

As the contributions to *PMLA*'s Forum on interdisciplinarity show (111 [1996]: 271–311), literary scholars do not follow one route to their profession, and they are eager to declare the differences—which may include age, gender, race, country, region, education, character, outlook, sexual preference—that drew them to the ostensibly objective enterprise of literary studies but disposed them to practice it differently, to study different segments or areas of the common wordscape, or to bring to bear on it different mixes of disciplines. This procedure seems especially inviting as we recognize how little in the world depends on our readings' being "responsible." If our structures collapse, they will crush no bodies, and what we are searching for will never be as definite as DNA or a cure for cancer. All we need to succeed is approval by some court of reading peers, so, like courtiers, we have only to please and imitate the notables of the court we have elected to join, but to do so in a style that is marked by our own distinctive take on our subject and methods.

Except for one recent article, my own scholarship has rarely made use of the personal, but as I grow older and become less anxious about the correctness of the procedures I follow (this at least my essays have in common with the rule-breaking great late works of masters like Michelangelo and Shakespeare and Yeats), I find that to interject some personal reminiscence, observation, or judgment into an otherwise well-behaved argument or footnote may lend a pleasing casualness to the otherwise fairly methodical work I do. If I tell how I chose this topic, what serendipitous encounter with book or friend put me onto this approach, what headaches it gave me and mine, what I learned from the spaniel's howl or the plumber's retort, from the lightning strike or the misplaced voice, I am only following lines laid down by Augustine, Montaigne, Coleridge, Keats, Woolf (and Booth and Brée). All of them brought richly inflected lives to the texts or professions they mused on, and it has helped the rest of us to read more wisely that they declared some of their personal baggage at the gate.

Still, there are dangers, from which only the integrity and good sense of editors and publishers can protect us: that the scholar will be shamelessly self-indulgent in flaunting a past irrelevant to the immediate issue, will offer a personal reason for overlooking the obvious, or will succumb to the bad poet's temptation of believing that "anything interesting to me will be interesting to them." It's easy, too, for a scholar entranced with the personal genesis of a theory to regard this kind of support as outweighing the obligation to mention contrary evidence. Finally—take it from me!—the foregrounding of personal testimony may turn out to be nothing more than

an appeal to another kind of authority: my conclusions must be true because I believe them.

GEORGE T. WRIGHT

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Problems with Personal Criticism

In 1989 I entitled the preface to my *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa, and Carrington* (Routledge) "Personal Criticism: A Matter of Choice." In that book, I invited the reader to participate in "the interweaving and construction of the ongoing conversation this criticism can be." Personal criticism, as I thought of it, was not only about one's autobiographical self but also about a lived and written warmth of approach, opposite to the impersonal. It was not just confessional, did not imply more narcissism than any other criticism; it included and dialogued with the other. It did not spring like Venus fully from some seashell onto the text but rather evolved its own kind of knowledge as it went along. It was a speaking criticism whose rhythms sounded as truly as its substance. It was nearer to the politics of the personal than to the self-involved recounting of "my" personal history.

In the intervening years, it has become apparent that the word *personal* needs more work than the word *criticism*. I had envisioned a mosaic of interrelated artistic, personal, and working matters on which we could share our concerns, but there remained a ticklish distinction between first and second persons, singular and plural, the *I* and the *we*, neither necessarily including the other. Wanting out of the mere *I*, some of us had the disturbing realization that opting for a larger-scope pronoun did not guarantee a more generous criticism. Some of us had believed with the surrealists that changing a vocabulary might change things, at least partially. "Our world depends on our ability to enunciate it," we had said with Gaston Bachelard, and with André Breton we had thought that "the imagined turns out to be the real." And then suddenly we could no longer say it the same way: the personal-pronoun problem, singular and plural, still lurks at the heart of this matter, insoluble.

Yet what disabled me was the tentativeness in thinking and writing that had been bred in me. In the South I knew, we didn't talk of such things as alcoholic fathers, and relatives died in their rocking chairs instead of admitting they had not enough to eat. In my South, you didn't let on you had a brain. My grandmother, a fine artist, suggested I not use long words, my mother that I speak

less quickly, and my father that I not take money for a teaching job. On the publication of my first book, my family recommended that I write a thank-you letter to Princeton University Press for being so kind as to think of me. As I wrote book after book, a tentative style seemed to capitulate to this tradition, in which you didn't initiate but simply responded, preferably with a smile.

The me behind my writing turned out to sound (and thus be) soft-spoken, humble, welcoming, thoughtful, and thankful. Not acerbic or brittle or ironic or, indeed, anything I cared about being. There were two beings, me and the me I wished to write and be. I wanted to be at once passionate and compassionate, but I couldn't express my wanting in a form hard enough, certainly not in my 1983 Presidential Address to the MLA. My personalizing criticism seemed weak to me. It felt like a lesser form that knew it was lesser. I anthologized, I entertained other writers; instead of being a poet, I translated poets. Much of my activity appeared to me passive.

I did not see then that the nature of personal criticism is more related to the nature of the person composing it than to any historical reasons for the form's existence or to the criticism's concerns. To place it where it belonged might have meant placing myself where I didn't belong, even if that location was where I most desired to be. Eventually my brand of personal criticism felt out-of-date, outpaced, even out of place. I prepared a book on personal criticism for a university press and then rapidly withdrew it, as if I had overstepped a line drawn in some distant past. It all felt mauve, tepid, self-serving, self-important. . . . I had to reach out differently, not just in. We all do.

Now this discussion of the topic marks a renaissance. Now, I think, personal history doesn't have to be a constraint. Now at least and at last a personal criticism can join in a conversational criticism.

MARY ANN CAWS
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I first encountered the notion of personal criticism in summer 1988 at the School of Criticism and Theory at Dartmouth College. Two of the instructors, Mary Ann Caws and Nancy K. Miller, were engaged in reflections on the topic that would soon lead to two books, Caws's *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa, and Carrington* (1990) and Miller's *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (1991). The topic surprised me since the problem that had brought me to Hanover was the vexed issue of agency. How could the personal be developed as a concept in the face of persuasive arguments by theorists such as Louis Althusser and Michel

Foucault that subjectivity is discursively constituted? Answering this question was crucial to my completing *Masculine Desire* (1990), a study of Victorian literary tradition as a discourse in which aesthetics was used to articulate modes of desire between men. For me, the best answer to the question had been given by Teresa de Lauretis. Her concept of experience emphasizes, first, that "subjectivity is constructed" and, second, that personal agency does or does not come into existence as a result of an "interaction" occurring between the individual and processes of subject formation (*Alice Doesn't* [1984] 159).

What struck me about the discussion of the personal at Dartmouth was that it tended to suppress this double awareness, which seemed to me vital for theorizing individual and group praxis. Invoking the personal appeared to mean a retreat from hard-won insights in feminist and other critical theory (*Getting Personal* ix-x). As Miller indicates in the paper she presented at the school's colloquium, the turn to the personal occurred when feminist theory in dialogue with French deconstruction was on the defensive both because of liberal and conservative attacks in the press and because of questions raised by African American feminists such as Bell Hooks, Barbara Smith, and Barbara Christian. Indeed, Miller reports that another version of the paper, presented earlier in the year at a feminist conference at Queens College, City University of New York, had been negatively received (93-94). In the face of criticism that exposed racial, ethnic, class, and national fault lines within feminist politics, relatively privileged feminists turned to personal utterance as a form that, they assumed, would authorize itself on the basis not of cultural capital but of human authenticity. Speaking as "I" would provide relief from what Miller calls the "position of representativity," "the incantatory recital of the 'speaking as a's' (ix, x). The tactic succeeded neither at Queens nor at Dartmouth (96-97). Yet I would argue that personal criticism needs to be recognized as one tactic among others in the strategic deployment of what Foucault terms "reverse" discourses, attempts to adapt existing discourses to resistant ends (*History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 103, 102). It is on this ground, I believe, that the choice of a personal mode of critical writing should be made and that such a choice should be assessed.

David Halperin's decision to use a personal mode in *Saint Foucault* (1995), a book that aligns Foucault with the new field of American gay studies, is of special interest since Foucault was critical of the way the human sciences define the subjects and objects of knowledge. Foucault's reservations are also pertinent to Halperin's use of "I," "we," "us," and "he" to constitute the subjects

and objects of gay (and, subsidiarily, lesbian and queer) studies. At the beginning of the book, Halperin speaks as “I” about a legal dispute at his academic institution in which the plaintiff’s lawyer named Halperin along with others. I doubt whether this incident, charged though it was, provides as suitable a context for personal and group identification as, for example, the ACT UP “die-in” at St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic Cathedral in New York City on 10 December 1989 (*AIDS Demographics*, ed. Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, 129–42) or the circumstances surrounding the murder of the gay American sailor Allen Schindler in Sasebo, Japan, in October 1992. Moreover, on theoretical, ethical, and political grounds, the “subject” of the book, Foucault, resisted appeals to sympathetic identification. Accordingly, Halperin might have provided an account of why he decided to proceed in a fashion at odds with Foucault. Foucault argues that minority subjects are constituted in relation to modes of confession that at worst subjectify them and at best can be raised to the level of *parresia*, or philosophic truth telling. The *parresias*t, in Foucault’s life and prophetic final words, “lived his principles *to the point of scandal*.” It’s a daunting standard for those who choose and are chosen to be the subjects of personal criticism.

RICHARD DELLAMORA
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My fields of interest take strongly different positions on the personal in scholarship: in women’s studies, writing about one’s experience is honored, but in Slavic studies a distanced and carefully neutral persona speaks. Unsurprisingly, I am ambivalent about the issue, all the more so since I share postmodernists’ skepticism about the coherence of the self, as well as the unease historicists have when present-day notions of identity are imposed on eras with other views of self and voice. Yet I read successful interpolations of autobiography in scholarship, such as Svetlana Boym’s recent book *Common Places*, with fascination and admiration.

Common Places reflects on “mythologies of everyday life in Russia,” as its subtitle says, and its author understands how the self is mythologized. Are we always so canny in our personal scholarship? Much of what we claim as idiosyncratic is hardly special. Many experiences that autobiographical scholarship recounts feel familiar—job searches, tenure struggles, and the stinging criticism of one’s former mentors. Some of us have written about shared experiences of racism, heterosexism, motherhood, and grief, speaking to an audience that can be imagined nodding in agreement. That affirmation of connection and similarity is an important role for per-

sonal scholarship, one that broadens the range of emotions we allow ourselves to write about and brings into our discourse the politics of our differences.

Less directly personal scholarship can provide quirky alternative perspectives. Svetlana Boym’s bicultural experience allows her to distance herself from her subject matter and from the conventions of scholarship as well. Other successful examples share her departures from the forms and norms of scholarly prose, her willingness to experiment boldly in the performance of self, and her canny sense of what aspects of self are worth sharing. Oddly, the result is not especially self-centered writing. I particularly respect the work of Lydia Ginzburg, who wrote “notes” about people, events, and experiences in her long life—a life that ran from the heyday of Russian formalism through the end of the Soviet empire. She used her notes to reflect on other scholars, on the witticisms of poets, and on the chitchat of people standing in lines.

Ginzburg named Prince Viazemsky her predecessor in this genre, but I regard Pushkin’s *Table Talk* as an important model, for Pushkin also recorded others’ conversations to suggest allegorically his own views. Pushkin was experimenting with methods of writing history, as was Ginzburg. Like him, she was a master at indirect self-revelation, and her scholarship, including books on what she called “psychological prose” and the Russian lyric, show her astute grasp of the ways linguistic registers compose the forms of subjectivity. For Ginzburg, as for Pushkin and dozens of other remarkable poets and essayists, the prestidigitation of self-creation inheres in the rhetorical choices and narrative voices we invent.

What kind of history of ourselves are we writing in personal scholarship? We record our professional ambitions and anxieties as often as we reflect on how we came to write about a particular poem or film or dance performance, showing ourselves to live in times of scarce jobs. We write of our complicated and often conflicting connections to family members and friends. Many of our essays show us living in an age of loss and faltering celebration. In our proliferating modes of self-description and our rites of self-assertion, we have our own version of Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis,” but it has to do with self, not sex. We feel ambivalent about the theoretical integrity of the person, but the personal fascinates us. We write of the death of the author yet read eagerly the self-creating prose of our colleagues and consider identity, autobiography, and self-mythologizing intensely meaningful topics for our scholarship. These fascinations may embarrass us, but they show us where (and who) we are.

STEPHANIE SANDLER
Amherst College

That I'm the wrong person to evaluate the increasing personalness of literary criticism is revealed by a recent personal experience. I was invited to appear on national television. My hour's interview was downsized on the little screen to approximately seven seconds, making me appear less like a wise professor than an old dog snapping at a fly. Worse, I was presented to six million viewers under an unfamiliar name. Since I'm a victim of what seems to be three-fourths-heimer's, I have to wonder if ABC researchers discovered something about my identity I've forgotten. Anyway, a guy whose name is up for grabs looks a poor choice to explain autobiography.

Yet perhaps someone with an inadvertent *nom de TV* is appropriate for illuminating the paradox of *PMLA*'s soliciting personal responses to the encroachment of personal narrative into scholarly criticism. The dangers of the New Personalism, after all, were presciently dramatized by Dostoevsky's nameless Underground Man, who loathed himself, "for deliberately sinking into self-deception."

Our profession, like garbage collecting, is intrinsically belated. Poetry has long been diminished to personal lyricism, and most novels are now told in the first person. So why shouldn't our sixty-watt leading lights melt down criticism into self-advertisement? The difficulty, as their Dostoevskian progenitor explained, is that sensitive modern intellectuals can't tell the truth about themselves yet lack the artistic skill to make self-falsifying entertaining. But the monologues must not stop, lest real life intrude.

Having learned the merits of haste from ABC, I here summarize my insights under two eye-catching rubrics: The Devolution of the Profession and The Death of Art. During *PMLA*'s first sixty years, professors of literature normally presented themselves in print using the first person plural. "We" became problematic after World War II. Lionel Trilling's use of the pronoun began to make some readers queasy, and by the early 1970s academic critics had lost any sense of participating in a meaningfully shared professional enterprise. Just when we Emersonianly chose self-reliance, coincidentally there came to be fewer academic positions than young humanists, Emersonian or otherwise. The subsequent appearance each year of fewer new PhDs and even fewer job openings is an inevitable consequence of our deliberate turn from community to embrace a delusory star system. For our celebrities are so well known for being well known they have no time to foster professional conditions supportive of younger colleagues.

Concurrently, the death of art became, as we now say, inscribed as orthodoxy. Professional literary studies were founded in the nineteenth century on the premise that there exist writings distinguishable by their "aesthetic" qualities. That premise dismantled, professors of litera-

ture find themselves with nothing very interesting to place before their students. What we used to lay out was an apparently quiescent Shakespearean play or Keatsian ode that, poked and prodded judiciously, suddenly flashed back into life, sometimes striking its startled investigators to the heart.

This art (like everything else except a few recalcitrant unmentionables like the prostate gland) has been exposed by our cultural critics' brilliance as NOTHING MORE THAN A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT! Any text, therefore, will serve as grist for classroom or critical essay, and the gristier the better for displays of clever, if factitious, schematizing. We no longer invite the less experienced to follow our explorations of moral dangers in a lost world of resurrectable imaginings. We preach dogmatic implications of an ideological attitude or dissect the methodological consequences of the very, very latest universal theory. In a condition of such desolated abstractness the only simulacrum of real life is pseudoautobiography.

It is pseudo because we have institutionalized the Underground Man's mind-set. Publishers, conference organizers, and hiring committees look not for what aspirant humanists can say for themselves but for how they may be socioideologically "situated." The ingeniousness of the implicit exclusions in MLA job listings makes them a locus classicus (albeit an increasingly succinct one) of the negative quotas that dominate our employment practices today. What seems an autobiographical impulse is in truth a contorted masquerade of its opposite, the loss of meaningful individuality. Our critics speak personally not for a real self but for a self conceived as representative of an approved ideology, race, or sexual preference—self-stereotyped as a subaltern postdeconstructionist, a black male lesbian, and so on.

We fake individuality as critics because we no longer desire a professional commonality, and for social beings there can be no real individuality except through community. We want, and want to be, stars, which by definition are isolates. I stress our wishes, because our condition is not imposed from outside, not enforced by some larger necessity. Our situation is chosen, as is the Underground Man's. He lives in a "mouse hole," a setting that exposes the "oppositionalism" cultural critics claim justifies what might be taken for spiteful impotence. Mice are indeed oppositional, but in no socially significant way.

For three hours the Underground Man paces back and forth ten feet from his partying schoolfellows, who ignore him. "Wouldn't it be splendid to throw that bottle at them!" he thinks. So he seizes the bottle—and fills his glass. Thinking about *PMLA*'s query has made me appreciate how right Dostoevsky was (thank you, *PMLA*). We can't stand reality because we have lost humility,

formerly the foundation of scholarship. “Who on earth goes around displaying his sickness, even taking pride in it?” Good question, Fyodor.

KARL KROEBER
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Questions about the place of the personal in scholarship arise with particular timeliness in this decade, which has seen the appearance of a relatively new subgenre, the memoir as criticism. Examples include Alice Kaplan’s *French Lessons*, Ellen Zetzel Lambert’s *The Face of Love*, and Neal Oxenhandler’s *Looking for Heroes in Postwar France*. These books and others like them can stand as limiting cases as one ponders the mysterious rapport between subjectivity and scholarly research. I assume that there are others like me who don’t doubt the unconscious determinism guiding one’s choice of an academic project but who remain content to leave the determinative process unexplored. Lately, it appears, more scholars want to explore it.

This reemergence of the unabashedly personal might usefully be considered in historical perspective. The opening of the nineteenth century saw the efflorescence in England of the literary journal, one of whose main functions was to publish critical essays reflecting a given writer’s personal taste and judgment. The Whig *Edinburgh Review* (founded 1802) quickly had a competitor, the Tory *Quarterly Review* (founded 1809). The United States followed with *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic*. In the post-World War II world, a good deal of the literary action could still be found in analogous journals, such as the *Partisan*, the *Kenyon*, and the *Sewanee* in the United States, *Scrutiny* and later *Encounter* in England, and *Les temps modernes* in France. In journals like these the personal essay flourished: the essay, without footnotes and apparatus, was essentially what they purveyed. The decline in prestige and excitement of the nonprofessional literary periodicals in the sixties was followed (or produced) by the decline in the authority of the personal voice heard in the personal essay. That decline continues, and conceivably the emergence of the confessional-critical memoir may stem from nostalgia for the loss thus entailed.

Although vulnerable to charges of genteel amateurism, theoretical naïveté, and journalistic impressionism, those postwar periodicals contained occasional brilliance. Whatever its perceived failings, the personal essay did frequently register that experience which returns so often in autobiographical criticism—the impact of a text on an individual sensibility. None of the journals was ideologically neutral, but the essay remained essentially ungrounded. This was its limitation and its strength; it

claimed only the authority that its measure of intelligence and elegance could obtain from the reader.

My own publishing record (since we’re talking autobiographically) followed the trend. My first pieces appeared in the *Sewanee* and *Partisan* before I switched to *Comparative Literature* and *Shakespeare Quarterly*. But the values of professionalism and theoretical density that undermined the older value of subjective responsiveness carried a repressive weight that I must have felt even as I accepted them. The turn to critical life studies, the turn even to a kind of confessional flamboyance from the critic who has herpes, represents, as I view it, the return of a healthy particularity in our critical discourse, inoculating it against any tendencies toward an official, factitious, repressive objectivity. I quote one of Kaplan’s best insights: “Writing isn’t a straight line but a process where you have to get in trouble to get anywhere.” Her book traces the trouble and achieves a kind of cathartic clarity denied to most of us.

The new sort of risk run by the critical memoir lies in its collaboration with a much larger trend in contemporary scholarship: the dispersal of interest away from the text toward context, a dispersal hastened by the growing hegemony of cultural studies. To counter that risk, we need a discourse where text and context do not struggle for supremacy and where attention to context does not entail hermeneutic reduction as, I worry, a good deal of current scholarship does. For the text to be free from that threat, we would be obliged to effect a different restoration of the personal in scholarship, one that considers the text’s own personal voice. “La critique récente,” writes Yves Bonnefoy, “oublie d’examiner l’inscription que l’auteur essaie de faire de soi dans la turbulence verbale” ‘Recent criticism forgets to examine the author’s attempted self-inscription in the verbal turbulence.’ The author’s self-inscription remains an integral part of any work under study, and illusions concerning the death of the author, often entertained by those ignorant of this cliché’s original formulation by Roland Barthes, lead straight to more reduction. I reflect here of course the influence of a certain strain of early modern humanism. Ben Jonson, I still think, had it right: “Language best showeth a man; speak that I may see thee.”

Let there be then a return of that partly repressed element of personal experience in scholarly criticism, so long as it stops short of effusion. But let us also remember the auditory imperative requiring us to hear the text’s own personal voice in its precious singularity. That voice’s uncanny accents, its tricky mannerisms, its obsessions and torments help us to conflate our legitimate curiosity about context with what remains primary and essential for literary scholars. They also help us to hear ourselves.

Attending to that voice, we could best satisfy our nostalgia for the unpredictable transaction between two private sensibilities and achieve a profounder responsiveness in our versions of history.

THOMAS M. GREENE
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When I write a poem or story, I want to bring something of my own life's experience to the reader, but I hope at the same time to appeal to something in the reader's experience, actual or potential, that will enable us to connect with each other. I should not try merely to display myself for narcissistic gratification or to gratify the reader's prurient interest. The personal should not be simply personal. It rarely is, even in explicitly autobiographical writing. Writers always look for some larger meaning in their material, just as readers look for some insight not found in their own personal experience.

This is all the more so in scholarship. However, as I've grown older, the matter has come to seem more complicated to me. I will take a turn, then, and become personal—perhaps as a kind of test case.

When I was going out for undergraduate honors at Harvard during 1947–48, I wrote my thesis on E. E. Cummings. Choosing a dissertation topic several years later, however, I was told it would not be wise to do a doctoral thesis on a living writer. We are not talking here about the desire to be personal but simply about making a personal choice. I subsequently did write a number of books about Cummings, but still in the objective-scholarly mode. Finally I have begun to deal in print with my personal relationship with him, and now, in my seventies, I find I have much more to say about the powerful effect his work and person have had not simply on the exterior of my life and career but, more significant, on the interior: about how my image of myself and my life was affected.

Cummings is sometimes seen as failing to integrate his songs of innocence with his songs of experience, though his vision of transcendence often resolves this tension and though he was aware of the split and tried to come to terms with it. Thus Cummings's influence in this area can be somewhat misleading for a reader, and it was for me during adolescence and early adulthood. I had therefore to learn how to integrate innocence and maturity in part on my own, a task on which I am of course still embarked. If I write about my struggle, perhaps other readers' appreciation of Cummings can become more firm and discriminating. I am now able to see what it cost him to persevere on his chosen path, despite enor-



David Brody (b. 1958), *The Day I Painted Myself into a Corner*, 1993, oil on canvas and wood, 32" × 12" × 6" (81 × 30.5 × 15 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

mous outer and inner obstacles, and how he dealt with the cost.

In such considerations of an author, how can we make sure that we are not being merely personal? Where is the limit, and how do we find it? Let me hazard a test as follows: does writing about my struggle help the reader come to a firmer appreciation and understanding of the author, of a larger problem, or even of reality itself?

NORMAN FRIEDMAN
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Writing oneself into one's work is a task taken seriously by scholars who espouse a close connection between the subjective and the subject in contemporary research. I regard this act as a necessary contribution to scholarship, albeit one that must be practiced with suspicion, even of oneself.

As a cultural anthropologist influenced by literary, semiotic, and textual theories of analysis, I heed the words of my interlocutors with utmost regard, because any practice of speaking emanates from a sociocultural world worth noting and knowing. But in reporting the speech of others, I filter their words through my textual and analytical voice. Still, the ethnographic word, dripping with authoritative—and authorial—presence, is not the personal.

Perhaps the most immediate concern with the personal in scholarship—or at least the one that seems most troublesome—is related to rebuttal, dialogue, and other interactions in knowledge production. While some may argue that scholarship is not an equal interaction but a genre of communication that intends to silence other voices, the collegial, collective, and communal process of producing, evaluating, and disseminating knowledge is necessary to intellectual activity. The personal seemingly stifles this process by silencing the judgments and critiques of others. How are my evaluative peers to assess my scholarly work that is fastened to my experience of growing up in south Texas beneath the watchful eye of those whose views of Chicanos were blatantly racist? Could my peers write in their reviews that my account is incorrect and that I must reconsider my experience? How do they argue with my lived reality? We can dismiss the theoretical arguments of others as immaterial to a particular case, but it is more difficult to claim that lived experience, when used to verify a scholarly position, is invalid or irrelevant.

It is here that suspicion must enter. If we accept the notion that scholarship in the humanities is judged not on verifiability but on rhetorically rendered and persuasively fashioned argumentation, we must also be suspicious of attempts to anchor positions in personal experience without discussion.

If the personal should not serve to fix truth claims, what purpose can it serve? Is it merely a rhetorical device, a genre of postmodern writing that gives our work and presence feigned authority? I believe not. I invoke the personal not to establish my intellectual perspective but to position myself socially. The words and stories I bring to bear on a subject—like other kinds of narratives—index both my subjectivity and the social world from which it emerges. Like the accounts of my ethnographic interlocutors, the penned presence of this Chicano scholar *de San Antonio* paints a social world often overlooked and sometimes misunderstood. In writing myself into my work, I do not pretend to speak for all but try to write from a place worth noting and knowing.

RICHARD FLORES
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In the 1970s, when the personal came to be understood as political, problems that had once seemed private and individual—like one's relation to a lover or to one's mother—turned out under the scrutiny of friends to be susceptible of political analysis. Conversely, it became apparent that one's most abstract scholarly interests were thinly veiled inquiries into the dilemmas that haunted intimate life, the issues one dreamed about. As it became increasingly impossible to believe in objective investigation dissociated from the mind directing it, investigators made a virtue of necessity and began to put their cards on the table. Critics could suggest the longitude and latitude of their complicated subject positions if they told personal things about themselves—she was a Jewish lesbian with an adopted baby from China; he was a fourth-generation New England WASP, once divorced, now remarried, with two grown children. It was assumed that life circumstances influenced what critics looked for (or recognized instantaneously) in a text, although everyone conceded that readerly responses could be trained and retrained. For feminists, working from an experiential base had the added advantage of calling into question a male idiom dominated by techniques of distancing and abstracting that gave professional inquiry the illusion of neutrality.

As academic discourse became commodified, personal criticism was used less as a political strategy to acknowledge or challenge the special interests and blind spots of particular critics and more to service the cult of personality, the emerging star system in university life. Personal criticism became grist for the feature-story mill in a media-saturated culture always looking for something new and not too serious—profiles that showed, wryly, the ironies of living within the system. As academics spoke of “reaching a wider audience” and “writing accessible work,” the public turned into a market, and the success of one's writing or speaking was measured by the fees it earned rather than by its effectiveness in arguing for a political position or program.

By now, self-revelations have come to substitute for politics. Whereas in the 1970s “the personal is political” meant that the feelings and experiences of (female) individuals could be analyzed as part of a larger system of (gender) ideology, twenty years later the phrase (no longer applicable primarily to women) has come to mean that the personal is all there is of the political. Identity politics has replaced a movement for social change; naming one's difference too often takes the place of demanding social justice for all. And because critics who tell about themselves are presumed to risk something, we are less rigorous with them about the *So what?* factor.

My point is not that we should avoid the personal again but that we need to reconnect the personal to political

strategies and to engage in a political analysis of private meanings. As free public space shrinks at a frightening rate and our commonly owned resources are ruthlessly privatized—from airwaves to wetlands to libraries and schools—we must raise our personal voices to describe the loss and to reconstitute a noncommercial sense of *public*. Let us reconstruct our attenuated civic sphere as public intellectuals rather than further commodify the personal. We can afford the privatization of criticism no more than we can afford the privatization of any other resource.

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In *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature* (1995) and in a related essay that H. Aram Veesser included in his *Confessions of the Critics* (1996), I have aired my views about the culture of autobiography in contemporary literary criticism. Generally I am suspicious of the appeal of these life stories, which strike me as symptoms of the revolt against theory and as participants in the fetishization of storytelling, of anecdote, and of conversation now governing many in the humanities and social sciences. I am suspicious of the abandonment of critique in favor of immediate narratives (albeit often pastiches) seeking to reabsorb literary criticism back into literature. I am suspicious of the all-too-easy iconoclasm that declares writing about oneself to be somehow a radical gesture, as if it were not the hoariest and most traditional of all forms of modern literature and the one most comfortably located in the permitted fantasy space of the modernization process (autobiography is still of the subject even when reproduced as anxiety). Most of all I am suspicious of the “freedom” that some seem to feel in writing about themselves, as if it were not the narrowest of all freedoms and perhaps the hardest to make something of (hence the high level of boredom generated by these writings).

Not that testimony is itself a bad thing. Where would we be without Rigoberta Menchú, without Holocaust survivors’ painfully elicited memories and other such remembrances? There are times in history and in life when it is of absolute importance that someone come forth to say, “I was there, and this is how it was.” But we scholars are, thank goodness, seldom “there.” Most of us are rather alike, much less individual than we would perhaps like to be. It may be the fear of typicality that makes us our own Boswells. Or, of course, the desire for typicality. Or more likely, both: the desire for typicality *and* individuality—since, as intellectuals alienated from the mainstream, we wish to be neither completely different nor completely assimilated. Above all we want to justify ourselves and be justified (as a secularized priesthood,

changers of other selves and of the world, doers of some clear good). At a time when we have largely lost faith in the power of sheer thinking, of traditional critique, to do that job, testimony, self-revelation, letting it all hang out can come to seem viable efforts, almost, oddly enough, sacrificial. Personal critics can indeed be believed when they declare an anxiety about doing what they do, even as they hope to profit and win celebrity.

If we have, more or less, made a career, are making more or less (but never) enough money, and have had our round of conventional (and always historical while still deeply personal) human experiences—marriage, divorce, parenting, bereavement, and so on—what is left? Such are the questions of middle age. They are acute enough when we are worried (after Bourdieu) about engaging in reproductive and not radical behavior, when we are feeling more a part of an academic “corporation” than we ever thought we would, and when we have lost the model of group affiliation that came with the commitment to critique. The questions are acute enough to drive us to self-fashioning and self-interpellation. But the theater in which this drama is played out is not, I think, just that of the academy. It is the theater of what we still have to call life, imaged against death. Middle age has much to do with readying for (or denying) death. Death is what the project of modernity, most visibly in its Enlightenment incarnation, promised to defer or mitigate by offering a faith in progress, both of the individual (in one life) and of the species (through many lives). Now, in the middle of the road of our lives, we inhabit a (postmodern) culture in which the project of modernity is under considerable stress. What do we do about death when the traditionally preservative and memorializing function of culture has been flattened by a belief that there is an end of history, that experience is simulacrum or pastiche, and that the future of the species (as well as of the individual) is uncertain?

One response is to shout, *I am still here. I am me*. We are back in the realm of the voice, the realm rigorously deconstructed in *Of Grammatology* but never made to disappear, since Derrida himself recognizes the omnipresence and priority of the autobiography that depends on the privileging of the voice (*Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge [New York: Routledge, 1992] 34). The vehicle of this effect in modern culture is of course literature, in which we speak with the dead and bring them briefly back to life. So if we want to live forever by leaving, like the dying Keats, something of ourselves behind us or if we want to fight off death by an investment in the rhetoric of being alive, then it is to literature that we will tend to turn. How could one look back at one’s autobiographical work except like an aging movie star rerunning film

clips: that was me and will forever be me to others, even when I am gone? Commemoration may be the deepest of all motives behind the current efflorescence of personal criticism. It is not a motive to be taken lightly. But neither should it be exempted from critique. And critique might make us wonder why, in this place and time, we are thus preoccupied with death and why we see no other ways of handling that preoccupation. Are we trying to bring the book to life because we are living through the end of the book? the end of history? the end of “man”? In so doing are we helping or resisting this process?

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The four speakers in the session on the place of the personal in scholarship at the 1995 MLA convention presented four strategies for discussing the personal: conceding its elusive place, multiplying it, fictionalizing it, and minoritizing it. It might have been better to conclude simply that the personal is always suspect, subversive, subterranean—lost. Indeed, the main question of the session was disposed of as naive: something called “the personal” does not exist as such. If it does, it fails to keep its place, which in the 1990s is to provide a distinctive site for a wide variety of questions, ranging from the latest vicissitudes of the Cartesian subject to the continuing effect of gender on scholarly discourse. What I saw at the convention was the sort of thing Laurie Langbauer criticized in a review of the influential volume *Cultural Studies*, when she noted that we never “learn from the podium” about the mistakes of the contributors, “unless [the mistakes] are redemptive” (“The Celebrity Economy of Cultural Studies,” rev. of *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, *Victorian Studies* 36 [1993]: 469).

Let me give a personal example of a nonredemptive mistake. When I returned home from the convention, there was a letter from Carol Zuses, managing editor of *Profession*, replying to my request for the readers’ comments on an essay I had submitted to *Profession* 95 nine months earlier about the consequences to a department of having too many temporary faculty members. I had requested the comments four months before, after a fateful rejection letter. Zuses’s letter begins with “apologies for the delay.” Would I be taking it too personally if I wonder about the nature of these apologies? Surely I would. Zuses doesn’t mean them as personal. Indeed, she doesn’t mean them as apologies. She simply means to mark a location in which the personal would exist if it could, and, alas, it can’t in such communications, whose burden is ritualistically to lament their own sovereign character, before they proceed to ratify it.

But how should I comprehend the central problem with my submission? In addition to not being “constructive,” the essay was, it seems, “too localized . . . the account of a single faculty member’s reaction to a meeting that took place at a particular institution.” In other words, it was too personal. How personal is too personal? The answer depends on an authority, which presumes itself to be impersonal. If one is given enough authority, it is a pleasure to contemplate the question. Hence we get an MLA session, where the discourses, conventions, and even national contexts, in which anything personal must be embedded, are far more theoretically compelling than, well, vulgar personal matters. Meanwhile, away from the podium or MLA headquarters, the fundamental place of the personal in scholarship remains to anticipate, if not suffer, some accusation about its excess.

Let me risk being still more personal about the last point. I can’t be surprised at the readers’ comments. Department meetings appear in *Profession* too casually, if at all, and institutions such as mine scarcely appear at all, unless they reproduce the lofty professional concerns of large research institutions—schools that can still afford to have departments, where reside members who regularly occupy the pages of *Profession* as well as MLA panels devoted to, for example, the place of the personal, which now carefully include the personal experiences of one or two speakers with sexism and racism.

Yet it seems the personal must remain lost. Call it a matter of class. I’m reminded of a colleague who met her dissertation advisor at the convention. He said he was organizing a national conference on subalternity. I asked why he didn’t offer her a place. “I’m too subaltern to be subaltern,” she replied. She meant she doesn’t teach at a distinguished university and hasn’t published enough. Similarly, it seems to me, there are many people in lowly institutions whose departments are so overcome with specific problems of the profession that their experience never appears in the pages of *Profession*. It’s hard to write that experience as narratives of racism or sexism. It’s fated to be too personal.

So the experience is consigned to perhaps the most basic of the venerable typologies of the personal: the complaint. Mention a rejection notice, and you can only be understood as complaining. I was surprised that none of the MLA panelists at least remarked on this sort of thing; after all, any academic convention is full of woe—about insufficient time to do scholarship, lack of administrative support, and so on. Here is where the personal in scholarship abides, and is unredeemed. The distinguished panelists didn’t have to begin here and thereby

risk being personal, any more than did Zuses or the organizer of the subaltern conference.

Such emotions could be restored in the place of the personal in scholarship, along with a myriad of others heard in the halls. But not at the last convention, although the allowing of space for these letters in *PMLA* registers the pressure of the feelings. The place of the personal is not at a session where those who are institutionally empowered to speak are given witness by those who are institutionally relegated to listen or where those

on whom it falls to be theoretically astute purport to make common cause with those who remain experientially clumsy. The personal probably must be lost because at its place matters always threaten to become as scandalously simple as someone's experience of sitting in an MLA audience and feeling too personal to represent the personal.

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