

Literary Companions

By Brooke Allen

JANET MALCOLM'S BOOKS ARE USUALLY written with an ulterior motive, some hidden subject encased within the stated one. *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1994) was a meditation on the art and business of biography, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990) a comment on the relationship between journalist and subject, *The Crime of Sheila McGough* (1999) a portrait of trial law as the struggle between conflicting narratives. Each book dealt, if only obliquely, with the search for an ever-elusive

ideal of "truth."

Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice has no such ulterior motive; indeed, it is difficult to perceive any motive for the book at all. It seems to have germinated when Malcolm stumbled on a passage in her old copy of *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, a cult volume during Malcolm's youth in the 1950s, in which Toklas (1877–1967) wrote of the years she and writer Gertrude Stein had spent in the Bugey

TWO LIVES:
Gertrude and Alice.
By Janet Malcolm. Yale
Univ. Press. 229 pp. \$25



How did Gertrude Stein (left) and Alice B. Toklas, shown here in 1944, manage to while away the Nazi occupation in the French countryside?

region of eastern France during the Nazi occupation. “When I had occasion to read this chapter again,” Malcolm writes, “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)?”

This certainly seems a promising line of inquiry, but the story itself, once Malcolm dug it up, turned out to be the usual tale of wartime expediency, and while the pair behaved no better than most, in that dire time and place, they also behaved no worse than many. Stein and Toklas proved to be what the French at that time dubbed *débrouillards*: They accommodated themselves to those in power in order to get by, just as most of the population did.

Rich and spoiled, Stein (1874–1946) had in her youth been protected from grim economic realities, and her politics were those of the rentier class from which she sprang. She was a snob, as well as “a conservative with an increasingly reactionary bent—she loved the Republican Party, she hated Roosevelt, and she actually supported Franco.” Living in an anti-Semitic world had conditioned her, and Toklas too, to downplay their Jewishness to the point where the subject eventually became unmentionable. Stein’s *Wars I Have Seen* (1945) never refers to it, and when Toklas entered the Roman Catholic Church in 1957, she contrived to make her action sound more like a return than a conversion.

As late as 1937—during the Spanish Civil War—many of Stein and Toklas’s French friends were members of the Croix de Feu, a right-wing organization founded by veterans of World War I, but the two ladies adjusted their ideas somewhat as Hitler’s armies overran Europe. Still, they never turned their backs on their reactionary friends, and Stein

always expressed open admiration for Marshal Pétain, who headed the collaborationist Vichy government during France’s occupation. It was one of Pétain’s advisers, Bernard Faÿ, who served as Stein and Toklas’s protector during the war years.

Faÿ, who came from a family of rich Catholic royalists, was appointed head of the Bibliothèque Nationale during the Occupation, replacing a Jew. A writer and professor, he specialized in American history and culture and had long been a promoter and translator of Stein’s work. Throughout the war he saw to it, via the *sous-préfet* of police in the Bugey town of Belley, that the two American ladies were protected from harassment and provided with a sufficiency of food and coal. Faÿ would be arrested and imprisoned after the liberation; in 1951 he escaped from a prison hospital with the aid of a group of friends that included—according to the scholars Malcolm consulted—Alice Toklas, who apparently sold artwork by Picasso to help with costs. (Stein by this time had been dead for five years.)

This tale may cast no great glory on the American couple, but it is not terribly damning either. While it is true that wartime France had its share of heroes, the vast majority of the population simply did what they had to in order to survive. Which of us, under those circumstances, would have done better? This seems to be the way Malcolm sees it too, for she soon abandons the unedifying little story and proceeds to examine Stein as a writer.

Here, again, her treatment of the subject is cursory, if occasionally amusing. The three eminent Stein scholars she interviews at length are high-modernist purists: They are pitying when Malcolm tells them she doesn’t care for Stein’s more avant-garde works, and appalled when she admits to having enjoyed Thornton Wilder’s middlebrow, sentimental play *Our Town*. (“At these times I feel like someone who has ordered a cheeseburger at

Lutèce,” she remarks dryly.) The background reading Malcolm took on during her research for *Two Lives* seems to have been something of a chore. “For a long time I put off reading *The Making of Americans*” (Stein’s hefty modernist novel), she writes. “Every time I picked up the book, I put it down again. It was too heavy and thick and the type was too small and dense. I finally solved the problem of the book’s weight and bulk by taking a kitchen knife and cutting it into six sections.” (Malcolm is in good company: Even the voracious Edmund Wilson said defiantly, “I have not read this book all through, and I do not know whether it is possible to do so.”)

Once she finally gets down to reading the book, she is not encouraged. “It is called a novel, but in reality it is a series of long meditations on, among other things, the author’s refusal (and inability) to write a novel.” Stein’s style, as other non-fans of her work will testify, is egregious and deliberately challenging—some might say stupefyingly self-indulgent. “It is as if Stein had made a rule for herself that she must allow every subject to exhaust itself before letting go of it,” Malcolm says. “Nothing is ever said once. It is always said many times with slight variations creeping in as they do in repeats in music.” The excerpts from the novel Malcolm includes in her text richly confirm this description.

Malcolm comes close to declaring Stein an artistic fraud, bolstering this case with copious quotations from the writer’s disaffected brother Leo, who believed that his sister’s eccentric style derived from the fact that she couldn’t write proper English, referred to her admirers as “fatuous idiots who go to hear her silly twaddle,” and called her most popular book, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, “a rather clever superstructure on a basis of impenetrable stupidity.” Yet after describing her own reservations about Stein’s work and her laborious delvings into the oeuvre, a task that appears to have

been both painful and unrewarding, Malcolm draws few conclusions, and ends up softening her sometimes sharp remarks with a few morsels of praise. “The alacrity with which [Stein] catches her thoughts before they turn into stale standard expressions may be the most singular of her accomplishments,” she writes, and opines that “every writer who lingers over Stein’s sentences is apt to feel a little stab of shame over the heedless predictability of his own.”

Surely not every writer—and perhaps not even Malcolm herself. The statement seems disingenuous, the mark of an unwillingness to render an

aesthetic judgment that might place Malcolm in the unaccustomed role of critic rather than her usual guise of journalist. But *Two Lives* is not really a work of journalism; it is an uneasy mixture of essay and reportage that lacks a unifying idea or direction. Malcolm includes her by-now-familiar philosophic digressions on the elusiveness of truth, the control of narrative, and the nature of biography. “Biography and autobiography are the aggregate of what, in the former, the author happens to learn, and, in the latter, he chooses to tell.” There is nothing too surprising in this. She goes on: The biographer “turns the bracing storylessness of human life into the flaccid narrativity of biography.” Why bracing? Why flaccid? Couldn’t the two adjectives just as easily be switched around?

But the nature of biography is not really Malcolm’s subject in *Two Lives*, and it’s not really clear what is. It’s hard to figure out what Malcolm is trying to achieve with this book, or what originally sparked her interest in two women she doesn’t even seem to like very much.

BROOKE ALLEN’s most recent book is *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (2006).

Janet Malcolm comes close to calling Gertrude Stein an artistic fraud, bolstering her case with quotations from the writer’s disaffected brother.