



*Gertrude Stein and "Pussy" (Alice B. Toklas) in my
Paris studio, 1912. — Amabel Ronnebeck.*

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Gertrude Was Always Giggling

(Memories of Gertrude Stein, Picasso, and Others)

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“THE days are wonderful and the nights are wonderful and the life is pleasant. Bargaining is something and there is not that success. The intention is what if application has that accident results are reappearing. They did not darken. That was not adulteration.”

Gertrude Stein was rather excitedly opening a small package just received from her publisher in Florence. It was the entire edition of her slender work *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia*, from which I have quoted the initial paragraphs. We were at her studio apartment at 21 Rue de Fleurus, not far from the Jardin du Luxembourg. The word-portrait has eleven pages printed on water-marked “Bütten” (Firenze; Tip. Galienna). She handed me one of the hastily extracted copies, saying: “Here, keep it!”

I sat down in one of her many comfortable chairs and read, and when I suggested that I translate the booklet into French and German, she laughed one of her contagious laughs and said: “Quite a stunt! Go ahead, I am sure you can do it.” I did.

She refers to these translations in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* with the comment that I “thus brought her her first international reputation.” About her most entertaining *Portrait of Mabel Dodge* she said: “Well, Pablo (Picasso) is doing abstract portraits in painting. I am trying to do abstract portraits in *my* medium, *words*.” At that time Ger-

trude Stein wrote a number of other abstract word portraits expressing in an indeed unacademic style the personality, way of life, character of work of other un-academically creative people. In 1912 Alfred Stieglitz printed in his distinguished publication *Camera Work* two such portraits by Gertrude Stein in a special Matisse-Picasso issue. Stieglitz ends his editorial with these words: "We wish you the pleasure of a hearty laugh at them upon first reading. Yet we confidently commend them to your subsequent and critical attention."

Here is a quotation from the Matisse portrait: "Some certainly were wanting to be needing to be doing that is clearly expressing something. Certainly they were willing to be a great one. They were, that is some of them, were not wanting to be needing expressing anything being struggling, he was a great one he was clearly expressing something."

With slight subtle juggling of nouns and adjectives and conjunctives these lines repeat over three pages. And suddenly you seem to recall a Matisse painting seen at Wildenstein's in New York or at Durand-Ruelle's in Paris.

Gertrude herself was always giggling, an intellectual silver giggle, over her own stuff, sitting like a very wise Bodhisatva, legs crossed, on the Directoire sofa under her latest portrait by Pablo in which one eye is lower than the other and it looks out of drawing, but since she always talked with a cigarette in one corner of the mouth and the smoke bothered the eye, she lived up to the apparently distorted likeness.

Interrupting her girlish giggle I said: "Now Gertrude, there isn't anything funny about this. The other day at the opening of 'Les Fauves' where Matisse is heavily represented, I heard people burst out in critical or appreciative words just as incoherent as his paintings evidently appeared to them. Your writing is not 'abstract', it is photographic. Maybe that's why Stieglitz published your portraits in *Camera Work*."—"You certainly got the idea," she said. "People don't see with their eyes what they hear with their ears. I write just the way I talk," which was mostly true. And that was why I had used the word photographic, and she liked that.

Here are some of the last lines from the Picasso portrait:

"This one was one who was working. This one was one always having something come out of him and this thing the thing coming out of him always had real meaning. This one was one who was working. This one was one who was almost always working."

When one day at the author's studio I read my French translation to the "sitter," I did not get very far. After about the first half-page Picasso, his coal-black eyes flashing, cried: "Assez, assez, oh mon Dieu!"

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—and the author and the model and Alice B. and I were as usual in convulsions of laughter and Picasso said finally: “Gertrude, I just don’t like abstractions.”

After general recovery I said: “Look here, Picasso, it’s bound to sound strange in French because the construction of the French language is different from the construction of the English language.”—Picasso: “But doesn’t it seem to you that this English construction is already different from English construction?”—“Now I’ve got you!” I yelled. “You understand the whole thing perfectly. You’re talking just like Gertrude this minute.” Since Picasso didn’t then know much English our conversation was in French but there was much shouting and laughter.

Always there was much intellectual shouting and laughter and mentally accelerated gaiety at Gertrude Stein’s Saturday evenings at home. Yes, we had a glass of Bordeaux or of Chablis with the filet mignon at dinner but nothing sparkling later, just the sparkle of her own mind and vitality and wit which seemed to be constantly bubbling over and made others feel that they themselves had ideas, but it was always she who said the unexpected and paradoxical thing, and when her round face started twitching and her eyes became slits and the corners of her mouth went up and up and suddenly a deep gurgle started that shaped itself into loud laughter, well you knew that some amusing or grotesque thought had been working inside her and she could not bear keeping it for herself any longer and when it finally came out it was always something either amusing or grotesque or witty, possibly a quotation from James Joyce or William James which exactly fitted our conversation in a slightly twisted and therefore even more amusing sense. I feel that such warm, deeply human qualities of Gertrude Stein’s spirit are perhaps some of the finest creative influences on those who have personally known her during those years when what we still call “modern art” was created in Paris some thirty years ago.

I know that during that period (1912-13), Gertrude Stein used “words for words’ sake” just as her friend Picasso, the great abstractionist, on canvas used “forms for forms’ sake.” The meaning of both forms of expression are first understandable only to the creators while the public laughs them off as absurdities. It is amazing, however, how quickly the public caught on to all this apparent unintelligibility in painting and writing.

I have quoted from Gertrude Stein’s *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia* and from her word portraits published in *Camera Work* because these short but most characteristic works of hers are hardly

known. There were only 150 or so copies of *Mabel Dodge*, and Alfred Stieglitz informs me in a recent letter that only a few (and I quote) "Public libraries are supposed to have sets of *Camera Work*. I know the Metropolitan Museum has a set. A complete one. Such are very rare. In Chicago the John Crerar Library has a set. The San Francisco Library has a set—has? The New York Public Library has one too . . ."

Upon inquiry Mabel Dodge-Luhan writes me from Albuquerque, New Mexico: "I don't remember how many of those things, the *Portrait of M. D. in Villa Curonia*, I had printed in Florence. I have not one myself. But it is eagerly searched for by libraries and has in some places fetched huge sums." M. D. is right: Only last year I noticed in a catalogue of an auction of rare books in New York one copy of these eleven pages offered to the tune of seventy-five dollars.—

One day when Gertrude Stein and Alice B. were at my Paris studio for tea, Gertrude very clearly criticized some pieces of sculpture I thought I had finished and she said: "Get that real roundness into them. This way I just don't like them. After all a form is a form is a form."

Much later she wrote: "A rose is a rose is a rose."

During my six years in Paris, until the outbreak of the war in 1914, I was in the habit of keeping a diary of conversations or discussions which for some reason or other seemed to me important enough to preserve. Gertrude Stein must have had the same habit, a habit not surprising on the part of one who is evidently fascinated by the spoken or written word. In *Alice B. Toklas* (pp. 122, 123) she describes a dinner party in her studio apartment at which Alice B., Picasso, the famous English museum director and critic Berenson, Mabel Dodge and I were present. I wrote down the conversation the same night, and it checks almost verbatim with the conversation as related by Gertrude Stein in *Alice B. Toklas*. In many other instances too she seems to be quoting my own notes with the exception of an incident where she has completely misunderstood my ideals and way of research, from the point of view of an artist. However I have forgiven, thinking that innuendos are amusing additions to a chatty and gossippy book. It's a case of: *Se non è vero è ben trovato*.

Gertrude, I thought when I read it, you really don't know how truly funny you are! (*Alice B. Toklas*, pp. 124, 125). I like you for being so funny Gertrude yes I do yes and I regret that we have never seen each other again since those many happy Saturday evenings in Paris yes even though you returned to these your native shores exactly ten years ago yes.—

Gertrude Stein's writing may appear easy to imitate. It is not. Imita-

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tion amounts to a shallow take-off, nothing else. I suppose it would be easy to imitate Wordsworth or even Shelley or the bombast of Victor Hugo in type, but very difficult to imitate convincingly Gertrude Stein because her style is her *meaning* and you can't imitate meaning if it is not your own. Gertrude Stein *does* write the way she talks and she always did that thing that way. There is the same photographic rendering of an impact of a reaction as we see it in her old friend Marcel Duchamp's famous painting "Nude Descending a Staircase." Once we happened to meet in the Louvre in front of the great fifth century Greek Apollo about which Rainer Maria Rilke wrote his moving poem *Archaischer Torso Apollos* and Gertrude Stein said: "There it all is. All is there. What else is there to be said is there?"

The final paragraph of her *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia* goes like this:

"There is all there is when there is all there has where there is what there is. That what is done when there is done what is done and the union is won and the division is the explicit visit. There is not all of any visit."—*Denver, Colorado*.

(Broadcasting from southern France after the entrance of the Americans at the beginning of September, Gertrude Stein is reported to have given vent to her emotions in the following words: "What a day is today, that is, what a day it was day before yesterday. What a day!"—*Editor*.)

"Children among South American countries speak in public with a skill and art that are almost beyond belief, and all educated people write extraordinarily well. Poets are as numerous as in that Andalusia of the mother country where the saying is there are always 3,000 bards playing their harps or guitars, and once in Popayán, an old Colombian city of 25,000 inhabitants, a visiting maker of verses received this greeting: 'Twelve thousand poets of Popayán salute you!'" —Herschel Brickell, in *The Pan American*, July-Sept. 1944.

In the Madrid historical journal *Revista de Indias* for the last quarter of 1933, the magazine's director, Antonio Ballesteros-Beretta, reports on certain documents which he has found in the Regional Archives of Valencia and which throw light on the whereabouts

and personal history of John Cabot during the latter part of the 20-year period (1476-1496) during which nothing had previously been known about him.

A testimonial to Latin American interest in North America is the Librería Norteamericana, 455 Calle Corrientes, Buenos Aires, an enterprising bookstore which according to the *Publishers' Weekly* deals solely and entirely in North American books.

According to *Biblos*, de luxe publication of the Cámara Argentina del Libro, the war has had little effect on the enormous trade in old and rare books which Great Britain carries on with other countries, particularly with the United States and the Argentine. An Argentine bibliophile recently paid 15,000 pesos to a London dealer for a copy of the *Quixote*.