“BETWEEN TWO COVERS WITH SOMEBODY ELSE”:
AUTHORITY, AUTHORSHIP, AND THE AUTobiography OF
ALICE B. TOKLAS

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The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933) is one of Gertrude Stein’s most famous publications and a work which also actualizes a number of intriguing questions about authorship and/as authority. Richard Bridgman’s comment indicates its generic eccentricity as a mock autobiography, the difference in standing between Stein the genius and her humble companion Alice Toklas, as well as the scandalous opportunity offered by this book of re-thinking this hierarchical writer/secretary relationship: “One possibility is sufficiently heretical that no one has dared advance it directly; but there have been hints that Alice Toklas composed her own autobiography.”1 Why would it be so outrageous to suggest that Toklas wrote her own autobiography? The answer is simple: because she is not the author. This is a non-issue. Nevertheless, most critics who have engaged with the question of authority/authorship in relation to The Autobiography have tried to settle the question, either arguing that Toklas influenced the text greatly or contesting rumours that she co-wrote Stein’s bestseller.2 Many critics have approached The Autobiography in terms of its doubleness and its enactment of a lesbian relationship, but most of them have ended up re-establishing

Stein as the author and marginalizing Toklas into mere material for her work.³

The Autobiography enacts in writing Stein’s and Toklas’ gender-bending butch-femme performance of patriarchal marriage structures and has contributed greatly to Stein’s standing as a specifically lesbian writer. At the same time, it is quite untypical in relation to her literary production as a whole, and especially in relation to her reputation as a writer of avant-garde experiment. Many Stein works are openly experimental, even to the point of deconstructing the codes of language and reading, but they typically retain a traditional authorial function. While stylistically conventional in some ways, The Autobiography instead challenges conventions of authorship as it speaks through the voice of Stein’s partner. The reason for this arrangement is Stein’s refusal to write her own autobiography (“For some time now many people, and publishers, have been asking Gertrude Stein to write her autobiography and she had always replied, not possibly”), a need for money (“She began to tease me and say that I should write my autobiography. Just think, she would say, what a lot of money you would make”), and Toklas’ inability to write an autobiography because she is too busy running the household: “I am a pretty good housekeeper and a pretty good gardener and a pretty good needlewoman and a pretty good secretary and a pretty good editor and

³ One example of this tendency is Georgia Johnston’s “Narratologies of Pleasure: Gertrude Stein’s The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas”, Modern Fiction Studies, XLII/3 (Fall 1996), 590-606. In this article, Johnston argues for the necessity of “digress[ing] from the generic focus of Toklas writing the autobiography” (ibid., 599). Obviously, this is a non-issue or a tactic of evasion, since the twist effected in the ending of The Autobiography has, generally speaking, prevented readers and critics from ever reading this text as a straight-forward instance of the autobiographical genre (where the author’s name on the cover, the narrator in the text, and the real-life writer correspond). Instead of this threatening imaginary reading of Toklas as author, Johnston presents us with, on the one hand, an intimate reader who, through “enter[ing] into the reading position of Alice B. Toklas”, in fact usurps or replaces her, and, on the other, Stein as a solitary author in control of the text. In my reading, contrary to Johnston’s, the greatest challenge of reading The Autobiography is not to suspend the generic presupposition of Toklas having composed her own autobiography, which is a non-issue anyway because Stein did, but to take seriously the possibility or impossibility that she might have, in a certain strategic fashion which destabilizes the construction of authorship as singular and uncomplicated, and above all leaves the question open.