

GERTRUDE STEIN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POSES: FROM IDENTITY TO ENTITY

SORINA CHIPER

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași

Abstract:

The dominant pattern in the Western hermeneutics has been to view autobiography as an occasion for the celebration of the individual. This article tackles the dialectics between identity and entity, between self and other, and between genius and “everybody” in two of Gertrude Stein’s autobiographies: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody’s Autobiography*. Drawing on associations between autobiography and photography, I highlight the performativity of Stein’s autobiographical self, suggest posing as a metaphor for the autobiographical act, and discuss Gertrude Stein’s move from the question of identity to the question of genius as entity.

Keywords: *Gertrude Stein, posing, identity, entity, genius*

1. Introduction: Autobiographical Selves

Some of the key figures who have focused their academic careers on scrutinizing autobiographies have built their arguments around definitions of autobiography that highlighted the centrality of the self. Autobiography has been conceptualized, for instance, as a “metaphor of self” (James Olney), the “invention of the self” (Jerome Bruner), the “art of self-invention” (Paul John Eakin), a form of “self-writing” (Avrom Fleishman) or “self-portraiture” (Francoise Lionnet). The corpus of male autobiographies on which the “law of genre” was established was viewed as naturally yielding “an uncanny sense that each one of us constitutes one irreplaceable human form” and as inviting “the cultivation of our individuality, our ineffable self” (Weintraub, xiii). Autobiography has been viewed as the medium that expresses and represents the

“self,” in its ontologically “vital impulse to order” (Olney, 3) which grants its “special unity and identity across time” (Gusdorf, 35).

The high-currency notion of the self is, however, highly problematic in light of current understandings of the term. In its Cartesian roots, the self is a universal and essential notion that transcends the body (a mere container for the soul) and its personal history. The essential self that emerged from Romantic autobiographies and which undergirds the main vein of autobiographical theories (Lejeune, Gusdorf, Olney) is defined by aggressive individualism in personal desires and impulses, and liberalism in philosophical perspective (Smith, 8). These features were nurtured by a number of different ideological and cultural factors: the ideals of the French revolution; John Locke’s and Jean Jacques Rousseau’s philosophical systems and their postulation of the experience of the senses as the locus of knowledge; the Romantic obsession with subjectivity and the genius; the shift in economics and politics from aristocracy to bourgeoisie, and Darwin’s theory of progress and evolution.

At another level, universal selfhood encapsulates the notion that the self is both pre-linguistic and extra-linguistic and the idea that language is a transparent medium for the translation/expression of the self which, in the case of autobiographical writing, stood as the stable, unitary referent outside the text. Yet, the epistemological crisis that questioned and undermined the possibility of universal truth, universal meaning and exhaustive knowledge shattered the ideology that constructed the subject as self-contained, bounded and self-sufficient. From universal subject to the subject of ideology, from subject positions to subjectivity, the vocabulary and the conceptual tool kit used to describe and analyze the range of personal experience that lies beneath the entity now most often referred to as “self” have changed to reflect new understandings.

A critical signpost in the modern trajectory of the self and of its partially overlapping synonyms was Freud’s contestation that there is one unified, stable and rational ego. His division of the life of the psyche between the id, the ego and the superego posited the ego as the battleground of conflicting drives: the unconscious pull towards pleasure and death, and the internalized demands of society’s moral principles, stored in the super-ego. Freud explored and explained the workings of the unconscious. However, he did not explain the formation of the ego and how one acquires consciousness of oneself. The task was taken by Lacan who argued for a primordial misrecognition and mistaken identification with an imaginary other. In their early development, children become aware of their self by identifying with an ideal projection in the mirror; thus, the mirror stage combines self-discovery and self-alienation, and posits a gap between the subject and himself or herself (MS, 4, quoted in Merrill, 13). This gap, together with screen memories, pre-empt the possibility of the self’s direct access to his or her self, the possibility of transparency and of being aware of one’s reasons for actions, emotional responses and feelings.

If Freud and his followers de-mystified the unity and knowledgeable self-awareness of the self, poststructuralist theorists grounded the self in language as subject **to** discourse rather than **of** discourse. With specific reference to autobiography, Paul de Mann, in "Autobiography as Defacement" questioned the genre's mimetic potential (in the way in which a photo is a mimesis of the model). Autobiography as prosopopeia – the trope of the voice from beyond the grave – emphasizes the self's constructedness in language and through language. With Foucault, the waning agency of the subject was emphasized even more in the face of the agency of discourse.

Thus, in its current conceptualizations, the "self" is no longer believed to exist as an essence prior to its in-textualization. Nor are autobiographical acts self-expressive of an ontologically whole, pure and immanently true interiority. In addition, whereas the essential, pre-narrated self was supposed to have free-access to its own archival memory, more recently, the relationship between memory and identity has been re-conceptualized to suggest that amnesia, rather than memory, is the catalyst of identity.

Recent research in social and cognitive psychology, social cognition, personality psychology and clinical psychology has pointed out that knowledge about the self is inevitably linked to knowledge about one's "significant others." In an article from 2002, Susan M. Anderson and Serena Chen argued that "the self is relational – or even entangled – with significant others and that this has implications for self-definition, self-evaluation, self-regulation, and, most broadly, for personality functioning, expressed in relation to others" (Anderson, Chen, 619).

In being social and relational, the self is also inherently performative. Complementing Austin's notion of the performative as speech acts that create the reality that they state, Erving Goffman argued that in situations of contact (i.e. when persons are engaged in face-to-face interaction), the self embraces and performs the social roles that are appropriate to the context of communication, i.e. the situated role (Goffman, 40). For Goffman, the performance of the self in everyday situations is a matter of playing roles and observing social rules that regulate conversational situations, especially in the public sphere. Implicit in Goffman's argument is that underneath the social mask that one has to wear in order to perform effectively in public, there lies the authentic, uncluttered, private self. This notion itself has been deconstructed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Writing "from the ruins of the Logos" (Butler, ix), Butler emphasises gender as a normative constraint imposed on the body from the moment of birth. The utterance "it's a boy" or "it's a girl" functions as Austin's explicit performatives: in naming the new-born child a boy or a girl, one determines the gender role that he or she will be socially ascribed and which will determine his or her personal experience as a subject (Butler, 237). Gendered bodies, therefore, are constructed in parallel with the construction of subjectivity

through the re-enactment of obligatory norms and not as a consciously chosen after-effect. In Butler's understanding, the naturalized performance of gender relies on the existence of an active cultural memory that enables the performance to be recognized as such, as the reiteration of previous socially sanctioned gestures, behaviors and acts.

Yet there is another way in which bodies perform, and which connects the performance of the self and memory in a different way: posing for a painted or photographic portrait. The presentation of the self in autobiography can be figured as a prolonged posing of the self, for the writing self and through him/her/it, for the readers. The figuration of autobiography as posing reveals several sites of contact and similarity between autobiography and the art of making (self) portraits. What is at stake in both portrait photography and autobiography is the representation of a person's identity, experience, typological belonging or uniqueness, as well as the attempt to defeat time, to fix images, events and characters in memory, and to acquire immortality.

It is no surprise, then, that autobiographies frequently include photographic portraits, not only due to their common *telos*, but also because photography as a document of the real has been rallied to support the truth value, in referentiality, of the facts described in autobiography. For Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, posing is a form of self-mimesis, a distancing performance of the self that displaces it from its interiority. In a phenomenological interpretation, this reposition of the self can be construed as intentionality, as *being towards* the image. The projection of the self in phenomenological intentionality escapes the self's intention: irrespective of the posing, the artistic representation fails to replicate the self presumed to exist prior to and behind the performative posture. It can only capture an image that lies outside of the control of the posing subject. This image is determined by the mechanics of the camera, the compositional rules that the artist observes, the distorting effects of the medium, the artist's craft, and ultimately, the interpretative lenses that the viewing audience brings to the representation. Posing, thus, implies an embattled site and a stage where the conscious self becomes aware of the uncontrollable forces that circumscribe it: social and artistic conventions that objectify subjectivity, make it available for public circulation and consumption and expose the self's vulnerability.

In Paul Jay's reading of Barthes, posing encapsulates an "existential drama of nearly operatic proportions" whose conscious and unconscious acts mingle in a "struggle for control and authenticity, a struggle between intentionality and convention, the essential and the objectified" whose ultimate goal is self-creation (Jay, 194). The performance of the self in the process of self-creation follows protocols and rituals that eventually, "appropriate that self for [their] own needs" (Jay, 194). The result is a multiply dispersed self, split between "the one I think I am, the one I want others to think

I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art” (Barthes, 13). What is more, through objectification, this split self that is haunted by the specter of inauthenticity experiences death in miniature. With this ontological twist, the Spectrum reveals its polysemantic ambiguity, as indexing the spectacle of the self in posing, the foretaste of death in objectification, as well as the possibility of the return from the death, as specter.

Photography is a certificate of presence (Barthes, 87); it suggests absence yet it reaffirms existence over non-existence and presence through memory. What is more, according to Barthes, from a phenomenological point of view, photography’s power to authenticate takes precedence over its power to represent (Barthes, 89). It is precisely this power of authentication that makes it valuable in autobiography, as an antidote against accusations that writing autobiographically is a way of “telling lies.” The following sections will investigate Stein’s autobiographical poses and her move from identity to entity.

2. Gertrude Stein’s Poses and Identity

The first section in *Everybody’s Autobiography* functions as an untitled preface and it makes several references to photographers, to being photographed and to how photographs contribute to publicity. Stein mentions her meeting with someone at Carl Van Vechten’s place;¹ the prospect of being photographed with sculptor David Edstrom; Mary Pickford’s idea to be photographed together and then her sudden change of mind; and her portrait photograph reproduced on the cover of *Portraits and Prayers*, which had just come out in New York.²

¹ Carl Van Vechten initially met Gertrude Stein in Paris in 1913 and they became life-long friends. At the time, Van Vechten was a writer of essays on music and literature but in the 1930’s he started making portrait photographs of celebrities. The list of celebrities who posed for him includes, among others, James Baldwin, Marlon Brandon, Truman Capote, Marc Chagall, Salvador Dali, Ella Fitzgerald, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Frida Kahlo, Norman Mailer, W. Somerset Maugham, Henry Miller, Georgia O’Keeffe, Sir Laurence Olivier, Diego Rivera, Alfred Stieglitz, Gore Vidal, and Orson Wells. His photos of Stein were published on the frontispiece or cover of her books. On account of their close friendship and mutual trust, Stein appointed Van Vechten as her literary executor, in which position he helped to bring into print Stein’s unpublished writings.

² At the time, photography was establishing itself as a medium for publicity. Implicit in one’s desire to be represented in pictures was his or her will to celebrity. Photography – once circulated through the media – could either boost or damage a celebrity figure’s relation with the public. Wondering why Mary Pickford changed her mind about being photographed together with Gertrude Stein, the latter found out a hypothetical reason that confirms this view. Stein was told that probably Pickford

Judging by the number of photographs reproduced in the *editio princeps* of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody's Autobiography*, one could rightfully conclude that both works are governed by the need for authorization and certification of presence. This is true on a superficial level of reading. An analysis of the visual content of the photos reveals that they do more than serve a documentary function.³

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the photo reproduced on the frontispiece shows Alice standing in the door-frame, one hand on the door handle, with the light behind her. Gertrude Stein is fore-grounded, writing at her desk among artifacts that denote status and high art, and she is partly obscured by a shadow. In this visual way, by contrast with subsequent editions whose frontispiece was different, the *editio princeps* constructs the autobiography for the reader as an autobiography of two: of Alice B. Toklas as Stein's companion, assistant, and witness, and of Stein as the creator of the work which, at least in its paratextual clues, gives voice to Alice in order to, eventually, represent and celebrate herself as a modernist genius. The last illustration – a photo of the first hand-written page of the manuscript – points back to the first one and thus highlights, at visual level, the main focus of the autobiography: Gertrude – the writer, and not Alice – her companion and “significant other.”

Stein's resort to a “borderline case” of autobiography, i.e. writing in the third person, has been judged by certain critics as a narrative trick that served her self-aggrandizing needs and allowed her to build a monument of herself allegedly through the testimony of her partner and editor (Lejeune, 27). Philippe Lejeune considered *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* the canonical example of the use of a fictive witness in autobiographies in the third person. This narrative strategy was credited by Lejeune with providing “a humorous way of singing your own praises without anyone being able to accuse you of obvious pride.” In addition, he considered it “a cunning form of self-hagiography which neutralizes or forestalls criticism” (Lejeune, 43).

More recent readings of the text have deconstructed the accusations of narrative dishonesty and have focused on the ways in which Stein subverts the conventions of the genre so as to dramatize her conceptions of the self. In unpacking the “complexity of its simplicity” (Merrill, 11), Cynthia Merrill argues that at the heart of the game of authorial confusion that *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* initiates lies a problem of high currency in Stein's work, namely the problem of autobiographical identity which is seen

thought that it would be more beneficial to Stein's success with the public to be photographed with Pickford, than for Pickford to be photographed with Stein.

³ Paul K. Alkon's article “Visual Rhetoric in the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*” provides a comprehensive analysis of the sixteen illustrations reproduced in this volume.

dialectically, at the nexus between the outside and the inside, the self and the other.

In psychoanalytical terms, Stein's understanding of identity invokes Lacan's genesis of the subject, via sight, in what he labeled "the mirror stage." In early infancy, a child becomes aware of her reflection in the mirror as a united representation of a united self that is her self. Identity, therefore, is a mediated rather than an immediate apprehension. For the child, the visual representation in the mirror is an ideal of perfection towards which she strives; at the same time, this representation allows her to conceive of herself as a unitary self. Thus, in Lacan's theory, identity is grounded in an ironic relationship between "self" and "other:" the self sees itself as other; just as in the myth of Narcissus, the image in the mirror is an idealized representation of perfection; the self aspires towards that idealized other and internalizes it. In Lacan's view, the self-other duality is paralleled by the child's dual temporal projections: the unitary image in the mirror leads the child to experience, in retrospect, her fragmented, disjoint and chaotic past and to anticipate a wished-for future. In this respect, an individual's birth into time as a self-aware human being is at the same time her birth into fiction. Pure subjectivity, felt at the level of personal, phenomenological experience, remains incompatible with the apparent wholeness and perfection of the image in the mirror. The mirror stage as a climactic moment of self discovery instills in the child the illusion of a perfect unity of the self this is deferred *ad infinitum*. In order to become a self, one must first be an "other," a reflection.

The self-other dialectics lends itself to confusions and to the situation of interchangeable selves. There are various occasions in *The Autobiography...* where Alice – Stein's double in the public life – is mistaken for Stein, especially when Alice had to deal with authorities on Gertrude's behalf. On such an occasion, during the war, a French major was outraged when he invited Alice – whom he had addressed as Mademoiselle Stein – to have dinner with his family and found out that he had been mistaken about her identity. If the authorities were duped, the readers, too, are led to believe, for the most part of *The Autobiography...*, that they are reading Alice's words and story and not Stein's. This possibility of interchangeability takes away the burden of immanence inherent in monadic understandings of selfhood and identity. If selves are interchangeable, this is so because they are in a state of flux, fluid and malleable, available for more or less ludic poses and transformations.⁴ In this respect,

⁴ Picasso is one such master of poses. In a brief party-scene that starts with the suggestion of the performativity of identity, Picasso approaches Alice B. Toklas to ask whether she thinks he resembles President Lincoln. In explaining the question, he links photography to performance of sameness and of American identity: "Gertrude showed me a photograph of him and I have been trying to arrange my hair to look like his, I think my forehead does" (Stein 2001:16). This explanation is followed by silence. In the

Stein's view of identity comes preposterously close to postmodernist conceptualizations of it.⁵

A challenging proposition that *What Are Masterpieces ...* puts forth is that identity is not an individually owned and mastered possession but a "thing" put on display: "... identity is not what any one can have as a thing to be but as a thing to see" (Stein 1970, 94).⁶ The centrality that Stein assigned to sight in the performative display of the self for the purpose of inter-relational recognition, self-assertion and self-formation is best exemplified by her countless poses for painters and photographers which are recorded in both autobiographies under discussion. The most significant and extended posing series was done for Picasso. After Stein's tens of sittings and Picasso's extensive work at the easel, he decided to erase the face in his portrait. He came back to it after a prolonged lapse of time and painted it directly, without looking at Stein for likeness or mimetic cues. He paints her "from his head" – translating onto canvas the idea of Stein that he had in his mind.

Quite significantly, even though the resulting portrait seems to defy mimesis, what it does, in fact, is to reverse the temporality and directionality involved in classical mimesis: the referent precedes the representation, and the representation resembles the referent. Picasso assured Stein that she would resemble the portrait, that she would become the majestic figure that he had portrayed. Stein's dramatic change in hair style did not interfere with the effect of pictorial representation: "everybody says that she does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will" (Stein 2001, 16). Thus, for Picasso, artistic representation was not mimetic, but prophetic.

narrator's mind, Picasso's impersonation of the American President is not a convincing performance; yet, it apparently leads Alice to realize, by contrast, how American Stein was.

⁵ I use the term "preposterous" in Mieke Bal's idiosyncratic acceptance as one way of doing cultural history that interprets the past (*pre* – what came before) as an after-effect (*post*) of what occurred later. In this juxtaposition of past and present, a "preposterous" approach suggests a way of dealing with "the past today" that tolerates "productive uncertainties" and breeds new revisionings of the past (Bal 1999 I: 6-7).

⁶ At this point, Stein's view of identity is reminiscent of Henry Adams' position on the "Ego" and how it is fashioned by education. The "ego" is, for Adams, the pre-socialized self that one is born with and that acts as a fix and stable support on which "the toilet of education" is draped. The metaphor of education as "garment" implies a performative display whose effect can be to highlight the fitness or ill-fitness of "clothes" on the "natural" self (à la Rousseau). In addition, it points out that what we now conceptualize as identity is essentially visual. Yet, as Paul Jay notices, whereas Adams belongs to a tradition initiated by Carlyle and that view the individual as "a patchwork of selves both past and present, literal and figurative" (Jay 1984: 156), Stein presented the self as unitary.

3. Autobiography in the prophetic mode: Stein as a genius

Similar to Picasso's portrait, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is written in a prophetic mode; it depicts Stein not necessarily as she was – in the eyes of the public – but as the autobiography itself made her be: a “genius” (in Stein's intention), or rather a celebrity (in the direct outcome of publishing the autobiography). Stein's self-proclamation as a genius has stirred suspicion. If genius is understood in its Romantic acceptation formulated by German philosophers and poets,⁷ to call oneself a genius may be rightfully considered an act of vanity. Yet Stein did not take over the raw notion of genius; in her lexicon, “genius” is a concept of meandering itineraries.⁸ It refers to the “vitaly singular” individual who, by connecting with transcendence through his or her pure self that exists beyond time and beyond contingent relations, is capable of producing masterpieces (Will, 8). At the same time, genius is an open, inter-relational mode of being that could be shared among everybody; genius sets Stein apart from her audience and legitimates her cryptic aesthetics, but it is also the key term that characterizes the relationship between an author and her audience in the co-creation of modernist compositions.

Typically, genius has been conceptualized as male. Barbara Will's book *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem of Genius* demonstrates how *Sex and Character* (1903) influenced Stein in her formative years, while she was working on *The Making of the Americans*. *Sex and Character* is a notorious book by the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger that Stein discovered in 1907-1908. Central arguments that Weininger formulated and that Stein embraced were that “‘the Jew’ and ‘the woman’ were the negation of the ideal and universal type of genius” (Will, 37).

⁷ Hegel, Friedrich Schlegel, Schopenhauer and Novalis are just a few of the German authors who pondered over the notion of genius and highlighted various aspects of it. Hegel saw it as a human ability “for the true production of a work of art”, that is actualized in the individuals who attain a high level of self-consciousness. Schlegel argued that genius is he who “carries his centre within himself” while Schopenhauer insisted on the commonality of genius among all men, as evidenced by their capacity to produce works of art and to enjoy them. Novalis, on the other hand, put a premium on the genius' transcendence of environmental matter and the materiality of the body. The freedom of the Romantic genius – defined as freedom from the immediate, hostile surroundings and freedom to create – translated, in modernism, as the artist's independence and detachment from the march of progress that was noisily advancing at the time. The label of genius was embraced defensively, as the artists' exclusionary self-definition in relationship to the masses that were becoming literate and were threatening to “invade” the empire of Letters (Will 2000: 2-7).

⁸ It is worth mentioning that Stein was not the only modernist who recontextualized the notion of “genius”. It was reused and imbued with new meanings in literature as well as in the other arts.

Weininger elaborated on the typology of the genius as well as on the connection between sex and character (understood as “whole being”) (Will, 62). He considered that all humans occupy various positions within a spectrum of sexual types, depending on the distribution of “sex cells” in their bodies. The end points of the spectrum are ideal Man and ideal Woman, where the former connotes truth, beauty and ethics, while the latter is associated with low moral standards and deceit. The worst possible type, in his view, was the Jewish woman – a person of (arguably) doubtful morality and who had limited, if any, capacity for transcendence.

Despite its current unacceptable anti-Semitism and misogyny, at the time when it came out, the book had the merit of supporting the progressive idea that character can be disentangled from the contingencies of race and sex. Masculinity and Femininity were considered the ends of a continuum of various sexually intermediate combinations that exist in humans. Therefore, irrespective of their apparent sex, individuals can choose to perform, at will, their allegiance to either masculinity or femininity and thus, through acts of performative repetitions, they can appropriate that gender as their own. Similarly, individuals can drop their racial belonging and take on a racial belonging of their own choice.⁹

In her notes for *The Making of the Americans* Stein argued that Jews have “good minds but not great minds” (NB, A-3, quoted in Will, 37). In time, her identity project became one of shedding ties to both gender and race¹⁰ and of asserting her “bottom nature” – the universality of her own type as a genius (Will, 7). The vehicles for the performance of her new and self-fashioned identity were multiple: her writings, her performances of the self in public life in “masculine” roles as a driver and public lecturer, her gait and personal appearance.¹¹

The “strongest possible personality,” for Weininger – is the genius. Like Nietzsche’s über-mensch, the genius is a “great discerner of men;” he “has all men within him,” unites and synthesizes all types within his person. He is the exceptional being – the refined, concentrated and pure expression of masculinity that exists, ultimately, as capacity and a universal process of becoming that is available to anyone.¹² The possibility of becoming a genius through an act of

⁹ Otto Weininger was writing to legitimize his own position and fluid identity. Jewish by birth and homosexual by sexual orientation, he constructed liberating philosophical arguments to justify his queerness and his conversion to Christianity.

¹⁰ In the case of Jews, ethnicity had been racialized.

¹¹ In Alice B. Toklas’ voice, Stein records several occasions when her posture and gait made common people whom she met in her travels or regular walks liken her to a male religious figure or to a general.

¹² In Weininger’s words, “Genius is the highest morality, and, therefore, it is everybody’s duty. Genius is to be attained by a supreme act of the will, in which the

will appealed to Stein, who discovered in Weininger the terms to describe and inscribe her own "type." At the same time, genius as a type allowed her to move beyond typologies (which were her main concern in *The Making of the Americans*) and socially performed identities. For Weininger as well as for Stein, genius is inherently dialectical. Whereas type represents a frozen construct of the subject in the social laboratory, genius un-freezes scientific conceptions "by approaching the world as an entity in process, infinitely variable, irregular and enlightening, always repeating itself in contradictory ways" (Will, 66). Genius negates the continuity of memory, selfhood and language. While revealing the "unsubstantiated" and the "unhypostatized," it can be embodied and typified even though it simultaneously resists typification.

The dialectical understanding of the "highest type" that Stein found in Weininger's works prompted her idiosyncratic definition of genius as "one who is at the same time talking and listening" (Stein 1975, 170). Genius projects and performs an identity, and in parallel, it deconstructs it and falls back on entity as a mode of existence. In light of this dialectical understanding of genius, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* can be read as the staged performance of Stein's identity *qua* genius and the assertion, by proxy, of her belonging to a rare and (re)strict(ed) typology. *Everybody's Autobiography*, on the other hand, is written from Stein's posture of entity and it asserts the possibility that anyone can inhabit this site of doing and undoing, of talking and listening, which is the *praxis* of genius.

At the heart of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* lies the dialectics of identity: the self *and* the other, the self *as* other. Alice B. Toklas was *the* significant other in Stein's life: she acted as her intermediary, created and maintained her public identity, provided her with an audience, contributed to her recognition and notoriety, typed, edited and proof-read her work, and was her life-long companion and lover. By deciding to move in with Stein, Alice began a "new full life" (Stein 2001, 9); by writing *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude became a celebrity. In depicting this relationship of complementarity between the two women, the autobiography celebrates the fulfillment of the self through the other, and thus puts forth what has later been called a feminist understanding of identity as dialogical and relational.

The use of Alice B. Toklas as a "fictive witness" who could testify to Gertrude Stein's performance as an amphitryon of modernist artists and mastermind of modernism made it possible for Stein to by-pass, in a very clever way, her own aesthetic principles and to produce identity through narrative. Toklas'

whole universe is affirmed in the individual. Genius is something which 'men of genius' take upon themselves; it is the greatest exertion and the greatest pride, the greatest misery and the greatest ecstasy to a man. A man may become a genius if he wishes to" (quoted in Will, 65).

voice allowed her to write in “plain” American English, and thus to perform her national identity as American. This identity was expressed, in part, through Stein’s choice of subjects in the writings that preceded *The Autobiography...*, as well as through her commitment to English: “there is for me only one language and that is English” (Stein 2001, 77). As mentioned earlier, Stein’s self-fashioning and self-promotion as a genius implied the shedding of her ethnic (and racial) identity as a Jew, and of her sexual identity as a woman. On several occasions in *The Autobiography...*, Stein proclaimed herself, in Alice’s voice, to be American. In the chapter “My Arrival in Paris,” for instance, Alice declared “I did not realise then how completely and entirely American was Gertrude Stein” (Stein 2001, 20). On the other hand, the disentanglement from femininity is achieved at discursive level as well, but through other performative acts.

Alice often “wrote” about her as “Miss Stein” or “Gertrude Stein” – using the family name as her appellative, without substituting it with endearing diminutives for Gertrude, as might have happened in their real-live private conversations. In his discussion of the poetics of the genre of autobiography, Philip Lejeune drew attention to the relevance of proper names. For him, the proper name of the author, written on the title page, anchors autobiography in reality. In his approach that pitted autobiography against fiction, Lejeune viewed the possibility of checking the proper name in civil records as the certificate of authenticity for autobiographies and a strong support for their claim to truth. Yet, as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* aptly demonstrates, proper names can perform an ampler range of roles and acts than the one envisioned by the French critic.

“Stein,” through this conspicuous iteration, acts as a sound bite in the success mantra that is recited, allegedly, in Alice’s voice. The name advertises the person who has it and makes her memorable in the readers’ mind. Just as the phrases “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl” perform a discursive act of gendering the body of the new-born subject – as Judith Butler has shown –, proper names participate in the social construction of gender through the various ways in which they are used in assertion or appellation. The use of the family name which, in most cultures, is the name of the father or of the husband, is a marker of public speech. By referring to Gertrude Stein as “Miss Stein” or as “Gertrude Stein,” without recourse to appellative endearments that might have revealed the nature of their relationship, the focalizer/narrator/author assigns her high status and shows the deference due to a genius in whom, as Weininger had argued, masculinity is naturally embedded.¹³ Thus, through reference and forms of

¹³ Mieke Bal defines the focalizer as the subject of focalization, the point from which the elements of a story are viewed (Bal, 146).

address, Stein shows her distance from the female gender and professes her belonging to the select type of genius.

Apart from the use of plain American English and the mediated assertion of Stein's de-feminized identity as a genius and as an American, another textual affordance provided by the use of Alice as focalizer is the fact that despite its experiments with representation, time and narrative, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* follows, to a certain extent, the generic conventions formulated by Lejeune. It is a retrospective prose narrative that retells, in diachrony, the story of a personality and a story of identity in its social relations with human and non-human others.

4. From identity to entity

If autobiographical narration, just like traditional realist painting, constructs identity, masterpieces – the production of a creative genius, convey entity. Stein's struggle to break away from identity and dwell in and on entity is paralleled by Picasso's struggle with the laws of representation. In painting Stein's portrait, Picasso encountered a problem of identity; from 'I can't see you anymore when I look' (Stein 2001, 60) when he erased Stein's face from the canvas, to "all the same it is all there" (Stein 2001, 64), when she changed her hair style from buns to a short cut, like a monk's. Sittings put Stein on display as performative identity. Creation, however, cannot reproduce identity. What was "there" was the representation of Stein as entity, beyond particulars of external appearance.

Like Picasso, Stein was committed in her writings to the "intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality" (Stein 2001, 228). If *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was written as the expression and promotion of identity (i.e. outer reality) *Everybody's Autobiography* aimed to represent entity. This move from identity to entity did not occur necessarily as a natural progression; it was precipitated by the impact of success on Stein's identity and personality. The sight of her name written out on shiny billboards in the United States was "upsetting;" it induced in her the "little shock of recognition and non-recognition....one of the things most worrying in the subject of identity" (Stein 1971, 175). Stein's "little shock" met, *preposterously*, Roland Barthes' drama of objectification triggered by the sight of his photographic portraits: "I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death... I am truly becoming a specter (Barthes, 11-14).

The success that Stein wished for as a gateway to introduce her experimental writings to the public was experienced at personal level as a loss of self. The recognition on which her definition of identity was based in "I am I because my little dog knows me" became misrecognition in a situation of "so

many people knowing me:” “I was I no longer” (in an essay for *Vanity Fair*, quoted in Glass, 123). This risk of the loss of self highlights the limits of conceptualizations of the self as relational. As Stein wrote towards the end of *Everybody's Autobiography*, “Settled down in Bilignin I became worried about identity and remembered the Mother Goose, I am I because my little dog knows me and I was not sure but that only proved the dog was he and not that I was I” (Stein 1971, 297). In other words, to ground one's self in inter-relational recognition cannot certify one's existence but the existence and consistency of the one who grants recognition.

As Stein's experience of extensive sociability as celebrity demonstrates, one cannot be relational with a mass of individuals, but only with a restricted number of significant others. Therefore there is a limit to sociality beyond which the integrity, wholeness and sanity of the self become endangered. When the outside (i.e. society, audiences) “puts a value on you” that is quantified in money, “then all your inside gets to be outside” (Stein 1971, 47). When the foundation of the self, anchored in entity, is emptied by publicity, writing becomes an impossible task:

Nothing inside me needed to be written. Nothing needed any word and there was no word inside me that could not be spoken and so there was no word inside me... I began to worry about identity. I had always been I because I had words that had to be written inside me and now any word I had inside could be spoken it did not need to be written. I am I because my little dog knows me. But was I I when I had no written word inside me. It was very bothersome (Stein 1971, 64).

For Stein, the self is relational but at the same time it is defined by praxis. Individuals exist through their ties to significant others, in affection and recognition. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, “telling about my brother was telling about myself as a genius” (Stein 1971, 69). Yet, individuals also define themselves through what they perform or allow to become manifest. Stein's definition of the writer as a medium that translates words from a transcendental place of “entity” to the materiality of the handwritten page was related to her understanding of genius as universal potentiality. Ultimately, for Stein, identity did not exist: “And identity is funny being yourself is funny as you are never yourself to yourself and then of course you do not believe yourself” (Stein 1971, 68). The tri-partite ipseity of the self on which theories of autobiography have been based was undermined by Stein who dissociated between the self that remembers and the self that is remembered, the self that narrates and the self that is narrated. In this sense, autobiography is a misnomer. Autobiographies can be written not because the self outside the text and the self in the text coexist but because as a genre, autobiography is “easy” (Stein 1971, 6); it does not strive to uncover the “interior” but reproduces “identity” as it was first constructed by

publicity: “And so autobiography is written which is in a way a way to say that publicity is right, they are as the public sees them” (Stein 1971, 69).

This is not the case with genius. The identity of a genius undoes identity yet it is intimately enmeshed with the identity and the ethos of a country in the making. If the identity of the people who “cover” the world expresses their social relations and how they mirror each other in the public, the identity of a genius is entity – the opposite of relation, of public recognition and of awareness of what one is:¹⁴

After all a genius has to be made in a country which is forming itself to be what it is but is not yet that is what it is not yet common property.... The minute you or anybody else knows what you are you are not it, you are what you or anybody else knows you are and as everything in living is made up of finding out what you are it is extraordinary difficult really not to know what you are and yet to be that thing. Very difficult indeed because not only you but the whole country in which you have your being had to be like that and that is the reason there are so few of them so few geniuses come to be existing (Stein 1971, 92).

Stein argued that it is difficult to achieve the synchronicity of becoming between a “being” that is making itself into a genius and the country where that “being” lives and that is “forming” itself towards fulfilling its potential. This explains why there have been so few geniuses. Recognition – argued Stein – makes it impossible for entity to be “that thing:” non-mediated, non-dialogical, and non-temporal. Entity, therefore, is similar to the way in which Freud imagined the unconscious: as the “other” of the self-conscious thinking subject, to whom it presents itself as drama, in fantasy and dreams, outside representation (Jacobson, 44).

The singularity and exceptionalism of genius is paralleled by the rarity of a “real miser:” “it takes the same kind of thing to make one, that is time must not exist for them” (Stein 1971, 154). A genius – the utmost embodiment of wisdom – cannot be caught up in the struggle for existence: “Really genius that is the existing without any internal recognition of time has nothing to do with the will to live” (Stein 1971, 243). The real miser leads the precarious life of someone who has no means to choose and no means to struggle for his or her existence. For a genius, the “things that make you a genius have nothing to do with being living” (Stein 1971, 243). Similarly, they have nothing to do with memory:

¹⁴ “...the earth is completely covered over with every one...” (Stein 1971: 99).

I meditated a good deal about how to yourself you were yourself at any moment that you were there to you inside you but that any moment back you could only remember yourself you could not feel yourself and I therefore began to think that insofar as you were yourself to yourself there was no feeling of time inside you you only had the sense of time when you remembered yourself And so I began to be more and more absorbed in the question of feeling of past and present and future inside in one (Stein 1971, 298).

Identity thrives on memory and on (the illusion of) the continuity of the self through time. It also relies on consistent performances in inter-relations and on acts that define the self as agent in social praxis. Entity, though, has no need of memory or of agency. Like saints, geniuses have to “sit around so much doing nothing, really nothing” (Stein 1971, 70). This is so because “[a] saint a real saint never does anything, a martyr does something but a really good saint does nothing” and “[g]enerally speaking anybody is more interesting doing nothing than doing something” (Stein 1971, 109). “Doing nothing” restates the high modernist stance of the artist who shies away from the trivia of mundane existence. The alignment of geniuses on a par with Saints further emphasizes their dislodgment from chronological time and their ontological place in the continuously present synchronicity of immortality – the “now” of “today”. Quite significantly, the last sentence in *Everybody’s Autobiography* reads: “perhaps I am not I even if my little dog knows me but anyway I like what I have and now it is today” (Stein 1971, 318).

Conclusion

This article has traced a brief itinerary of the notion of the self as a defining subject of autobiography and it has analysed the multiple implications of Stein’s choice to write about her self using Alice B. Toklas as a focalizer. The mirroring effect initiated by this narrative strategy exemplifies a theory of identity as relational. For Stein, when two persons are involved in a relationship, they can easily become interchangeable and the boundaries between self and other prove to be superficial and superfluous.

If, in relations, humans exist as interchangeable identities, bound to a certain time frame, geniuses exist as entities. The difference between identity and entity that Stein reasserts in the end is a difference of ontology and of how one lives in time: identity – be it performative or relational – is not stable; it exists as multiple possibilities that can become actualized in social life and during one’s life time; entity is stable and it exists outside the passage of time, in the eternity of a “now” that makes it contemporary to itself and to whoever encounters it in reading what that entity has produced. Yet, “you have to be a genius to live in [time] and know it to exist in it and express it to accept it and deny it by creating it (Stein 1971, 281).

Works Cited

- Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams. An Autobiography*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1916. Print.
- Anderson, Susan M., and Serena Chen "The Relational Self: An Interpersonal Social-Cognitive Theory" in *Psychological Review*, vol. 109, No 4, pp. 619-645. 2002. Print.
- Bal, Mieke. *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1999 I. Print.
- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology*. Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press. 1999 II. Print
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang. 1981. Print.
- Bruner, Jerome. "The Narrative Construction of Reality" in *Critical Inquiry* no. 18, Autumn issue, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 3-21. 1999. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge: New York, London. 2002. Print.
- Eakin, Paul John. *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1985. Print.
- Fleishman, Avrom. 1983. *Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Print.
- Glass, Loren Daniel. *Authors, Inc. Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980*. New York, London: New York University Press. 2004. Print.
- Goffman, Erving. "The Self and Social Roles. Role Distance. In *The Goffman Reader*. Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, pp. 35-42. 2004. Print.
- Gusdorf, George. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" in Olney, James. *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 28-48. 1980. Print.
- Jacobsen, Mikkel Borch. *The Freudian Subject*. Houndmills, London: MacMillan. 1989. Print.
- Jay, Paul. *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1984. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits. A Selection*. New York: Norton. 2002. Print.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "Autobiography in the Third Person" in *New Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 *Self-Confrontation and Social Vision* (Autumn issue), pp. 27-50. 1977. Print.
- Lionnet, Françoise. *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1989. Print.
- Merrill, Cynthia. "Mirrored Image: Gertrude Stein and Autobiography", in *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 20, No. ½ (Nov. issue), pp 11-17. 1985. Print.
- Olney, James (ed.). *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1980. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie. *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body. Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 1993. Print.

- Stein, Gertrude. "What are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them" in *What are Masterpieces*. New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation. 1970. Print.
- Everybody's Autobiography*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers. 1971. Print.
- Lectures in America*. New York: Random House. 1975. Print.
- The Making of the Americans*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press. 1995. Print.
- The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, London, New York, Victoria, Ontario, New Delhi, Auckland: Penguin Books. 2001. Print.
- Weintraub, Karl. J. *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1978. Print.
- Will, Barbara. *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem of Genius*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2000. Print.