trajectory of the military gaze'.³¹ The photograph thus represents the moment that Stein's wartime preoccupation with acoustic experiences and compromised wartime subjectivities have apparently been folded into and resolved by the authorised visual account of the war.

Stein's withholding of information and unresolved anecdotes throughout the convoluted text of *Wars I Have Seen* draws attention to the frustrations of wartime conditions for the non-military population, while at the same time implicitly destabilising future histories that would inevitably construct more conventional and 'objective' linear narratives that would resolve and correct any lingering ambiguities surrounding the recording and communication of wartime events. Stein's silences about the larger and more troubling aspects of the war, such as the Jewish deportations from the French countryside and the ethics of implicit collaboration within the village, are therefore not simply gaps in her account. It has been pointed out that silence 'while universal in its form as perceived absence, is indicative of repressed, unobtrusive presence and functionally tied to the context'.³² In this reading, the power of such significant silence by Stein lies in its inherent ambiguity: it is a form of withholding that is simultaneously an understanding that such absence only exists in the ear of the listener—the

knowing postwar reader. Just as musical rests and pauses do not involve absence of sound, but rather a suspension which the audience recognises as significant for the overall experience of a musical event, the interruptions and silences in *Wars I Have Seen* resonate disquietingly throughout the narrative of everyday life under the Occupation.

In many ways, Stein anticipated Henri Lefebvre who went on in the postwar period to instil the notion of everyday life with theoretical currency, understanding that history needed to go beneath the surface of political events.³³ War is usually the most urgent of narratives, necessarily about life or death, but Stein focuses on her unstructured private life with asides about neighbourly gossip, dog-walking, and the entertainment value of the propaganda in various national radio programs. Not that nothing happened—her narrative is larded with anecdotes about people being taken prisoner, denunciations, and intrigue by the Maquis hiding in the nearby mountains. *Wars I Have Seen* is not, however, presented as an authoritative view of the war, even as it expresses the urgency that underlines all war narratives. Instead, the very first line prepares the reader for an unstable text that experiments with the representation of truth as well as with the conventions of autobiography, history and war writing as Stein cautions: ‘I do not know whether to put in the things I do not remember as well as the things I do remember’ (1). Her growing distrust of hitherto compelling media technologies—from the typewriter she forbade Toklas to use to prepare her manuscript to the unreliable telephone lines that are tangled up in her narrative—build a peculiarly evocative picture of wartime frustrations, suspended communication, and interpretive ambiguities.

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2. Linda Wagner-Martin, *Favoured Strangers: Gertrude Stein and her Family*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1995, p. 238.
3. Gertrude Stein, ‘The Winner Loses: A Picture of Occupied France’ (November, 1940), reproduced as an appendix to *Wars I Have Seen*, p. 181.
4. Gertrude Stein, ‘A Message from Gertrude Stein’ in Carl Van Vechten (ed.), *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, Vintage, New York, 1990, p. vii.
5. See Julian Murphet, ‘Gertrude Stein’s Machinery of Perception’ in Julian Murphet and Lydia Rainford (eds), *Literature and Visual Technologies: Writing After Cinema*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire and New York, 2003, pp. 67–81; Susan McCabe, ‘“A Delight in Dislocation”: The Cinematic Modernism of Stein, Chaplin and Man Ray’, *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2001, pp. 429–53; and Jean Gallagher, *World Wars Through the Female Gaze*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1998.
6. Avital Ronell, ‘Talking on the Telephone’ in S. I. Salamensky (ed.), *Talk Talk Talk: The Cultural Life of Everyday Conversation*, Routledge, New York and London, 2001, p. 219.

7. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, Virago Press, London, 1985 (1937), p. 3.
8. Mark Gobel, 'Cameo Appearances; or, When Gertrude Stein Checks Into Grand Hotel', *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2001, p. 119.
9. Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, p. 1.
10. Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, p. 213.
11. Alice B. Toklas later recounted Stein's insistence on being updated with even the broadcasts she had missed while she was in the bath or asleep. 'Letter from Alice B. Toklas to William Whitehead' (31 July 1948), reproduced in Edward Burns (ed.), *Staying on Alone: Letters of Alice B. Toklas*, Angus and Robertson, London, 1974, p. 132.
12. Bettina L. Knapp, *Gertrude Stein*, Continuum, New York, 1990, p. 173.
13. Shari Benstock, 'Paris Lesbianism and the Politics of Reaction, 1900–1940' in Martin Duberman, Martha Vinicus and George Chauncey (eds), *Hidden from History*, New American Library, New York, 1989, pp. 338 and 342.
14. Therese Bonney, 'Gertrude Stein in France', *Vogue*, 1 July 1942, reproduced in Linda Simon (ed.), *Gertrude Stein Remembered*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994, p. 177.
15. Stein, 'The Winner Loses', p. 178.
16. This handwritten comment from Stein's publisher Bennett Cerf is quoted by Wanda Van Dusen in 'Portrait of a National Fetish: Gertrude Stein's Introduction to the Speeches of Maréchal Pétain', *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1996, p. 70. Gertrude Stein's original 'Introduction to the Speeches of Maréchal Pétain' has since been published in *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1996, pp. 93–6.
17. Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Fell Down and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 220.
18. Cited by Wagner-Martin, p. 248.
19. Wagner-Martin, p. 249.
20. Phoebe Stein Davis, 'Even Cake Gets to Have Another Meaning: History, Narrative and "Daily Living"' in Gertrude Stein's World War II Writings', *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 1998, p. 568.
21. John Whittier-Ferguson, 'The Liberation of Gertrude Stein: War and Writing', *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2001, pp. 405–6.
22. Gallagher, pp. 116–17.
23. Pétain delivered over sixty radio broadcasts, collected in *Paroles aux Français: Messages et écrits*, Lardanchet, Lyon, 1941. It was for Stein's own translation of these collected speeches that she wrote the controversial 'Introduction'.
24. Ian Baucom's emphasis in 'Frantz Fanon's Radio: Solidarity, Diaspora and the Tactics of Listening', *Contemporary Literature*, Spring 2001, p. 25, cited in Sarah Wilson, 'Gertrude Stein and the Radio', *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2004, p. 267, note 1.
25. Emanuel A. Schlegoff, 'Beginning in the Telephone', in James Katz and Mark A. Aakhus (eds), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 284.
26. Kenneth J. Gergson, 'The Challenge of the Absent Presence' in Katz and Aakhus (eds), *Perpetual Contact*, p. 232.
27. *Colliers Weekly* did not publish Stein's manuscript, but it was passed on to Random House. For more on this encounter, see Wagner-Martin, p. 224.
28. Eric Severeid, *Not So Wild a Dream*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1946, p. 54.
29. John Whittier-Ferguson, 'Stein in Time: History, Manuscripts, and Memory', *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1999, p. 146.
30. Gertrude Stein, 'Off We All Went to See Germany', *Life*, vol. 19, 6 August 1945, p. 57.
31. Gallagher, p. 147.
32. Marie-Luisa Achino-Loeb, *Silence: The Currency of Power*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2005, pp. 1–2.
33. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, *Introduction*, trans. Michel Trebitsch, Verso, London, 1991.