I Am Not Who "I" Pretend to Be: The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and its Photographic Frontispiece

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The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas *and its Photographic Frontispiece*

A photograph by Man Ray (fig. 1) serves as the frontispiece for the first edition of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933).[1] In the image, a severely cropped version of Man Ray's original composition, a waifish Alice B. Toklas, in a loose-fitting, floor-length dress, enters the study where Gertrude Stein sits at her desk, enveloped in her work. Although Stein dominates the foreground of the photograph, the caption fails to acknowledge her presence. It simply reads, "Alice B. Toklas at the door, photograph by Man Ray."

With the frontispiece, Stein establishes a comparison between two purportedly direct modes of referentiality: autobiography and portrait photography. The medium of photography, in general, complements Stein's deconstruction of autobiography as a genre. The frontispiece, in particular, reads as *The Autobiography en abyme*.[2]

The frontispiece, with its seemingly askew caption, highlights the discrepancy between the book's title and its content. According to Stein's own specifications, her name did not appear on the spine, front cover, or title page of the first edition. Since the first publication, publishers have exhibited a palpable anxiety about this absence. While not a household name, by 1933 Stein had achieved a literary reputation in the United States. Toklas, in contrast, was completely unknown. The title, therefore, failed to deliver autobiography's usual pledge; *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* did not promise to provide the details of an exemplary or otherwise extraordinary life. To this day, republications of *The Autobiography* almost always feature Stein's image (sans Toklas) on the cover and Stein's name on the spine, front cover, and title page. In other words, Stein's transgression of autobiographical convention still requires considerable explanation in publishers' eyes.

In 1933, the Literary Guild of New York introduced the book to its members by means of a brief, clarificatory letter. The revised title became *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas: The Life Story of Gertrude Stein*, by Gertrude Stein. As editor-in-chief Carl Van Doren states in the letter: "It is important to know from the outset that while this book is called the autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (a companion of Miss Stein), it is actually the story of Gertrude Stein's life since 1903."[3]

FIGURE 1. © *2004 Man Ray Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADAGP, Paris*

Van Doren does not want the reader to judge the book by its cover. With a tone of urgency, he attempts to purge from the title the very ambiguities Stein wanted to project.

Van Doren places Toklas within parentheses in more ways than one. For one thing, his introduction dismisses Toklas's importance both as a narrative persona and as Stein's lifelong partner. Perhaps more importantly, Van Doren's imposition hampers the reader's participation in the construction of the text's meaning. The

"by Gertrude Stein" decreases the reader's active skepticism about the "I." Van Doren's decided explanation of Stein's ruse of authorship undermines the latter's interrogation of (self-)representation.

Readers expect autobiographies to "tell all," and Van Doren assures potential readers that while *The Autobiography* does not occupy itself with the details of the lesser-known Toklas's life, it does "tell the story" of the more noteworthy Stein's life. Obviously, Van Doren was more interested in book sales than genre analysis, but his comments compromise one of Stein's main purposes for the project. With *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein asserts that autobiographies reveal much more about the conventions of representation than they do about individual lives.

Just as Stein's ruse of authorship challenges the "auto–" of the book's title, the frontispiece undermines the illusion of singularity suggested by the photograph's caption ("Alice B. Toklas at the door"). In Man Ray's original photograph, Toklas's figure marks the center of the plane. In the severely cropped frontispiece, however, Toklas appears left of center. In other words, the image does not privilege either subject's form, but bifurcates the viewer's attention.

The frontispiece provides important initial clues about *The Autobiography*'s construction. Toklas, whose form is echoed by the long, slender candles on the desk, seems to provide Stein with the light of inspiration. While Toklas bathes in the glow that emanates from behind the doorframe, Stein's bulky form remains partly hidden by shadow. The tomes that occupy the lower lefthand corner of the desk add weight to the broad, horizontal plane of the tabletop. Because Toklas appears to materialize from the light, within the symbolic space created by the photograph it appears as if Stein, the brooding genius who toils away in mental solitude at her desk, has conjured up her muse.

For some, the frontispiece highlights a power imbalance that pervades the written text. Leigh Gilmore provides the following reading: "Stein sits at the desk, pen in hand. Something in her pose suggests Prospero's conjuring skills, for Alice seems summoned to the scene" (214). Gilmore claims that Stein, like Prospero, has become too absorbed in the pursuit of knowledge. Like Prospero's Ariel, Stein's Alice, while potentially mischievous, remains a servant. Gilmore's use of Toklas's first name, "Alice," suggests that Toklas has been victimized by the more powerful Stein.

Sidonie Smith's reading of Toklas's representation in the text echoes Gilmore's reading of the photograph: "The camouflaged Stein displaces her monumental egotism into the self-effacing voice of 'Alice'" (77). Once again, Stein is the overbearing master and "Alice" the dutiful servant. According to this reading, Toklas exists solely as an instrument of Stein's desire, and, as a result, The *Autobiography*'s "I" becomes nothing more than Stein's foil.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that further evidence of Stein's monumental ego surfaces in Toklas's declaration of "Gertrude Stein's" genius.

> I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken, and I may say in each case it was before there was any general recognition of the quality of genius in them. The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, and Alfred Whitehead (6).

Gilbert and Gubar interpret that passage as a self-congratulatory statement. Stein "turns collaboration into collusion. . . . The result is a kind of cannibalism, Stein makes Alice into a character of her own devising who, in turn, certifies Stein as the genius who will usher in the twentieth century" (251). This line of argument reduces *The Autobiography*'s ruse of authorship to a struggle for power. Words such as "collusion" and "devising" corroborate Gilmore's vision of Stein as Prospero and loudly proclaim her intent as sinister. Furthermore, the accusation of cannibalism, with its suggestion of predation, again casts "Alice" in the role of victim.

While his phrasing is more delicate, Charles Caramello also views Stein's intent in *The Autobiography* as self-serving. He writes about "the morose theme of erasure" in Stein's autobiographical work and suggests that, in *The Autobiography*, Stein has "erased the real Toklas from history"(14). The question remains, however, where does one locate "the real" in any text?

Ironically, critics who interpret *The Autobiography* as "the auto-referential clothed in biographical dress" (Neuman 15) mistake Stein's critique of genre for a clever disguise of her self-centeredness. Although *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* does not represent Toklas's autobiography, that does not imply that Stein fashioned Toklas as her mouthpiece merely to disguise her own selfish motives. Stein's innovative ruse of authorship explicitly uncovers the premises of autobiography's construction and thereby challenges the genre's status as a direct mode of referentiality. As Bela Brodski and Celeste Schenck state:

> To the uncritical eye, autobiography presents as untroubled a reflection of identity as the surface of a mirror can provide. The corresponding assumption has been that autobiography is a transparency through which we perceive life, unmediated and undistorted (i).

In *The Autobiography*, Stein purposefully distorts Toklas's reflection in order to magnify the genre's distortion of identity. She crafts *The Autobiography* from Toklas's perspective in order to denude the "I" of its unified status. The book's ruse of authorship, like the double portrait on the frontispiece, privileges Rimbaud's "I is an Other" over Descartes' "I think therefore I am."

Brodski and Schenck's use of a mirror as a metaphor for identity makes implicit reference to Lacan's poststructuralist theories about the formation of the *cogito*. According to Lacan, an infant first understands the differentiation between self and

Other even before the infant can recognize its own reflection. The emerging subject both delights in the coherence exhibited by its reflection and despairs at its inner sense of asymmetry. In other words, the mirror's surface never provides an "untroubled reflection" of identity. The ideal image in the mirror, this fictional construct of a fully coordinated self, marks the subject's alienation and foreshadows its lifelong existential crisis. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan explains, "Human beings will forever after anticipate their own images in the images of others" (25). Although it remains veiled, the illusory image of coherence first found in the reflection fuels the subject's desire. In order to ease the conflict that emerges as a result of the mirror stage, the subject represses its failure to embody its ideal and builds up conscious defenses against the knowledge.

A similar process of denial fuels conventional autobiography. Since ancient times, definitions of 'the self' have revolved around the *cogito* or the belief that a self-reflective consciousness is knowable. Conventional autobiographers, however, tend only to construct "the surface of the mirror" or the ego. Autobiographies that culminate in the "always-foreseen fullness" of "the writer's present life and vocation" (Clark 316) perpetuate a fantasy of self-knowledge because they ignore the Other's alienating effects. Subjects deny their alienation when they retrospectively establish, then proclaim they have fulfilled, their own definition of self-actualization. As Shari Benstock suggests, "autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream; what begins on the presumptions of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction" (11).

The Autobiography and its frontispiece disturb the fundamental logic that drives both conventional autobiography and the ego or the *cogito*. In *The Autobiography*, Stein uncovers the premises of autobiography's construction as she interrogates the foundations of the ego ideal. The ruse of authorship that Stein employs does not strengthen the illusion of her ego's stability but emphasizes the alienation of the subject, that is, the self / Other dynamic of subjectivity. In *The Autobiography*, Stein investigates the presumption of the autobiographer's self-knowledge. The narrative persona of "Alice B. Toklas" allows Stein to view her own subjectivity from the vantage point of the Other.[4] Her critique of autobiography requires 'I' to signify improperly. Stein underscores the dependent nature of the subject, that I exist only in the eyes of the Other, as she confounds the transparency of the personal pronoun, that I am not who "I" pretend to be.

Photography allows for a similar "disassociation of consciousness from identity" (Barthes 12). When we look at ourselves in a photograph, we better understand how the Other sees us. Because "'myself' never coincides with my image" (Barthes 12) a photograph repeats for its subject the frustration first experienced during the mirror stage. The frontispiece of *The Autobiography* reminds the reader

of this frustration. Although the caption ("Alice B. Toklas at the door") suggests the presence of one subject, the image does not fulfill the expectation. The viewer–reader anticipates coherence but does not experience it. This failure of one-to-one correspondences prepares the reader for Stein's critique.

With *The Autobiography*, Stein suggests that neither photography nor autobiography should be thought of as "a straightforward transcription of an observed reality" (Owens 16). In the image used for the frontispiece, Stein cannot be distinctly discerned; only her hands and back are illuminated. While light accentuates Toklas's form, shadows obscure the features of her face. In other words, the frontispiece does not make its subjects accessible to its audience. While the frontispiece can be studied for the internal relationships that structure it, it does not furnish any clues about the inner lives of its subjects (Owens 27).

Neither the frontispiece nor *The Autobiography* captures "reality." Man Ray depicts Toklas and Stein as they pose for the camera, not as they truly are. At first glance, the photograph appears to reproduce a spontaneous moment, just as, on a first reading, "Toklas's" narrative comes across as off-the-cuff. Upon further inspection, however, it becomes obvious that the photograph, like *The Autobiography*, has been thoroughly constructed.

The slight smile on Stein's shadowed face suggests her anticipation of Toklas's arrival, as well as her foreknowledge of Man Ray's presence. Although she holds a pen, Stein does not write upon the papers on her desk, but simulates the activity. Toklas's blank look in Man Ray's direction betrays her attempt to ignore the photographer's position. Her stiff posture breaks the illusion that she spontaneously entered the room. Instead, it appears that she wants to "hit her mark."

The frontispiece upsets the idea that photographs come closer to reality than other modes of representation. Autobiographies, like photographs, are often mistaken for reality when they are nonetheless only substitutes (Owens 27). Despite autobiography's privileged relationship to real life, the genre remains highly mediated. The book's infamous last paragraph makes this point in an ironic fashion:

> About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever 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 (*Autobiography*, 310).

With those closing remarks, Stein satirizes the conception of autobiography as a simple translation of experience into discourse.[5] First of all, it is difficult to believe that the composition of either *Robinson Crusoe* or *The Autobiography* was a "simple" task. Furthermore, the Defoe analogy complicates the genre status of

autobiography in its own right. With this conclusion, Stein classifies the textual "I," as well as the entire *Autobiography*, as fiction. Stein did not intend to represent Toklas's identity accurately in *The Autobiography*, nor did she attempt to portray herself accurately in the book. Instead, the last paragraph suggests that *The Autobiography* provides a fictionalized account of Toklas's perceptions of Stein. As Neil Schmitz states, "The ending of *The Autobiography*, which twice declares: *I am not here*, at once contradicts the intention of the form, self-revelation, and the obvious appeal of autobiographical narrative, intimacy" (204). Likewise, the photographic frontispiece, which obscures Stein's image in its shadows and appears staged, or falsely intimate, reinforces Schmitz's notion of absence, rather than Caramello's notion of erasure.[6]

As Schmitz claims, the revelation of the ruse of authorship in the final paragraph undermines the conventional definition of autobiography. In *On Autobiography*, the influential French theorist Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person, but it does not focus on an individual life. Stein's mind-boggling refraction of the "I" calls into question the meaning of such terms as 'real,' 'existence,' 'individual,' and 'personality.' Instead of providing an intimate portrait,

> Stein constructs *The Autobiography* as a text of exteriorities: a first-person narration whose narrator lacks direct access to the consciousness of her central figure, executed as a portrait by an author who lacks direct access to the narratorial consciousness (Caramello 147).

When critics mine *The Autobiography* for intimate details about Stein and Toklas's relationship, they tend to overlook *The Autobiography's* focus on exteriorities (e.g., Stimpson).

"Toklas's" incessant repetition of the name 'Gertrude Stein' places such an emphasis on the exterior that it teeters on the edge of farce. Rarely "Gertrude," "Miss Stein," even "she" or "her," the full name, "Gertrude Stein," appears an average of four times per page. For example, "Maddalena, the old Italian cook, came up to Gertrude Stein's bedroom one morning to bring the water for her bath. Gertrude Stein had the hiccoughs"(82). Although critics often interpret the repetition of Stein's name as another masterstroke of her egotism, the reiteration ironically achieves the opposite effect. After hundreds of pages, 'Gertrude Stein' does not exist apart from its shape in the composition (Dydo 4). The constant repetition exposes instabilities in the relationship between signifier and signified until the full name, 'Gertrude Stein,' begins to function as an unstable element within the cycle of resignification.

Printed in a one-inch circle in the lower righthand corner on the cover of the first edition, Stein's famous device "ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE" operates in a similar fashion. This microcosm of a linguistic system suggests that all signs are simulacra, or false copies. 'ROSE' does not refer to a reality outside of the device itself; its meaning changes in relation to its reiteration in the cycle. Like the repetition of 'Gertrude Stein,' the endless repetition of 'ROSE' releases the "signifier from its signified into its wordness and sound" (Smith 81).

Stein's unorthodox linguistic play typically draws comparisons with the unconventional visual perspectives introduced by Picasso and Braque at the height of analytical cubism. The broken-down planar components and *trompe-l'oeil* techniques of cubism, with their emphasis on exteriority, remain consistent with *The Autobiography*'s focus. It is photography's emphasis on its own duplicability, however, that creates a closer parallel with *The Autobiography*.

Although it would have immediately unraveled Stein's ruse of authorship, to some degree Picasso's proto-Cubist *Portrait of Miss Gertrude Stein* (1906) would have been a good choice for the frontispiece. Just as Stein challenges the traditional mimetic function of autobiography in *The Autobiography*, Picasso's portrait challenges the "traditional mimetic function of painting" (Lubar 57). Furthermore, the *Portrait* serves as a frequent topic of discussion throughout the book. As the infamous story behind *The Portrait* goes, Stein sat for Picasso over eighty times, but the latter was never satisfied with the portrait. In the summer of 1906, Picasso quit Paris for Spain and left the unfinished canvas behind. When he returned, he painted over the portrait's naturalistic features and replaced them with anti-naturalistic features inspired by ancient Iberian sculpture (Hilton 66, 73).

In the early pages of *The Autobiography*, Stein includes Picasso's now famous quip about the *Portrait*: ". . . everybody says that she [Stein] does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will . . . ." (*Autobiography* 14). With the remark, Picasso calls attention to his confidence in his ability to change the way people see. While Picasso's later, fully realized Cubist works will challenge "the traditional physiognomic reading of portraits as imprints of the sitter's soul" (Lubar 63), his *Portrait of Miss Gertrude Stein* does not. As the previous quotation reveals, Picasso believes that his painting does more than reflect Stein's essence; it constitutes it (Lubar 62). And Picasso's later reaction to Stein's short haircut reveals that he feels his painting captures more than Stein's likeness. "Let me see, he said. She let him see. And my portrait, said he sternly. Then his face softening he added, *mais, quand même tout y est*, all the same it is all there" (*Autobiography* 53). Neil Schmitz aptly reads that statement as an example of "Picasso's masculine authority" (216). Schmitz suggests that with the comment, "Picasso speaks a judgment: *This is who you are*" (215). By writing her autobiography through the assumed consciousness of Alice B. Toklas, however, and by purposefully omitting a visual reproduction

of Picasso's *Portrait* from *The Autobiography*, Stein has the last word. To borrow a phrase from Schmitz, in relation to both the *Portrait* and *The Autobiography*, Stein emphatically asserts: "*I am not here*."

Stein focuses on surface and absence in *The Autobiography* not because, as Paul Alkon asserts, she wants to conceal "the moral emptiness of [her] soul" (874), but because she wants to break with the traditional ontological reading of autobiography as an imprint of the subject's soul. Whereas a painted portrait is often valued for its ability to capture the essence of its subject, a photograph is often valued for its ability to serve as a mirror of the real. The fact that a photograph perpetually retains the fleeting instant underscores its exteriority. "The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (Barthes 4). Stein's use of the continuous present produces a similar effect. Characterized by simple transitions and lightly punctuated run-on sentences that overflow with present participles, the continuous present breaks from a concept of time as departure and instead suggests a "monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape" (Kristeva 14, 16). Transitional phrases such as "As I was saying . . ." (*Autobiography* 4) and "Before I tell about . . . I must tell about . . ." (*Autobiography* 8) not only create a casual, conversational spontaneity that establishes an intimacy with the reader, they perpetuate an illusion of a perpetual here and now. No one will ever have the opportunity to enter into Stein's atelier and find Picasso and Matisse conversing there, and yet the instance perpetually replays itself in the "snap shots" (*Autobiography* 11) of the atelier that Toklas looks at, as well as in the text itself. Although the events described in *The Autobiography* occurred in the past, "Toklas's" energetic retelling, like a photograph, continuously reproduces a fleeting moment.

Where paintings are valued for their uniqueness, photographs are valued for their duplicability. Photographs "procure their authoritative status" because of their ability to duplicate the external (Owens 26). Once a photographic image is captured, through various printing techniques, it can be reproduced *ad infinitum*. As Rosalind Krauss states in "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," the photograph's repeatability upsets the notion that the photograph might capture the subject's essence or soul. In its ability to break down the distinction between the original and the copy, the photograph challenges the idea of uniqueness.

> At a certain point, in its precarious position as the false copy—the image that is resemblant only by mechanical circumstance and not by internal, essential connection to the model—served to deconstruct the whole system of model and copy, original and fake, first- and second-degree replication. (27)

Stein makes the point, through her use of the photographic frontispiece, that all autobiographies are "false copies." *The Autobiography* deconstructs the whole system of model and copy through the narrative persona "Alice B. Toklas." Stein's

explanation of the ruse of authorship suggests that the "I" of The Autobiography resembles Alice B. Toklas by mechanical circumstance only and not as the result of any internal, essential connection to the real Toklas.

On the last page of the first edition, Stein includes a facsimile of the handwritten first page of *The Autobiography*'s manuscript. The ability infinitely to reproduce the handwritten manuscript reemphasizes the artifactual nature of all representation. Furthermore, the facsimile returns the reader to the book's opening. The facsimile, therefore, achieves a similar purpose as the "ROSE" device. Although the period inserted at the top of the circle divides the phrase into a beginning, middle, and end, the device perpetually repeats itself. In this way, it ruptures the notion of "time as departure, progression, and arrival" (Kristeva 17). The book's last line also undermines the notion of progress. While the titles of *The Autobiography*'s chapters[7] maintain the underpinnings of chronological time, the point of arrival, or the end of the book, does not mark a final destination. The point of arrival perpetually dissolves into the point of departure, or the book's beginning. The last line, "And she has and this is it," like the facsimile of the first page, encourages a second reading.

The photographic frontispiece, the repetition of "Gertrude Stein," the cyclical device on the front cover, and the facsimile of the manuscript all aid Stein in her deconstruction of the genre of autobiography. Within *The Autobiography*, all reference to an extratextual world becomes nothing more than an illusory effect.

Stein not only constructs a time indiscernible from space, but also an "I" indiscernible from language. The ruse of authorship reduces the subject to the status of a grammatical pronoun (de Man 18). Because the "I" of *The Autobiography* does not transparently reflect the identity of the author, it challenges the unified ego as the metonymy of the "I"s signification (Lacan 307). The "I" in conventional autobiography perpetuates an illusion of a rational, knowable, unified self. In other words, it reinforces the *méconnaissances* that constitute the ego and shelter the subject from its own discord.[8] *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* does not remain focused on the portrayal of the *cogito*. The double self-portrait that serves as *The Autobiography's* frontispiece, as well as Stein's innovative ruse of authorship, exposes the ego's investment in coherence as a denial.

In the *Geographical History of America*, Stein states, "I am I because my little dog knows me"(113). With that quip, she suggests that individual identity requires recognition in the eyes of the Other. Perhaps more interestingly, through the example of her dog, she claims that this recognition occurs outside of the realm of language or any other form of representation. We might harbor an illusion that photography and autobiography make their subjects more accessible to an audience, but the concepts and notions of identity that these forms of representation rely on prevent an audience from getting to their subjects. Stein does not write *The Autobiography* so that the reading public might get to know her. Instead, she stresses that a real

human being is quite different from a concept, and neither photography nor autobiography come close to capturing a real being. Nonetheless, by disrupting communicative transparency Stein is better able to analyze how language (verbal and visual) exercises power and negotiates desire. She highlights photography's and autobiography's conventions in order to test their purposes and strengths.

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NOTES

1 Born Emmanuel Radnitsky, Man Ray (1890–1976), an American artist–photographer who moved to Paris in 1921, often photographed Montparnasse's artists and intellectuals. He shot the photograph used for the frontispiece in 1922, a full decade before *The Autobiography*'s publication.

2 "In the vocabulary of literary criticism, the phrase 'en abyme' describes any fragment of a text that reproduces in miniature the structure of the text in its entirety" (Owens 17). In other words, Man Ray's photograph reproduces in miniature the structure of *The Autobiography*. For an historical treatment of *mise en abyme* in literary theory, see Dallenbach.

3 Van Doren does not capitalize, italicize, or set off the original title in any way.

4 Here 'the Other' refers to the gaze of the symbolic Other and not to the disenfranchised other.

5 Four years later, in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), Stein issues a similar lampoon of this misconception. "Anyway autobiography is easy like it or not autobiography is easy for any one and so this is to be everybody's autobiography" (4).

6 Stein has "erased the real Toklas from history" (Caramello 14).

7 The chapters are "Before I Came to Paris," "Gertrude Stein in Paris 1903–1907," "1907–1914," "The War," and "After the War 1919–1932."

8 *Méconnaissances* is a Lacanian term, meaning misconstructions, or failures to recognize.

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