Confessions of the Critics
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Confessions of the Critics

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Introduction

The Case for Confessional Criticism

H. Aram Veeser

Students are always shocked when they come upon their teachers out of school: incredible! The teachers actually have a life apart from the classroom! Rachel Brownstein asks you to remember the “delight and mischief and disbelief you first felt when your third-grade teacher turned up in a two-piece bathing suit at the beach. Why, that’s Mrs. Fisher—out from behind the desk, in a body!” This two-sentence anecdote encapsulates that peculiarly Western duty to pass everything to do with the body through the endless mill of speech. You saw, and suddenly you are exclaiming, “Why . . . !” Teachers today have not reversed the peristalsis and ceased to speak. They have come to appreciate the attention they suddenly command as soon as they slip into a body. That most austerely impersonal biographer, Arnold Rampersad, quipped during a recent talk at Columbia, “When in doubt, wax autobiographical.”

Until recently only the toughest critics dared to make the autobiographical move. Literary theory was against it. Conservative colleagues were against it. Personal critics themselves turned against it, chastising any “critic bold and clever and successful enough to shock and thrill by interposing her own body.”

Disapproval only eggs some people on. Stanley Fish allowed his own publisher to bill him as “the Roseanne Barr of the professoriate,” and Jane Gallop dubbed herself the “bad girl” of feminist theory. They knew they were outsiders.
Nowadays, autobiographical criticism has come into general use. Granted, the autobiographical segment may occupy no more than forty seconds of a forty-minute talk. But the audience will ask questions only about the forty seconds. Autobiography triggers their startle reflex. But is that good? Or is it bad?

The present volume brings together accomplished writers who consider the validity of subjective interpretation; the fashioning of critical selves; professorial isolation, embodiment, and personification; autobiographical moves in a postcolonial and global frame; historical representation; collective process writing; and the politics of performance. They enact self-writing and personal criticism in several genres: travel writing (Greenblatt), science writing (Bérubé), postcolonial deconstruction (Spivak), cultural Marxism (Robbins), African-American literary historicism (Andrews), oral history in Marxist feminism (Newton), and performative pedagogy (Tompkins).

“Confession is but poor amends for wrong, Unlesse a rope would follow”
—Dekker, Roaring Girl, 3.173

A critical practice that breaks long-standing rules is bound to encounter resistance. In this volume, anti-expressivist, radical-Left, psychoanalytic, and high-culture critiques of autobiographical criticism all get an airing:

1. No one will listen to anyone if one has interest only in expressing oneself.3

2. Confessional criticism builds on the hypothesis of liberal authenticity. “I felt it, therefore it is true,” parodies David Simpson.4

3. The corollary—native identity politics, is invoked. Simpson paraphrases, “I felt it. I am white. Therefore, this is what white people feel.”5

4. Yes, everyone has subjective reactions to literature, and our job as professional interpreters is precisely to overcome those reactions and move beyond ordinary personal responses (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese).

5. Autobiographical criticism has sanctioned criticism without texts. It has “interrupted reading,” and reading is our day job (Brownstein).

6. Autobiographical critics are self-indulgent in their “naked display of . . . complacent exhibitionism” (Fox-Genovese). The response from Jane Tompkins: “Self-indulgence is the charge made by people who are afraid of their own selves.”6

To these six antiexpressivist complaints, the contributors add Leftist, psychoanalytic, and high-culture critiques:
(7.) Critics are retreating into a genre wherein (unlike the theory genre) ques-
tions of accountability and indebtedness to the public rarely arise (Altieri).

(8.) Autocritographers are playing the Romantic poet, recollecting in tran-
quility a moment of ungoverned excess (the moment of Theory). They pro-
mote a conservative ideology.7

(9.) We know that we cannot simply articulate our drives—psychoanalysis
would not exist if we could—so who are we trying to kid? (Pecora)

(10.) Autobiographical criticism includes “a chummy implicit appeal to let go
of pretensions to talk about anything higher” (Brownstein).

(11.) No one can hear anyone if everyone is talking at once.8

And I would add for future discussion:

(12.) Confessional criticism means drafting new rules for judging scholarship,
ranking journals, and preserving decorum, etiquette, and style.

(13.) The qu'en dira-t-on critique. “Giving the public details about oneself is a
bourgeois temptation that I have always resisted,” writes Gustave Flaubert,
1879.9 But every social class now fields its autocritographers. Anthony Appiah
descends from Ghanaian kings and Linda Orr from South Carolina governors,
and Candace Lang misspent her adolescence racing her father’s yachts. Gloria
Anzaldúa came from a migrant laboring family, and Ruth Behar’s folks were
Cuban exiles. Patricia Williams’s grandmother was chattel and Williams can
produce the bill of sale. Your move, Gustave.

(14.) The social need for hypocrisy argument. “His Confessions are an attempt
to force the hands of God and humanity, to confess that all are equally bad,”
Stephen Spender said of Rousseau. “Better than this the secrecy of the confes-
sional, in which each person reveals his shame, without challenging the
appearances that make up the decent hypocrisy of society.”10

(15.) The Rightist critique. An overpaid army of arrivistes and drones, who
abuse their cultural guardianship by celebrating everything crude, lumpen,
and de trop, would have the final Neroesque pleasure of teaching only books
written by themselves, about themselves. Hard hearts on the Left—Fox-
Genovese in this collection—would agree.

(16.) The critique from social and intellectual superiority. Sara Suleri dis-
misses other people’s confessional criticism as a mode in which “radical sub-
jectivity is raised to the power of inanity or functions as an excuse for
intellectual shoddiness.”11 Her own prose is a frightening alternative. Consider
this opaque example: “The unsequestered writing that I pose as a counter-
point takes autobiography as a strategy of dismantlement that dispenses with
such dichotomies as public and private or inside and outside in order to position itself at the border of outsidedness.” Sentences like that one, whatever the truths they may conceal, bring to mind Professor Irwin Corey, the double-talk artist whose act consisted in making himself incomprehensible.

(17.) The critique from ennui. Contributor Charles Altieri points out that Frank Lentricchia’s life, Nancy Miller’s (another founding figure of personal criticism), and Altieri’s own are quite frankly boring. “The shaping events are so common, so interchangeable with events in other parallel lives” that “critics’ autobiographies do not serve to highlight anything. They serve to bury something” (Altieri).

(18.) The critique of evasiveness: Altieri accuses autocritographers of burying questions of accountability. Alice Kaplan tells interviewer Scott Heller that her book is all about secrets. “The big emotional issue was secrets and hiding.” Gillian Brown cites another evasion: “In the present ethos of anxiety and controversy about authority, critical discourse now often entails showing some kind of identity papers: not actually an admission about oneself but a credential composed of personal matter.”

Have I mentioned yet that in 1984 I went to Nicaragua for three weeks to pick coffee for the Sandinistas?

(19.) The critique of Power. Foucault’s mordant History of Sexuality calls into question the whole confessional enterprise:

one has to be completely taken in ... in order to believe that all these voices ... —repeating the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is thinking—are speaking to us of freedom. (60)

By these lights the autobiographical-literary establishment is completely taken in. Phillipe Lejune’s very influential Pacte autobiographique is notable for its “quasi-legalistic language of contracts, rights, obligations, promises, expectations, and pacts” (Olney, Introduction, 17–18). Phillip Lopate can simply assume, in his recent anthology The Art of the Personal Essay (Doubleday, 1994), that in each of the collected essays “a contract between writer and reader has been drawn up: the essayist must then make good on it by delivering, or discovering, as much honesty as possible” (xxv). Foucault would have raised his bleached eyebrows skeptically.

“I must tell the children about my body!” A Mrs. Fisher-à-la-Foucault would insist on telling all, perhaps with charts.

The contributors disagree about Foucault and the purgative power of confessing. They disagree as to whether autobiography “deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores” and prolongs life. They even dis-
agree about one’s simple ability to tell the truth. “Who, finally, ever writes the memoir that reveals what must remain hidden?” asks Vincent Pecora.

But why write autobiographical criticism if not to purge guilt, secure reputation, achieve community, or reveal verity? Why read it if not to overhear intimacies or absolve sinners?

What does the confessional critic want? This question, mutatis mutandis, stumped Freud. One may hazard this: confessional critics reject polarities. They replace a process with an erotics. They recreate the gorgeous iconoclasm of performance.

1. The autobiographical critic wants performativity.

Confessional critics no longer accept the antithesis between expressive, “process” writing and objective, logical thinking. They practice an art that falls somewhere between writing and performance, an art much akin to the erotics envisaged by Roland Barthes: “The intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing: ... it is this flash itself which seduces or rather: the staging of appearance and disappearance.” Contributor Gillian Brown draws attention to the “hide-and-seek quality of critical personification”; Diane Freedman and Marianne Hirsch discuss the vanishing and reappearance—in photography or poetry—of the unmarked gendered subject; and Michael Bérubé develops further the concept of oscillation as described by reader-response criticism and feminist film theory. The mood was caught years ago by David Lodge when, in his 1984 novel Small World, he had Morris Zapp (a.k.a. Stanley Fish) deliver a paper entitled “Textuality as Striptease.” Then it was satire. Today it is realism.

If confessional criticism “seduces,” it also “performs.” “Performativity” made its spectacular and disruptive entrance as “die-ins” and theatrical “outness.” It conversed with ordinary language philosophy and deconstruction; the topic was “iterativity.” “Mobilized by the injuries of homophobia, theatrical rage reiterates those injuries,” writes Judith Butler. Bérubé gives new meaning to “performativity” when he takes over and corrupts some preexisting roles:

we look something like a cross between Johnny Rotten and Cotton Mather: just take the Sex Pistols’ political tact and respect for authority, toss in the Puritans’ good cheer and sense of rhythm, and presto, you’ve got Rotten Mather, assistant professor of English, thirty years old and not to be trusted.

He reiterates damaging complaints and makes them sound ridiculous: “Amniocentesis, sonograms, Apgar ratings, laryngomalacia, polycythemia, torticollis, vertebral anomaly, scoliosis, possible sepsis; don’t you despise all this barbaric jargon?” (Bérubé). He dredges up the historically destructive textbook images
of Down's syndrome children “facedown in their feeding trays.” Irony such as Greenblatt's in the riotously funny “Laos is Open” presupposes a certain superiority to the situation, whereas performativity implies a certain disadvantage. Each member of the Duke writing group limbers up by writing a parody of her own style. Is parody exhibitionist, inane, bourgeois, evasive, and shoddy?

These judgmental terms make no sense. Parody can be well-performed or badly performed; that is all. “The performative utterance, like the live performance event and the sexual union of two same-sex people, cannot be repeated or reproduced,” according to Peggy Phelan, Department of Performance Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. “Same-sex lovers live in the present (rather than take stock of one's reproductive legacy).” By contrast, Marxism, deconstruction, and New Criticism have (or had) big ambitions; they want to succeed not just on this text but on any text.

Confessional criticism takes its tempo from performance art. Split Britches' lesbian performance piece, “Upwardly Mobile Home,” captures the rhythm. Everything is temporary, one-shot. What you write about King John will not help you to write about Richard II. “To say ‘my body;’ wrote Adrienne Rich, “reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions.” Performativity, too, eschews the grandiose and embraces the body. “Where is Indonesia, Professor Baker, unless in the sole of your shoe?” demands Amitava Kumar.

The humility topos allowed the socially untouchable Horace to attain every reward a Roman poet could win. Houston Baker may wear a humble Nike shoe, but he stands atop the global ladder of labor.

Is autocritography merely, then, a faux performativity? “Within the political economy of performance, writing is always on the side of the Law,” writes Phelan, performance being on the side of the Outlaw (23). Deconstruction has nagged for twenty-five years that writing eviscerates the present: that is why it is a dangerous supplement. Writing hordes up, preserves, reproduces, cites and re-cites; like heterosexual fornicators, it has one eye on posterity. Even if it rarely feels like an operation of power, writing seeks to preserve “the beauty and folly of performance [which is] its insistence on the power and fullness of the present as such” (Phelan, 24). Writing diverts its attention to its own afterlife, whereas performance lives its present.

But the written format of these “confessions” is not fatal to their performativity. Behind autobiographical criticism stand those eminently performative writing traditions, namely the theory (not so much the practice) of écriture féminine, and pedagogical theories of expressive writing.

French feminists defended a style of writing that disrupted “masculine” norms of usage and logic. “Erection doesn't interest us: We're fine in the lowlands,” writes Luce Irigaray, in her credo for French theories of écriture. Écriture féminine had much in common with a confessional criticism that hates
pouring itself into molds. Confessional criticism is the writing practice, moreover, of a gendered subject. It puts back on the table the question of whether a particular sort of writing can be assigned to the biologically female subject. Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, each in her different way, said “No.” Jane Tompkins has said “Yes.” “[W]hat is perceived as personal by men, or rather, what is gripping, significant, ‘juicy,’ is different from what is felt to be that way by women,” writes Jane Tompkins. And though Tompkins has since changed her mind, that earlier manifesto positions sexual difference as the irreducible premise of autobiographical criticism.

Expressivist composition pedagogy—the “process” theory of writing—also defended the rights of the weak, including the open-admissions students who flocked to public universities. Expressivism embraced the idea that writing was a gendered practice. The early expressivist gurus, Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie, considered outlining and formulaic argumentation to be oppressive, patriarchal norms. Elbow parodies a writer filled with fear that “my mind will grow soft and limp, it will atrophy; it will finally fall off. No! I’ll have high standards. I’ll be rigorous. I’ll make every argument really stand up” (33). He shows how fully male performance anxiety—“growing soft and limp,” losing “rigor,” wanting to “really stand up”—underwrites traditional writing instruction.

Expressivism has all sorts of problems. Susan Jarratt astutely observes that Elbow could not so readily “come out” as a woman writer were he not an established masculine author. Elbow’s farcical enactment of male performance anxiety would convince most of us that Elbow really has no anxiety at all. Expressivism gained prominence in the seventies, when even radical feminists were prepared to accept a sex-determined basis for behavior; when Nancy Chodorow could write that young girls have “more flexible or permeable ego boundaries,” and Sheila Rowbotham could argue that women have had to identify themselves with groups “instead of viewing themselves as unique individuals.” Performativity assumes no essences. Rather, acts of writing “effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal.” Autobiographical critics enact selves in the same way legislators enact laws.

Confessional critics have avoided the failings of “process.” The “naked display of complacent exhibitionism,” hopelessly emotional readings of literary texts, patently overconfident but really naïve self-analyses, the flushed excitement of writers bursting through blockage: Elbow, Macrorie, and Donald Murray may leave themselves open to these charges, but confessional critics avoid sophomoric excesses even while they redouble the expressivists’ radically democratic, risk-taking honesty.

But if confessional criticism escapes the various essentialist and identityian fallacies as well as the risk-free, self-aggrandizing, Elbowesque “confes-
sion” of frailty, does it simply fall into another worn-out attitude, that of pervasive modernist irony? Irony crops up with unnerving frequency. Noting that “heterosexuality is regarded as an embarrassment,” Judith Newton concludes that “the irony of this reversal in an obscenely homophobic culture is something to savor.” Charles Altieri notes that the autobiographical critic “steps into the ironic condition.” And Greenblatt’s outrageous “travel” piece here piles irony upon irony. The designers of the River View Hotel in Vientiane had little experience of indoor plumbing, he observes, for “how else to explain the quaint decision to place the toilet in the bathtub?” Irony comes in many shades; one of the contributors has written a book about them. Here it serves most often to deflate posturing, pomposity, and Brobdingnagian theory-speak. It is a new skill that, like e-mail, everyone will soon want to have.

2. The autobiographical critic wishes to tell anecdotes.

Confessional critics deny that a critic has to opt for chilly analysis or gritty texture, but not both. Performative criticism signals an end to the era when critics searched for what Bruce Robbins has called “allegories of vocation”—wishful thinking of the sort that identifies Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre as an antitype or prefiguration of the late-twentieth-century feminist literary critic. Rejecting grandiose Hegelian unfoldings no less than the faddish fetishizing of Geertzian local knowledge, confessional criticism is fashioning a written performativity that eroticizes disclosure and concealment.

One relic of the New Historicism has floated down to autobiographical critics. They cling to the anecdote. The anecdote assumes new theoretical importance when, Joel Fineman has theorized, the “large story of the exigent unfolding of beginning, middle, and end no longer carries an urgency,” and the appetite for stories must be satisfied by the anecdote: “the event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity ... the hole and rim—using psychoanalytic language, the orifice—traced out by the anecdote within the totalizing whole of the story....” The seductive opening of the anecdotal form can operate as “a breaking and a realizing interjection within the encyclopedically closed circle.” Tradition operates here, too: anekdota meant “secret,” “unpublished,” “risqué.”

Autobiographical criticism uses the anecdote as a sluice gate for alarming emotions rather than, as in New Historicism, to provide a “representative instance.” In Tompkins’s “Let’s Get Lost,” the students take trips to Okracoke and to an old Southern plantation in order to act out what they have felt in reading Moby Dick and Beloved. She herself focuses on Ahab’s “inimitable hate, so abundantly thorough and satisfying.” “It was Ahab’s hate so eloquently expressed” that determined Tompkins’s own choice of career. Literature and life take on an immediate connection, and certain incantatory quotations,
such as “breaking open the heart’s hot shell” of hatred, move language toward a sort of dithyrambic violence that makes the post-Dachau, post-Sabra-and-Shatila world understandably nervous. In an equally uncensored moment, Judith Newton, Marxist feminist and founder of Feminist Studies, confesses “a certain weariness of twenty years in mainly female communities, a liking for progressive men, the heterosexual erotic”; and Timothy Brennan, who wrote the first book about Salman Rushdie, collected the “Writing of Black Britain,” and defined Latin America’s revolutionary “national longing for form,” makes a startling homage to white, midwestern “fanaticism.” These authors hand us anomalies and say: “You explain it.”

Certainly there is something troubling about a personal criticism that gives transcendentally moving performances of execrable emotions. That is its point. Vincent Pecora writes that “the biggest villains” of Alice Kaplan’s French Lessons, namely fascist intellectuals from the 1940s to the 1980s, possess “an excess of strong emotion, welling up from the gut, utterly transparent as to personal interest, and spewed forth directly at Jews and any other ‘inferior’ group.” Do we want, he asks,

figures like Bardeche [the French holocaust revisionist and fascist] to be more in touch with what they feel? Or do we want them to think, calmly and rationally, about the evidence, about history, about how dominated they have been by emotional lives that are out of control?

Though Pecora plays devil’s advocate, one must hear echoes, here, of the Dworkin and MacKinnon antipornography campaigns. First Amendment fundamentalists like me will cautiously hazard this: Better to “spew” in a book than to burn up a Reichstag.

Anecdote cuts a channel from mind to sensation, and is useful for intellectuals who ordinarily keep emotions to themselves. Professors learn to “love loneliness,” as David Damrosch has recently argued. “I didn’t realize until I tried to write [French Lessons] what an intellectual I had become and how unused I was to expressing emotions,” Kaplan remembers. Confessional criticism may well provide “a solution, a ritualized resistance” of the sort that Simon Frith attributes to pop music. Intellectuals may enjoy rock music neither as a “fond look back at adolescence” nor a flaunting of proletarian roots, but rather because it expresses “the deep desire of intellectuals not to be intellectual.”

Readers will no doubt object that Western philosophy has no more hoary polarity than the one that positions intellect opposite emotion. Confessional criticism has the signal virtue of unsettling any certainty that the writer knows that s/he is evoking powerful emotions. Eve Sedgwick uses the vocabulary of gay sadomasochism to describe an autobiographical passage in Henry James. But one can hardly imagine James writing, even in his private Notebooks in
California, something so crude that it could be dubbed, in Sedgwick's words, "fisting-as-écriture":

I sit here, after long weeks, at any rate, in front of my arrears, with an inward accumulation of material. . . . Everything sinks in: nothing is lost; everything abides and fertilizes and renews its golden promise, making me think with closed eyes of deep and grateful longing when, in the full summer days of L[amb] H[ouse], my long dusty adventure over, I shall be able to plunge my hand, my arm, in, deep and far, and up to the shoulder—into the heavy bag of remembrance—of suggestions—of imagination—of art—and fish out every little figure and felicity, every little fact and fancy that can be to my purpose. These things are all packed away, now, thicker than I can penetrate, deeper than I can fathom, and there let them rest for the present, in their sacred cool darkness, till I shall let in upon them the mild still light of dear old L[amb] H[ouse]—in which they will begin to gleam and glitter and take form like the old and jewels of a mine. (James, quoted in Sedgwick 208 n. 33)

And yet, having read Sedgwick, one wonders, "Could James really be saying that?" Confessional criticism regularly encourages just such readerly speculations, an inward tango danced between corrupt knowingness and jejune naiveté.40

A sublimated erotics boils in the most innocent-seeming accounts. Growing up white in segregated Virginia, contributor William Andrews used to see the family housecleaner but rarely heard her speak. Occasionally he overheard her singing, but she stopped whenever she noticed him. It was this state “of simultaneous visual connection and aural isolation” that made him eager to pick up books by Du Bois, Chesnutt, and other African-American writers. “Reading African-American autobiography that semester became a way for me to reconsider the accumulated memories, the unresolved confusion, the still unexamined lessons of a lifetime of segregation.” Against the expectations and desires of white society—his mother’s refrain “But why the colored, Bill?” captures the mood—Andrews made African-American literature more than a successful career. He made it a commitment.

Half-buried private emotion pokes up through remote Apollonian theorizing. Frank Lentricchia’s magisterial After the New Criticism cannot fully inter his zany, performative The Edge of Night. Interviewer Jeffrey Williams elicits another such moment. “I took ten years trying to write [36 Views of Mount] Fuji and couldn’t figure out how I wanted to do it,” Duke professor Cathy Davidson tells him. “And then I brought in this section about sleeping in a flophouse when I was sixteen and how this reminded me of sleeping in a Zen temple the first time I was in Japan. And the group said, That’s it, you’ve got it, that’s the book.”41
It would be nothing to convert all this to a portrait of intellectual exhaustion painted with one tired foot atop Theory and the other crushing down Politics. This tableau would cancel the most exciting interpretive opportunities that autocritography offers. Autobiography shapes itself within larger theoretical projects, but the larger projects continue in force. The excitement comes when the reader can detect bridges connecting the two. An example is Henry Louis Gates, Jr., whose memoir of Piedmont, West Virginia, reinforces his larger contention that black writers look primarily to each other for models and opponents. Replete with his youthful Uncle Earl, the recherché Sneakin' Deacon, who visits his female parishioners late at night; the six austere Coleman brothers, who lust after property and drink nothing stronger than iced tea; and Gates's own restless search for the perfect hair straightener, his decision to be saved, and his initiation in the mystery of Piedmont bologna—Colored People taps into every surface emotion and Artesian drive that courses through Gates's natal Appalachian backwater.

These refluent memories do not interrupt so much as they illustrate, enable, and empower Gates's larger academic project, which is to discover the true African-American rhetoric and to describe the whole linguistic and cultural system that he began laying out in The Signifying Monkey. Gates's larger theoretical project enfolds the two-hundred-page anecdote that is Colored People and yet is itself "inspired by the seductive opening of the anecdotal form." Gates has said that other critics amply study white influences on black authors. He wished to show that African-American writers study, acknowledge, and answer each other. Gates's autocritography about growing up in segregated Piedmont helps to locate and historicize his literary theories. The Cut-Rate drugstore where only whites could sit down, Up the Hill, Colby Carroll's barbershop, Big Mom, Uncle Earkie, Miss Toot, the Fearsome Four-some, Skip Gates himself: all the staging, blocking, and character-acting leave little question that life, like criticism, asks to be played, not just "expressed."

The essays in this book offer many opportunities to discern the links that connect anecdote to career project. A gangster grandfather has some relationship to Robbins's left-wing defense of literary critical professionalism. Lang's "self" acquires its uncomfortable ambivalence about feminism and feminist criticism and its pleasure in deconstruction because she learned, early, to master big machines. The anecdotes and the careers: an arbitrary connectedness? Or a causal chain? That is for the reader to decide.

3. Critics wish to retain artistic control over their own self-staging.

The easy antithesis of celebrity and invisibility comes under equally devastating attack. Our academic "star system" has been variously savaged and
celebrated; so has our academic marginality.\textsuperscript{42} But this division of the academic landscape into an inside and an outside, center and margin, onstage and offstage, has had its day.

Instead, critics in this collection place themselves “betwixt and between.” They repeatedly emphasize physical locations of scenes of initiation. Brennan locates Latin America, the source of his radical priest uncle’s letters, as the site to work the “transformation of the bohemian impulse to a usable politics.” Davidson recalls that the Duke writing group subjected her to “a sorority hazing”; these four nonsmokers also tend to light up and, thus, to heighten the ritual aspect of their weekly sessions. Robbins shuttles between the Belmont racetrack and Harvard Yard, inhabiting a kind of middle earth that he calls cultural Marxism; in that corridor, he can affirm loyalty to where he has been (to his lower-class origins—this is the Marxism) and loyalty to where he wished to go (to fruitful, interesting \textit{cultural} work).\textsuperscript{44} Amitava Kumar places himself in a succession of transitory sites—a taxicab, the University of Pennsylvania interview suite, the JFK Airport customs shed. Even the hotel room is “more like being at a foreign airport” because “I was utterly ignorant of the world that now confronted me,” a world where “I wasn’t yet beginning to hear words as words” and where one might confuse the sign for “bus” with the sign for “bags.” Pecora imagines academic life as sort of pilgrimage, as “a search for the parent (traditionally the father) that one believes one should have had from the start.” Greenblatt takes an ironic view of his “small twin-engine Chinese plane” that could not get above automatic-rifle range. It “grew tremendously hot, the cabin filled with smoke—just normal condensation, we were told—and several passengers became violently ill.” Moving between margin and center requires some risk. An “origin was staged for [Gayatri Spivak]” by a psychoanalyst in France, the “foreign place” most appropriate “because [there,] a ‘proper’ analysis could not take place.” Once outside the gravitational pull defined by “foreign” and “origin,” instruments like psychoanalysis begin to function improperly.

Liminal spaces, pilgrimages, secured locales where secret knowledge changes hands—such \textit{topoi} suggest that Victor Turner and kindred ritual theorists, important to early New Historicists such as Louis Montrose, have had a surprising resurgence. Thus, “Turner’s model of social drama and ‘liminality’ provides a handy conceptual model for the study of exile—or border crossing ‘betwixt and between,’” writes Mae G. Henderson (5). The liminal “traveler” must literally cross a threshold in order to move from preliminal to postliminal status. Between these fixed status-positions, the passenger enters a cultural “limbo,” where the “blurring and merging of distinctions” permits the subject to “pass through a place or period in which [s/he] experiences freedom from the constraints of normative or oppressive social structures” (Henderson, 5). Turner finds tremendous creative potentiality in many societies’ protected
opportunities for "standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements."45

Henderson ascribes liminality to exiles, emigres, refugees, and expatriates, perhaps because her book must be faithful to its title, Borders, Boundaries, and Frames. And yet Turner was largely concerned with internal exile. His hopes for antistructures (he wrote enthusiastically about hippie communes!) evolve within a single culture. They thrust against that culture's constraints. Judith Butler stresses the creative and constructive side of Turner's oppositional antistructures. “[V]arious acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Butler, 273).46 The liberating, antistructural moment comes, then, when a person appropriates socially established acts and repeats them subversively. Ice-T, Madonna, M. Butterfly, and Split Britches all subvert norms by repeating them with a difference.47 In the process, these marginals make themselves culturally central.

The critique of academic celebrity and would-be centrality has come from all sides. From the Left, Laura Kipnis has trashed the "hypervisibility" of "the ideological category of the subject."48 On the comparative Right, one finds Peter Brooks:

A recent trend toward the personalization of criticism, indeed toward the cult of the critic's personality, seems to me regrettable, a kind of academic version of the postmodern replacement of personhood by celebrity—as if one did not really exist until celebrated in People magazine.49

But is autobiographical criticism really about hypervisibility, celebrity, and the play of signification? I think not. Critics want, rightly, to make themselves objects of desire, interest, public fascination. Why indeed should they write if their work blooms in the forest unseen?

Yet if visibility were equivalent to power, then young, nearly naked women would run the state—clearly not the case.50 Autocritographers know the technologies of the visible; many would accept Lacan's theorem that the object of desire remains potent only when veiled. To remain desirable, the object must remain inaccessible. It must remain ungotten. That is a given. It brings me to the critic as transvestite.

Marjorie Garber’s figure for the category-crisis-inducing, partly known object of desire is . . . the transvestite. The transvestite willfully creates a third space beyond the masculine/feminine dichotomy, the homo/hetero binary, the real/artificial antithesis, the onstage/offstage dualism. To take one small example, Dee Snider, male lead singer of Twisted Sister, was voted one of the worst-dressed women of 1984.51

Garber develops, in her article for this volume, a “logistics of competitive desire.” Her example is the country auction, where she and her partner decline
to buy, among other commodities, a large green bronze garden frog. “Part of the fascination . . . comes,” she explains, “with the act of displaying whatever the item is—a rug, a table, a pair of andirons. It is held up for admiring scrutiny for as long as the bidding lasts.” Could this be our allegory of vocation—the auction? Every critic held up for display? “It’s a rule of thumb that everything, however bulky or improbable, gets displayed; if it’s a set of eight chairs, all eight are held up, two to a person.” Not just Alice Kaplan or the slender Jane Tompkins, but even the bulking Lentricchia and the slippery de Man: all are held up for view. Autobiographical criticism oscillates, then: one minute an elegant, finely crafted piece by Tompkins or Bérubé; the next minute an inelegant grotesquery—a pompous self-promotion or a weepy complaint. The present collection excludes all large green frogs.

What does this image, the critic-as-cross-dresser, suggest? Not that autobiographical criticism tells the truth, is authentic, represents an ethnos, speaks for a gender, makes criticism accountable, or repays critics’ debt to society. But not that it is complacent, exhibitionist, chummy, professional, hostile to reading, arrîviste, de trop, or a “betrayal of personhood,” either. It appears to be fun, “but ultimately nothing,” Garber warns, “is free” (Vested Interests, 161). The auctioning and hawking of critics’ selves yields what Garber’s country auction yields: “Another good lesson in the arbitrariness of desire.”

Confessional criticism stages the anxieties that suffuse all forms of contemporary criticism. It has unsettled the firm dichotomies of expressivism and objectivity, petite histoire and grand récit, celebrity and invisibility. It has stage names galore: “plebeian autobiography” (Jill Johnston); “autocritography” (Henry Louis Gates, Jr.); “sequestered criticism” (Sara Suleri); and integrative writing (Marianna Torgovnick).\(^\text{52}\) It divides itself into parts; Nancy K. Miller’s centrally important book distinguishes autobiographical from personal criticism, the latter of which requires no autobiographical self-representation. It has incarnations that range from brief codas and cameos (D. A. Miller’s Cage aux folles and Stephen Greenblatt’s Renaissance Self-Fashioning) to full-scale experimental autobiographies (Carolyn Steedman’s Landscape for a Good Woman and Alice Kaplan’s French Lessons).\(^\text{53}\) Contemplating this profusion, one recognizes that critics are no longer willing to settle for Nietzsche’s assurances that every critical text is “a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir,” nor Wilde’s assertion that “criticism is the highest form of autobiography.” They abjure hypervisibility as much as silenced scopophobia. Theatrical, sexy, flashing their bodies between the folds of theory, they could hardly stand further from the neutered “third sex of Ph.D.s.”\(^\text{54}\)

They conceive kaleidoscopic variations on the theme of erotic, generative apertures. It is no accident that Gerald Graff proposes, as his preferred model for a new pedagogy, the academic conference. The conference breaks into the
academic calendar much as the autobiographical anecdote breaks into teleological narration: each instigates a revivifying time of raised expectations. The highly successful writer-scholars interviewed by Jeffrey Williams first formed their writing group in order “not to be alone.” Initiation—an entry “interview”—was required, and the participants name a desire “to feel accepted,” and “to be a part of something,” to have “experiences that set the two of you apart for that moment from the rest of humankind.” Confessional criticism offers to make a subculture out of solitude.

Autocritography offers many versions of refreshment and community. The very act of reading refreshes. Isolated by my dark coloring and my fatness, I used to cringe with embarrassment as I went to the ready-to-wear rack marked “Husky.” As I prepared this introduction, I read Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s confession. “I was fat,” Gates, né Skippy, writes, “and therefore compelled to wear ‘husky’ clothes. . . . Whoever thought of the euphemism ‘husky’?” Gates adds, “should be shot.” Skippy Gates, mon frère!

When I look at Kumar, Brennan, and Andrews making the bridges to Houston Baker, to a Pakistani cab driver, to Mexican-American Pinto plant employees, and to the editors of Race and Class, Spivak insistently returning to the tribals and the people, and all these contributors battling the fearful inertia, solitude, and torpor that clogs U.S. academic culture, I have hope. And I feel proud to be among them. They step beyond center and margin, beyond self-effacement and self-absorption, beyond liberal authenticity and identity politics. And they do so in myriad, enchanting ways. Better than force on these essays some spurious unity, a reader might seek to enjoy each on its own invented terms.

“I’m tired of the conventions,” announces Jane Tompkins, and her exhaustion summons new, defiant energies. Few North American readers can resist her hit-the-road retort to tired, stilted scholarship. Autocritography takes us across a threshold: there was scholarship before it, and after it, and they are not the same.

Even David Simpson, who initially considered personal criticism the purest eyewash, has come around. The cult, Simpson admits, has blossomed into a culture. “For it has been nurtured and cherished awhile, and regularly fertilized; and it is, as a historical culture, inescapable, and not at all open to dismissal from some high point of disinterested inspection.” Personal criticism—no longer compost, it is now in full flower.

These essays were for the most part written for this book. The authors had full artistic control, and the majority chose to enjoy “the power and fullness of the present.” Mesmerizing storytellers, they move at a cinematic pace.
They speak for and against autobiographical criticism, and after them, it will be harder to write a theoretical narration that lacks its own anecdotal hole, its flash of intermittence, its moment of beauty and folly. Critics of such critics might recall Matthew Arnold: "with oneself one may always, without impropriety, deal quite freely." Anyone eager to see criticism step out from behind the desk should prepare for a stiff round of delight, mischief, and disbelief.

Notes

1. Brownstein, this volume. Further references to essays in the present volume will be parenthetical.
8. TLS, 14.


28. Susan C. Jarratt, "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict," in Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age, ed. Patricia Harkin and


44. Michael Sprinker, whom Robbins acknowledges, gives a rather different spin to this point about cultural Marxism in Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism (New York: Verso, 1987), passim.


47. See the anthologies edited by Case and by Hart and Phelan; Marta E. Savigliano, Tango and the Political Economy of Passion (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1995); Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (Routledge, 1993); and Randy Martin, Socialist Ensembles: Theater and State in Cuba and Nicaragua (forthcoming).


54. The phrase from Nancy K. Miller, 14.

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Is It Okay to Read Subjectively?
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Autobiographical literary criticism is a subset of "The New Belletrism" explored in a recent MLA session and in print and of what is here deemed "confessions of the critics." In general, the New Belletrism refers, I think, to the increasing presence of the literary essay of personal meditation in bookstores, book reviews, and the academy—including in cross-disciplinary scholarship and in the writing asked of students as well as what they read. Especially in literature departments, autobiographical criticism may, on the one hand, also go by such names as personal criticism, narrative criticism, autocritography, public criticism, and personalist or experimental critical
writing, and on the other, as the personal essay, writings "on location," or simply the essay.\textsuperscript{2} Other contributors to this collection will use additional terms as well to describe both public and academic or quasi-academic versions of the writing in this movement—or moment. "It is engaged," my co-editor Frances Zauhar wrote in her contribution to our own collection, \textit{The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism}. It is accessible, as likely to be published by trade presses as university presses.

Journalist Scott Heller suggests that "the new subjectivity" is a politically and emotionally engaged, often belletristic mode that "freely mixes personal elements with research expertise" (A7). Before settling on "autobiographical criticism" I myself have also previously described it (in \textit{An Alchemy of Genres: Cross-Genre Writing by American Feminist Poet-Critics}) as cross-genre writing (writing incorporating critical theory, textual exegesis, autobiography, poetry, manifesto), alchemical writing, border-crossing writing, hybrid writing, embodied writing, or a quilt, collage, or patchwork of genres—all metaphors invoked or suggested in the examples of hybrid writing on which I focused in that book: Gloria Anzaldúa's \textit{Borderlands/La Frontera}, Cherríe Moraga's \textit{Loving in the War Years}, Adrienne Rich's "Split at the Root: An Essay in Jewish Identity," Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Susan Griffin's \textit{Made from this Earth}, Marge Piercy's \textit{Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt}, Tess Gallagher's \textit{A Concert of Tenses}, Jane Gallop's \textit{Thinking Through the Body}, Maxine Hong Kingston's \textit{The Woman Warrior} and \textit{China Men}, Nancy Mairs's \textit{Remembering the Bone House}, Jane Tompkins's "Me and My Shadow," and others. Together, these kinds of texts represent a paradigm shift in academic writing, a shift that, although (as I'll explain in a moment) it has roots in a range of discursive traditions, may be said to have begun in earnest in the late 1980s.

A short list of other belletristic scholars in fields outside literature might include Anthony Appiah (philosophy/Africana Studies), Ruth Behar (anthropology), Norma Field (Asian studies), Eunice Lipton (art history), Sara Ruddick (philosophy), Patricia Williams (law), and Carolyn Steedman (sociology/psychoanalysis). Fuller bibliographies of autobiographical literary critics and autobiographical scholars across the disciplines may be found in \textit{The Intimate Critique} and in \textit{Nexus}, respectively, and the work of some important practitioners is well represented in this volume.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Liberty Belle-etrism}
\end{center}

Ann Rosalind Jones has pointed out the "phonocentric emphasis" of much of the writing associated with the feminist movement (think of Gilligan's \textit{In a Different Voice}, and Frey's "Beyond Critical Darwinism: Women's Voices and Critical Discourse"), something I find resounding in the New
Belletrism. I had considered for my "New Belletrism" talk many different terms and tropes for the personal criticism I read and write and was intrigued by the genre-naming that Jane Tompkins, Marianna Torgovnick, Alice Kaplan, and Cathy Davidson attempt in their interview reprinted in this volume. I returned to some of the terms that, as I have mentioned, I had previously adopted: cross-genre writing (ungainly), autobiographical criticism (not evocative of the full range of genres used or of disciplines whose term for academic work is not "criticism"), and alchemical writing (because of its association with change, and even because of its association with the failure to transmute base metal to gold. I was interested in evoking the idea of process, not product).

Each time I began to write about the New Belletrism, I kept thinking of the Liberty Bell.

The Liberty Bell embodies its (supposedly failed) process; its makers were unable to meld several metals into a stable amalgam. Hung in 1753, "it was inscribed 'Proclaim Liberty throughout the Land unto all the inhabitants Thereof' (Lev. 25.10) [and] it was rung in July, 1776 to Proclaim the Declaration of Independence.... It was cracked in 1835 and again in 1846 and it now rests on its original timbers as an exhibit" instead of being hung and rung (Columbia Encyclopedia). Comprised of three different metals—silver, copper, gold?—its amalgam didn’t hold. Nor should it have—the melting pot metaphor that was earlier a supposed American ideal was flawed. It is appropriate that the bell of freedom and independence at once holds together as symbol and yet symbolizes the limits of assimilation, of holding together (as our nation failed to hold itself together in the late 1800s). In fact, the bell probably "functions" better as a relic accessible for ready view than as something lifted high and away, functions better as a reminder of the several peoples and cultures that make up our United States than as a permanently harmonious blend.

In the Duke group interview, Jane Tompkins goes on to say that she wants a term for personal writing "permitting fragmentation, or permitting lots of different selves, or different aspects of the self." All of which makes me want to say that the new belletrism is somehow deeply U.S. American (though practiced elsewhere, of course—most especially in Great Britain, France, and Canada, and by U.S. Latino/as, at the moment).

**Multiple Origins**

The kind of writing I'm excited to hear about these days produces liberatory feelings and audible music while retaining visual evidence of its multiple and conflicted origins. In fact, Philip Lopate, in his new, nearly eight-hun-
Diane P. Freedman's page collection, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, speaks of multiculturalism as one reason for the turn toward the personal. Given "the growing awareness that the United States is a pluralistic, multicultural society," he writes,

and that we need to listen carefully to the intellectual voices of minorities and immigrants.... The personal essay turns out to be one of the most useful instruments with which outsiders can reach the dominant culture quickly and forcefully and testify to the precise ambiguities of their situation as individuals and group members. It can also be, as Adrienne Rich's essay shows, a vehicle to analyze how often we are "split at the root" when it comes to our chosen and inherited identities. (ii)

In *An Alchemy of Genres*, I also argued for the efficacy of the hybrid essay for creative writers split at the root or in the "shadows" personally and professionally—Rich, Anzaldua, Moraga, Kingston, Audre Lorde. I would add Carol Taylor, a scholar of folklore, who finds herself "standing in the shadows" of institutional "plantations" ("Dividing Fences"); lawyer Patricia Williams, who writes in her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* that she slipped "in and out of shadow, as [she] became nonblack for purposes of inclusion and black for purposes of exclusion"; and anthropologist Ruth Behar, who was "non-Latina for purposes of inclusion and Latina for purposes of exclusion" and then the reverse (at the hands of her institution).

Autobiographical literary criticism, the most common and widely published form of autobiographical criticism, owes something, in addition, to the increasing presence of poets in the academy, the proliferation of creative-writing programs, and the historically hybrid nature of poets' prose and of English departments housing poets and novelists along with composition teachers, journalists, textual critics, and literary and cultural theorists. Autobiographical criticism shares, for example, composition theory's emphasis on writing as process, not product; reader-response theory's attention to the reactions of readers; and some French theorists' penchant for "crossing over genre lines, cross-pollinating autobiography, fiction and theory, and challenging traditional dividing lines between subject and object, self and others" (Flieger, 265). Autobiographical criticism may also be indebted to such first-person political-aesthetic (and oral) traditions as the Latin American *testimonio* and the African-American slave narrative. Perhaps China and Japan, two cultures with a strong tradition of "I" writing, as Lopate reminds us, will be the next prodigious producers of and influences upon autobiographical criticism.

The 'I' implicated here is very precise, yet more than half unspeakable. Its descriptors are not mere political trading chips. They are vectors, inter-
locked with energy, joy, imbalance, determination, depression—themselves not free-floating emotions, but situated and socially formed.

—Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Reader, I Married Me: A Polygynous Memoir”

My location or situation as a poet, long before I ever became a critic, and as a woman writer of mixed religious and class identity, mixed up about faith, makes me, I think, privilege bellestristic writing, the self-consciously meditative and musical essay, and books and essays by persons with (and whose subject is) hybrid genealogies and social histories. In my writing, editing, and teaching, I lean towards autobiographical criticism that depicts what An Alchemy of Genres and the texts studied therein did—an “identity [that] oscillates among sometimes fogged-in points of reference, multiple angles of vision—and confusion” (Alchemy, 33).

Marianna Torgovnick, in “Experimental Critical Writing,” insists that the critic must work as “a writer, not just a critic. . . . When writers want to be read they have to be more flexible and take more chances than the standard scholarly style allows: often, they have to be more direct and more personal.” To her, “writerly writing is personal writing, whether or not it is autobiographical. Even if it offers no facts from the writer’s life, or offers just a hint of them here or there, it make the reader know some things about the writer—a fundamental condition, it seems to me, in any real act of communication. . . .” (26-27). Surveying some early attempts at the genre while making a case for “essayistic” writing, Douglas Atkins makes clear that in personal criticism, if “the text is not . . . illuminated for another reader, the resultant writing surely doesn’t deserve to be called literary criticism” (97). He continues, “if, on the other hand, the experiencing, responding critic is not interestingly and effectively represented, I don’t know why anyone else would want to read him or her or should be expected to do so.” So, the writer has vectors needing voice(s), and the criticism has vectors needing inclusion (literariness, illumination of literature and culture, illumination of the textual and critical personalities involved. A gyrating X marks the spot.)

Further, most autobiographical criticism, I would argue, is personal in tone (though it needn’t be), self-disclosing (though it needn’t be), emotional, full of concrete particulars, but it is also theoretically and historically engaged, confronting many of the reigning academic and social debates and problems today (social constructionism, essentialism, identity politics, social construction of gender, alcoholism, child abuse, pornography, sexism, classism, racial discrimination). “This balancing act—to speak from the place of personal experience and to scrutinize the assumptions of the universality of that experience—has produced a particularly persistent tension within the feminism of the past two decades,” writes Bonnie Zimmerman (“In Academia and Out:
The Experience of a Lesbian Feminist Literary Critic," 116). Beyond literature departments, scholars in one discipline after another are taking a fresh approach to their subject matter and writing style as well as to their readers. As frequently unacknowledged connections between a critic's life experiences and his or her research assumptions, methodologies, and conclusions are revealed, academic prose begins to seem more intimate and honest, more inviting—and also more literary. It has become more accessible and exciting to the general public and to general-education students.

**Informing Traditions**

Although autobiographical criticism represents a radical shift in academic writing, its variants owe something to the essay tradition, with its writerly freedom, and much to the second-wave feminist tenet that the personal is the political; to a female psychology that allegedly favors "connected" over "separate" knowing (Gilligan; Belenky et al.), and to a feminist epistemology that sees social location (the nexus of one's racial, religious, gender, class, geographic, sexual, familial, and institutional histories) as necessarily implicated (and thus needing to be articulated) in one's research (Rich, "Notes Towards a Politics of Location"; Harding). As Leslie Rabine reminds us (quoting Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn's assumption for their coedited volume, Changing Subjects), "a major strength of feminist scholarship is the vital connection between lived experience and theory" (211). The New Belletrism is not a passé throwback, however: although "the 'authority of experience' was basic to feminist inquiry from the start, most academic feminists have also used a depersonalized, academic style, in order to pass" (Greene, "Looking at History"). The time has finally come to follow up on the experimentations of the few early rebels. Personal testimonies still have political-action, aesthetic, and epistemic value.

"Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think" (20) and "the instruments of reasoning are changing" (23), writes anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *Local Knowledge*. It is a happening that the writings in this volume attest to. In their present forms, writings on and from the autobiographical are inflected by social constructionist views of identity, by feminist and poststructuralist cautionary tales about "essentializing" and binary thinking. Even those like me, with materialist, "expressivist" leanings, see neither the self nor group identity as stable or unified. Even categories like gender blur and change through ongoing individual, medical, and social intervention. Race and ethnicity change through discourse and history. Biology is not seen as governing one's destiny. To the autobiographical critic, no one self, no one approach is taken as a constant.
Just for the Record

Our own profession’s fascination with the belletristic personal essay (in its many variations) is evident in the many convention sessions on related topics since 1989, and in journals, book series, new books, and at least one internet discussion group. 1994 MLA sessions included: (1.) “The New Belletrism” (special session); (2.) “Autobiography and Pedagogy” (Division on Autobiography, Biography, and Life Writing); (3.) “Narrative in Non-narrative Contexts: The Critic as Narrator” (Society for the Study of Narrative Literature); (4.) “Confessional Criticism” (Division on Literary Criticism); (5.) “Using Personal Experience in Critical Writing: Theory and Practice” (Division on Nonfiction Prose Studies, excluding Biography and Autobiography); and (6.) “The Words to Say It: Empowerment through Personal Voice” (Division on Psychological Approaches to Literature). At the 1993 convention, Madelon Sprengnether offered a panel on autobiographical criticism with Gayle Greene and others, who read from essays soon to be published in Greene and Kahn’s Changing Subjects. In past years, beginning in 1989, Olivia Frey and I have organized sessions on “Autobiographical Literary Criticism,” “Voices of Color: Autobiographical Criticism,” and, at the Midwest Modern Language Association meeting in 1988, “Analytical versus Relational Discourse.” I also remember a 1988 MLA session entitled “What Does It Mean to Me?”

In 1992, The Sonora Review announced “cash paid” for submissions published in its special issue on merged genres. In response to a query I sent Joan Marcus, the editor at the time, I was told that she had had “an astounding response to our announcement in Associated Writing Programs Newsletter (people really seem to need a market for cross-genre work) but we always want more” (personal letter October 4, 1991).

PMLA around that time featured a Mid-American Review call for essays for a forum on women’s positions in contemporary writing for which “diverse and creative approaches [were] encouraged.” It suggested discussions of a distinctive feminist poetics, experimental forms, ecofeminism, and so on. The same issue of PMLA featured a notice seeking “poetry, personal narratives, essays, letters [and more traditional academic forms]” for a special issue of Women and Language focusing on women and spirituality. In December, 1994, Creative NonFiction advertised itself as a new journal “for writers, teacher and readers of the rapidly emerging genre of creative nonfiction,” with issues featuring writings by John McPhee, poets writing prose (Adrienne Rich, Charles Simic, Margaret Gibson), “powerful new voices … of emerging women writers,” and the New Journalism. In 1994, the University of Illinois Press inaugurated a new series in creative nonfiction.
The popular literary press has taken notice (Times Literary Supplement, The Chronicle, Women's Review, Lingua Franca) along with the book review editors of scholarly journals. The internet offers a discussion group or “list” on “the place of the personal in feminist work/lives.” Discussed are “autobiographical theorizing, pedagogy, personal experience, life writing, literary critical theory.” List subscribers are encouraged by the list administrator, Sidney Matrix, to “tell stories about their lives, work, writing, and teaching,” as they challenge the idea that “academic work and ‘personal’ experience should be kept, or are, separate, opposite, or radically different things.” My own working bibliography of recent book-length works in autobiographical scholarship (and not the more general-category, personal writing) stretches to seven single-spaced pages. As Lopate reports, “More and more publishers are willing to bring out essay collections.”

Who is she then?

Who is she then? It appears she locates herself only to disclose that she has no secure location. She writes herself only to falter over the necessity for a stable identity. There are too many categories available to her. The very space of location is in fact a decentered one.

—Terry Caesar, Conspiring with Forms

Memory: my sister and I go shopping at Nordstrom’s in Seattle. An English salesperson asks if we need help. Gail, a true Long Islander who drops her “r”s and dawgs her “o”s, responds in a clipped British accent, “Diane, do we need help? I don’t think so.” Embarrassed, I shush her. She doesn’t even realize she’s spoken that way, never intending, as I thought she might have, to parody the speaker.

Identity and identity markers/attributes are fluid, mutable, sometimes self-consciously so. One sociobiologist claims our genetic histories are knobs tuned by family and environment, as Michael Bérubé’s essay here may well dramatize.

I suffer from depression. So do my sister, who takes an oral antidepressant, and my father, who at sixty-seven has had several ischemic episodes and suffers from long-term diabetes diagnosed when he was in his twenties. But I prefer to think of and to treat my diagnosed depression as “situational” rather than genetic, to treat it with words rather than drugs.

Exercise in comp. class: write a letter describing your car accident to your best friend from high school. Write another letter to your parents, grandparents, nephew. What do you leave out? What are you sure to include?
How and why do these letters differ in content, tone, diction, length, handwriting, format?

Are these personae, masks? Or other (authentie?) selves?

We are early occupied by many voices, many selves, I’d argue, and then, through stress, loss, change, age, reading, acquire or let go of still others.

First-person writing doesn’t erase this theoretical position, doesn’t mean totalization of the self or of the community of which one temporarily posits oneself to be a representative (Jewish Long Island? Middle-class depressives with advanced degrees?). It’s a window in and a route to other work, other selves.

Critiques/Poetic License

I’ve been so distracted by critiques launched at the supposed essentialism, solipsism, and anti-intellectualism of autobiographical or personally inflected scholarly writing, that I’ve expended entirely too much energy explaining the ways in which this sort of writing is relational rather than subjective or objective; it is not merely a swing to a pole opposite the prevailing one, and the personal (what we mean by the personal) is as much transformed by the new practices as the professional is when we transport the “personal” into our “professional” talk. All such categories are put into constant motion. Instead, however, there is much to emphasize about the formal and aesthetic dimensions of the New Belletrism, the pleasure it brings to the ear, and the relief. Atkins seeks it as a source of a “revitalized” critical writing. I looked to poets as some of the best sources. It seems, however, that to renew or use poetic license these days in academia, one needs to have a license as large as a library or with as much storage as a pentium chip. (Of course, we all know the pentium chip is flawed when it tries to make certain, sophisticated mathematical calculations, which only argues for its efficacy as a symbol of the New Belletrism—a kind of writing no longer concerned with getting everything right or figured out to the nth decimal...).

In college, I liked reading poets’ autobiographies and prose, with all their directness and sensory detail. I drifted from a critical and creative focus on poetry to one on the essay, in large part because, as a graduate student, I paid my way by teaching composition, courses on the essay, courses I increasingly focused on the autobiographical essay. A focus on sound and speech and verbal play seem to me more embodied than other kinds of discourse, the pleasures of mouth and ear a way to begin with the political commitment to “the body closest in” (Rich, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location”). Bass-line (as in music) discussions about actual bodies unite many of the works I’d put on the list of the New Belletrism I’d celebrate and attempt to emulate—Rich’s
essays; Behar’s “The Body in the Woman, the Story in the Woman” (an essay about Behar’s mother); Behar’s “translated woman,” Esperanza; Mairs’s “bone house.” I shift from epistemical focus on the eye to the ear and touch (Tompkins wants writing that will “touch her where she wants to be touched”). The vulnerability of the writing and writing subject—its contested status in this volume, for example—derives, probably, from the fact of the writer’s body making itself so present.

What I do know is that despite its dangers for teaching and scholarship—hypersubjectivity in the assessment of literary and student writing and hypersensitivity to criticism, writing that veers towards the boring and trivial, teaching that turns psychotherapeutic or merely confessional, leaving students and teachers at loose ends and avoiding the rigors of social, academic, or publishing reality—autobiographical criticism is a moving and effective intellectual and literary practice. Joining the personal and professional, analysis and emotion, “self” and other, it powerfully connects readers to texts, to their own writing, to our own (if previously unacknowledged) critical process, and to one another.

**Coda/Agency Adrift**

But if belletristic, self-consciously musical, metaphorical, descriptive for description sake, at once tentative and sententious, much of the new personal criticism might additionally be called a literacy narrative, stories of how the writer came to read or write as she or he does. Inevitably metadiscursive in being a story of its own genre and technique, a literacy narrative often invites the reader to a specific book or set of books or to a place and thence to her own favorite book or place.

Back against the apple tree I once cried for when my sister dimbed into its then frail limbs and disfigured the tree and buds, I read, against the dinner cries of my mother and the laundry list, I read. Then, in the large closet in my new basement bedroom, in a womb within a room, I read, ignoring as best I could the clatter upstairs, the calls to chores. There, too, I played an old phonograph in private devotion to my favorite folksinger-poet, whose lyrics I learned from reading them on album covers as I listened and then sang along: “Blue—ooh-ooh-ue-ue. Songs are like tattoos. / You know I've been to sea before.”

I meditated in a tall box and hid in the laundry room next to my bedroom, eyes shut tight, mind gone awandering and self-sorrowing. When my father tried to bring me out in the world and make me useful at his office—where I was supposed to pull medical charts; file floppy, oversized X-rays that resisted the rack and cut my finger ends; stick lead letters on new X-ray
films; and centrifuge blood specimens—I would take any opportunity to sit on the little brown stepstool in the storage room to read out of sight of my father and his nurse-receptionist, whose affection I treasured but whose gossip I derided.

I've been having the blues lately, weeping when a colleague asks me how I'm doing, unable to explain my rage at the institution that in so many ways has made me welcome. I've passed through all the stages, age ten through twenty, sung about in Joni Mitchell’s “The Circle Game,” I’ve worn out the turntable no one repairs any longer, I can't sing to myself in my closet or living room—I'm too busy with teaching, writing, child care, trying to sneak in some sleep. I’m too old to moon about the house in my nightgown and thick socks, cheery only to the dog, living on chocolate and daydreams and daytime TV. I’m supposed to be a professional, writing footnotes, finding through-line arguments, not distracted by the intrusions of the real or sentimental: Where are the sorrow songs of my youth? What of these varicose veins, the sciatica pain, these twelve visits to three dentists for the care of one old tooth? And the pain and loss and fear of loss one can't write about in less than tedious clinical detail or without seeming cruel to one's family or without banality?

I left the white kitchen of my Long Island childhood behind for college in the country and multicultural studies; for poetry workshops in Boston bars; for feminist studies in Seattle; for teaching in private preparatory schools and colleges; and, now, for teaching in a public institution in rural New England. But in my head I'm back in my red room with the poet-singer's blues, this time with the frog in my throat of age and responsibilities and too many desires beyond the good man hard to find or the good book to read in the margins of the day and office. Daily, I want first a good word (does my toddler son love me? does my partner?), then a good garden, a good dog, good words to read and write, that would be the good deed. But as with my garden, the perennials of my life are too crowded together, red aphids run rampant, moles burrowing frantically. And the perennial question: What to work on first?

Notes

1. “The New Belletrism,” MLA convention special session, San Diego, 1994 (at that session I gave an earlier version of this essay woven together with a presentation by Denise Stephenson entitled “A New Belletrism: Experimental Writing.” Also on the panel was Mike Hill, author of a paper entitled “What’s New about the New Belletrism?” The session was chaired and arranged by Jeff Williams. I am grateful to Denise, Mike, and Jeff for a lively exchange on the subject. I am additionally grateful, as always, to Olivia Frey.) For another invocation of the New Belletrism, see Hesse, “Cultural Studies and the New Belletrism.”
2. These terms are used, respectively (and this is really just a partial list), in Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar, *The Intimate Critique*; Caws, *Women of Bloomsbury*; Miller, *Getting Personal*; about Gates, *Colored People*; in Hesse, "Cultural Studies and the New Belletrism"; the subscriber blurb for the personalist list administered by Sidney Matrix [Michelle Reynolds] and in her unpublished monograph "(Un)Authorized Discourse"; Torgovnick, "Experimental Critical Writing"; Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*; Freedman and Frey, *Nexus: Writings on Location*; and Atkins, *Estranging the Familiar*.

3. Jeff Williams generously made available a transcript of the interview before it was edited for inclusion in *The Minnesota Review* n.s. 41/42 (Fall 1993/Spring 1994): 53–74 and this volume.

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