

“The point of view of somebody else” in Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

El punto del vista del ‘otro’ en la obra de Gertrude Stein *The Autobiography of Alice Toklas*

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Abstract

Gertrude Stein’s memoirs of the modern art movement in Paris appear in several of her works. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein becomes overtly vulnerable by exposing her lifestyle choices and her biased opinions. Through Alice, the reader is introduced to Cubist artists and their milieu. Furthermore, in writing *The Autobiography*, Stein departs from the literary style she employed previously. She chooses a new genre and, in a way, a new, momentous style. This article examines Stein’s technique of memory writing, and its dynamics concerning the self, identity, and narration.

Keywords: Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, identity, autobiography, genius

Resumen

Las memorias del movimiento en arte moderno de Stein en París aparecen en varios trabajos suyos. En *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein muestra su vulnerabilidad de forma manifiesta al exhibir sus estilos y formas de vida, y sus opiniones parciales. El lector, a través de Alice, conoce el entorno cubista y sus principales representantes. Aún más, cuando Stein escribe *The Autobiography*, ésta se aparta del estilo literario que ha empleado anteriormente. Para ello, elige un género nuevo, y de alguna manera, utiliza un estilo nuevo y trascendental. Este artículo examina la técnica que Stein utiliza en sus memorias, y la dinámica en relación con su yo, su identidad y la narración.

Palabras clave: Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, identidad, autobiografía, genio

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the early twentieth century, Paris was the hub of the avant-garde and Modernist movements. Struggling young artists and writers from Europe and America flocked to the Left Bank of the Seine to establish themselves as innovators in art and literature. Their “self-indulgent hedonism” and their amazing “intellectual fervor” still lure readers today to the works of women writers such as Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton and Colette and men like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound and James Joyce. In 1903, Gertrude Stein settled in her brother’s apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus and lived the rest of her life as an American expatriate in Paris. However, only in 1932 did she embark on a fictional journey to document this fascinating era in cultural history: “And now I will tell you how two americans happened to be in the heart of an art movement of which the outside world at that time knew nothing.” (1933: 34.) In a simple and candid statement, Gertrude Stein summarizes the essence of her popular book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) [*The Autobiography*]. Apart from conveying personal stories from the lives of the “two Americans,” Gertrude Stein and her lifelong companion Alice Toklas, *The Autobiography* is an intricate novel, which describes the development of Cubism and Modernism. The book became an international best seller and made Gertrude Stein a literary icon that defied conventional and traditional approaches to literature.¹

Due to hot weather in the fall of 1932, Stein and Toklas extended their stay in their summer home in Bilignin in southern France. It was then that Gertrude decided to start writing *The Autobiography*, after Alice refused to do it herself. Alice resented the fact that they had to sell paintings from their collection in order to subsidize Stein’s self-published works and felt it was time for Stein to write some sort of a popular novel so they would have the financial means to publish her other more complicated works.

Five hours a day for about six weeks, Stein spent writing the book on “a little double decked table as near [to] the sunny wall as” she could get. She confessed she wrote it without her usual excitement. However, the overwhelming reaction to her manuscript from her agent and prospective publishers delighted Stein and she suspected it might be a best seller. (1933: 61-62).

¹ In the 1980s, two significant and compressive studies about the art scene in Paris became available. The first is the tome by Noel Riley Fitch, and the second is Shari Benstock’s account about the women writers of the Left Bank.

MASKING THE SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STEIN AND TOKLAS

Right from the beginning of *The Autobiography*, Stein and Toklas are both depicted as ordinary characters. Gertrude is described as a middle-class highly educated woman, witty and widely traveled. Her artistic taste is natural; she “sees” art with artist-eyes but she is also a genius who has revolutionized American modern literature.²

On the other hand, Alice is the “good daughter” who takes care of her father and brother after the premature death of her mother. The San Francisco earthquake transforms her life, and she decides to travel to Paris, where she eventually meets Gertrude. Thereafter, Alice, the quiet, uninvolved character, is introduced to Cubist artists, famous poets, writers, and philosophers – public figures she would never have met had it not been for Gertrude. The real nature of their relationship is never admitted in *The Autobiography*. Alice is perceived as Stein’s right hand, confidant, typist, and editor:

When Ford Madox Ford was editing the Transatlantic Review he once said to Gertrude Stein, I am a pretty good writer and a pretty good editor and a pretty good business man but I find it is very difficult to be all three at once.

I am a pretty good housekeeper and a pretty good gardener and a pretty good needlewoman and a pretty good secretary and a pretty good editor and a pretty good vet for dogs and I have to do them all at once and I found it to add being a pretty good author. (1933: 309-310).

Unanticipated confirmation of the profound loving relationship between Gertrude and Alice emerged in 1999 with the publication of love notes and poems they wrote to each other. Mistakenly shipped by Toklas to Yale University along with Stein’s official papers, these intimate explicit innuendoes shed light on the life of the lesbian couple in a way never exposed before.

Gertrude writes,

“Baby precious you took
little husband so sweetly
through his troubles the way
you always do baby precious...” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 87.)

Alice writes,

“My own petsie is a darling

² More on the nature and complexity of the relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, see Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989): 79-80.

and I love him dearly and
 completely and sweetly.
 Allie mine
 We entwine" (ibid., 156.)

The Literary Style of The Autobiography

In writing *The Autobiography*, Stein departs from the literary style she employed in her previous works. She chooses a new genre and, in a way, a new style. Her writing is lucid and straightforward; the language is uncomplicated and clear. Stein's use of Alice as the narrative voice is remarkable. Her imitation of Toklas' speech patterns is amazingly precise, leading some critics and even acquaintances to suspect that it was indeed Toklas who wrote the piece.

While translating the poems of a young French writer, Stein came upon a rather "startling" revelation "that other people's words are quite different from one's own, and that they cannot be the result of your internal troubles as a writer..." Therefore, narrative, in Stein's view, does not reflect what is in the author's mind "but what is in somebody else's." She discovered that she was able to create "the point of view of somebody else" in her return to the "form of narration." (Stein, 1933: 61-62.)

A few months before her death, Stein recapped her return to the narrative form in *The Autobiography*, stressing the value and complexity of writing without a sense of historical time, which makes writing "ephemeral." What she did consciously to the time element in *The Autobiography*, she achieved subconsciously in her *Everybody's Autobiography*, the autobiographical sequel to *The Autobiography*, and in her World War II memoir, *Wars I Have Seen*. In these works, she claims to have achieved "an existence suspended in time" that is depicting actual present events without what she calls "a sense of time."³

Stein's unique literary style conveys the correlation between the "exactitude," the "inner" and the "outer" reality. According to *The Autobiography's* narrator, these elements comprise the core of her writing. (1933: 259.)

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, before embarking on her bestseller *The Autobiography*, Stein continued to experiment with form and language. She developed a hate relationship with nouns and adjectives and wrote portraits almost entirely with adverbs and prepositions. Moreover, the constant mixing of fictional and non-fictional characters, the disclosing of intimate details from her life and the lives of her friends and

³ "The Transatlantic Interview 1946," in *Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, 19.

relatives, intertwined in place and time, make it impossible to overlook the Cubist character of Stein's work.

Investigating the structure of *The Autobiography*, Carolyn Faunce Copeland (1975) notices that the book is not arranged chronologically. Even though Toklas narrates the story line in the first person, Stein, the author, manipulates both the narrator's voice and the chronology of the narrative.

Evidently, according to the book's chronology, in chapters three and four Alice gives a first person account of information that antedates her arrival in Paris and her first meeting with Gertrude. Proportionally, Alice's life occupies very little space in the book compared to Gertrude's, making it obvious that *The Autobiography* is actually not Toklas' work but Stein's.

Being a Genius

To set the appropriate scene and to establish Stein's role at the center of the art world in Paris, chapter two and three concentrate on Stein's early years in Paris, when she meets and mingles with Picasso and other Cubist artists. Equal in stature to Picasso and Matisse, Stein is portrayed as an insider, a central figure of the art movement, with special attention to the year 1907, the year Cubism had presumably begun:

This was the year 1907. Gertrude Stein was just seeing through the press *Three Lives* which she was having privately printed, and she was deep in *The Making of Americans*, her thousand page book. Picasso had just finished his portrait of her...and had just begun his strange complicated picture of three women..." This was also the year Henri Matisse worked on his *Bonheur de Vivre*, and Max Jacob, the poet, "has since called the heroic age of cubism. (1933: 7.)

Employing Toklas' voice as the narrator enables Stein to establish herself not only as the great patron of the arts but as a genius as well, a persona that attracts visual artists and writers to her midst, eager to listen to her advice and take her guidance. (5-6.)

Obsessed with the implications of being a genius, Stein recurrently discussed the matter in her works. In *Gertrude Stein on Picasso* (1970), she notes, "Pablo and Matisse have a maleness that belongs to genius. Moi Aussi, [me too] perhaps." (97.) As Stein reiterates, "being a genius" entails an added characteristic—masculinity. Greatly influenced by the racist and misogynist philosophy of Otto Weininger, [*Sex and Character* (1906)], she adopted elements from his theory that suited her search for identity. As a Jewish lesbian, apprehensive of becoming an outcast, she aligned herself with what she perceived as the

exceptional male genius. By embracing the “genius-type” persona, Stein veered from the normal sphere to the super-normal sphere, where her homosexuality could be better comprehended and accepted by a society that could not tolerate any deviation from the so-called normalcy and heterosexuality.

This obsession continues to surface in Stein's later works. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, the sequel to *The Autobiography*, Stein dwells heavily and repeatedly on the meaning and the significance of being a genius:

And so what is it that makes you a genius. Well yes what is it. It is funny that no matter what happens, how many more or how many less can read and write can write and read can talk and listen can move around in every kind of way the number that is the lack of geniuses always remains about the same, there are very few of them... (Stein, 1985: 67)

In this particular discussion, Stein concludes that being a genius is a rarity; often there is one genius or even none. (Ibid.) She asks how does a person know that he/she is a genius, as there is no conviction or convention in the matter. Being a genius is also tied, in her opinion, to politics vis-à-vis revolutions and leadership. Despite the fact that she admits that the matter is not “worrisome” to her as a genius, she spent the entire chapter pondering and weighing the issue of being extraordinarily bright (Ibid., 67-139). Towards the conclusion of this volume on their return from America, Stein and Toklas met Fred Ashton in London:

We met Fred Ashton. I am always asking Alice Toklas do you think he is a genius, she does have something happen when he is a genius so I always ask her is he a genius, being one it is natural that I should think a great deal about that thing in any other one. (Ibid., 275)

Franziska Gyax (1998) calls *The Autobiography* the “Double-Voiced Autobiography.” Indeed, using Alice's voice permits Stein to present herself as a genius and to camouflage her real relationship with Alice. Stein manages throughout her works to conceal her “inner life” in a series of anecdotes about friends and relatives, her busy social life and the support she and Alice offered to the artists of the Left Bank.

The Narrator's Real Identity

Only in the concluding six lines of *The Autobiography* does the reader discover the real identity of the narrator: “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to

me as if you were going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it." (Stein, 1933: 310.)

This admission in itself is sensational, not merely because the reader might feel deceived, but because it is so difficult to differentiate between the tones and voices of the two main characters, Gertrude and Alice. It is as though their two distinct voices become one. Stein "used Defoe in lectures and essays as an example of the biographical narrative she considered correct. It is not what happens that is interesting, but what happens to the character; his existence is the main interest... In [the] 'Autobiography,' Stein was able to narrate her own life as something that had meaning to someone else."⁴

If Stein, the author, is interchangeable with Toklas, then they are also equal in terms of the roles they play in the book.

Gertrude Stein, the theorist, clearly believed in "the impossibility of autobiography..." (1933: 41-9). Generally, a work of autobiography implies that "the narrator and the subject of narration are the same person." (184-5) An autobiographical narration suggests that the narrator, relying on her memory, is in control of the past as it actually happened. It may also suggest that facts outweigh fiction.⁵ Yet unlike other critics, Phoebe Stein Davis notices that *The Autobiography* conveys the same anecdotes repeatedly, using different sources or different points of view, like the sale of Matisse's *La Femme au Chapeau* and the account of the battle of the Marne in World War I.

Additionally, in many instances, Toklas the narrator admits to losing her memory or vaguely recollecting the full details of certain events. Even in a genre that focuses on remembering facts as they really happened, Stein reminds the reader of the frail quality of memory. Her manipulation with the life-narrative in *The Autobiography* presents a case in which the author and the narrative voice becomes one entity, confusing existing literary norms while reconstructing language and style and obscuring the boundaries between the autobiographer and the autobiography.

The relationship between the autobiographer and the autobiography poses some significant questions as to the nature and ambiguity of the autobiography genre. Timothy Dow Adams (1990) perceives all autobiographers as "unreliable narrators."⁶

⁴ Steven J. Meyer, "Gertrude Stein Shipwrecked in Bohemia," 12.

⁵ Phoebe Stein Davis (1999), "Subjectivity and the Aesthetics of National Identity," 157.

⁶ In the abstract to her M.A. thesis, Nina Yardley claims: "The close-readings aim to uncover how these experimentations with form both allow a certain degree of self-exposure and simultaneously divert attention from the author-figure characteristic of traditional depictions of the writing self. My argument is that these

Readers may confuse life narratives with the literary form of the novel due to the author's use of the pronoun "I", the first-person narrator. Some scholars of the newly instituted autobiography genre presume that telling the truth is the fundamental principle underlying the relationship between autobiographers and their readers. Nevertheless, this assumption is contradictory to the process of life writing due to its innate subjectivity. Whatever the writer believes to be the truth might not be perceived as such by others who participated in the event. Moreover, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that "Some critics have suggested that this [The Autobiography] might be a fraudulent act, an act of ventriloquism of Alice's voice." (2001: 31)

In the case of *The Autobiography*, the narrator retains the first-person voice throughout the work. The reader becomes familiar with the distinct style of Toklas' narration, her somewhat distant anecdotal approach, her humility, and domesticity. Once the deceived reader realizes that Stein is the real narrator who has assumed Toklas' voice and role, it is too late for re-consideration. The reader is then confronted with the question of the autobiographical boundaries: Is it really an autobiography, the life of Alice B. Toklas, or is it merely a fictional account of the lives of Alice and Gertrude? The straightforward answer would have to be that once Stein uses another narrative voice for her autobiography, she is entering the genre of fiction.

Stein had never intended *The Autobiography* to conform to the genre of Autobiography; she deliberately caused the boundaries between the life-narrative and the novel to collapse by altering the narrator's voice and refusing to be "bound by historical time." ["Novelists are not bound by historical time."] Justifiably, Georges Wicks (1969) argues that "the myth of the Modernist movement was more important to her than the actual facts." In fact, Stein had never presented *The Autobiography* as a historical or non-fictional work, knowingly twisting actual facts in her continuous scheme of part and whole and purposely omitting the names of her family members (such as Leo, Michael and Sarah Stein) who were instrumental to the development of modern painting.

With the publication of *The Autobiography* and its astounding success, Stein discovered that she had suddenly gained an audience:

texts engage with canonized autobiography, and that Stein and Cha's generic subversions in effect problematize the underlying mechanisms of normative autobiographical narration. The contextualized juxtaposition further illustrates certain instrumental theoretical developments within the field of life-writing in general and feminist contributions to autobiography theory in particular." (V)

"...I write for myself and strangers, after these years to know that I have a public gives me what the French call a *coeur léger*, it makes me not light-hearted but it leaves me unburdened... And so all this which has pleased and contented me will please and content them [the readers]." ("The Story of a Book," (1933), *How Writing Is Written*, 62.

For decades, Stein's inaccessible writing style has kept her work in the margins of the early twentieth-century literature. Often she had to resort to self-publishing her books, which steadily drained her financial resources. Even those critics who appreciated her literary innovation and abstract style were skeptical of her ability to write anything of a conventional nature. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* has changed this criticism forever. Michael J. Hoffman calls *The Autobiography* "a masterful performance" and "the most important memoir of any Modernist figure." (120) In his opinion, Stein has created a double myth: the myth of Paris as the center of modern art, and the myth of "Gertrude Stein," the mother of modernism. With the latter, she struggled for the rest of her career because it had the propensity to overshadow her other writings.

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Alice B. Toklas. Gertrude Stein. The Modern Library. I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned to it. I led in my childhood and youth the gently bred existence of my class and kind. I had some intellectual adventures at this period but very quiet ones. Gertrude Stein was just seeing through the press *Three Lives* which she was having privately printed, and she was deep in *The Making of Americans*, her thousand page book. Picasso had just finished his portrait of her which nobody at that time liked except the painter and the painted and which is now so famous, and he had just begun his strange complicated picture of three women, Matisse had just finished his *Bonheur de Vivre*, his first big composition which gave him the name of fauve or a zoo. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is a book by Gertrude Stein, written in October and November of 1932 and published in 1933. It employs the form of an autobiography authored by Alice B. Toklas, her life partner. In 1998, Modern Library ranked it as one of the 20 greatest English-language nonfiction books of the 20th century. Alice B. Toklas, as narrator of the work, says she was born into an affluent family in San Francisco. Later she met Gertrude Stein's sister-in-law during the fires in the The *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* investigates the art and artifice of the genre and transformed how I thought about it, says the author Deborah Levy. Gertrude Stein. "The plan was that she would write about her own life in the guise of writing the autobiography of her partner, Alice B. Toklas." Photograph: Hulton Deutsch/Corbis via Getty Images. Gertrude Stein. "The plan was that she would write about her own life in the guise of writing the autobiography of her partner, Alice B. Toklas." Photograph: Hulton Deutsch/Corbis via Getty Images. Mon 13 Apr 2020 05:00 EDT.