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Visual Rhetoric in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

Paul K. Alkon

Past, present, and future are reversed in the reader's encounter with the illustrations selected by Gertrude Stein for her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.¹ After the table of contents there is a table of illustrations that encourages everyone to look at the pictures before they begin reading. During that initial examination, the illustrations forecast what is to be discovered in the text. Expectations are aroused by photographs showing Gertrude Stein in front of the atelier door, rooms hung with paintings, Gertrude and Alice in front of Saint Mark's Cathedral, and both with a car in front of Joffre's birthplace. It is natural—although, as it turns out, not altogether correct—to assume that the accumulation of paintings will be explained, that the life lived within the rooms will be fully depicted, and that conventional narrative explanation will be provided to account for the presence of Gertrude and Alice together in such disparate settings as Venice and the French marshal's home.

Other illustrations provide reassurance. The picture of Picasso with Fernande Olivier identifies Gertrude Stein's circle as culturally important. A painting called *Homage to Gertrude* supplies proof of her own eminence. The picture of her in Vienna as a child adds a disarming touch. And a photograph of her as a medical student in a booklined study dispels any suspicion that her notorious prose style was the result of sheer ignorance.

Curiosity is aroused by the remaining pictures. Readers may wonder about the inclusion of an enigmatic painting by Juan Gris called *A Transatlantic*. The significance of Francis Rose's painting of Bilignin

1. For useful comments on several pictures as well as evidence that "even the book's sixteen photographs were carefully placed in the first edition," see Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York, 1970), p. 219.

from across the valley is not immediately apparent. Nor is it clear why there should be a photograph of Gertrude Stein and Bernard Faÿ standing together in a garden. She had many more famous visitors. But he is the only person besides Alice who is shown and identified in a picture with Gertrude. Even Francis Rose's painting of Alice B. Toklas is a puzzle. He was never likely to be a rival of Picasso. There are three photographs showing us enough of what Alice looked like. Rose's painting doesn't much resemble her. The full page devoted to it might more plausibly have been given to a reproduction of Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein, which is very hard to make out where it appears in the poorly lighted upper-left-hand corner of a photograph showing it on a wall with many other paintings. Such puzzles point expectation forward to the text. So, in different ways, do the reassuring pictures and those arousing somewhat mistaken expectations that the narrative will provide a coherent story. All the illustrations thus serve at first glance as images of what, for the reader, is the immediate future of his experience with the text.

As he proceeds through the book, the pictures scattered among its pages become part of the present moments of reading it. Their placement at intervals is crucial to this temporal effect, because had the illustrations been put together in one gathering they might not be looked at again until after completing the text. At that point they become (as in every illustrated book) focal points for memories of what has been read: images of the reader's immediate past experience of the book as well as evocations of whatever more distant past the book recaptures.

Distinctions between past, present, and future are blurred, however, by the final illustration: *First page of manuscript of this book* (fig. 1) creates a familiar twentieth-century circular temporal structure by directing readers to the beginning as they finish their initial inspection of illustrations, and again to the beginning when they finish reading the text. Calling attention to the first page also invites attention to the last page (printed opposite the final illustration), which will therefore often become the first printed page actually read. Insofar as last and first thus interweave, public time categories of past, present, and future are called into doubt because they don't neatly correspond to or provide much help in sorting out the reader's order of involvements with the book. The spatial fact of its arrangement into conventionally numbered pages is at slightly jarring variance with the temporal fact that page 310 is likely

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~~Ch. Part I~~
~~Ch. Part I~~
Before I came to Paris

I was born in San Francisco, Cal.
I have in consequence always preferred
living in a temperate climate but
it is difficult on the continent
of Europe or even in America to
find a temperate climate and

FIG. 1.—First page of manuscript of this book

to be read before page 3 where the text begins, while the initial sentences may first be read in the illustration at the end of the book.²

But reading the manuscript page shown in the final illustration duplicates and calls to mind simultaneously, thus blurring distinctions between, two other beginnings, one in the evermore remote past, one in the reader's immediate future: the first beginning of the book when Gertrude Stein started writing the manuscript, and the reader's beginning as he finally starts printed page 3. It is the last page of text (p. 310) which also provides a necessary gloss on the final illustration as well as a key to understanding the book by explaining that Gertrude Stein wrote it. With this information, the frontispiece (fig. 2) assumes its proper role as an emblem of the book's primary subject: Gertrude, not Alice. Perhaps Alice's placement in the background framed by a doorway echoes the renaissance portrait tradition of providing windows through which one looks at scenes emblematic of the subject's lifework. Gertrude's role as author is in any case made visible in the picture but not conspicuously signalled on the title page opposite, which reads: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas Illustrated*.

After an allusion on page 7 to the Picasso portrait of Gertrude Stein which nobody in 1907 liked "except the painter and the painted and which is now so famous," there is printed facing page 8 not that portrait but a photograph of her in front of the atelier door (fig. 3). Here it is as though the reader's familiarity with the painting could—or should—be taken for granted. Even when the portrait later appears among others on a wall, the photograph showing it is more successful at evoking memories of something known than as an adequate representation (like the photo of Rose's painting of Alice) of something never seen. The reader either remembers or is ashamed that he is not in a position to remember the "now so famous" portrait so it can be compared with the photograph. That comparison, either made in the mind's eye or wished for by those who have never seen the portrait, symbolizes the relationship between art and reality. The painting, any painting, is of course art, while the photograph, any photograph, seems to show things as they are.

Acceptance of this misleading distinction is at first, but only at first,

2. Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York, 1933). Subsequent references to this edition will appear in my text. For the priority of this as first edition, see Robert Bartlett Haas and Donald Clifford Gallup, *A Catalogue of the Published and Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein Exhibited in the Yale University Library 22 February to 29 March 1941* (New Haven, Conn., 1941). See also Julian Sawyer, *Gertrude Stein: A Bibliography* (New York, 1940). The Bodley Head edition (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* [London, 1933]) does not include *Gertrude Stein at Johns Hopkins Medical School* but prints three illustrations in addition to those also included in the first edition: *Marie Laurencin, The Family having come to California*, and *Mildred Aldrich and Gertrude Stein at the hilltop on the Marne*. The effects which I describe therefore will be somewhat different for readers of the Bodley Head edition. These differences, as well as the related bibliographical questions, deserve consideration in future studies of *The Autobiography*.



FIG. 2.—Alice B. Toklas at the door, photograph by Man Ray



FIG. 3.—Gertrude Stein in front of the atelier door

encouraged by captions that attribute paintings to their artists but withhold photographer's names. A significant exception is the frontispiece, which is elevated to its proper status as a work of art by its caption: "Alice B. Toklas at the door, photograph by Man Ray." This attribution suggests the possibility of viewing subsequent photographs as if they, too, are works of art. The reader has a choice. If that possibility is explored, his original naive distinction between art and photographic reality—echoing Alice's naiveté upon her arrival in Paris—collapses. And so, I shall argue, do distinctions between the artist and her creation as well as distinctions between the portrayed and the portrayal.

The costume and pose assumed by Gertrude Stein in front of the atelier door are as striking as the strong vertical lines which dominate the picture. Although a necklace somewhat feminizes the outfit, her dress, rendered black whatever its color may have been, resembles a monk's robe. Her hands, placed unnaturally in an almost but not quite prayerful attitude, accentuate the rigid forward gaze which helps create a statu-esque impression. The picture hovers on the brink without quite becoming, or declining to become, an allusion to several kinds of statues and paintings: dead crusaders, bishops on tombs, and saints carved or painted for veneration. On returning to this picture after finishing the book, its religious overtones are comically heightened by memories of Sherwood Anderson's comment on Gertrude's close haircut: "I like it, he said, it makes her look like a monk" (p. 304).

Any question of how closely she resembled Picasso's portrait of her is answered by the reiterated anecdote of his response to the haircut: "Picasso seeing it, was for a moment angry and said, and my portrait, but very soon added, after all it is all there" (p. 304). The anecdote suggests that, no matter how Gertrude's appearance seems to vary after having been painted by Picasso, it is the essential truth of the portrait that remains. As any of the photographs of her will show when properly viewed, she has, thanks to Picasso, become forever what he depicted. But the sense in which this is true—and argued for through visual rhetoric—does not become clear until the book is completed. Nor is it until then possible fully to understand the role of this photograph as the first in a series of illustrations which display a gradual but not complete displacement of photographs of reality by photographs of paintings and, at the end, the photograph of a manuscript page. Photographs of reality give way to photographs of works of art. But as this happens the distinction between art and reality collapses, because whatever can be photographed must be real. The illustrations provide visual proof that works of art are not only realities but perhaps—their placement suggests this—final realities.

After an account on page 22 of the moment when Picasso and Fernande had "decided to separate forever," the reader discovers facing page 24 a photograph of them together at Montmartre (fig. 4). However, they are not looking at each other but, Janus-like, in opposite



FIG. 4.—Pablo and Fernande at Montmartre

directions. Instead of holding hands, each holds—Picasso more closely—a dog. Because the narration of their relationship, as of almost every other major event recounted in the book, moves backwards and forwards through time rather than following a straight chronological progression by unfolding events in the order in which they occurred, the photograph of Picasso and Fernande together but looking away aptly anticipates and eventually (when looked at after finishing the book) recapitulates both their situation and the reader's encounters with it.

On the page opposite this photograph is a description of Fernande: "She was very very beautiful with a marvellous complexion. She was a big woman but not too big . . . and she had the small round arms that give the characteristic beauty to all french women" (p. 24). Any attempt to check out this description against the photograph is frustrated because, after noting that she does seem big but not too big, it is impossible to judge her complexion in a black and white photo and equally impossible to decide anything about arms that are completely concealed by a baggy outfit. The photo does not tell much one way or the other about the most important aspect of her spatial reality: the fact that she was very, very beautiful. What it does convey is the temporal reality of her impermanent but important affair with Picasso.

The absence of people in the next three illustrations, which show rooms hung with paintings, serves as a corrective to narrative accounts of visitors and parties by focussing attention on what is most important: works of art (figs. 5, 6, and 7). The pictures also invite and supply visual confirmation of some claims made by Gertrude Stein about her own writing. To the possible charge that her style is unnatural, she responds by suggesting analogies between responses to her early work and responses to innovative modern paintings that at first—like the *Sacré du printemps*, whose reception is also described—enraged audiences.

We are told that Matisse's *Lady with a Hat* "infuriated the public, they tried to scratch off the paint." In the next sentence, without explanation, is the statement: "Gertrude Stein liked that picture, it was a portrait of a woman with a long face and a fan. It was very strange in its colour and in its anatomy" (p. 41). Then after another description of how at its exhibition "people were roaring with laughter at the picture and scratching at it" is the information that "Gertrude Stein could not understand why, the picture seemed to her perfectly natural . . . it upset her to see them all mocking at it. It bothered her and angered her because she did not understand why because to her it was so alright, just as later she did not understand why since the writing was all so clear and natural they mocked at and were enraged by her work" (p. 42). When the *Lady with a Hat* is seen twelve pages later it is hard to dissent from Gertrude Stein's judgement. The possibly offensive colors are gone in a black and white photograph. The painting is so placed at the far left-hand corner that it is not easy to decide whether any strangeness in its anatomy is due to the artist or to the slightly distorted perspective of its position in the photo-

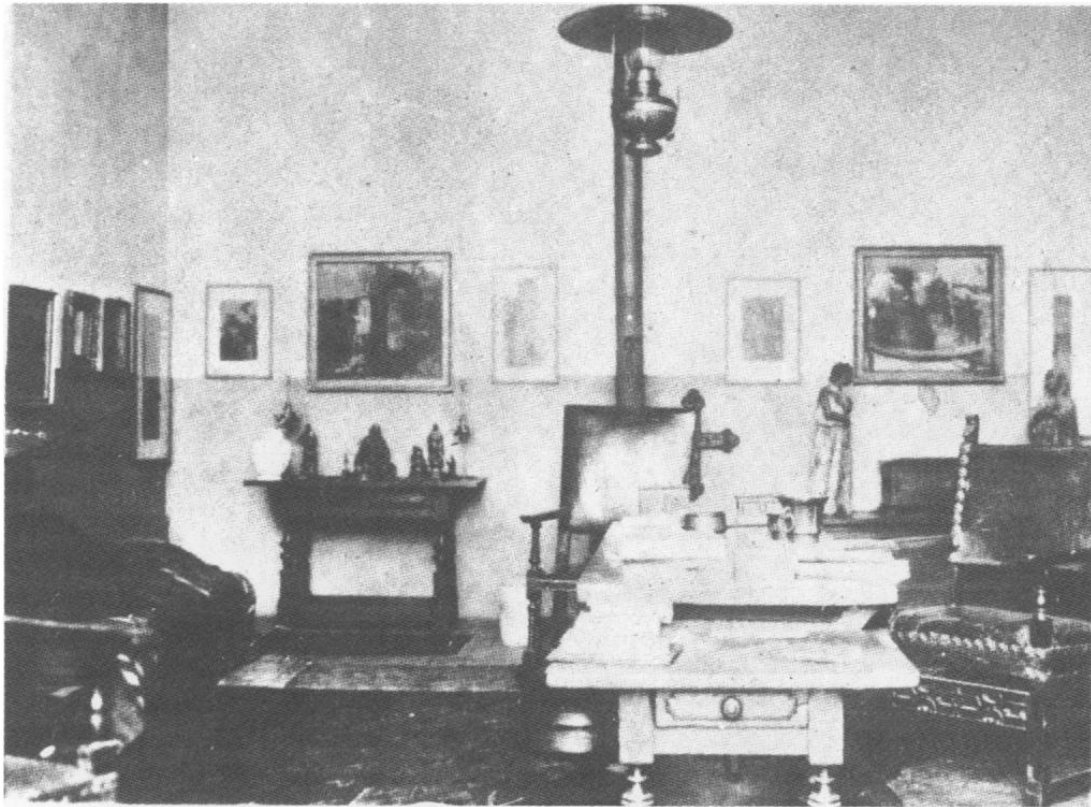


FIG. 5.—Room with Oil Lamp



FIG. 6.—Room with Bonheur de Vivre and Cézanne

graph. It is hard to see—and possibly object to—details of the painting because it is reduced on the page to exactly the size of a small postage stamp. And its presence conventionally framed on a wall as one among several absolutely respectable pictures further domesticates it to the category of something accepted as perfectly natural. *Lady with a Hat* is presented as a visual analogue of Gertrude Stein’s writing and illustrated in a way that invites readers to agree that her work is equally acceptable.

Unlike the more distant perspective of *Room with Oil Lamp*, the *Room with Bonheur de Vivre and Cézanne* (fig. 6) brings readers up close to the paintings. Their importance is suggested by their relatively greater size: neither occupies an entire page, but both are larger than postage stamps, and the *Bonheur de Vivre* much larger, thus calling attention also to their distortions of human form and to the text’s explanation of how such distortions operate:

It was in this picture that Matisse first clearly realised his intention of deforming the drawing of the human body in order to harmonise and intensify the colour values. . . . He used his distorted drawings as a dissonance is used in music or as vinegar or lemons are used in cooking or egg shells in coffee to clarify. . . . Cézanne had come to his unfinishedness and distortion of necessity, Matisse did it by intention. [P. 49]

Again there is a powerful analogical argument here, this time implied rather than explicitly stated by the text, suggesting that the verbal distortions in Gertrude Stein’s writings are in some way intended to “clarify.” Other remarks, as well as the fact that she is displayed throughout the narrative surrounded by painters and paintings, encourage the reader to perceive parallels between visual art and her prose.

Explaining the advantages of living in Paris, she stresses the visual and spatial aspects of her work:

One of the things that I have liked all these years is to be surrounded by people who know no english. It has left me more intensely alone with my eyes and my english. . . . As she says eyes to her were more important than ears . . . it has been so often said that the appeal of her work is to the ear and to the subconscious. Actually it is her eyes and mind that are active and important and concerned in choosing. [Pp. 86, 91, 92]

Whether “eye and “eyes” in these passages create aural puns on “I” and “I”s, self and selves, is doubtful. But there is no mistaking the connection made between looking at paintings and Gertrude Stein’s verbal creativity.

She explains the influence of Cézanne’s portrait of his wife: “It was an important purchase because in looking and looking at this picture Gertrude Stein wrote *Three Lives* . . . *Melanctha* . . . the second story of



FIG. 7.—Room with Gas (Femme au chapeau and Picasso Portrait)

Three Lives . . . was the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature” (pp. 40, 66). The significance of the Cézanne portrait would be obscured in a picture which showed more of the room containing it, with perhaps a caption like that from just such a photograph printed in a recent book about Gertrude Stein: “It was at this desk, facing the Cézanne Portrait of Madame Cézanne, that Stein, a few years earlier, had written *Three Lives*.”³ Although the picture accompanying this caption seems to convey information similar to that provided by *Room with Bonheur de Vivre and Cézanne*, the two illustrations differ widely in rhetorical strategy.

The *Autobiography* illustration depends upon the reader’s memory of the narrative for the creation of connections between the Cézanne portrait and *Three Lives*. Absence of the desk is a crucial difference. Readers are for a disconcerting moment placed where the camera was: at that desk seeing the paintings through Gertrude Stein’s eyes as she saw them when writing. It is the only time in the *Autobiography* where this happens.

Throughout the narration and when looking at other illustrations the viewpoint is either outside seeing Gertrude from wherever the camera was located, or else regarding her from a simultaneous outside and inside viewpoint as the reader struggles to see her through Alice’s eyes while realizing (or trying to realize and keep remembering) that it is really Gertrude pretending to be Alice and thereby contemplating herself and compelling readers to contemplate her through the eyes of an imagined (but not fictitious) other. The self in this case is presented as an other. It is difficult to maintain full awareness of this complicated narrative technique. Along with the interest and fun derived from it, there is an undercurrent of longing for a simpler situation. But each of the three times that an easier alternative seems proffered, it turns out to be neither so attainable nor so desirable as supposed.

Looking at the photo of the first page of the manuscript before and after reading the text, one sees it as though looking down on it pen in hand. But before reading the *Autobiography* it is hard to imagine what writing it would be like because it is hard to guess what Alice’s life was like. And after reading this surprising book, it is harder still to identify with Gertrude as she sat down to write the opening sentences. Moreover, there is no incentive to do so.

The caption of *Homage to Gertrude, Ceiling painting by Picasso* prevents easy identification with Gertrude’s view of that work. To see it as she saw it, the photograph would have to be taken out of the book and pasted on the ceiling. The narrative increases this difficulty by informing us that the painting was placed on the ceiling above Gertrude’s bed. The picture both invites speculation on whatever took place in the bedroom (life, presumably) and deflects attention from that to art. As Richard Bridgman has remarked, the *Autobiography* is after all a memoir, not confes-

3. Edward Burns, ed., *Gertrude Stein on Picasso* (New York, 1970), p. 37.

sions. It is in any case hard to imagine a reader who would even mentally venture to put him or herself in Gertrude's bed.

The desk, however, is another matter. Everyone inclined to read the *Autobiography* would surely like to fancy themselves (if only for a moment) an important writer, perhaps one taking the "first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature." But even readers without such fantasies are likely to seize their only respite from the complexities of the complicated double-narrative viewpoint created by Gertrude pretending to be Alice. It would be easier, the reader may suppose, to follow someone who is only one person at a time. But taking mental advantage of the opportunity to sit at her desk and view the Cézanne portrait just as Gertrude Stein did is disconcerting.

How that portrait led to *Three Lives* is far from clear even after being told that it did. What other creative work looking at this portrait might lead to is even less clear. Analogies between Cézanne's technique and Stein's may be pursued to the point of a *post facto* explanation not supplied by the text. But even that is hard given the poor quality of the illustration, which doesn't show the painting in clear detail. It is probably safe to guess that no one ever looked at this illustration and felt himself inspired. Every aspect of looking at a photograph of a painting conspires against that outcome. What the reader will most likely experience is either an impulse to work out an abstract theory of relationships between modern painting and prose, or else bafflement at Gertrude Stein's leap from this particular painting to *Three Lives*. From either response it is a relief to return to the text. This illustration of the *Room with Bonheur de Vivre and Cézanne* thus enhances estimation of a narrative technique that may at first have seemed something of a strain.

The more complex situation proves after all more bearable. Better to be outside a genius, or at least viewing her from an outside part of her mind, than inside attempting the impossible—for us—feat of being her and seeing as she saw. In a picture showing the desk and consequently removing viewers to an outside vantage point by encouraging them to imagine not themselves but Gertrude Stein sitting at the desk, deceptive but comforting causal relationships are maintained. Glancing at such a picture establishes a reassuring line between cause and effect: sitting at a desk equipped with pen, pencil or typewriter, and paper is a necessary condition for writing, and the viewer need not stop to remind himself of the difference between necessary and sufficient causes. But there is no obvious causal connection from painting to book. No one ordinarily thinks "I'll sit down at my painting and write."

When that possibility is called to mind, as it is by *Room with Bonheur de Vivre and Cézanne*, it is also vividly brought home that, although such connections may and indeed must on occasion exist, they are far from obvious, hard to recapture, and impossible neatly to explain. This realization, induced by the visual strategy of the illustration's viewpoint,

confirms and experientially duplicates for readers a major theme of the *Autobiography*: the dissociation, especially in the retrospect of living or written memory, of cause from effect. An equally prominent theme is the disappearance and perhaps even nonexistence of causation in the modern world. The narrative dwells throughout on effects, on *what* happened as individuals differently perceive it, but shows the futility of trying to discover causes.

The account of Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* best exemplifies this narrative strategy:

It was only a very short time after this that Picasso began the portrait of Gertrude Stein, now so widely known, but just how that came about is a little vague in everybody's mind. I have heard Picasso and Gertrude Stein talk about it often and they neither of them can remember. They can remember the first time that Picasso dined at the rue de Fleurus and they can remember the first time Gertrude Stein posed for her portrait at rue Ravignan but in between there is a blank. How it came about they do not know. Picasso had never had anybody pose for him since he was sixteen years old, he was then twenty-four and Gertrude Stein had never thought of having her portrait painted, and they do not either of them know how it came about. [P. 55]

Viewed after reading this episode, the portrait becomes emblematic of the disappearance of causation from human awareness. Almost wherever one looks hardest for causes in the *Autobiography* "there is a blank."

The issue is raised again visually by the photograph of Gertrude and Alice in front of Joffre's birthplace (fig. 8). The picture itself functioned effectively as a cause whose effect was money when distributed as a postcard in successful fund-raising campaigns for the American Fund for the French Wounded. Within its context in the *Autobiography* it serves as the only visual image for World War One. As such it is unsatisfactory. But the narration of a visit to a battlefield after the armistice explains why no picture could satisfy visual curiosity about the war: "Soon we came to the battle-fields and the lines of trenches of both sides. To any one who did not see it as it was then it is impossible to imagine it. It was not terrifying it was strange. We were used to ruined houses and even ruined towns but this was different. It was a landscape. And it belonged to no country" (p. 230). By inviting attention to the French marshal's birthplace seen years after his birth, during the war in which he played such a crucial role, the illustration raises without answering the questions of what caused Joffre, what gave birth to the war, what led to the most significant public events of the century.

Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in front of Joffre's birthplace shows Gertrude caught up in the events of public time, and alludes to disparate eras: the war, the nineteenth century of Joffre's youth, and the years intervening. The little girl alludes to an uncertain future. The older



FIG. 8.—Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in front of Joffre's birthplace

figures as well as the historic house allude backwards. So does the barely visible cross on the side of the car. But the picture does not supply any causal links. Statements elsewhere in the book that do link wartime events with their causes are equally off-center and unsatisfactory as explanations. Seeing for the first time camouflaged cannon going through Paris toward the front, Picasso ambiguously exclaims: "C'est nous qui avons fait ça." And the narrator adds: "He was right, he had. From Cézanne through him they had come to that" (p. 110). Commenting on the differences between French, German, and American camouflage, the narrator says: "The colour schemes were different, the designs were different, the way of placing them was different, it made plain the whole theory of art and its inevitability" (p. 231). Wars are coldly described as announcements of change. A recourse from disturbing encounters with the unanswered question *why* is concentration on recollections of *what* happened. But an equally persistent theme of the *Autobiography* is the fragility, perhaps even undesirability, of memory.

Although Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein is placed in *Room with Gas* so that its image in the photograph serves more as an invitation to remember if possible from some other source what the painting looks like than as a depiction of it helpful to anyone who hasn't seen the original or a better reproduction, that illustration is surrounded with anecdotes calling in doubt the value of memory. Turning the page, one is appropriately confronted with the blank verso of *Room with Gas* and a regret on the facing page of text that the earliest state of Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein was not preserved: "It is too bad but in those days no one thought of taking a photograph of the picture as it was then and of course no one of the group that saw it then remembers at all what it looked like any more than do Picasso or Gertrude Stein" (p. 57). In the context of this statement the blank verso may become emblematic of an empty memory. The next paragraph on the same page undercuts absolute reliance on the virtue of precise memory by recounting the story of Andrew Green ("none of them knew how they had met Andrew Green"), who "had a prodigious memory and could recite all of Milton's *Paradise Lost* by heart." He eventually faded out of sight "to live permanently in the South Sea Islands after he finally inherited quite a fortune from his great-uncle who was fond of Milton's *Paradise Lost*" (p. 57). Those like Picasso who matter cannot remember clearly, and those who remember photographically don't matter, even if they have a rich uncle.

Not that all memories are discredited. The *Autobiography* is composed of recollections from distinct periods written down though not always complete and seldom proceeding in a straight line. Yet despite narrative leaps backward and forward within and across the eras marked out by chapter titles, the temporal framework they provide, like the narrative they contain, does finally coincide with the linear progression of calendar time:

- I. Before I Came to Paris
- II. My Arrival in Paris
- III. Gertrude Stein in Paris 1903–1907
- IV. Gertrude Stein Before She Came to Paris
- V. 1907–1914
- VI. The War
- VII. After the War 1919–1932

The fourth chapter is pivotal. “Gertrude Stein Before She Came to Paris” is the last explicit backward reach before the concluding three chapters formally acknowledge via their obediently chronological sequence the individual’s final subordination to historical time. Only one of the first four chapter titles contains a date. All four mention Paris, thus giving space a kind of phenomenological priority over time. No place is mentioned in the titles of the last three chapters, only dates and the war which serves as a public clock marking historical moments. Artistic accommodation to the claims of time is a major argument of the remaining illustrations.

Gertrude Stein in Vienna (fig. 9) plunges the reader backward, as does its immediate narrative context throughout chapter 4. But the caption refers to a place instead of a date, thus emphasizing the privacy and subjective nature of time as initially experienced by individuals. The public encounter of Gertrude Stein in Vienna is spatial: with a city but not yet with historical time, and its calendars marked out by dates and wars. The caption echoes and reinforces the avoidance of dates within the narrative. Thus we typically learn in chapter 4 that “Gertrude Stein was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania” and that “she left it when she was six months old.” But there is no mention of when she was born. Throughout the *Autobiography* there are frequent vague, frustrating references to “this time,” but seldom exact dates apart from those mentioned in chapter heads. The experienced duration of places and the events encountered in them initially matters more than public modes of time.

The skull in *Gertrude Stein at Johns Hopkins Medical School* (fig. 10) serves conventionally as an emblem of time and mortality. Placed staring at, but not directly at, Gertrude Stein, who ignores it in her study of life through the microscope, the skull is a glancing allusion to her inevitable but distant end. Only in this image is the circular structure of the book transcended insofar as the reader’s thoughts are led by ideas of death past the last page and last picture which deflect attention back not to the birth of Gertrude Stein but to the beginning of the *Autobiography*. Even in *Gertrude Stein at Johns Hopkins Medical School*, however, the overwhelming thrust is backward to medical school days, not forward in time beyond the concluding date, 1932. The picture also calls attention to the pivotal function of the fourth chapter because only this illustration is placed opposite the last page of a chapter, thus visually creating the sense of an important ending.



FIG. 9.—Gertrude Stein in Vienna



FIG. 10.—Gertrude Stein at Johns Hopkins Medical School

But this ending, like the book's ending, is also a beginning. The final paragraph tells of the short novel singled out in the *Autobiography* as the start of Gertrude Stein's literary career:

The funny thing about this short novel is that she completely forgot about it for many years. She remembered herself beginning a little later writing the *Three Lives* but this first piece of writing was completely forgotten, she had never mentioned it to me, even when I first knew her. She must have forgotten about it almost immediately. This spring just two days before our leaving for the country she was looking for some manuscript of *The Making of Americans* that she wanted to show Bernard Faÿ and she came across these two carefully written volumes of this completely forgotten first novel. She was very bashful and hesitant about it, did not really want to read it. Louis Bromfield was at the house that evening and she handed him the manuscript and said to him, you read it. [P. 104]

Within this paragraph culminating in an invitation to read a novel, the issues of time, memory, forgetfulness and art converge to create an altered context for the remaining illustrations.

Emphasis is shifted away from Gertrude Stein as apprentice learning to write after her childhood, student days at Harvard and Johns Hopkins, and earliest years in Parisian art circles. Mention of the forgotten novel invites by contrast attention to her later works—especially the one in the reader's hands—that are not forgotten. The last photographs are viewed with heightened awareness of Gertrude Stein as creative literary artist.

The pigeons in the foreground of *Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in front of Saint Mark's, Venice* (fig. 11) are not on grass. They cluster at Gertrude's feet on the pavement. Alice, by this point in the book, becomes an allusion to her *Autobiography*, of which she is a most convenient emblem. Insofar as readers know her only through the book, she is also entirely created by Gertrude Stein. Henceforward, Alice stands for the *Autobiography* and other works of its authoress.

The text facing this illustration is concerned with a visit to Assisi, adventures there, Gertrude's fondness for the place, and her favorite saints: Saint Theresa of Avila, Saint Ignatius Loyola, and Saint Francis. The other saint mentioned in this part of the *Autobiography* is Alice's favorite: Saint Anthony of Padua. He makes a fourth, thereby inviting readers to regard the illustration as a reference to the recently published (*Transition*, June 1929) and soon to be performed (Hartford, Connecticut, February 8, 1934) *Four Saints in Three Acts*. The relevant passage easily comes to mind:



FIG. 11.—Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in front of Saint Mark's, Venice

Pigeons on the grass alas.
 Pigeons on the grass alas.

.
 If they were not pigeons on the grass alas what were they. He had heard of a third and he asked about it it was a magpie in the sky. If a magpie in the sky on the sky can not cry if the pigeon on the grass alas can alas and to pass the pigeon on the grass alas and the magpie in the sky on the sky and to try alas on the grass alas the pigeon on the grass the pigeon on the grass and alas. They might be very well very well very well they might be they might be very well they might be very well very well they might be.⁴

This hermetic passage has not had much critical attention. There is some agreement, however, about the strong contrast of the pigeons on the grass with the magpie in the sky, which is usually taken as emblematic of God or the Holy Ghost. The illustration provides a visual parallel to this contrast by including in the upper-right background a seated figure whose clearest feature is its haloed head. However incongruously, the seated figure in the cathedral mural forms “a third . . . in the sky” complimenting the other seated figures, Alice and Gertrude, as well as contrasting with the pigeons.

But if the parallel works visually, it hardly succeeds morally. Nor does the implicit visual metamorphosis that transforms Saint Francis preaching to the birds into Gertrude Stein either addressing or feeding the pigeons. Her outstretched left hand is in an ambiguous posture, appropriate either to scattering food or reinforcing a verbal point with a conventional though restrained orator’s gesture. Her mouth is slightly open in a way that suggests but doesn’t necessarily imply speech, while Alice’s mouth is unambiguously closed in a way that suggests disapproval. Even the possibility of this unwholesome transformation of Saint Francis into an unlikely twentieth-century analogue may seem as disagreeable as a comparison of the seated figure in the mural with Stein’s dubious magpie in the sky. It is the next illustration, however, which less ambiguously encourages just such parallels while further displaying their moral emptiness.

Homage à Gertrude, Ceiling painting by Picasso (fig. 12) is a marvellously funny but nevertheless morally diminished echo of works like the Sistine Chapel ceiling decorations honoring the creative powers of God. Here the angels sound their music above a sterile bed. In a traditional metaphor, the artist honored by the painting is compared to the Creator of the Universe. But in this illustration there is no ennoblement, only awareness of comic disparity. The conceit is too metaphysical to succeed except as satire. The opposites are yoked too violently together. Perhaps the *Autobiography* is after all best regarded as a twentieth-century analogue of traditional confessions. Bridgman is right to point at con-

4. Carl Van Vechten, ed., *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (New York, 1972), pp. 604–5.



FIG. 12.—Homage à Gertrude, Ceiling painting by Picasso

cealments and decorums by way of stressing Gertrude Stein's distance from Saint Augustine or even Rousseau.⁵ Nothing significant is said about Leo Stein. Nor is the relationship with Alice overtly discussed. Sins are not paraded although they are certainly revealed. But the very absence of the concept of sinfulness serves at a deeper level than accounts of sins would do to reveal the moral emptiness of a soul that is not so much displayed as denied.

Only the visual rhetoric encourages such judgments. Nothing in the text does. Its categories of praise and blame are largely aesthetic (Green was "very dull") or political, not moral. Those like Bertrand Russell who did not take for granted the rightness of serving with the English and French against Germany during World War One are viewed as culpable. No one else is. Political deviance and aesthetic ineptitude are the major categories of improper conduct.

But in the frontispiece (fig. 2) a crucifix is barely visible in the shadows at the upper-right of the photographed room, well away from both Gertrude and Alice. The picture of them in front of Joffre's birthplace (fig. 8) more prominently displays on the side of their car a red cross. Its association with the two figures—Gertrude is furthest from it—calls attention to their charitable work helping soldiers during the war. And the concept of *caritas* is thus distantly but properly evoked as the proper moral measure of their wartime conduct. Both the crucifix and the cross serve to amplify and extend the more ambiguous allusion to religious values implicit in *Homage to Gertrude*.

As if in anticipation of the postwar confusion described by the last chapter, "*A Transatlantic, painting by Juan Gris*" (fig. 13) suddenly intrudes in the chapter on "The War" to create problems for readers. It isn't related to the pictures that have gone before or to the immediately surrounding text. Juan Gris isn't discussed until the next chapter. The painting is printed standing on its side so the book must be turned for proper viewing. The black borders are confusing because they don't in any obvious way form part of the ship. The perspective distorts the shipboard scene. Smoke pouring from the funnels indicates movement but gives no clue to which direction the ship may actually be heading. It is either coming or going, depending on which side the Atlantic is taken as the starting point. Only an outside portion of the ship is visible, with closed doors whose upper panels seem almost like mechanical eyes gazing out while preventing us from looking within. Most conspicuously, the distorted decks are empty.

The title is an invitation to consider the picture as an apt emblem of that other transatlantic, Gertrude Stein. This interpretation of the painting's emblematic function is encouraged by her theory of verbal and visual portraiture:

5. Bridgman, p. 227.

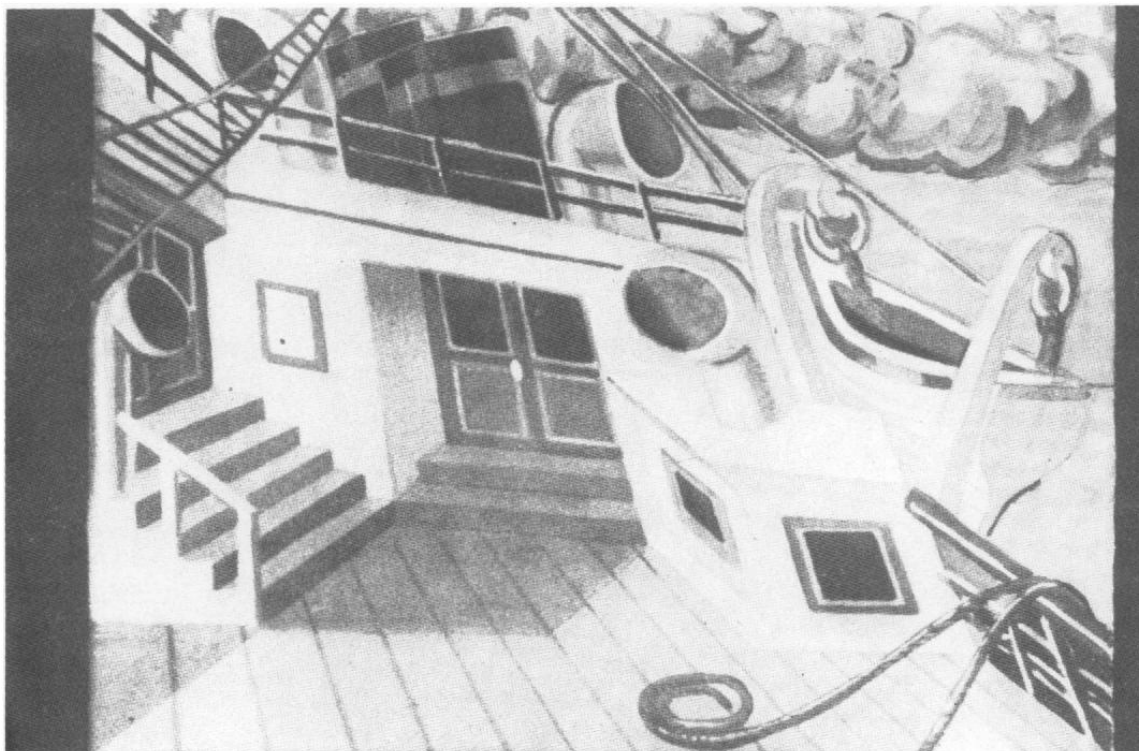


FIG. 13.—A Transatlantic, painting by Juan Gris

She always was, she always is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal. One of the things that always worries her about painting is the difficulty that the artist feels and which sends him to painting still lifes, that after all the human being essentially is not paintable. [P. 146]

The essence, the inmost self (if any) cannot be rendered. Gertrude Stein's first verbal portraits represented a change from interest in what went on inside people to a "desire to express the rhythm of the visible world" (p. 145). *Tender Buttons* is described as "the beginning . . . of mixing the outside with the inside. Hitherto she had been concerned with seriousness and the inside of things, in these studies she began to describe the inside as seen from the outside" (p. 192). This serves as one rationale for the narrative viewpoint chosen for the *Autobiography*. The remarks may also suggest that an appropriate visual correlative for Gertrude may be something like the empty exterior spaces of a painted ship.

Explanations surrounding *Bilignin from across the valley, painting by Francis Rose* (fig. 14) make it reinforce the argument for outside views: "One day we saw the house of our dreams across a valley . . . we took the house still only having seen it from across the valley and we have liked it always more" (pp. 281–82). Their satisfaction further confirms the exterior viewpoint as most valid. But instead of a photograph to depict Bilignin (and their dreams), the *Autobiography* supplies a painting of a house seen from the distant vantage point where the inner reality of their dreams was correctly perceived by Gertrude and Alice to coincide with the outer world. Thus by its narrative context the painting is transformed into an emblem of the proper way to view reality: from the outside, organized as a work of art.

Bernard Faÿ and Gertrude Stein at Bilignin (fig. 15) veers away from the main argument in what is at first a puzzling fashion. Readers are likely to wonder why a photograph and keep trying to remember who Bernard Faÿ was. But in its context of the preceding painting of Bilignin, the succeeding picture of *Alice B. Toklas, painting by Francis Rose* (fig. 16), and the concluding photograph of the manuscript page, even the photograph of Gertrude Stein and Bernard Faÿ confirms the major transformations described in the final chapter, "After the War—1919–1932." It was a time of restlessness epitomized by a comment on those people who came and went while Gertrude Stein was posing for her statue by Jo Davidson:

I cannot remember who came in and out, whether they were real or whether they were sculptured but there were a great many. [P. 251]

The final pictures blend real and sculptured, photograph and painting, to render this episode symbolic just as it, in turn, calls attention to the

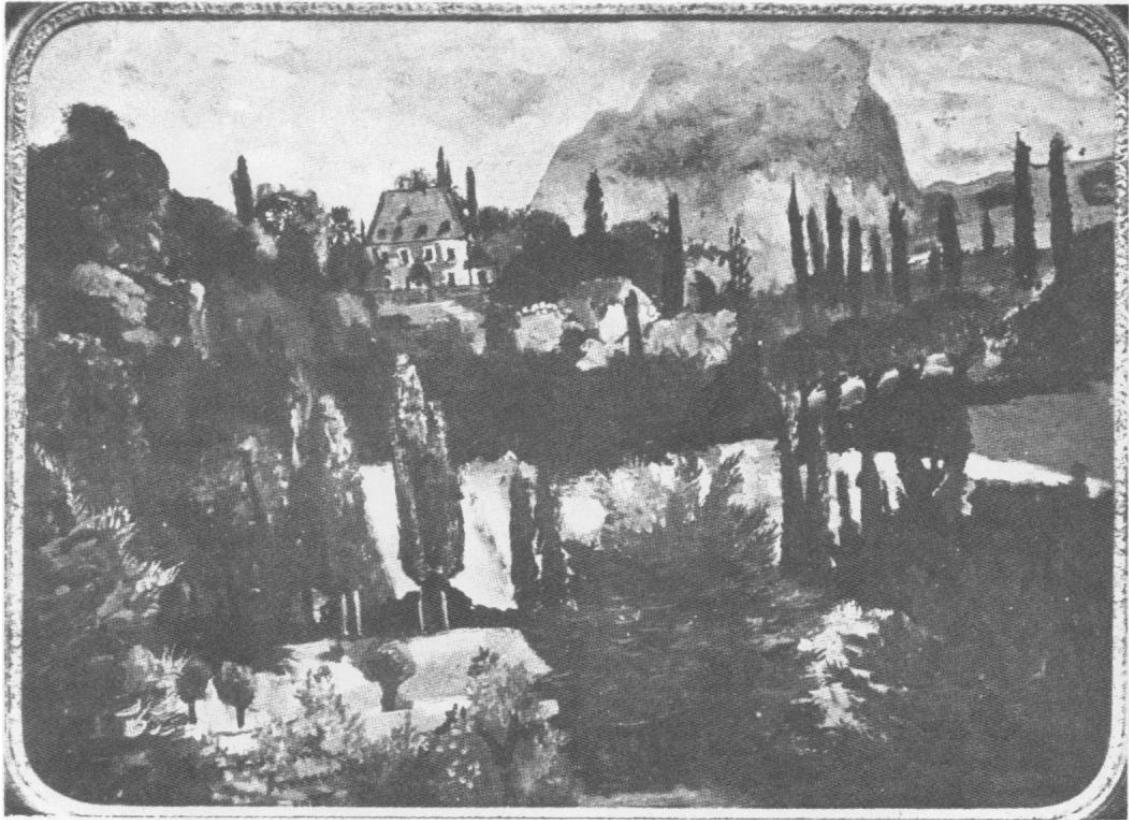


FIG. 14.—Bilignin from across the valley, painting by Francis Rose



FIG. 15.—Bernard Faÿ and Gertrude Stein at Bilignin



FIG. 16.—Alice B. Toklas, painting by Francis Rose

main thrust of all the illustrations: a gradual turn away from photographic to other modes of representation. The progression mirrors a final transformation, within the *Autobiography*, of both Gertrude and Alice into works of art. Whether they were real or whether they were sculptured becomes harder to tell and matters less and less.

In the June 1929 issue of *Transition* where *Four Saints in Three Acts* was first published, there also appeared discussions of the "Revolution of the Word" and a "Proclamation" with twelve articles printed in capitals. Numbers 4 and 10 could sum up much of what is accomplished in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: "4. NARRATIVE IS NOT MERE ANECDOTE, BUT THE PROJECTION OF A METAMORPHOSIS OF REALITY. . . . 10. TIME IS A TYRANNY TO BE ABOLISHED."⁶ A later editorial describes the magazine's "basic aim of opposing to the then prevailing photographic naturalism a more imaginative concept of prose and poetry" by encouraging "a new style . . . postulating the metamorphosis of reality."⁷ This could serve equally as a rationale for the *Autobiography* or the shorter works that Gertrude Stein published in *Transition*. Other articles of the proclamation, however, stress goals that were not shared by her. Of these, the most significant is an affirmation that every author "HAS THE RIGHT TO USE WORDS OF HIS OWN FASHIONING AND TO DISREGARD EXISTING GRAMMATICAL AND SYNTACTICAL LAWS." This part of the verbal revolution was mainly carried forward by successive installments of *Finnegans Wake* but repudiated in the *Autobiography*: "The english language was her medium and with the english language the task was to be achieved, the problem solved. The use of fabricated words offended her, it was an escape into imitative emotionalism" (p. 146). Perhaps this public break with an important part of *Transition's* theoretical program obscured her conformity to the other parts and was as provoking as the factual inaccuracies that were complained about in its *Testimony against Gertrude Stein*.⁸

It is in any case ironic that the *Autobiography* ever since has been mainly charged by its enemies with the fault of doing one of the things *Transition* was founded to encourage. Matisse puts the accusation most forcefully: "Her book is composed, like a picture puzzle, of different pieces of different pictures which at first, by their very chaos, give an illusion of the movement of life. But if we attempt to envisage the things she mentions this illusion does not last. In short, it is more like a harlequin's costume the different pieces of which, having been more or less invented by herself, have been sewn together without taste and without relation to reality."⁹ Exactly. But this is the *Autobiography's*

6. "Proclamation," *Transition* 16-17 (June 1929): 13.

7. "Frontierless Decade," *Transition* 27 (April-May 1938): 7.

8. Henri Matisse, Tristan Tzara, Maria Jolas, Georges Braque, Eugene Jolas, André Salmon, *Testimony against Gertrude Stein*, *Transition* Pamphlet no. 1, suppl. to *Transition*, vol. 23 (July 1935).

9. *Ibid.*, p.18.

strength, not its flaw. There is no mere anecdote, no merely photographic naturalism. Surface reality is transformed, not transcribed. The harlequin's costume is amusingly put on for its traditional purposes. And the book is indeed composed of different pieces of different pictures which finally do prevent us from trying only to imagine what the models really looked like or said, and which force us to concentrate instead on those truths communicated by the images before us. To this nonmimetic effect the illustrations are as crucial as the verbal "pictures" described by Matisse's perspective metaphor. The effect would be similar if there were only words. But Gertrude Stein's decision to illustrate the *Autobiography* was also a recognition that its distinctive virtues could be enhanced by integrating visual and verbal to reinforce each other. The value of such interweaving of different media is nicely summed up by the portrait of Alice (fig. 16). The entire book which provides that illustration's context has turned her into as much as a symbol for Gertrude, pretending to be her, as for herself, and the merged selves are both alluded to by the photograph of Rose's painting. The painting is also as emblematic of the book which Gertrude has created as of the "real" subject, who has been doubly transformed into a work of art. Here surely is the projection of a metamorphosis of reality. And this transition from person to painting to a book serving as the permanent embodiment of Gertrude in turn symbolizes both what history had by 1933 done to Gertrude Stein and what she had done to abolish the tyranny of time. "Once out of nature I shall never take my bodily form from any natural thing." The *Autobiography's* visual rhetoric confirms the transformation of Gertrude Stein's unsatisfactory life into eminently satisfactory art.

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