

When I read *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* for the first time, Eisenhower was in the White House and Liz Taylor had taken Eddie Fisher away from Debbie Reynolds. The book, published in 1954, was given to me by a fellow member of a group of pretentious young persons I ran around with, who had nothing but amused contempt for middlebrow American culture, and whose revolt against the conformity of the time largely took the form of patronizing a furniture store called Design Research and of writing mannered letters to each other modeled on the mannered letters of certain famous literary homosexuals, not then known as such. *The*

TWO LIVES

Alice B. Toklas Cook Book fit right in with our program of callow preciousness; we loved its waspishly magisterial tone, its hauteur and malice. “The French never add Tabasco, ketchup or Worcestershire sauce, nor do they eat any of the innumerable kinds of pickles, nor do they accompany a meat course with radishes, olives or salted nuts,” Toklas wrote, as if preparing a manifesto for us. Her *de haut en bas* footnote pointing out that “a marinade is a bath of wine, herbs, oil, vegetables, vinegars and so on, in which fish or meat destined for particular dishes repose for specified periods and acquire virtue” filled us with ecstasy.

The *Cook Book* itself sits in a kind of bath of reminiscence about Toklas’s life with Gertrude Stein, from which its own literary virtue derives. More than a cookbook and memoir, it could almost be called a work of literary modernism, a sort of pendant to Stein’s tour de force *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, published in 1933. The similarity of tone of the two books only deepens the mystery of who influenced whom. Was Stein imitating Toklas when she wrote in Toklas’s voice

GERTRUDE AND ALICE

in the *Autobiography*, or did she invent the voice, and did Toklas then imitate Stein's invention when she wrote the *Cook Book*? It is impossible to say.

Leafing through my copy of the *Cook Book*, the evidence of ancient food stains leads me to the recipes I actually cooked, and there are not many of them. Most of Toklas's recipes were and remain too elaborate or too strange to attempt (I did make—loving its perversity—her Gigot de la Clinique, which involved taking a large hypodermic needle and injecting a leg of lamb twice daily for a week with orange juice as it sat in the obligatory marinade of wine and herbs). Underlinings and marginal comments also highlight the passages—such as those quoted above—whose tart snottiness gave me special delight in the fifties. But there is one chapter whose pages bear no gravy stains or underlinings and whose bare cleanliness makes it look almost unread. It is entitled “Food in the Bugey during the Occupation,” and in it Toklas writes of the years of the Nazi occupation, which she and Stein spent in an area of provincial eastern France called the

TWO LIVES

Bugey—first in a handsome old house near the town of Belley, and then in another old house in nearby Culoz. When I had occasion to read this chapter again, I was struck by its evasiveness, no less than by its painfully forced gaiety. How had the pair of elderly Jewish lesbians escaped the Nazis? Why had they stayed in France instead of returning to the safety of the United States? Why did Toklas omit any mention of her and Stein’s Jewishness (never mind lesbianism)? Well, in the fifties one did not go out of one’s way to mention one’s Jewishness. Gentlemanly anti-Semitism was still a fact of American life. The fate of Europe’s Jews was known, but the magnitude of the catastrophe had not registered; the term “Holocaust” was not yet in use. In 1954, Toklas’s evasions went as unremarked as her recipes for A Restricted Veal Loaf and Swimming Crawfish went uncooked. Today, the evasions seem egregious, though hardly incomprehensible. What we now know about Stein’s and Toklas’s war makes it easy to see why the complex actuality of their situation and conduct found no place

GERTRUDE AND ALICE

in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*. “As if a cook-book has anything to do with writing,” Toklas says of her enterprise at the book’s end. Or with complexity, she might have added.

In August 1924, while driving to the French Riviera to visit Picasso, Stein and Toklas veered over to the Bugey and spent a night in Belley at a hotel called the Pernollet, which had been recommended to them for its good food. The food turned out to be mediocre, but they liked the hotel and the countryside so well that they stayed on—wiring Picasso that they would be delayed a week, and finally never making it to the Riviera at all. Stein and Toklas returned to the Pernollet summer after summer (eating elsewhere) and presently began looking for a place of their own in the region. They were prepared to buy, build, or rent, but could find nothing that suited. Then one day, across a valley, they saw “the house of our dreams,” as Gertrude Stein writes in the *Autobiography*, and continues:

TWO LIVES

Go and ask the farmer there whose house that is, Gertrude Stein said to me. I said, nonsense it is an important house and it is occupied. Go and ask him, she said. Very reluctantly I did. He said, well yes, perhaps it is for rent, it belongs to a little girl, all her people are dead and I think there is a lieutenant of the regiment stationed in Belley living there now, but I understand they were to leave. You might go and see the agent of the property. We did, He was a kindly old farmer who always told us *allez doucement*, go slowly. We did. We had the promise of the house, which we never saw any nearer than across the valley, as soon as the lieutenant should leave. Finally three years ago the lieutenant went to Morocco and we took the house still only having seen it from across the valley and we have liked it always more.

Stein wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in the fall of 1932 in a kind of paroxysm of desire for the fame and money that had so far eluded her. Since her youth, she had wanted “*gloire*,” as her friend Mabel Weeks reported, but her experimental writings had not brought it. Finally, at the age of fifty-eight, she

GERTRUDE AND ALICE

decided to (so to speak) prostitute herself and write a book in regular English that would be a best seller. That it actually became one may be a measure of the genius Stein claims for herself throughout the book. What kind of a genius she was is hard to pin down. She had trained to become a medical doctor, specializing in psychology, and only after dropping out of the Johns Hopkins medical school in her last year, in 1901, did she begin to think of writing as her conduit to glory. Her apprentice work was conventional and unpromising, rather stilted. After she settled in Paris, in 1903, however, as if her muse were finally roused by the Old World's more bracing air, she began to produce the writings for which she is known—stories, novels, and poems that are like no stories, novels, or poems ever written but seem to be saturated with some sort of elixir of originality. In the trio of stories *Three Lives*, written in 1905, and the novel *The Making of Americans*, begun in 1903 and completed in 1911, Stein is still writing in regular, if singular English, but by 1912 she had started producing work in a lan-

TWO LIVES

guage of her own, one that uses English words but in no other way resembles English as it is known. “Not to be wrapped and then to forget undertaking, the credit and then the resting of that interval, the pressing of the sounding when there is no trinket is not altering, there can be pleasing classing clothing,” she writes in “Portrait of Mabel Dodge at Villa Curonia” (1912), an early foray into this language. (The ostensible subject of the portrait—a rich American adventuress who had entertained Stein and Toklas at her Italian villa—was so taken with the piece that she had it privately printed and bound in Florentine wallpaper, and handed it out to visitors at her Fifth Avenue apartment.) Two years later, in “Tender Buttons,” inspired by Cubist still-lives, Stein raises the stakes:

A BOX

Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a

GERTRUDE AND ALICE

pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analyzed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.

APPLE

Apple plum, carpet steak, seed clam, colored wine, calm seen, cold cream, best shake, potato, potato and no no gold work with pet, a green seen is called bake and change sweet is bready, a little piece a little piece please.

A little piece please. Cane again to the pre-supposed and ready eucalyptus tree, count out sherry and ripe plates and little corners of a kind of ham. This is use.

ORANGE

Why is a feel oyster an egg stir. Why is it orange centre.

A show at tick and loosen loosen it so to speak sat.

It was an extra leaker with a see spoon, it was an extra licker with a see spoon.