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The Uncanny at the Heart
of the Country Household: Gertrude Stein's
Blood on the Dining Room Floor

Of course Lizzie you do understand of course you do
(*Blood* 19)

There are so many ways in which there is no crime.
(*Blood* 34)

I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from
History, but that a lot brings one back to it.
(Barthes, "Myth Today" 112)

Gertrude Stein's venture into detective fiction is intimately bound to her life-long fascination with the contemporary, mainly American, mass culture. She was herself an avid reader of detective stories, confessing to her partiality for Edgar Wallace and befriending Dashiell Hammett during her American tour of 1934, also analyzing the peculiar aesthetics of a typical whodunit in at least several of her lectures or essays. Her lively interest in mass culture had far-reaching consequences for her writing techniques, also deeply influencing her ideas and intuitions concerning the gendered nature of the processes of human cognition. First of all, her undisguised admiration for what she called the American "space of time" with the effect of mobility it engendered prompted her to apply the concept in her own representations of what she defined as "the period of the cinema and series production," which ultimately led her to develop the aesthetics of "nondevelopmental forms of self-containment as a kind of national or cultural characteristic emblematic of modernity" (Parry 73). The poetics of the self-contained fragment, enveloped as it was in the hermetic, nontransparent texture of Stein's difficult form and style, induced many canonical modernist critics to look at her experimentation as typical of the period, although generally considered too radically obscure and elitist even for a sophisticated modernist reader.

On the other hand, however, her repeated engagement with the ordinary domestic sphere, as emblemized e.g. in *Tender Buttons*, caused many contemporary critics and admirers of high art to associate Stein with "the feminine realm of consumerism, romantic affection, and quotidian, material life – and worse, a homoerotic version of that realm

where the creative place of the heroic male artist figure has been usurped by the figures of the cook and the seamstress” (Pitchford 660). In this way, the unique condensation of the formal and stylistic obscurity that the mainstream critical opinion was ready to embrace as characteristic of the time’s aesthetic idiom became in Stein’s case an object of ridicule and was frequently rejected: although not as marginalized as other contemporary female writers, Stein was nevertheless considered an odd, eccentric and controversial figure, even if her merits as a radical avant-gardist were recognized and celebrated. Even a late admirer such as Richard Kostelanetz, in the introduction to his edition of *The Yale Gertrude Stein* of 1980, while associating Stein with the modernist literary giants like Joyce, Faulkner, or Pound, discovers in her a degree of idiosyncrasy that went perhaps too far to treat her throughout with steadfast seriousness: “Not unlike other American geniuses, Stein walked the swampy field between brilliance and looniness; and even today, as in her own time, her works are perceived as extraordinary or mad or, more precisely, both” (XVII). Nevertheless, whether considered mad or courageous, her persistent formal idiosyncrasy, matched as it was with the homely, popular and domestic, created an inimitable Steinian variation of the modernist avant-garde which slowly worked to undermine the elitist division of culture into high and low.

Stein’s pervasive interest in the movies, automobiles (she owned a succession of Fords herself), and detective stories made her sensitive to the rhythms of twentieth-century modernity and its discourses which she creatively introduced in her own writing – through characteristic repetitions which, as she contended, were not repetitions at all as they differed from one another, even if only in tiny details; through the polyphonic, depersonalized narration, and through the ellipsis and parataxis of her unique grammar and stylistic manner. It is important to notice how the peculiar combination of obscurity with the trivial, banal, and domestic aspects of reality appeared to exclude any serious political and social concerns: while the mainstream interpreters of modernist experimentation precluded high art’s connections to the political and the public as a pre-condition of aesthetic perfection, the contemporary Marxists like Brecht or Adorno testified to the opposite, arguing for the political, revisionist, and potentially revolutionary impact of the characteristically modernist ways of refracting rather than reflecting the social reality. The high modernist critics of either ideological persuasion as a rule perceived mass culture as no culture at all, warning against its deadening, even fascist influence on the unthinking masses, at the same time associating its destructive triviality with the domestic and the feminine, the connection diagnosed and analyzed in Andreas Huyssen’s well-known *After the Great Divide* of 1986. In this context, Stein’s implications in the popular aspects of contemporary culture confused any attempt to see her as a serious observer and critic of the waste land of the “botched” modern civilization. Thus, the ways in which

she managed to unsettle, while also paradoxically reinforcing, the contemporary cultural systems, institutions and codes of producing truth and meaning became visible only with hindsight, from a much later, postmodern, critical perspective (Berry 133).

The intention of this paper is to examine Stein's investments in the contemporary popular literary discourses as practiced in the genre of the detective story, in the form which she had herself devised to overturn, or at least to question the detective narrative's basic conventions and ideological assumptions. In this study I wish to discuss the hitherto very much doubted and contested visibility of the socio-cultural context as, in this case, evinced in the avant-garde and experimental modernist text primarily foregrounding the material solidity of language, using the example of Gertrude Stein's famous detective story, *Blood on the Dining Room Floor* from 1933. Stein's preoccupation with the social aspects of her lived experience in this work took the form of recording the strange habits, reactions, and in general threatening presence of the local people, inhabitants of the French countryside, serving as transients, i.e. mobile domestic servants, and it is the persistent, if also vague, anxiety pervading the whole text of *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*, that turns this particular motif into the formal dominant of her "mystery" narrative.

Although apparently unconscious, the mode of Stein's fragmentary but nearly obsessive recourse to this social aspect of her daily existence is at times uncannily reminiscent of the contemporary discourses of American sociologists concerning the phenomenon of unchecked social mobility that accompanied the emergence of consumer capitalism as the result of what was termed Second Industrial Revolution (cf Kenner 9-11). As reported by Michael Trask in his *Cruising Modernism*, the social thought of the first half of the twentieth century in America was obsessively preoccupied with the problem of the subversive potential of the migrant work force, represented by the uncontrolled mobility of "a new working class characterized by an untraditional makeup of women, foreigners, transients, and casual laborers" (1). The critic discusses, for example, Henry James's ideas on immigration and his fears originating from the fact that "[no] longer conforming to the inherited view of underclass peasants as stationary and subordinate... the Italian immigrant emerges in turn-of-the-century life as the dismantler of traditional social hierarchies and the epitome of groundlessness" (5). The association of James's social views with Stein's is only seemingly extravagant: "during her actual trip to America [in 1934], she comes close to identifying with James's own experiences and attitudes toward both the country and its language. Indeed, Stein's entire experience in the States parallels James's 1904 trip to America, the first after a twenty-year absence" (Nadel 91).

It is also James who in *The American Scene* describes a peculiar and telling encounter of an affluent "native" and a group of immigrant Italian workers, which in his eyes testi-

fied to the insurmountable social and cultural division between the inscrutable and inferior aliens and an enlightened representative of the Anglo-American upper middle class:

To pause before them, for interest in their labour, was, and would have been everywhere, instinctive; but what came home to me on the spot was that whatever more would have been anywhere else involved had here inevitably to lapse. What lapsed, on the spot, was the element of communication with the workers, as I may call it for want of a better name; that element which, in a European country would have operated from side to side, as the play of mutual recognition, founded on old familiarities and heredities, and involving, for the moment, some palpable exchange. The men, in the case I speak of, were Italians, of superlatively southern type, and any impalpable exchange struck me as absent from the air to positive intensity, to mere unthinkability. It was as if contact were out of the question and the sterility of the passage between us recorded with due dryness, in our staring silence. (quoted in Boelhower 445)

The awkwardness of the encounter finds an additional reflection in the text, in James's unusually, even for this author, contorted syntax (Boelhower 445). On the whole, the import of his musing amounts to a view that, while in Europe, where modernity and the related sense of violent social transformation were less felt and visible, a kind of friendly contact would have been possible and even warmly welcome, in America, the unexpected meeting of one's social others, complicated by ethnic difference and lack of a common medium of communication, led to silence and indifference which could only generate anxiety and fear in someone reflecting on the mass character of the transatlantic influx of laborers and the omnipresence of the immigrant other.

The sense of otherness, alienation and lack of human contact conveyed in James's passage could have been additionally increased by the impossibility to communicate in the same language, or speak it with equal fluency, which might have enabled a friendly if also casual exchange. While in Europe, the upper class stroller would probably speak the same language as the workers, or if he were a foreigner, he would probably feel obliged to talk to them in their native language or dialect; in America, such ways of an assumed social propriety were absent since the whole situation was culturally new and this kind of inter-class, inter-ethnic contact remained as yet unrecognized and uncoded in the sphere of manners or the sense of social decorum. It is precisely this socio-linguistic aspect of the economically and culturally imposed necessity of brushing up against one's social inferiors, the more or less anonymous and ever-changing domestics, that seemed to deeply preoccupy Gertrude Stein in *Three Lives* and in her detective novel. There was, however, fascination as well as profound anxiety in her rendering of this odd proximity,

if not intimacy, with strangers, which prompted her to turn the figures of her servants into a constant source of apprehension, if not fear, in her detective novel where they were persistently alluded to as potential and most probable miscreants and perpetrators of evil doings.

Blood on the Dining Room Floor has been by now widely discussed and copiously and variously interpreted not only because of its revision and reworking of the traditional model of detective fiction. As critical treatments of this novel testify, the characters and events depicted in this quasi-narrative, in Stein's typical, nontransparent, fragmentary and repetitive fashion, have been mostly based on occurrences and people the author encountered in real life. She started to write the novel in 1933, after the tremendous success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, published a year before. The huge applause and celebrations that followed that publication, although coveted by Stein who felt that her writing was ignored or at best thought eccentric, caused a writing block in the usually very prolific and enthusiastic writer, probably because of her fears at having been "consumed" by the mass reader (Chessman 161). Writing this novel in Bilignin, the location of her and Toklas's residence in the French countryside, she related strange events that had taken place in the neighborhood, wreaking havoc, causing wonder, and, most frequently, evoking fear and excitement. Although the events referred to in a hazy and discontinuous manner remain unclear and chaotic till the very end of *Blood*, critics can also rely on Stein's much more coherent and consistent report in *Everybody's Autobiography*, which enables the readers to recreate the sequence of mysterious occurrences in summer 1933, which were the direct inspiration for writing her detective novel. The central event was Mme Pernollet's death by falling out of the window of her husband's hotel in the nearby town of Belley. Stein and Toklas knew the couple, stayed at their hotel, and were duly horrified by this accident which was also interpreted as murder or suicide by the town's inhabitants. Stein's novel seems to suggest the writer's own serious doubts as to the causes of this tragic death: she mentions the impervious "inside" of the hotel-keeper's household, rumors of the husband's infidelity, as also the strange maneuvers of the mysterious figure of Alexander, the local horticulturist (gardener), whose sister worked in the hotel as a servant and was suspected of plotting with her brother to insidiously ingratiate herself with M. Pernollet in order to eventually oust his wife from her position in the business. Brief mentions of this apparently treacherous servant and her brother appear here and there throughout the whole text.

Blood consists of twenty one chapters of highly unequal length: while the first chapter takes up about eighteen pages and is the longest, the others occupy the space from two to four pages or contain only one sentence or phrase. The longest, first chapter brings details of the lives of two families: the hotel keeper's and the horticulturist's, the

latter being Alexander's father. These details remain unclear and interchangeable, so we are never sure as to where pieces of someone's story belong, not to mention any appearance of chronological sequence. We can only guess, for instance, that the information about a crying woman in the first chapter pertains to the hotel keeper's wife, and not, say, to a servant seduced by the owner, because such a motif also appears in the text:

All this time she was at home, home at the hotel.... Every day and every day she had to see that everything came out from where it was put away and that everything again was put away.... She cried when she tried but soon he did not try and so she did not cry. As a day was a day it came to be that way. But it was never only a day, and that a little left it to her still to cry.... In this way one day she tried to find the night beside and when she tried to find the night beside, she cried. But she did not care to die. (10)

The monotony of the words "day," "way," and "night" repeated in this passage seems to render the character of the hotel keeper's wife's existence, and her trying and crying refer to her hard work and then possibly to the discovery of her husband's unfaithfulness, suggesting at the same time that her eventual death was not suicide ("she did not care to die"). What follows is a recourse to the family history: "Just how she did everything. But it was very sweet and very feminine. And she did everything and her husband came home from the war and there were four children." An important aspect of the story is the economic one: "They grew richer and richer," yet while the hotel owner had come from a well-to-do family, her origins were humble: "She had come from poor people and he had not" (11), which might have had some bearing on the events that followed.

However, as mentioned above, the hotel keeper's family is not the only one to preoccupy the narrator: another story suggested is that of the horticulturist family in which there were eight children, and the eldest one was the said Alexander. Among diverse and scattered facts (they were religious "in their way," they might be rich but if they suffered from poverty, they had suffered long, Alexander's brothers "stayed at home and carried their garden with them wherever they went" [15], etc.), the most important was the strange disappearance of the father of the family which the narrator seems to associate with the gloomy and towering figure of Alexander, and which is related in a passage bearing indirect affinity to Freud's notion of the uncanny:

And so here he was and his brothers and sisters, here he was, and his mother, here he was. And a father. A father who lived alone, who owned and owned and lived alone, and had a cataract in one eye and nobody saw anybody cry but they worked all day too soon.

...Once the eldest brother with a watering can, a kind of apron on, and a watering can which he waved and between him and the one that came was a man. Who was the man. A stout man, all the others were thin, a walking man, all the others bowed and ran. Who was this man, and he was in between.

I feel I do not know anything if I cry.

Slowly they could see their way. (17)

The passage presumably narrates the situation before the father's disappearance, when the sons worked in his garden while he "owned and owned and lived alone." Then there comes a vignette of the "eldest brother," Alexander, in his working clothes and waving a watering can, as if flaunting the insignia of his father's trade in a gesture which could mean his taking over of the father's domain by force. He is accompanied by someone who "came," possibly the estranged father himself, and a strange stout man who is in between them, and at whose sight the other brothers bow and escape. "Between" could also signify the division between the father and the sons, and the ambivalence is made possible by the typical Steinian indeterminacy and fluidity of pronouns, here present in the clause "and he was in between," where "he" could refer to Alexander, his father, or the mysterious "stout man." The situation in the family is described through reference to weak eyes ("a cataract") or lack of sight ("nobody saw anybody cry"). The moment of the brothers' confrontation with the father and the stout man, as implied in the text, is combined with their loss of sight which they eventually "slowly" recover (though "see" in the last sentence of the quote has also a metaphorical meaning). Literally, the mysterious male figure could be associated with the agent of the father's disappearance, or metaphorically, with the brothers' sense of guilt and their fear of punishment (by castration) for their disobedience toward or mistreatment of the father.

In Freud's lengthy discussion of the story of the Sand-Man from Hoffman's *Nach-tstuecken*, this fabulous creature comes at night to punish naughty children by taking away their eyes, and as Freud explains:

The study of dreams, fantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is quite often a substitute for the fear of castration. When the mythical criminal Oedipus blinds himself, this is merely a mitigated form of the penalty of castration, the only one that befits him according to the *lex talionis*.... These and many other features of the tale appear arbitrary and meaningless if one rejects the relation between fear for the eyes and fear of castration, but they become meaningful as soon as the Sand-Man is replaced by the dreaded father, at whose hands castration is expected. (139-140)

In the ensuing argument, Freud explicitly connects the emergence of the sense of the uncanny to the dread over castration, foregrounding this kind of anxiety as one of the possible main sources of the aesthetic effect of the “unheimlich.” Stein’s indeterminate and inconclusive references to the drama of the horticulturist’s family, and in fact, her entire account of all the “crimes” in her novel, seem to be especially intent on evoking the sense of the uncanny as experienced by both the writer and the reader, the more so as the mysteries she hints at rather than narrates remain forever unresolved. However, in her case, as in that of any female reader, the classic psychoanalytical interpretation of the uncanny as it reveals itself in Stein’s novel can hardly be seen as convincing: instead, what appears to prevail in her text is an insistence on a strange combination of the cosy, familiar and homely with an implication of unexpected brutality and violence erupting in the very midst of the warm and secure middle-class interior. What is characteristic of Stein’s version of the strange occurrences of the summer of 1933 is that they are all connected with countryside households, both “country houses” and “houses in the country” according to her introductory differentiation, the “homes” that for some strange reasons turn out to be the most “unhomely” places, haunted by some never revealed dark family secrets. In the case of Alexander’s family we are further told that “The eldest felt that he could not be a priest [as his brothers would wish him to be, probably to get rid of his overbearing presence] no not as long as his father was alive and his father did not die nor did they, not even a cousin died, but they got rid of the father just the same.... It was not a crime but a crime is in time” (17). The last sentence might suggest the outsiders’ reflections and judgment as to what might have happened to the father of the family, and their subsequent identification of his odd disappearance, and thus disowning, with a criminal act.

The other strange events in *Bilignin* that found their way to the novel include the violent death of an Englishwoman who was the companion of a wealthy elderly lady living in the neighborhood: she was found dead in the garden with a bullet in her head. This death is discussed at length in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, while in the novel Stein only alludes to it, passing on to unclear stories of a group of young women, all married but unfaithful to their husbands, one of their presumed lovers being the horticulturist’s son, Alexander. The motif of infidelity, deception and victimization seems to surface throughout the whole text, leading the narrator to a number of remarks on the specificity of “crime” in the countryside, perceived as different, more momentous and noticeable than criminal acts in the city, but also, oddly, more easy to hide and ignore. Just as in her conceptualization of America in her first Narration lecture (in contradistinction from England) as a self-contained, autonomous continent, free from England’s imperial burden (Parry 45), Stein seems to perceive the countryside as separate, self-enclosed and radically isolated from the city, and this difference is paradoxical:

They said nothing happens in the country but there are more changes in a family in the country in five years than in a family in a city and this is natural. If nothing changed in the country there could not be butter and eggs. There have to be changes in the country, there had to be breaking up of families and killing of dogs and spoiling of sons and losing of daughters and killing of mothers and banishing of fathers. Of course there must be in the country. Nothing happens in the city. Everything happens in the country. The city just tells what has happened in the country, it has already happened in the country.

Lizzie do you understand. (42-43)

The passage seems to comment not only on the changes brought about by modernity, but on the inherent inevitability of changes in the country at any time, the changes being necessary to enable the production – in sufficient quantity for the market – of “butter and eggs.” However, in the rural environment, as Stein seems to argue, these very necessary transformations cause much more damage, especially in the family, which often leads to grim consequences that the narrator duly enumerates. The crimes committed in the country appear to be more horrifying and prior to whatever terrible happens in the city: “The city just tells what has happened in the country, it has already happened in the country” (43).

The passage ends with one of the characteristic, repeated exhortations to a mysterious “Lizzie.” While some critics argue that this proper name is but an intended distortion of the word “listen” (Gygax 94, note 16, 98) which serves as a means of buttonholing the reader and keeping his attention in an implied emotional dialogue that characterizes the whole novel, the editor of the second (1982) and third (2008) publications of *Blood*, John Herbert Gill, claims in his “Afterword” (1982 and 2008) and “Introduction” (2008) that Stein engages here her memory of the famous 1892 murder case involving the murder of the father and stepmother of Lizbeth Borden, in River Fall, Massachusetts. Lizzie Borden, the heroine of countless popular reports of the murder was the defendant in the case, eventually released for lack of conclusive evidence. This famous unresolved murder story seems to have especially fascinated Stein as an example of a never-explained countryside crime that transfixed the imagination of the mostly urban audience and for long held the attention of the contemporary mass media. Borden was said to have killed her father and stepmother with an axe due to a quarrel over inheritance, as the rich father presumably intended to leave most of his property to the children of his second wife. It was probably the stuffy and stultifying atmosphere of unreleased passions in a hermetic middle-class family and household that could have interested Stein, inducing her to choose Lizzie Borden for her first reader/listener, as someone who could have perfectly understood the

creeping horror of the “inside” family life of the French countryside where “The more you see the country the more you do not wonder why they shut the door” (38).

The inevitable changes in the traditionally enclosed and conservative countryside are referred to in Stein’s novel as conducive to killing, banishing, spoiling, losing, breaking up, i.e. acts of crime whose causes remain invisible to outsiders, and whose consequences, as in the case of the hotel keeper’s wife, are quickly swept away and covered up so as not to frighten the guests in the hotel: “nobody who just went and ate and slept at the hotel could know that anything had happened. It was wonderful the way they covered it up and went on” (18), as the narrator muses not without a touch of irony. The appearance of permanence, tradition, and undisturbed continuity seems to serve well the easiness with which the countryside people get over the unexplained, mysterious events taking place around them: “The father was safely away, the mother with the wig did not stay, that is she went another way, and there they were in the garden all getting richer and richer” (20). Indeed, “when there is a background for a crime, there is no crime” (28).

At the same time, the inroads of modernity, making rural changes more profound and violent, took their toll in Stein’s countryside as well, emblemized in the novel by the hotel and its guests. The hotel as the site of transit, transience, mobility and desire is often mentioned in modern texts or texts on modernism, together with railway or bus depots, subways and city streets, as “physical sites of mobility” that escape institutional control and management: instead of promoting social order and harmony, as Lewis Mumford observes, “The principal effect of the gridiron plan... of the American city... is that every street becomes a thoroughfare” in which “the tendency towards movement... vastly overweighs the tendency toward settlement” (quoted in Trask 18). Modern public transport systems become equated with disorder, unsettling freedom from traditional norms and conventions, and thus with social anarchy that begins to spread from the urban landscape toward the apparently pastoral surroundings, tainting the visibly idyllic countryside with the same modern desire for instant, anonymous, and unsanctioned gratification. In this context, social mobility becomes not only a necessity but creates a desired occasion for transgressing traditional boundaries of class and decorum: “the whole notion of social placement becomes compromised by the ease with which modern culture allows persons to move in and out of spaces” (Trask 19).

Stein’s hotel in *Blood* is exactly this kind of place and an opportunity to transgress at the same time, which is communicated in the typically indirect and confusing fashion:

As I was saying meadows and grass are often dry in summer and if they are country houses, hotels are inhabited. In which case changes and pleasures are incessant but which makes it a pleasure to dearly love.

The three who are married are as much married as ever and they miss themselves and their husbands quite as much as if for instance they do not like what they feel to be alike it is of course of no importance that their advantage is not easily taken. (51-52)

The countryside hotel appears a deceptive and ambivalent surrounding: the three married women succumb to temptation, and even if reluctantly, they take advantage of the opportunity to betray, while being betrayed themselves. The hotel keeper lives in his hotel with his wife, but it is also the place where he is unfaithful to her. The hotel is a place of betrayal of husbands and wives alike, offering people an occasion to abandon conventional loyalties and succumb to unsanctioned, forbidden pleasures. In the hotel, the constraints of the “inside” regulations of private life felt as oppressive undergo relaxation, which enables the constrained individuals to experience sudden exaltation and sense of freedom, at the same time forcing them to deceive and lie to themselves and to others. Yet the illusory sense of liberation prevails, as in the hotel keeper’s reaction after his wife’s tragic death: “He had to go out, he had not gone out because he had never done any other thing than stay in. And now he had to go out. Think of it not only he but he had to go out and sometimes even to be out. Out is not out. Some in that place can always be coming in and going out from staying in, but he not at all not at all not at all” (68-69). The freedom of modern travelers associated with uninhibited “coming in” and “going out” of the hotel resembles the conditions of living in the city where superficial and anonymous contacts with strangers overturn any sense of stability in human relations, and in the country, additionally, it dissolves the permanence of traditional and well-established boundaries that had hitherto regulated the apparently peaceful country life. Now the hidden crime characteristic of the countryside, due to the presence of the city-like hotel in its midst, becomes more open to public view, as in the case of the death of Mme Pernollet, and thus appears more disturbing and destructive to the sense of security of the country dwellers. However, in Stein’s representation of this phenomenon, the decisive factor in the new circumstances is the unregulated proximity of the mobile work force epitomized in the figures of the ever changing domestic servants.

As Trask contends in his book on the modern conflation of discourses on social mobility and subversive sexual desires, the persistent modern exposure to the attenuation of traditional class divisions under the impact of urbanization, industrialization and implementations of new technologies brought uncertainty and fears about the future that were distinctly pronounced in sociological and, less directly, literary texts of the era (1-14). In this connection, it might be useful to attend to the motif of changing servants in Stein’s novel, and the pervading sound of anxiety, if not alarm, in its numerous passages dealing with their threatening, and yet necessary if not desired presence. Stein opens the novel

with a lengthy description of several pairs of servants (there is always a woman and a man) that came and were sent away from the household she and Toklas kept in Bilignin. In *Everybody's Autobiography* she provides more details about this disquieting turnover that culminates in a series of mysterious, frightening events; nevertheless, the jumpy syntax and the fragmentary sequence of broken sentences in *Blood* is more evocative of the overall atmosphere of unnamed threat that permeates Stein's memories as rendered in her text. Stein's account of the changing succession of domestics is full of details about their idiosyncratic behavior and odd habits, but she rarely gives exact reasons why the servants have had to be finally dismissed. The first pair, who were Italian, had their "queer way of walking," and he was no good keeping a fire in the stove; the next pair had problems with health and were psychologically unstable, the third pair had a child and wished to sleep under a tree, which caused a scandal and thus they had to be fired. All of them were found wanting, even if for hardly rational reasons.

However, it is the last pair of servants that causes the greatest apprehension and anxiety. This last pair are said to be immigrants, and the narrator comments on this as follows: "That is immigrants exist no longer because no nation accepts them. These however had been immigrants years ago when everybody wanted them. This is a pity" (4). Clearly, Stein's narrator does not consider herself an immigrant writing in English in the French countryside: immigration means for her more a class than national distinction, while the prior desirability of immigrants and their later expulsion had all to do with their serving as cheap labor, now made expedient. Again, the strange habits of this pair are duly recorded: "she was wonderful with horses and he loved automobiles only he would never take a job where he would have to lie down under an automobile with his legs sticking out" (4-5). *Everybody's Autobiography* specifies the nationality of the woman servant as Polish and the name of her husband as Jean. Both *Everybody's Autobiography* and *Blood* record the strange occurrences that follow the arrival of this pair: there is a disturbing train of visitors at Stein's and Toklas's country house and in the meantime the hosts' and the guests' cars are discovered to have been tampered with, and the telephone is found disconnected. When the garage mechanics come to repair the cars they advise Stein to get rid of the servants who cannot well explain their actions during the whole incident. *Everybody's Autobiography* records the Polish servant's awkward explanation: "The Polish woman was there and I said well and she said yes and she said Jean is always like that when anything like that can happen. What I said. Blood on the dining room floor she said" (63). The last sentence, which has been eventually turned into the title of the novel, seems to provoke the most acute turmoil due to its apparent disconnectedness from anything that appeared meaningful to Stein in her attempts to interpret the situation. The idea that the servant could have tried to rationally refer to an

aspect of the same reality escapes the narrator: the servant's world is not Stein's world because they cannot well communicate even when using the same language.

Interestingly, even if the incriminated couple are immediately dismissed, the state of confusion persists – Stein and Toklas are to attend the funeral of the hotel keeper's wife and they feel excited and shaken, which is underscored by sudden and unexpected emotional addresses to the reader: "Oh dear. We all cried. When we heard she was dead" (7); "Listen to this one" (8); "Do you really understand" (9); "Think of all that. Just think of all that" (9); "She tried to be while she cried. Oh dear yes" (12); "What did you say. Yes they had somebody employed there who certainly did her share" (12-13). For the time being the servants are not mentioned, though it seems that the reasons for dismissing the couple amount to their behavior being interpreted as odd and their poor linguistic ability to communicate with their employers identified with their culpability. Yet later the narrator obsessively returns to the figures of the servants as unexplainable and ominous, almost wishing for them to have some connection to the hotel perceived as the scene of crime, as if to justify her hardly contained feeling of unspecified menace and danger.

[T]here were one two three four five and now six couples who succeeded one another and anybody would know that something had happened but nothing had, not if anything had...

Of course that made it at no time that they had at any time they had at no time, any connection with a hotel.

The matter is that they are accused but nobody mentions it. (61)

So they change none of them have gone none of them are at, a hotel. And why not, because there is no need of them there besides they had not thought of it. If they had it would have been a coincidence, and because this is so, oh yes, oh yes, oh yes I know, because oh yes I know this is so. (62-63)

In the passage above the narrator seems to almost hysterically insist on her knowledge, or intuition, of the servants' guilt though her panic confirms the suspicion (her own as well as ours) that there are no grounds whatsoever to accuse the servants of any wrongdoing, not to mention crime. They are simply aliens who enter one's house to live there like close relations while having no traditional right to stay "inside" as, in fact, ultimate outsiders: "he comes to answer an advertisement and you never saw him before and there you live in the house with him" ("What Does She See..." 64).

While Nadel stresses in his essay the similarities in Stein's and James's aesthetics, such as preoccupation with language conveyed through "the atmosphere of the unasked question," fascination with the theatre, opera, and ballet, the parallel between Stein's

concept of the continuous present and James's moment or centre of consciousness (84-88), it is equally important to observe the striking affinity of their expatriate experience (which Nadel also mentions in passing) and their ensuing perception of class difference as uncanny and threatening. In *Blood*, the narrator's anxiety at the thought of the servants' ominous presence brings to mind another story of the uncanny seated right at the heart of the country hearth and home, in which servants play the role of horrifying ghosts: James's *The Turn of the Screw*. In this novella, the dead servants reveal themselves only to the governess, a half-servant herself in whose case class inferiority proves to function as an insurmountable barrier to sexual fulfillment. The servants' unacceptability in the eyes of their employer, the governess and other servants (Mrs Grose) consisted in the scandal of their sexual mismatch that had dared to transgress rigid class boundaries: Quint was a gardener and valet, Miss Jessel was educated and, by implication, of lower middle class origin, a combination that in the governess's mind might have vaguely reflected her own situation vis-à-vis her gentleman employer, and at the same time legitimized Quint and Jessel's otherworldly existence and explained their corruption of innocent children. In Stein's novel, the sexual aspect of the servants' presence is less pronounced, nevertheless it attracts the narrator's attention as marked in her meticulous recording of their coming and going in symmetrical heterosexual pairs (always as a man and a woman), at least on one occasion accompanied by a child, which might have in itself constituted an oddity from the homosexual writer's point of view. The sexual difference was here combined with and complicated by the sense of social and cultural otherness, all of them located right at the heart of Stein and Toklas's warm and cosy but unconventional household in the French countryside, a difference within difference within another difference, becoming a source of ceaseless apprehension, anxiety, and suspicion.

The servants' uncanny otherness, that at times seems to almost undermine the speaker's belief in their humanity, is thus mainly that of culture, class, and sexuality and it is these social categories that loom in Stein's texts as ideally rigid, impermeable, and immune to any inroads from outside, but in reality constantly infringed upon by "citified" modernity. Thus, it is the figure of an undecipherable and alien servant that appears to invade and then haunt the confines of the enclosed Steinian household, the "unheimlich" within the "heimlich," to be exorcised only by the vigilant observation of exotic habit and the right to expel the undesirable alien. It is their social and cultural difference that amounts to the most strongly felt mystery and an ultimately unnamed crime perpetrated in the background of Stein's detective fiction, the crime whose scandal and horror, as the narrator well realizes, are to stay with her: "No one is amiss after servants are changed. Are they. Finis." The last word, latinate and ornamental, following a question without

a question mark that sounds like a grim foreboding, amounts here to no more than wishful thinking, never to be fulfilled since both the writer and her readers know that the conventional beginnings and endings which constitute the traditional plot of the genre, as she defines it in her third Narration lecture, are forever suspended, if not cancelled, by Stein's indeterminacy of meaning, lack of any finality, combined with the fundamental nontransparent nature of the world posited in her text. "Finis" means an arbitrary boundary set up to forestall the flow of mysteries which her "story" allows in, like a door to a haunted house serving as a kind of artificial barrier and demarcation line that could as well function as a new threshold or a new beginning, and thus an invitation to a view on yet another "crime" spotted against the background of reality rendered as an incessant flux of words. As in her other works, the textual and the social, the "inside" and the "outside" in Stein's detective fiction are not so much opposed to each other as rather form an unbroken continuum; in the same manner in which Freudian "heimlich" and "unheimlich" are in fact inseparable from each other, so are Stein's "crimes" and their cultural background, her avant-garde text and the historical reality in which it is brought to being.

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