

The Gertrude Stein–Alice B. Toklas Symbiosis

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GERTRUDE Stein and Alice Toklas never stopped writing each other's biography, which then merged seamlessly into autobiography. Gertrude Stein may have committed the words to the page, but once the two women had met, on 9 September 1907, to form one of those rare alliances rooted in eternity, the shadow of Alice Toklas's hand always touched Gertrude Stein's pen, no matter in what genre she wrote, from her prolix word portraits to the sometimes coded language in *Tender Buttons* and a massive archive of similar but unpublished material, to her free association memoirs, her lectures, her novels, her plays, indeed, all of it. The vast body of her work contradicts conventional definitions of genre anyway, except for autobiography. This is not immediately apparent, because the biography of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas always comes to us as autobiography, but slyly so and piecemeal, rarely published in chronological sequence.

There is no evidence that Stein's early critics—including admirers Carl Van Vechten, Henry McBride, and Sherwood Anderson, and detractors Edmund Wilson and D. B. Wyndham Lewis alike—realized that her enigmatic writing had been autobiographical long before she wrote her own public biography in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), imitating the narrative voice of her longtime companion. In this 300-page book, Alice Toklas gets the first four pages to herself,

and after that Gertrude Stein takes over. This fairly straightforward recounting of three decades of artistic and literary life in Paris, and of annual summer holidays in the Rhône Valley near the Swiss border, pretends to be written in Alice Toklas's economical voice laced with her deadpan wit and sometimes lethal observations.

Readers would not know what a good mimic Gertrude Stein was until over twenty years after her death, when Alice Toklas wrote a cookbook in the unique voice that surely helped make *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* a critical as well as a commercial success. Alice Toklas's memoir, titled *What Is Remembered*, dictated in her old age, is sometimes short on factual accuracy but long on verifying her own voice, already familiar from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

Gertrude Stein never wrote anything like it again; she went on to write some other memoirs—*Everybody's Autobiography*, *Paris France*, *Wars I Have Seen*—in a cozy, conversational tone, but that voice belonged solely to Gertrude Stein, and it bore no resemblance to the slightly baleful, frequently bemused, voice that narrates *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in a conscious effort to imitate the voice of her friend.

Temperamentally, Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas were very different, in both manner and matter, and as captured physically in so many photographs. To themselves as well as to visitors, Gertrude Stein was “Lovey” and Alice Toklas was “Pussy.” They complemented each other entirely in conversation and on the printed page, filling in each other's blanks, although in conversation Alice Toklas supplied the footnotes and Gertrude Stein supplied the major text, as Carl Van Vechten, her lifelong supporter and literary executor, clearly recalled. He recalled, too, Gertrude Stein's getting stories garbled and chronology confused, while Alice Toklas then established a tidy record as the final version.

Here, for example, are five recountings of a single incident to demonstrate how verbal embroidery could turn life into art and at the same time reverse the process. In the first widely available version of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, published in 1933, Gertrude Stein has Alice Toklas tell the reader how they went about renting the manor house at Bilignin, a tiny hamlet near the town of Belley where they had first gone on a summer holiday in the mid-twenties:

One day we saw the house of our dreams across a valley. Go and ask the farmer there whose house that is, Gertrude Stein said to me. I said, nonsense it is an important house and it is occupied. Go and ask him, she said. Very reluctantly I did. He said [. . .] I think there is a lieuten-

nant of the regiment stationed in Belley living there now. [. . .] He was a kindly old farmer who always told us *allez doucement*, go slowly. We did. [. . .]

Finally three years ago the lieutenant went to Morocco and we took the house still only having seen it from across the valley and we have liked it always more. (281–82)

The version proved incomplete, for in *Everybody's Autobiography*, written four years later, Gertrude Stein had noted that when the lieutenant continued to live on in what she had already come to consider her own house, friends asked, “Why [. . .] do you not get him made captain, then he would have to leave as there is no room for another captain there in the garrison” (23). The women thought that was “an excellent idea” and passed it on to a friend who had some inside connections with the war office and got the lieutenant promoted and transferred. The narrative, including digressions on men named George and Gertrude Stein’s preference for white keys over black ones on a piano, concluded, “Alice Toklas’ conscience troubled her, mine did not trouble me but hers troubled her” (*Everybody's Autobiography* 1937, 25). Then this queen of nonsequiturs tells the story all over again, with some intriguing embellishments including one about furnishing the house with cast-offs from the neighboring estate of the early nineteenth century French gourmet Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, concluding that the lieutenant had been too dim to pass his exams and therefore was transferred to Morocco at his own rank but with higher pay. Gossip leads nowhere in itself, except in this instance to illustrate the collaborative effort. Long afterward, Alice Toklas included the following paragraph in her cookbook, in half the space Gertrude Stein had required in *Everybody's Autobiography*:

one afternoon we glimpsed the perfect house from across the valley. It was neither for sale nor to rent but this time nothing would prevent our securing the summer home of our dreams. It was let to an officer in the garrison at Belley. How did one dislodge a tenant without a legal reason? [. . .] . We would get two influential friends in Paris to have him promoted, he would be ordered to another garrison and the house would be free for us. [. . .] Someone suggested his being appointed to Africa, at advanced pay and tantamount to promotion. The captain accepted, the friends became active again and soon we were ecstatically tenants of a house which we had never seen nearer than two miles away. (*The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* 1954, 94)

Later, in 1963, Alice Toklas drew all this material together in her

memoirs and simply ignored the devious plan that may never have come off anyway:

After several summers at Belley we saw a house at Bilignin where we wanted to spend our summers [. . .] and Gertrude said, I will drive you up there and you can go and tell them that we will take their house. I said, But it may not be for rent. She said, The curtains are floating out the windows. Well, I said, I think that proves someone is living there.

But I arranged to have a conversation with the agent of the owner of the house. He told me that the present occupant was an officer in the army but that it might soon be necessary for the officer's regiment to move. [. . .]

Finally the regiment left. We signed a paper giving us the house, without seeing it nearer than from the road. We and our white poodle, Basket, moved in and settled down. (*What Is Remembered* 1963, 123–24)

But before any of these accounts written after the fact, Gertrude Stein had already transformed the incident into art in a novel, *Lucy Church Amiably*, two years before they actually rented the house. After or before an event, when art contradicted truth, Gertrude Stein could invent details or embellish her fancy. The passage in *Lucy Church Amiably*, like the rest of the novel, is sheer invention, with a happily-ever-after conclusion to a story that would not be told in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* for yet another two years:

Lucy Church rented a valuable house for what it was worth. She was prepared to indulge herself in this pleasure and did so. She was not able to take possession at once as it was at the time occupied by a lieutenant in the french navy who was not able to make other arrangements and as the owner of the house was unwilling to disturb one who in his way had been able to be devoted to the land which had given birth and pleasure to them both, there inevitably was and would be delay in the enjoyment of the very pleasant situation which occupying the house so well adapted to the pleasures of agreeableness and delicacy would undoubtedly continue. And so it was. (*Lucy Church Amiably* 1930, 130–31)

These examples suggest some of the essential differences between the women as both personalities and as writers. Gertrude Stein's garrulity and Alice Toklas's economy; their responsibilities in their relationship; Gertrude Stein's doubt and Alice Toklas's conviction; the imagined world and the real world; the fanciful and the practical. Their symbi-

osis, however, was no stronger in the books from which these passages come than it was in the rest of Gertrude Stein's protean output, for their relationship was always emotionally and professionally grounded in what Gertrude Stein more than once called their "daily island living." That life refused admission to external impediments and resolved all internal disruptions within a private cocoon spun by Alice Toklas in which Gertrude Stein could write. Gertrude Stein wrote; Alice Toklas did everything else, and Gertrude Stein said so, again in Alice Toklas's voice: "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." (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 1933, 309–10). Stein scholars have long known all this, but the lay reader, to whom this assessment is addressed—bewildered by Gertrude Stein's maddening repetitions, her disdain for question marks and other conventional punctuation, her veiled sexual candor, her Cubist view of the landscape—may find some consideration of a biographer's voice or, rather, voices helpful in reading her work.

Alice Toklas herself did not write, at least not while Gertrude Stein was alive. Van Vechten pointed out more than once, in letters and in conversation, that Gertrude Stein forcibly, even cruelly and insistently, advised Alice Toklas that she could not write and grew cross at the thought that she might attempt to. But from Gertrude Stein's point of view, not many could: "Think of the Bible, and Homer think of Shakespeare and think of me" (*The Geographical History of America* 1936, 117); "I think the reason I am important is that I know everything" (*How to Write* 1931, 169). She wasn't kidding.

If, however, the voice that narrates *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is not Gertrude Stein's but Alice Toklas's voice—if indeed Gertrude Stein so effaced her own voice from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that people actually began to read Toklas instead of making fun of her—the result might have given pause to any willing Sisypha obliged to shift her heavy chore after over twenty years of laboring in obscurity without getting anywhere.

In her subsequent writing, Gertrude Stein employed two distinct voices, although both were as passionately engaged in the creative process. What she called "audience writing," consciously directed toward readers, was superficially gossipy and rambling but as skillfully calibrated as the hermetic voice she used in literary criticism and poetry, what she called "entity writing," a private discourse with herself. As Ulla Dydo has demonstrated in her magisterial study,

Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923–1934 (2003), based on a scrupulous reading of Gertrude Stein’s manuscripts, both kinds of writing are equally faithful to her aims.

Here is an example of Gertrude Stein’s “audience voice,” followed by an example of Alice Toklas’s voice, which was of course always an “audience voice.” They demonstrate the difference between the actual writing voices of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, not only in tone and expression, but also in attitude and emotional equilibrium. The passages relate the same incident, and here the content of each is nearly identical, concerning a minor hardship during the German occupation of France in World War II. They are almost exactly the same length, but their voices could never be confused. First, Gertrude Stein’s version, written in only two sentences, with six commas:

Madame Roux had the habit of carrying off the dish-water to give to a neighbour who was fattening a pig, and as there was very little milk with which to fatten pigs, dish-water was considerable of a help [. . .] well anyway Alice Toklas said to Madame Roux, no we will not give away our dish-water, if the neighbour wants it she has in return to be willing to sell us a certain quantity of eggs. So Madame Roux went to the neighbour and told her she could have the family dish-water only under the condition of our having the privilege of buying from her a certain quantity of eggs, well she wanted the dish-water and we bought the eggs, but alas she killed the pig at Christmas, and everybody killed their pig at Christmas and so there was no need any longer for dish-water to fatten the pigs and so our right to buy eggs was over. (*Wars I Have Seen* 1945, 75)

Ten years later, Alice Toklas told the same story, in nine sentences with four commas:

One sombre afternoon I saw the good Widow Roux who was our handyman going to the portals with a pail in either hand. What have you got there, I asked. Our dishwater for the Mother Vigne’s pig, she answered. Listen, I said, you tell her if she isn’t ready to sell us an egg a day you won’t bring her any more dishwater for her pig. The Mother Vigne accepted the proposal and our diet was appreciably increased. It was manna from heaven [. . .] but a few days before Christmas my hopes were shattered. The Mother Vigne’s son told me that he was killing the pig for the holidays. As they would no longer have any need for the dishwater his mother wanted to say that she was not selling us an egg each day. It was a blow. Perhaps something else would turn up. (*The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* 1954, 206)

Alice Toklas's prose marches along, dramatizing the situation as it proceeds, while Gertrude Stein's prattling narrative interrupts itself with inconsequential detail and reminders like "well anyway" to get herself back on track. Digression is a foreign language to Alice B. Toklas, but it permeates much of Gertrude Stein's writing; it is what so many disparaging critics have long labeled "Steinese."

As a result of the disparity, Alice Toklas's voice is barely a whisper in the margins of her companion's work. Indeed, there is no substantive evidence that she participated in the actual compositions of Gertrude Stein. Her role was editorial rather than creative, and her voice encroaches only to offer factual corrections, to improve Gertrude Stein's French, to question an asseveration she encountered in typing up the manuscripts, to state minor disagreements of opinion, or to even make suggestions, these remarks all penned in the margins or between the lines of manuscripts and typescripts.

The pattern of their professional life together seems to have been that Gertrude Stein usually wrote at night, sprawlingly in *cahiers*—French grammar school notebooks, about seven by nine inches—which Alice Toklas then typed up the following morning, ready for revision and correction. She had developed, she said, "a Gertrude Stein technique, like playing Bach," and aside from business letters—even those were sometimes in holograph—could therefore type nothing else. (Her side of the voluminous correspondences she engaged in with a number of people, for nearly twenty years after Gertrude Stein's death, was always handwritten.)

Their union was a marriage, powerfully sexual as well as intellectual. Gertrude Stein had proposed marriage early on, later detailed in "Didn't Nellie and Lily Love You" (posthumously published in 1954), and their consequent life together became the preoccupying subject of nearly everything Gertrude Stein wrote. Was their union entirely free of disagreement? Of course not. Alice Toklas could grow distraught in the extreme, when she felt betrayed by Gertrude Stein's making an apparent pass at Mabel Dodge (later Luhan), for instance. She grew merciless and nurtured her wound, for example, when she first read Gertrude Stein's novel, *Q.E.D.*, written twenty-five years earlier and squirreled away before the women first met. Alice Toklas would forget, as she later declared about some visitor's slight, but she would not forgive. When they were in synch, however—actually in tandem, Gertrude Stein ahead and Alice B. Toklas behind—and that was most of the time, the hand of one influenced the hand of the other. In Gertrude Stein's *carnets*—tiny notebooks, about three by five inches, which

included grocery lists, reminders of errands, lists of books and guests, scribbled ideas, erotic joking and sexual banter, fragments, phrases, nonsense verses, and drafts or preliminary stabs at composition later expanded in her customary *cahiers*—Alice Toklas’s voice, and her self, are often apparent, as Ulla Dydo has observed in detail in *The Language That Rises*. Sometimes in the *carnets* Gertrude Stein wrote little notes to Alice Toklas who was, after all, her daily inspiration for nearly forty years. Sometimes the women exchanged messages or engaged in verbal games, playful, frequently sexual, and never intended for publication or the eyes of anybody else, although a selection of them was published in as *Baby Precious Always Shines* (1999). There has been some disagreement among Gertrude Stein’s readers about the wisdom of publication, since the notes are riddled with euphemistic scatology about bowel movements (“cows”) and orgasms (“caesars”) as well as embarrassingly private declarations of love. Sometimes she dedicated the *carnets* before beginning to write in them, and sometimes she dedicated them at both ends, an act that assured her of her capacity to write. Failure to dedicate a *carnet* could be blamed if something went wrong, even if she had begun writing from the end:

It all happened because this little book got started without a look from wifey. To be sure it started backwards but even so it was not right and now I say loving loving all day and all night too. (*A Gertrude Stein Companion: Content with the Example* 1988, 124).

In another entry she wrote, “Baby has her husband here to give her good cheer,” and Alice Toklas wrote back, adding a question mark to her reply, “And likes it Baby has a cheerful husband?” “A question mark is not admitted by us moderns,” Gertrude Stein retorted. “Then you’ll have to learn to read,” Alice Toklas replied, prompting Gertrude Stein’s conclusion: “She is a wonderful mind reader. She is a wonderful mine reader” (*A Gertrude Stein Companion: Content with the Example* 1988, 125).

During the decade immediately preceding *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein began to explain herself through a long series of essays on grammar and rhetoric and her own composition. In many of them, and even more intensely in her writing before 1923, when she began writing about her literary aims, Gertrude Stein wrote incessantly about her sexual marriage as well and her absolute devotion to her partner. Alice Toklas once said—or was obliged to say in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*—that she liked a view but she liked to sit with her back to it; conversely, Gertrude Stein stared at the view

itself—she even liked to stare directly into the sun, she claimed—in nearly everything she wrote, in detailing their life together. Alice Toklas was always there to disrupt the view behind her wife.

A little of this sexually charged work got into print—as in an orgasmic play on words in a short piece in *Tender Buttons* (1914), “This Is This Dress, Aider,” and went right over the head of every contemporary reviewer—without any attempt on Stein’s part to censor or expurgate. But nobody apparently got it, though in truth the bulk of the material did go unpublished. This material seems to be punctuated from time to time with Alice Toklas’s comments, transformed into Gertrude Stein’s words. Sometimes the compositions are dialogues, and we read them rather the way we half-hear without understanding a conversation going on in the next room, behind us on a bus, at the next table in a restaurant. These dialogues often they deal with mundane issues about private matters we cannot fully understand; sometimes they are virginally pure and sometimes boisterously randy, both of which are equally disconcerting though for different reasons. Here is a rather commonplace exchange from “The King or Something (The Public is Invited to Dance)”:

I hear a star.
Do you where.
There.
Don’t you see.
It’s an aeroplane.
Oh yes I heard it before.
So did I.
I do not care to bother.
We do.
That is quite natural.
Come again.

(*Geography and Plays* 1922, 130)

And another one, rather more coy:

Can you see why I am inspired.
I can recognise the cause of inspiration.
So can a great many people.
This is laughable.
Come pleasantly.
And sing to me.

(*Geography and Plays* 1922, 131)

Sometimes—as in a chaste passage from “Idem the Same,” written in 1923 and published a few years later—an intimate address comes to us

as a solo about Alice Toklas in what purports to be “A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson”:

If you hear her snore
 It is not before you love her
 You love her so that to be her beau is very lovely
 She is sweetly there and her curly hair is very lovely
 She is sweetly here and I am very near and that is very lovely.
 She is my tender sweet and her little feet are stretched out well
 which is a treat and very lovely
 Her little tender nose is between her little eyes which close and are
 very lovely
 She is very lovely and mine which is very lovely.

(Useful Knowledge 1928, 93)

These passages were all published during Gertrude Stein’s lifetime, but a fifty-page poem written circa 1915 titled “Lifting Belly” was not published until eight years after her death. Like everything else she wrote, it is, as she described her work, “literally true,” in part a single voice and in part two voices in a game of literary one-upmanship between the women. No brief passage from “Lifting Belly” can demonstrate its cumulative effect, but almost any passage can suggest it, as well as its sexual complexity. As a dialogue it playful and flirtatious; as a monologue it is ruminative and private. Clearly enough, some of the lines suggest two speakers; others do not, but there is no indication from the author that she has shifted her discourse.

Lifting belly is so strong. And so judicious.
 Lifting belly is an exercise.
 Exercise is very good for me.
 Lifting belly necessarily pleases the latter.
 Lifting belly is necessary.
 Do believe me. . . .
 Lifting belly is so near.
 Lifting belly is so dear.
 Lifting belly is all around
 Lifting belly makes a sound.
 Keep still.
 Lifting belly is gratifying.
 I can easily say please me.
 You do.
 Lifting belly is precious.

(The Yale Gertrude Stein 1980, 14)

A few years later, but at some time before Alice Toklas had given Gertrude Stein her signature crew cut that identified her forever—then widely ridiculed but now widely affected by women of a certain age—she wrote “A Sonatina Followed by Another,” openly avowing her marital devotion to her partner:

Little Alice B. is the wife for me. Little Alice B so tenderly is born so long so she can be born along by a husband strong who has not his hair shorn. And what size is wise. The right size is nice. How can you credit me with wishes. I wish you a very happy birthday.

One two one two I come to you. To-day there is nothing but the humble expression of a husband’s love. Take it. (*The Yale Gertrude Stein* 1980, 295)

Several similar pieces similar in content though not in form appeared in print in *Geography and Plays*, the publication of which the women themselves financed in 1922, when the Stein–Toklas salon at 27 rue de Fleurus was as well known in literary circles in New York as it was in Paris. It included “Sacred Emily,” notable for the first appearance of Gertrude Stein’s signature sentence “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” in which a bewildering number of both domestic and erotic images snake their way in and around short lines that might again be dialogue: “How do you do I forgive you everything and there is nothing to forgive”; “Cow come out cow come out and out and smell a little”; “Do I make faces like that at you”; “Color mahagony center”; “Loveliness extreme”; “Measure treasure”; “Pussy pussy pussy what what” (*Geography and Plays* 1922, 178–88). “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” reappeared a year later in “Lifting Belly,” flanked by the suggestive “Lifting belly can please me because it is an occupation I enjoy” and “In print on top.”

In 1933 the women financed *Operas and Plays* into print, one of the five titles they paid to have published as part of their “Plain Edition” to combat the silence of commercial publishers. It contained “A Lyrical Opera Made by Two,” rampant with further disclosures about “cows” and the author’s avowal of both randy sex and romantic love for readers to discover, provided of course that they had a key to Gertrude Stein’s strange treasury. In “A Lyrical Opera Made by Two,” Alice B. Toklas is her “sweet pretty prettily,” her “April fool baby,” her “dear dearest queen,” and Gertrude Stein herself is “April full of fool which is me for my sweetie” (51–53).

For them to have brought any of this material into print was as daring then as it is astonishing now. Moreover, on Gertrude Stein’s orders,

Alice Toklas authorized the posthumous publication of what amounted to about three thousand printed pages, of which perhaps half recounts the intimacies of their remarkable union in hermetic, confessional poems. After Gertrude Stein's death, the material was scattered in the contents of over half of the eight thick annual volumes issued by Yale University Press: *Bee Time Vine* (1953), *As Fine As Melanctha* (1954), *Painted Lace* (1956), *A Novel of Thank You* (1958), arguably in *Mrs. Reynolds* (1952), *Stanzas in Meditation* (1955), and *Alphabets and Birthdays* (1957). These verbal collages occupy in all about twelve hundred printed pages and are published as part of *The Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein*.

"Disillusionment in living is finding that no one can really ever be agreeing with you completely in anything" (*The Making of Americans* 1926, 264). Gertrude Stein spent nine years writing the novel from which that passage comes, only to find her observation contradicted by the advent in her life—no other word is so appropriate as "advent," something not only momentous but holy—of Alice B. Toklas. Their alliance was so complete that the work is forged from both of their lives, beginning with Gertrude Stein's little biography, "Ada," written in 1908 soon after they first met, in which Alice Toklas is "Ada" and Gertrude Stein refers to herself as "someone," in an interchange woven on the words "living" and "loving" and "telling." This first of Gertrude Stein's many word portraits of people—celebrated and anonymous alike—is a narrative, written just a few years before Gertrude Stein began to fracture conventional syntax, images, and associations. It is constructed of the participial repetition or, as she called it, "insistence" building to a conclusion of her deepest feelings:

Some one who was living was almost always listening. Some one who was loving was almost always listening. That one who was loving was almost always listening. That one who was loving was telling about being one then listening . . . Trembling was all living, living was all loving, some one was then the other one. Certainly this one was loving this Ada then. And certainly Ada all her living then was happier in living than any one else who ever could, who was, who is, who ever will be living. (*Geography and Plays* 1922, 16)

They had in effect absorbed each other. Gertrude Stein may have written the words, but Alice B. Toklas had made that writing possible. Their personalities were so distinct from each other that their individual roles in the creative process of Gertrude Stein's writing cannot be confused. It is nevertheless true that—as "Ada" tells us in a phrase easy

to miss under the hypnotic rhythm of the narrative—"some one was then the other one." The portrait begins with a fairly straightforward recounting of Alice Toklas's early life in San Francisco, but it rhapsodizes in conclusion, with permanent, urgent evidence in anticipation of an extraordinary relationship in the history of modern literature and letters, manifested in a body of work that continues to challenge us. They built it together.

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