Modernist Autobiography, Audience and the Archives

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At least in its most textbook form, modernism has long remained associated with ideas of impersonality, detachment, autonomy and the absence of authorial emotion. Yet autobiography is also a key narrative mode of modernist poetry and prose. For several decades, by the 1930s, a number of key modernists were not just writing material from their lives, but were starting to publish their own complete autobiographies. Gertrude Stein, Ford Madox Ford, Wyndham Lewis, William Carlos Williams, the Sitwells and Ernest Hemingway all took the opportunity to produce major autobiographical volumes during this time, with varying approaches and levels of success.

When it comes to archival research into modernist autobiography, there are several fruitful avenues for assessing the potential for this genre and its execution by technical innovators under modernism. In fact, authors in the Bloomsbury circle were some of the first theorists exploring methods for building on archival evidence while simultaneously using the techniques of good fiction to re-animate the corpse. More recent criticism has focused on questions of subjectivity, authenticity and (the stretching of) truth. Scholars like Max Saunders and Jerome Boyd Maunsell — both, like Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey before them, biographers themselves — have further opened up modernist autobiography to an exploration of the borders between fiction and non-fiction, revealing the extent to which archival evidence available to the scholar may be at odds with the manuscript version of self or the narrative of events that the authors are keen to promote.[1] There is little question that this critical terrain is highly relevant to the modernist project in terms of exploring subjectivities and authenticity, but it sometimes situates the archive as the battlefield on which biographers and autobiographers debate and contest versions of narrative lives. This is not to suggest the task of biographers is simply to use archival research to correct faulty autobiographies, but it raises questions about what the modernist archive is *for* when it comes to autobiographical narrative.

[1] Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Jerome Boyd Maunsell, *Portraits from Life: Modernist Novelists & Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

This chapter examines two case studies of 1930s modernist autobiography in order to address this question, opening the archive of Gertrude Stein and of Wyndham Lewis to further explore what can be learned from the papers of each author. Rather than reading the volumes alongside the evidence of their lives, as found in biographical research, the autobiographies will briefly be reconstructed in terms of motivation for sharing the personal and the intimate, in terms of textual publication, promotions and sales — certain crude measures of success — and in terms of reception. We find in key modernist autobiographical texts authors hungry to reach new reading publics, either to change the narrative version of themselves already in circulation or to broaden their appeal and extend their reach. This does not always work as intended, of course, but we can learn as much about the cultural moment in which an author seeks to negotiate their own identity before a newly identified readership in those cases where it fails as clearly as we do when it succeeds. What the archive can reveal is that the attempt to reshape a life and a career is probably more important in some cases than the shape itself — and that autobiography, unlike other modes of writing, is best understood when put into the context of its intended readership.

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Targeting Publishers, Finding Readers

Neither Gertrude Stein nor Wyndham Lewis appears as a likely candidate for writing autobiography prior to the 1930s. In some ways, the first half of their careers mirror each other: both recognised widely in 1914 for exceptionally radical literary pieces like Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Lewis's 'The Enemy of the Stars', the latter appearing in *BLAST*; they were both regularly in the newspapers because of the difficult nature of their art; then both consolidated their reputations for serious literary work with long and challenging volumes: *The Making of Americans* by Stein in 1925 and *The Art of Being Ruled* by Lewis in 1926. But even if their reputations were firmly established as literary artists early in the century, a major parallel aspect of their careers is that very few members of the public actually read any of their texts. The popular perception — rehearsed by many critics, from Juliana Spahr to Lawrence Rainey — is that *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* took Stein from obscurity to fame; in the words of Spahr, it 'made her a celebrity'.[2] In fact, while it is true Gertrude Stein was not a bestselling author prior to *The*

[2] Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), p. 35. See also Lawrence Rainey's introduction to Stein in *Modernism: An Anthology*

Autobiography — her books were regularly published in small print runs, which rarely sold out, so she was incapable of being a bestseller — Stein was already a celebrity with her earliest publications, as Karen Leick has pointed out.[3] Leonard Diepeveen has gone further to reveal that *Tender Buttons*, despite being privately printed in only 1000 copies, was reviewed in hundreds of newspapers, more reviewers than could conceivably have got their hands on a copy; or, as he writes, 'every newspaper editor in the United States seems to have assigned someone to the *Tender Buttons* beat', despite it being a book scarcely available to the common reader.[4] Stein's innovative style rendered her 'news' in 1914, and while not always attracting positive publicity and almost never being seriously read, Stein clearly had a public.

Wyndham Lewis the Vorticist was not entirely different. He was regularly in the newspapers in 1914, regularly mocked, serially unread, but regularly celebrated. Or to take up his own label, he was a literary lion. Lions are not entirely synonymous with celebrities, according to Nicolas Dames: the lion remains a person to be seen, someone invited to parties and lavished with attention, while the celebrity, more detached or mediated, often remains on a pedestal.[5] Lewis would write in his 1937 autobiography, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, about the time between the publication of the first issue of *BLAST* and the outbreak of World War I:

> Everyone by way of being fashionably interested in art, and many who had never opened a book or bought so much as a sporting-print, much less 'an oil', wanted to look at this new oddity, thrown up by that amusing spook, the Zeitgeist. […] For a few months I was on constant exhibition. I cannot here enumerate all the sightseers, of noble houses or of questionable Finance, who passed me under review. They were legion. Coronetted envelopes showered into my letter-box. The editor of *Blast* must at all costs be viewed.[6]

Lewis goes on to make very clear that he gained nothing from his lionisation; there was no profit. But this is not quite the full story — at the time, he took his reputation quite seriously, announcing in a letter

(Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 373.
[3] Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (London: Routledge, 2009).
[4] Leonard Diepeveen, 'The Newspaper Response to *Tender Buttons*, and What It Might Mean', in *Transatlantic Print Culture 1880–1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernism*, ed. by Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 199.
[5] Nicolas Dames, 'Brushes with Fame: Thackeray and the World of Celebrity', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 56.1 (2001), 23–51.
[6] Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1937), pp. 50–51.

to Augustus John in 1915 (with his own involvement in war imminent, and his fate unknown): 'That you will enter the history books, you know, of course! Blast is a history book, too'.[7] In other words, in 1915 the fascination with which the public had taken up Lewis as artist promised him immortality; but by 1937, his celebrity appeared to him as a joke, completely devoid of meaning and certainly unprofitable.

So neither Stein nor Lewis was a bestseller. Neither was widely read throughout their early careers, though both were highly regarded. The question thus arises: what were Stein and Lewis hoping to accomplish by writing their autobiographies in the 1930s, thus catering to an audience eager to consume authors through image, personality or renown? In Stein's case, she was keenly aware of the public hunger for her celebrity image, and was uneasy about indulging it. There were those who would urge her to profit from her public image, through her memoirs or promotional lecture tours, including her agent William Bradley and the sculptor Jo Davidson, but Stein regularly refused. As she would write in her 1937 autobiography — the second volume of memoirs in the decade:

> And Mr. Bradley said I was making a mistake and I said no, Jo Davidson always said one should sell one's personality and I always said only insofar as that personality expressed itself in work. It always did bother me that the American public were more interested in me than in my work.[8]

Clearly Stein does not sound keen to share her more personal side, and yet we cannot ignore the context, writing this as she does in her second autobiography, one that describes in detail how she came to write her first, and the success it attained in making her difficult works more palatable to a general readership. But it is the archive that reveals the steps leading Stein from insisting on letting her work speak for itself to eventually offering her own personal intervention.

When it comes to archival evidence for this change of heart, key evidence is found in the correspondence between Stein and Ellery Sedgwick, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* — a magazine that was both Stein's greatest unachieved ambition leading up to 1933, and then the place of her greatest publishing triumph. As early as 1919, Sedgwick was rejecting a hopeful Gertrude Stein for her

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[7] *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, ed. by W. K. Rose (Norfolk: New Directions, 1963), p. 70.
[8] Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1993), p. 51.

incomprehensibility, citing in particular that the magazine did not provide the audience Stein seems to think it did. 'You misjudge our public. Here there is no group of literati or illuminati or cognoscenti or illustrissimi of any kind, who could agree upon interpretations of your poetry. More than this, you could not find a handful even of careful readers who would think that it was a serious effort.'[9] Sedgwick seems well aware of who Stein is, and presumes from her reputation as an obscure expatriate modernist that she is targeting an elite readership. The editor, in rejecting Stein's work, is saving her from becoming a joke, since no one will read her work closely enough or find the universally agreed interpretation he assumes she has targeted. 'But I don't misjudge your public,' she responds, 'I am not interested in their being literati, etc. My work is legitimate literature and I amuse and interest myself in words as an expression of feeling.'[10] The fundamental disagreement between Sedgwick and Stein, while appearing to focus on the type of reader Stein might find in *The Atlantic Monthly*, actually centres on the role of the author in the modernist period, pitting the elitist professional writer needing a professional public against the expressive writer hoping for a democratically broad audience. Stein wants to offer an amusing expression of feeling for anyone who will read her, while Sedgwick expects her writing to conjure a carefully wrought riddle from which readers would struggle to work out the preconceived answer.

By the mid- to late 1920s, as modernism increasingly entered the mainstream, the struggle over the role of the author only grew more heated. As Isabelle Parkinson has shown, Stein was for a time at the very centre of the debate.[11] Whereas Sedgwick had branded Stein as an intellectual heavyweight, in need of an elite and specialist readership, Stein's reputation amongst her peers was often the opposite. Wyndham Lewis, John Rodker and T. S. Eliot, all writing in 1926 and 1927 about Gertrude Stein, establish

[9] Sedgwick to Stein, 4 December 1919, Beinecke Yale Collection of American Literature (hereafter YCAL) MSS76, Box 97, Folder 1825.
[10] Stein to Sedgwick, 2 January 1920, Beinecke YCAL MSS77, Box 15, Folder 245.
[11] Isabelle Parkinson, 'Democrat or "imbecile"? Gertrude Stein's *Useful Knowledge* and Discourses of Intellectual Disability in the *To-day and To-morrow* Pamphlet Series', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 43.3 (Spring 2020), 1–18.

an attack centred on a similar theme: her method (Lewis suggests that 'her method is the processes of the demented'), her democratic approach (Rodker says that she uses words 'to mean nothing but what she would have them mean'), and her likely legacy (Eliot recognises her approach may represent 'a more simple and indeed more crude [...] future of the barbarians').[12] The simplicity of Stein's experimental work, where words are only words — exactly what Stein argues when pursuing a large readership in *The Atlantic Monthly* — leads a number of intellectual modernists to denigrate her literary legacy and suggest her experimental work only reinforces mass-cultural empty rhetoric. As Parkinson has revealed, both Mina Loy and Laura Riding jumped to Stein's defence as a more democratic defender of the arts, and it is in this particular conflict that Stein offers her own intervention with the volume *Useful Knowledge* (1928). The title offers a direct response to Rodker's attack on Stein's fruitless experiments in 'Composition as Explanation' (1926), or Eliot's dismissal of her work as 'not good for one's mind'.[13] Where her critics had suggested her experiments were empty rhetoric, closed off from meaning and part of a barbaric futurism, Stein responded with her own *Useful Knowledge* — open to all and educational. In Parkinson's summary, 'Stein's title identifies her work with [...] the gradual emergence of mass democracy and aims at a popular audience Stein also wished to claim.'[14]

If this was the purpose of *Useful Knowledge*, though, it hardly succeeded in reaching that mass audience. In Joseph Brewer, Stein found an editor who believed her work was 'a permanent value to the world', though perhaps 'not likely in the first instance to find a wide reading public' — even printing these markers of exclusivity on the back cover of the first edition. Payson and Clarke — her fourth US publisher out of four books — originally wanted to print limited runs of her difficult works, though they

[12] Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*, ed. by Reed Way Dasenbrock (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), p. 346; John Rodker, *The Future of Futurism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1924), p. 85; T. S. Eliot, 'Charleston, Hey! Hey!', *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 29 Jan. 1927, 595.
[13] Parkinson summarises Rodker's dismissal of Stein: 'her work is an intellectual closed-circuit that produces nothing but itself'; 'Democrat', 5. See also Eliot, 595.
[14] Parkinson, 'Democrat', 11.

were eventually convinced to publish a larger run of 1500 copies in both expensive and cheap editions.[15] When Stein's agent William Bradley wrote to enquire whether it was paying off, Joseph Brewer sent a royalty statement revealing 215 copies of the $5 edition for domestic markets, 10 copies for foreign markets, and a solitary copy of the cheap edition.[16] When Brewer signs off with, 'Was this what you wanted?', it's safe to presume Bradley's response was negative.

Still, it was *Useful Knowledge* — or more specifically, the failure of Payson and Clarke a few years later — that led Stein to her greatest success. It was only two weeks prior to Stein completing the manuscript of her breakthrough work, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, that Harcourt, Brace and Company took over the leftover stock of *Useful Knowledge*. William Bradley wasted no time in checking if the major publisher might be interested in pursuing further Stein publications, though there was nothing available that immediately recommended itself for trade success.[17] The timing was fortuitous; just as Stein's public and publisher were aligning, Stein was discovering new ways to walk the line between mass-market barbarism and intellectual *literati* — a distinction she found entirely arbitrary. Stein's idea for the autobiography of her partner in their shared life together likely derived from the efforts of her friend, Fernande Olivier. As Pablo Picasso's partner through early stages of his career, Olivier had little means of income, once he had left her, other than the interest in her connection to the artists in Picasso's circle. While Picasso sought to block publication of the French-language *Picasso et ses amis*, Stein wrote to Bradley about American publication:

[15] See Leick, p. 125.
[16] Joseph Brewer to William Bradley, 3 April 1929, YCAL77, box 99, Folder 1900.
[17] See Ulla E. Dydo and William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises 1923–1934* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), p. 543.

> I am also sending you a specimen of the autobiography of Fernande Olivier, my nine years with Picasso, I have just had a rather sad letter from her she seems to be hoping that selling this in America will pull her out of her difficulties, at any rate if it interests you at all, do let her know.[18]

This manuscript letter, seemingly little noticed, presents a significant clue in identifying what led Stein to write her own memoirs. While many advisers had suggested she write her autobiography and several friends had succeeded in publishing their own, it is the distinctive approach of the less-known Olivier writing her memoir of the celebrity Picasso (and Bradley's enthusiastic reception of it) that anticipatese the breakthrough found in Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. While Stein wants a broad and democratic readership, she still must guard against the antagonism of her contemporaries suggesting she is little more than an empty, mass-market sell-out. To have Toklas author her personal side is the obvious route, although as *The Autobiography* itself tells us, Toklas is reluctant and Stein has to write it for her. While Olivier had published her own memoir under the title *Picasso et ses amis*, it is highly relevant that Stein proposes two new possible titles for the English version, either *The Autobiography of Fernande Olivier* or *My Nine Years with Picasso* — the first reflecting Stein's own title for her next book, and the second reflecting a rejected title: *My Twenty-five Years with Gertrude Stein*.[19] If further evidence is needed, Olivier certainly observed the connection between the two autobiographies, threatening to pursue legal action for plagiarism when Stein's *Autobiography* first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*.[20]

Stein had clearly been on a journey to get here, from vanity-press works like *Three Lives* to self-published works in the Plain Edition, often funded by selling paintings by Picasso; or from royalties for *Useful Knowledge* bringing in $109 for the author, and amounting to $1000 in losses for its struggling

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[18] Stein to Bradley, stamped 25 Mai 1931, William A. Bradley Literary Agency Records, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Box 59 Folder 2.
[19] Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 274.
[20] Dydo and Rice, p. 538.

publisher.[21] The remarkable transformation is evident in the accumulation of royalties and advances for *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* found in the Bradley archives: the advances alone, indicating the amount of faith in the book's success, include the currency equivalent of: $500 from Harcourt (US), $250 from John Lane (UK), $125 from Librairie Stock (France), $1000 from *The Atlantic Monthly* (US serial rights), $250 from Harper's (UK serial rights) and $3000 from the Literary Guild (US book club).[22] Stein's royalties for the Harcourt edition rose from 10% to 15% after the first 5000 copies sold, likely two weeks after the book appeared.[23] For a book priced at a moderate $3.50, she would have made more than $2000 on the 5900 copies sold less than two months after publication, nearly four times her significant advance. By the end of February 1934, Bradley is writing about the Harcourt volume being in 'its 42nd thousand, and seems to increase rather than diminish in its popularity', and by May further Harcourt royalties of $3132 are paid.[24] As mentioned, the volume fell to Harcourt only on the failure of Payson and Clarke, so there is irony in finding amongst all these earnings a royalty statement from September 1933 in the Bradley papers announcing the sale of two copies of *Useful Knowledge* — her book promoting the democracy of art — with a cheque enclosed for $1.10, reminding us how far she had come.

'The Same Careful Regard for the Public'

Turning our attention to Wyndham Lewis's *Blasting and Bombardiering*, we find the author's career stage, the motivations and the approach not dissimilar. Lewis was equally incapable of securing a single

[21] Joseph Brewer offers this detail in a letter to Bradley when rejecting acceptance of Stein's next proposed book, 26 March 1929, Beinecke YCAL MSS76, Box 99, Folder 1900.
[22] These sums are paid in various currencies and have been calculated at the exchange rates in 1933 for ease of reference. All fees can be found in letters from Bradley or statements of account from his agency in the Beinecke and Harry Ransom Center archives.
[23] A press release from Harcourt (20 September 1933) says the first run was 5500 copies, and a second printing was ordered two weeks after the release date; Beinecke MSS76, Box 5, Folder 103.
[24] Bradley to John Lane, 21 February 1934, Harry Ransom Center, Box 123, Folder 7.

publisher who could sustainably publish his many works. His career was similarly marked by curiosity, bafflement and scandal — with Lewis, like Stein, often proving to be his own worst enemy. Even excepting the tendency of picking fights with publishers or those liable to sue him, excepting his prickly public persona and the self-sabotage of seeing potential in Hitler's ideas just prior to the rise of National Socialism, his work, like Stein's, rarely met with a popular audience. As he would write in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, while offering his credentials:

> *Time and Western Man* (my biggest book of philosophic and literary criticism) had a stupendous Press (that means the reviews about it in the papers). But it treated of topics which only a handful of people in England know or care anything about. "The Subject as King of the Psychological World," and "The Object as King of the Physical World," are awfully interesting things if you have a bent for such topics. But only a few dozen people out of forty million have.[25]

Lewis believed by this point that he could do better. As he concludes: 'The times are propitious for me.'[26] The earliest indications that Lewis was intent on writing his own memoirs are lodged in correspondence about money and popularity. A year before the publication of his autobiography, he would write: 'To hell with these experimental "difficult" contraptions, which only the Young and impecunious in England like and which are hard to sell – I will do no more for six months, or until I am solvent. I will really do dreams of beauty, which will sell themselves, as I am bringing them down to the Gallery.'[27] Even prior to writing the autobiography, then, he was turning his back on unprofitable and experimental work — and Thomas R. Smith suggests it was a few weeks later that he began writing the preface to a volume then entitled *The Men of 1914*, a gossipy account of highbrow artists that would effectively reach a larger audience.[28]

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[25] Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, p. 5.
[26] Ibid, p. 6.
[27] Lewis to Oliver Brown, 16 October 1936, *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, p. 239.
[28] Thomas R. Smith, 'Introduction', in 'Preliminary Aside to the Reader: Regarding Gossip, and Its Pitfalls', by

However, a letter written to Lewis dated that very day (16 October 1936) from Wren Howard of Jonathan Cape shows that Lewis had previously sent a fragment of the planned manuscript, asking for (in Howard's words) 'a very substantial advance on account of the royalties if it is to be worth your while to write the book, but since we could not approach this figure I am afraid that the only thing to be done is to make no offer at all. I am very sorry about this because I think that the book will undoubtedly be a most interesting document, and I, personally, shall certainly want to read it when it is finished.'[29] Howard clearly sees potential here, but wisely holds back an offer until he sees the completed product. But by February 1937, Lewis — having written nothing further on the manuscript — appears to have found publishers ready to gamble. William Morrow in the US signed a contract with Lewis in that month for a volume now called *Blasting and Bombardiering*, offering an advance of £200, about twice what Harcourt offered Stein for *The Autobiography*, a volume they had seen and were confident would be a commercial success. On top of this, Eyre & Spottiswoode in the UK agreed to publish the as yet unwritten autobiography, advancing him £150, nearly three times what John Lane had offered to Stein a few years earlier.

One of the first pieces to be drafted by Lewis — an ultimately rejected preface — reveals Lewis's ambitions and why he may have convinced these publishers to back him. The opening lines are comical in their bold claims to giving the public precisely what they want:

> I am about to gossip. I am going to be exceedingly "personal" about certain persons. But this is not at all because I wish to be. It is because of <u>you</u> that I descend to these picturesque details. Quite at the start it is far better that I should lay the blame where it is due — namely at your door — for anything that is of too familiar a nature that may be uttered in these pages.[30]

Wyndham Lewis, *Modernism/modernity* 4.2, 181–87.

[29] G. Wren Howard to Lewis, 16 October 1936, Wyndham Lewis Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Cornell University Library, Box 113, Folder 109.

[30] Wyndham Lewis, 'Preliminary Aside to the Reader', Wyndham Lewis Collection, Poetry Collection, University of

Blaming his readers for writing to their tastes: Lewis or his publisher was wise to discard the preface. But if Lewis's profile — as I've already described — was that of a renowned intellect and celebrity artist thus far writing highbrow and heavyweight treatises that appeal to even fewer readers than those who have the intellectual capacity to read them, then condescending to common interests for once might just pay off. It did, after all, for Stein.

What's more, Lewis reveals that he has done his market research, referring in the unpublished manuscript exactly where he expects his book to sell. He announces, despite the fact his book is a distinctly unpalatable 'history of ideas', that 'it is my ambition to lie upon Smiths station book-stall side by side with Mr. Priestley – the lamb lying down with the lion. How should I ever do that without showing the same careful regard for the Public that is shown by the author of "Good Companions"?'[31] Andrew Nash, writing about book sales in the period between the world wars, describes an 'intensification of popular reading and publishing' into the 1930s: 'The spread of public and commercial libraries and the increased sales of books in newsagents and general stores, such as Woolworths, ensured that rising production levels continued unabated by the strikes of 1926 and the slump of the 1930s.'[32] Lewis describes these same emerging and developing markets in his preface, though he acknowledges it is a fine line he must walk — not only remaining true to his highbrow qualities and convictions, but also treading lightly. As he would write in another rejected section of the introduction found in Lewis's papers, 'This book can be read, or that is what I hope, as "a book of reminiscences," and you can take as much or as little notice as you like of the specialist criticism contained in it, whether explicit or implicit. [...] It is extraordinary how a book can have a dual personality like this.'[33] Lewis, we

Buffalo, Box 4, Folder 2.

[31] Lewis, 'Preliminary', Buffalo Box 4, Folder 2.

[32] Andrew Nash, 'Literary Culture and Literary Publishing in Inter-War Britain', in *Literary Cultures and the Material Book*, ed. by Simon Eliot, Andrew Nash and Ian Willison (London: British Library, 2007), p. 323.

[33] Wyndham Lewis, unpublished early draft of 'Introduction' to *Blasting and Bombardiering*; Buffalo, Box 4, Folder 3.

find, is never willing to give too much, insisting he will be charming, popular and tasteful, but always hedging on content – insisting he can relay highbrow ideas and lowbrow gossip without transgressing his own principles or anyone else's. A critical reader is immediately put on guard, but William Morrow and Eyre & Spottiswoode were evidently not; they offered Lewis what amounts to a year's salary in advance of royalties on the promise of a book for which only a wildly ambitious preface had been written.

As I have said, this compromise between intellectual elitism and mass-market salesmanship worked with Stein's own autobiographical project. The same cannot be said for Lewis's *Blasting and Bombardiering*. The publishers' archives at the University of Reading contains a detailed ledger of sales held by Eyre & Spottiswoode, revealing 3000 copies of Lewis's book were printed, of which 1007 copies were bound.[34] Of these almost 600 were sold on subscription or prior to publication and 113 copies given away. Four hundred further copies were sold in the next six weeks, and 400 other copies were bound inside three months. By 31 March 1938, five months after publication, 1204 total copies had been sold. Sales flattened dramatically. The last unreturned copy to sell was sold before the book had reached the one-year publication anniversary; after that, the volume was forgotten. At the end of 1940, the remaining thirty-five bound copies were burned — possibly in the Blitz — although, rather inexplicably, Eyre & Spottiswoode would bind another ninety-nine copies, only to remainder ninety-eight of them exactly one year later. The remaining copy was given away, not sold, according to the records.

A Tale of Two Autobiographies

If Stein and Lewis had many things in common in producing their autobiographies, why did one become a bestseller and the other become a disaster? Was one simply a better book than the other? The archives, naturally, cannot help answer this last question. But for those who see them as very different

[34] Eyre & Spottiswoode stock book, part of Random House Archive and Library, Archive of British Printing and Publishing, University of Reading Special Collections.

but equally engaging autobiographies of fascinating and conflicted personalities, the archive can help reflect on further reasons for the very different markers of success.

One hypothesis is that the US was a better market than the UK for gossipy artists' memoirs. In pointing to Harcourt's success with Stein's book and Eyre's trouble with Lewis's, perhaps we're comparing similar products in very different markets. After all, the archives show that John Lane — a leading UK publisher in the 1930s — had disappointing sales for Stein's autobiography, with only 848 copies sold in the first three months, whose royalties amounted to only a tenth of the advance she had received. So what about Lewis's *Blasting and Bombardiering* in the US, first contracted with Morrow? According to Lewis's literary agent, the editor at Morrow

> feels that the book as it stands requires some revision if it is to have good prospects of an American success, and he tells me that after further consideration and reading he will be sending a full editorial report. He has not sent us his cheque due on delivery of the material …[35]

Disastrously for Lewis, Morrow pulled out of publishing the volume upon seeing the first typescript, which contained only the war memoir sections. If American readers remained as interested in modernist memoirs as they had been in 1932, they were largely unable to get a copy of Lewis's. Lewis raged about the dereliction of Morrow's contractual responsibilities, threatened lawsuits, even ordered his agent *not* to 'hawk my book around New York' when he stated he was already aiming for another publisher.[36] Thus, *Blasting and Bombardiering* only appeared in an American edition posthumously, when Lewis's widow put together a slightly revised edition in 1967.

But even Stein's autobiographies were not bulletproof in the USA. By August 1936, Harcourt was ready to cut and run — selling the stock and the plates of *Alice B. Toklas* to Bennett Cerf at Random

[35] C.H. Brooks to Lewis, 31 Aug 1937, Cornell, Box 111, Folder 20.
[36] Lewis to Brooks, undated (Aug 1940?), Cornell, Box 61, Folder 9.

House, who went on to publish the follow-up *Everybody's Autobiography* in 1937. Cerf wrote a number of apologetic letters, lamenting that he could not recreate the success of the earlier volume, though he sold 2200 copies in the first three months (1000 more than Lewis sold).

Perhaps just as important as the country of publication was the publisher each author ended up with. Harcourt pulled off the perfect campaign for *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, first working closely with Stein, Bradley and *The Atlantic Monthly* to choreograph serial publication, offering a book publication that teased and intrigued the audience (Stein's name didn't appear on the spine or the title page). This attracted much attention in the press — the Stein papers in Beinecke collect every notice or casual mention that appeared — wondering who Miss Toklas (a non-celebrity at the time) was: was she an invention, what was her relationship to Miss Stein? Harcourt, through carefully staged press releases, fanned the flames, issuing corrections to gossip or quoting the real Alice. Harcourt skirmished with reviewers, claiming even negative reviews were under the influence of Stein's magical prose style, and 'making a (private) exhibit of non-competents' — outlining the mistakes reviewers made, 'just for fun'.[37] One gets singled out here, when she writes that: 'One of the reasons why Gertrude Stein is a genius is because you are not supposed to think when you read.'[38] Harcourt's publicity department made light of this, but it does suggest part of Stein's success — that she attracted, for the first time, both thinking and unthinking readers.

Reviews for Lewis were also varied in tone and appreciation. Some, like Graham Greene, found in *Blasting and Bombardiering* some of the best World War I writing — visceral, unpolitical and emotionless. But those who did also found the literary gossip about Joyce, Pound and Eliot hardly enlightening. And those who wanted gossip — like Lewis's American publisher Morrow — found too

[37] Harcourt press release, Sept 20 1933, YCAL MSS76, Box 5, Folder 102.
[38] Harcourt press release, Oct 3 1933, YCAL MSS76, Box 5, Folder 103.

many long passages about book culture, politics, and 'the art-less society' that was such a major part of Lewis's approach (praised by Geoffrey Grigson in *New Verse*). Whereas Stein had attracted thinkers and non-thinkers, readers and non-readers, Lewis, in projecting himself as a condescending highbrow, seemed to alienate all readers. As one reviewer suggests, acknowledging that even those who had not read Lewis would be attracted to the book due to his renown: such readers would likely be 'irritated at the waste of intelligence and skill'.[39]

In Bernard Faÿ's review of Stein's *Autobiography*, he records her as once saying that 'all writers, good or bad, of a time try to sell themselves and to sell their souls. They do, but all of them do not succeed. It is not given to everybody to be cheap.'[40] The irony is that Stein succeeded triumphantly with her autobiography in ways that her critic, Lewis, simply could not.

[39] J.E.M.C., 'Over-Imposing Dust Cover', in *Western Morning News*, Dec. 30, 1937, p. 3.
[40] Bernard Faÿ, 'A Rose is a Rose', in *Saturday Review of Books*, September 2, 1937. This clipping can be found in Stein's papers (Beinecke MSS76, Box 5, Folder 103), but a corrected proof copy was also in her possession prior to publication (HRC box 59, Folder 3), and it is evident Stein had oversight if not input into the language of this early review, further helping shape her own public reception.

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