I

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933) has always been considered Gertrude Stein’s most ‘readerly’, her most ‘transparent’ text. In an important essay on Stanzas in Meditation, the difficult set of abstract poetic compositions written the very same summer as the autobiography, Ulla E. Dydo observes,

The language of the Autobiography may surprise by its cleverness and felicity, but it never calls attention to itself by its difficulty. The life and times of Alice Toklas and Gertrude Stein make easy reading. The difficult language of Stanzas, on the other hand, demands a reader’s full and equal attention to every single word as word... The two books do not even sound as if they were by the same author. Gertrude Stein herself was quite clear about this difference. The Autobiography was the first of a series of books which she characterized as her ‘open and public’ books, or as ‘audience writing’. ... On the other hand, works like Stanzas – virtually everything Stein wrote up to 1932 and a good deal that she wrote after she became famous – she described as her ‘real kind’ of books: a literature of word compositions rather than a literature of subject matter.¹

Compared to Stanzas in Meditation, the Autobiography is indeed an ‘open and public’ book, a book of ‘subject matter’ rather than of ‘word compositions’. But, precisely because it does seem to be such ‘easy reading’, we tend to ignore its own very real difficulties. Both The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and the later Everybody’s Autobiography (1937) are, in fact, anything but the straightforward,
anecdotal memoirs that readers, in search of good gossip about Picasso or Hemingway, take them to be.

A good example of the characteristic misreading to which the autobiographies are subjected may be found in Marty Martin's 'one-character play', *Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein*, commissioned by the actress Pat Carroll, a play that has enjoyed extraordinary popularity since it opened at the Circle Repertory Theater in New York on 4 June 1979. On the blurb of the Random House edition of the play we read,

Here is the text of the one-woman play that has become for many the essence of Gertrude Stein. Set in 1938 in her famous apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus in Paris, from which she is being evicted, it is an imaginary monologue — in true Stein style — that covers her childhood in California, her studies at Harvard with William James, her decision to leave America and come to Paris with her brother Leo, her discovery of Alice B. Toklas (who, in the play, is asleep upstairs), her pleasure in that relationship, and her favorite reminiscences of the famous people they have entertained — Marie Laurencin, Bernard Berenson, Picasso, Matisse, Cézanne, Isadora and Raymond Duncan, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, the young Ernest Hemingway, and many more.

The implication here is that 'true Stein style' is something that can be distilled from the actual Stein text by the mere retelling of the stories contained in the autobiographies. Indeed, in his Introduction to the play, Robert A. Wilson goes so far as to suggest that Martin's play captures the 'essence of Gertrude Stein' more fully than does Stein's own writing:

In all the voluminous literature that has been written about Gertrude Stein, there is very little that gives us any clue as to what she was like in person. The preponderance of exegesis on her work, while in the main useful and helpful, has been pretty much one-sided. This unfortunate imbalance has been amply corrected by Marty Martin's *Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein*. . . . It is an extraordinary work of art on many levels. It brings Stein to life so vividly that for many people the image of the real Gertrude has begun to fuse with that of Pat Carroll.

The longing for 'the image of the real Gertrude' has bedevilled