Personal Effects
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Taste and Good Taste have become so separated from active human senses, and have become so much a matter of acquiring certain habits and rules, that Wordsworth's attack [on them] is still relevant.  
*Raymond Williams*

PART 1

Keith says he thinks Jane Austen is “naughty”; Sarah purses her lips. He draws big gay quotation marks around the word with his gay voice, reminding the class that nice as pie though he is he’s also naughty and knowing; she looks demurely down through the bottoms of her bifocals, quietly amused, refusing to meet his campily candid blue gaze. There is a sense, in the room, that the bartender and the schoolteacher—members, this semester, of my graduate seminar—are playing themselves to an audience of intimates, like the amateur actors at Mansfield Park. Both of them are sure they understand Jane Austen, sure she would have understood them. Each is one of those “true admirers” who read Jane Austen cherishing the happy thought, as Katherine Mansfield put it, “that he alone—reading between the lines—has become the secret friend of their author” (qtd. Booth 265). For both of them, it is as if (in spite of the notorious failures of her biographers) they know Jane Austen personally, know—in spite of her careful, cagey obliquities—what she really thinks. (People tend not to read Tolstoy, or even Henry James, in quite this way.)

As often in a graduate seminar, more is at stake than interpreting a text: for the dramatic moment, lives seem to be, or at least lifestyles. Keith is about twenty-five, with a shaved head, a leather jacket, and three graduated gold rings in one ear; Sarah, more unusual, is over fifty. Keith has been provocatively maintaining all term that Jane Austen’s notoriously chaste novels are all about sex, sex first of all: sex is their “ground,” he says excitedly now, and as he interlaces his long white fingers he explains it’s in everything in the novels, it can’t be separated out, because it isn’t “just sex, by itself,” which is what’s so very good about it, so, well, sexy. It’s clear to me that sober-suited Sarah thinks Jane Austen is (like her) beyond sex—and so very good precisely because she transcends it. Sarah cannot speak compellingly here as a member of a marginal group, the
way queer Keith does; the others aren’t eager to agree with her, his party being
much more exciting; but I personally have considerable sympathy for Sarah’s
position, being closer to her age than Keith’s—also distracted by the vagrant
thought that it’s easier to come out as gay, in the late nineties, than menopausal.

But no one here is coming out, around Jane Austen of all people: Keith is
merely claiming the novelist for his party (the transgressives) as Sarah is claim-
ing her for hers (the ironists). Appropriation is what literature students engage
in these days, illusions of objectivity having been put away. For their separate
reasons, Keith and Sarah treasure Jane Austen’s skepticism about the gendered
status quo. They share her acute sense of what’s socially appropriate in looks,
behavior, bearing, being—and the as acute sense of being themselves, person-
ally, both more and less than what is generally expected. “Personally,” that is, in
the near-archaic sense of that word which signifies the person or the body: the
aging woman, the gay man, hear their own odd inflections echoed in the voice
of George Austen’s not-handsome, not-rich, but extremely clever younger
daughter. Keith is correctly costumed for his role as Sarah is for hers, and just
like her in his love of decorum and the pleasures of parsing epigrams. He too
prefers the oblique, wrapped-up, and elliptical to the explicit, bald, and bla-
tant; he finds it more sexy, as I do. That’s why they’re both here in my class-
room reading between Austen’s lines instead of Blake’s or Bronte’s or Ellison’s.
Jane Austen might have called it a matter of taste—a perfect word, with its
(sexy) suggestion of talents of the tongue that tongues can’t articulate.

No theorist, the top-ranking genteel lady novelist of all time cuts a figure in
the conversation about taste that has been going on from Hume and Addison
through Wordsworth and Ruskin to Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu.
She has been widely considered an avatar of taste at least since the beginning of
this century, when a representative American critic wrote flatly, “The apprecia-
tion of Miss Austen has come to be one of the marks of literary taste” (qtd. in
Southam 7). In spite of the recent feminist emphasis on her professionalism,
most of her true admirers have been unable to shake the first impression made
by her brother Henry’s influential assertion: “She became an authoress entirely
from taste and inclination. Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her
early motive.” (Austen V, 6) By naming “taste” and “inclination” as two different
things, Henry Austen begins to suggest the distinction and the connection
between Definition 6 of taste in The American Heritage Dictionary, “A personal
preference or liking,” and Definition 7a, “The faculty of discerning what is aes-
thetically excellent or appropriate.” He points, as well, to 7b, “A manner indicative
of the quality of such discernment.” Implying links between feeling, intelligence,
and manner—between the senses, the critical mind, and appearances—the
sequence of definitions might have been conceived by Jane Austen herself.
By signing her novels “A Lady,” she lent herself to being read as an arbiter of taste—as the proper lady who, as Mary Poovey and others have pointed out, ruled the drawing rooms of England where propriety (along with civility, and civilization itself) was being defined. For women like the historical Jane Austen—landless and portionless members of the gentry with tenuous tantalizing connections to the aristocracy—claiming distinction by making distinctions was a way of life. (Latter-day English professors and graduate students may be in a somewhat analogous position: witness Keith and Sarah, both of them working hard at low-prestige jobs, both of them tuned in to the intelligence-taste-superiority nexus, each on the *qui vive* to note the other one’s gaffe or lapse.) In Jane Austen’s England, as people with new wealth and works of art and leisure aimed to ape aristocrats, there was a question of whether true distinction was based on blood or something more ambiguous that was then (with another nod to the body) sometimes called breeding. Clever or artistic people could stake a claim to personal superiority on a (tasteful) display of their taste in clothes, furnishings, feelings, personal habits, and/or in music, drawing, and poetry. Class and its markers concern the characters in Austen’s novels; the plots pivot on lapses of taste, and the people tend to be anxious about how their taste measures up to the very best people’s, and to pride themselves on how it surpasses that of the vulgar. A glance at some uses of the word in one Austen novel suggests her awareness of the range of its meanings.

*Taste* is sometimes fairly value-free, simply personal inclination: Lady Russell, in *Persuasion*, has “little taste for wit” (*P*, 27); because they have similar tastes, Admiral and Mrs. Croft are happily married. More often, *taste* means *good taste*, a positive aspect of genteel femininity. Anne Elliott is distinguished by “the fastidiousness of her taste” (*P*, 28); she has “a mind of taste and tenderness.” (*P*, 84) (The alliteration associates the mental faculty with the emotions, or sensibility.) Seven years before the action the novel chronicles, Anne’s taste overcame her tenderness when Lady Russell convinced her, against her inclination, not to marry Frederick Wentworth because the sailor was socially inappropriate for a baronet’s daughter. Taste is socially conservative, being the ability, as Bourdieu writes, to “sense or intuit what is likely . . . to befall—and therefore to befit—an individual occupying a given position in social space.” (Bourdieu 466) But Austen’s language characteristically registers and seems to embrace opposite meanings: *taste*, a mark of high civilization, is also a nearly physical feminine attribute that makes a woman attractive to men. The narrator explains that Anne, in early youth, was “an extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling,” perfectly suited to match the dashing Wentworth, whose more masculine attributes are “intelligence, spirit, and brilliancy.” (*P*, 26) Elsewhere *taste* is not gendered but simply sexed: back on shore years later,
Wentworth is described as “ready to fall in love with all the speed which a clear head and quick taste could allow” (P, 61). Taste sexily mediates between the poles of maleness and femaleness as the less than masculine Captain Benwick, who has “considerable taste in reading,” influences bumptious Louisa Musgrove to develop into “a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection” (P, 167).

Literary taste, in Jane Austen’s novels, is a sure sign of sensibility, a quality of mind and heart that can be excessive and debilitating but is also civilizing. Her reading heroines are the ones whose color changes most often, Marianne Dashwood and Fanny Price. (Jane Austen always lays snares for would-be generalizers: bookish Mary Bennet, who recites by rote from the readings assigned to girls, lacks both tact and taste.) The aesthetic faculty seems to be socially benign, but it can nourish a preference for luxury and excessive pride in the distinctive, distinguishing signs of membership in the upper class. This is true in the case of Anne’s snobbish father and older sister, whose desire to “reduce their expenditure, without involving the loss of any indulgence of taste or pride” (P, 10) motivates their move to Bath. Too-fastidious taste can produce those overly nice distinctions that embarrass even devotees of Jane Austen. Comparing Mrs. Musgrove’s tolerance for domestic noise to Lady Russell’s for the street noise of Bath, the narrator disdains both: “Every body has their taste in noises as well as in other matters; and sounds are quite innoxious, or most distressing, by their sort rather than their quantity.” (P, 135) The show of distaste for noise of all kinds—the implicit boast of delicate, distinguishing, and therefore distinguished superior ears—is nearly offensive. Worse yet, good taste borders on bad in the scene where Anne and Wentworth try not to laugh at fat Mrs. Musgrove weeping over the death, years ago, of her son: the hard-hearted attack on maternal feeling distresses many twentieth-century readers. “Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions,” the narrator elegantly and wickedly intones. “A large bulky figure has as good a right to be in deep affliction, as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. But, fair or not fair, there are unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronize in vain—which taste cannot tolerate—which ridicule will seize.” (P, 68) We have come full circle: far from taming and civilizing unruly individualizing passions, taste here leads to an anarchic giggle that threatens mannerly self-control. Tellingly, it is a response to a body.

Wordsworth worried whether taste was active or passive; Jane Austen’s critics attack her for being conservative, judgmental, coercive. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier,” writes Bourdieu (6). Jane Austen’s novels are fun for graduate students to analyze; developing a taste for them, one develops a taste for making distinctions, and a more developed taste for distinction itself. Austen’s distinguished prose may make the students in my seminar find less complex and
nuanced texts too boring and bland; by over-refining their taste, it may even make them unfit for ordinary writing, noise, behavior, society. What price refinement? We don’t ask; we take the risk. Talking about *Persuasion* and manners and language and what Keith calls sex, which is to say ourselves, we are having a very good time—in spite of the fact that graduate students today are in no position to linger over what suits their taste and inclination, or to write without the hope of fame or profit. Seminars like mine have no clear, direct relation to the academic work of teaching composition or literary history, or publishing scholarly papers that spell out meanings (we enjoy the process of teasing them out). Would Keith and Sarah and the rest be better off doing—and reading—something else? Are we, in this seminar, open to the charge of escapism that is so often leveled against amateur readers of Jane Austen’s novels? Am I wasting their time?

Could be. The most successful of my students will write persuasive papers that consider Jane Austen’s relation to the jurists and journalists and poets and playwrights of her time, and/or to the theorists of ours—some of whose language is (if for different reasons) as dense and demanding as hers. Will they be betraying their personal stake in interpretation, their giddy, charged excitement about tiny shifts and slippages of meaning? And what of the others who are unable to stake out territory of their own in the well-tilled terrain of Austen studies? Will they be equipped to move over—as one is encouraged to do, now—to the less interesting language of Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith?

PART 2

[T]he question is . . . not only how to understand and with what to connect Austen’s morality and its social basis, but what to read of it.

Edward W. Said

People read and study what other people have written in order to situate themselves among others, to gauge and locate and define more precisely their own feelings and experiences, some say their humanity. (“I’m back in school only to find out who I am,” a student confided recently, as if no one had said that before.) It is not a matter of being narcissistic or solipsistic or simply self-involved. To put ideas and feelings into language is to put them into a shared social world; to see how the best writers deploy words is to learn what can be expressed. When high school seniors argue about why Hamlet dilly-dallies, their own fears about taking action are discernible in the things they say. Some readers are turned on by finding that in its very difference and distance, formality and dignity, Shakespeare’s dialogue or Jane Austen’s speaks to (and about) them; others prefer the writing of a lyric poet or a contemporary memoirist who is more concerned with the solitary self. But no matter what text you talk about in an
English class, a teacher always aims for personal reactions: it’s a sign you have sold the book. And in the process of exchanging responses to a book everyone has a chance to discover something new.

I was initially annoyed by the sweet young undergraduate who smugly argued, in one of the first classes I ever taught, that Jane not Elizabeth Bennet was her favorite character and the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, being prettier and nicer than her sister. I despaired of a reader so blind to the shape of the book. But Linda’s discomfort with Elizabeth’s wit (and perhaps with mine) ended by taking the class in a useful direction. The same sort of thing happened in another class, when John, also an undergraduate, startled me by arguing the novel was really about Mr. Darcy, who had nothing on his mind but relationships and arranged everyone’s lives in the end. Linda couldn’t see herself in Elizabeth; John, brought up to believe that men went to work while women were in charge of family life, envied Darcy’s leisure as well as his power. Decades later, I remember their distortions of the novel, which led me to tell the class about Austen’s condemnation of most (pretty, nice) novel heroines, and her admiration of Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison*, a novel about a heroically domestic man. My students’ misreadings taught me something. But mostly clearly, I recall the drama of their charged, barely articulated discoveries about themselves.

Teaching *Mansfield Park* to undergraduates in Brooklyn, one semester in the early eighties, I was forced by my students to look harder than I ever had before at a minor moment in the plot—Edmund Bertram’s response to his sister Maria’s engagement to Mr. Rushworth. “Edmund was the only one of the family who could see a fault in the business,” Jane Austen writes apropos of Maria’s having closed the marital deal in her father’s absence; “but no representation of his aunt’s could induce him to find Mr. Rushworth a desirable companion. He could allow his sister to be the best judge of her own happiness, but he was not pleased that her happiness should centre in a large income; nor could he refrain from often saying to himself, in Mr. Rushworth’s company, ‘If this man had not twelve thousand a year, he would be a very stupid fellow.’” (*MP*, 40) The punch line, for most readers, makes you forget what goes before. But Teresa, the cleverest young woman in my class, wanted to talk more about what she called Edmund’s self-absorption and his passive complicity: taking up what had seemed to me a marginal point, she insisted that he should have intervened and told his sister what he thought of her fiance. Popular magazine articles about “co-dependency” were in the background of her indictment of the hero who Jane Austen is said to have admired above all her others (except Mr. Knightley); still, Teresa was feisty, fiery, and eloquent. Her passion provoked tall, taciturn Steve to rise to the defense, not exactly of Edmund but of Rushworth. Maria, he insisted, should be allowed to marry as
she chose. As the debate heated up uncomfortably, pitting the rights of stupid people against the responsibilities of those who can identify them as such, I tried to change the subject and bring the conversation round to what then seemed to me an important theme of the novel. I pointed out that when Sir Thomas Bertram comes back home and meets Mr. Rushworth, he takes it for granted that Maria is marrying for money, complacently telling himself she doesn’t have “strong feelings,” which is Jane-Austen for sexual ones. Tender Fanny Price, I observed, who blushes easily and refuses to give up her tenacious love for Edmund, does have strong sexual feelings—of a different quality than those of Maria, who flirts adulterously with Henry Crawford while she’s engaged, and runs off with him after marrying Rushworth.

But my students were less interested in distinctions among forms of female desire, which is what my fellow feminist literary critics were talking about in the eighties, than in the morality of marrying for money’s sake and matrimony’s, which is openly discussed in every Austen novel as desire is not. There were two reasons for this: first, they were unsophisticated readers, better at noticing the said than the unsaid; and secondly, Brooklyn in the eighties, as regards what was said and left unsaid, was just like Hampshire in Jane Austen’s day. These young people could no more talk about sex, for them a furtive, rebellious, ecstatic, or drunken release from consciousness into the purely physical. On the other hand, they did have a lot to say about marriage and money. I let them say it. As the conversation raged it became clear that there was a personal matter at stake. To my surprise but nobody else’s, Steve finally admitted to the group that his own sister had just gotten engaged to a rich man, a nice guy but nothing special, and that while he personally didn’t think she really loved him he also didn’t think there was anything wrong with her marrying money and having a big diamond to show for it. Teresa indignantly insisted that Steve was morally obliged to ask his sister to think about whether she really loved the man; he maintained that it wasn’t his business any more than it had been Edmund’s. But he left the room dropping a remark about maybe having a little talk with his sister that evening.

On my way home on the subway, I thought about how good the class had been and how close, in spite of everything, the discussion had come to the important themes of Mansfield Park. We had begun to consider the theme of permissible and impermissible intimacies, which is first broached when Sir Thomas Bertram meditates darkly about “cousins in love.” We had come close to the theme of exogamy versus the countervailing pull of the familiar and familial; and we had dealt with the theme of the responsibility of brothers and sisters for one another, and raised the question of whether we are not all brothers and sisters. (Critics would develop these themes in interesting ways in the
next several decades.) I congratulated myself on orchestrating the interaction, around common concerns, of ethnically diverse people (Teresa was Hispanic, Steve Jewish) who ordinarily wouldn’t meet or talk like that, outside the classroom. Basking in rather presumptuous contentment, I thought about how literature (and English classes) could alter lives for the better (Steve would finally talk to his sister). But I was under no illusion that I’d created lasting enthusiasm for Jane Austen’s novels. Maybe Teresa, who was in the throes of a long engagement, would develop a taste for canonical literature—which might alienate her from the sweetheart she’d been going with since high school. All the others would leave at the end of the semester with perhaps a tiny bit of cultural capital they could conceivably parlay into cash and nice things—big diamonds, maybe, that were not in the best taste. Reading and discussing Jane Austen was no more likely to advance these students in life than to radicalize them.

On the other hand, it might begin to make them look harder at words and people, and to talk more together about what matters. Our discussion of *Mansfield Park* had led to an exchange on a deeper-than-ordinary level; analyzing the motives of Jane Austen’s characters had led the students to talk to one another more directly, more seriously, passionately, personally, than they habitually did. Real talk doesn’t happen among most friends and families; in most people’s lives today, there is a dearth of what Anne Elliott, in *Persuasion*, calls “good company, the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation.” (Even in Jane Austen’s time that was hard to find: Mr. Elliott—ironically, the villain of the piece—corrects Anne, saying “that is not good company, that is the best” (*P*, 150). People in the habit of exchanging banalities find few occasions to exchange more than that, and less and less need, perhaps, to do so. In the temporary community of a classroom, or in an informally organized reading group, we enact the phenomenon that so interested Jane Austen, the play of language generated by the differences and similarities among very different individuals. It is pleasurable, human, even socially useful to weigh one’s own perceptions against other people’s, to gauge the difference between what can be said and what must remain unspoken, to notice how much good writers can manage to say by focusing on some things and leaving some things unsaid.

PART 3

[T]he most crucial lesson in composition; namely, that what makes a narrative good is not the story itself but what follows what. 

*Joseph Brodsky*

Jane Austen herself went to school for barely a couple of years. But the schoolgirl habit of ganging up and giggling at the duller kids can be traced through not only the *Juvenilia* but also her mature works: it fairly sends you
back to fifth grade. Consider, for instance, this exchange between his favorite
daughter and Mr. Bennet, over Mr. Collins’s fatuous and over-written letter:

“Can he be a sensible man, sir?”
“No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse.”

(pp. 64)

Many latter-day readers feel constrained to condemn Jane Austen’s linguistic
(therefore social) elitism: Geoffrey is one of them. He was a quiet member of the
graduate seminar that starred Sarah and Keith, and he has come to my office
now to pick up a letter of recommendation. Irrelevantly, I recall the pain that
crossed his sensitive face when he observed that Jane Austen made it impossible
for people like Lucy Steele—narrow-minded, grasping, and ungrammatical peo-
ple, that is—to read Sense and Sensibility. (Lucy would not be able to pick up the
book, he complained; but can anyone who does pick it up see herself in Lucy?)
Committed to the belief that anyone can be educated and improved, Geoffrey is
a dedicated teacher of composition. Jane Austen is way off his screen, now: in the
three institutions that employ him, only regular, full-time faculty members have
the privilege of teaching the great literature of the past. No problem, he tells me:
he likes teaching comp. The son of a tax lawyer, he has decided to take his
chances in an uncertain profession; not only does he love to read and write, but
for him (he says it without pomposity) teaching is a vocation. He protests that
his taste runs to torn sweaters, rice and beans, and free music on public radio—
but he does get huffy when colleagues with tenure condescend.

As he prepares to interview for a full-time job that would give him three
sections of composition per semester, Geoffrey cheers himself up by reviewing
his best moments in the classroom.

“I always teach only one thing,” he tells me. “I try to show them how to
make an argument; sometimes it works, sometimes not. I remember a student
I had once—I can’t believe I forgot her name—who got it straight off. ‘You
have too many ideas in this paragraph,’ I told her, ‘you need to choose one of
them, and have the confidence to develop it.’ I explained that throwing out so
many ideas was a sign of lack of confidence, and she got it right away and I
knew right away that she got it. In the next paper she did exactly what I told
her to do, and she was all right from then on. Other times, you say exactly the
same thing and it doesn’t work, they don’t understand what you’re saying, they
come in and they say, ‘But you told me to do it this way, and I did, and now
you’re telling me it’s wrong.’ I can’t believe I can’t remember her name.”

She might not be able to remember his name either, but their connection for a
critical moment had been real, close, intimate, personal. Something made it pos-
sible for him to move in past her paragraph to her sense of self; something made
her feel recognized rather than threatened, and able to build self-confidence on what she might have heard from someone else as dammingly faint praise (so many ideas!). Was the exchange charged by an erotic element? I wouldn’t know. But I’m not sure that he or she would be able, either, to list the factors that contributed to their momentary perfect understanding: the weather or a recent encounter, successful or not, with someone else; a quality of voice or expression; the hole in his sweater; the paint on the wall; the subject she had so many ideas about; a certain slant of light. My point is that in the process of teaching composition, especially if you teach it well, you often get personal. (An ancillary point: this work is vital, and people like Geoffrey should be paid well for doing it.)

But I am being disingenuous: “personal criticism” as the phrase is used in academic parlance today is something quite specific and particular. Usually, the term refers to books and essays by literature professors who acknowledge or explore their own subjectivity, sometimes as a point of departure but sometimes, especially when the critic is well-known, as the subject itself, more or less shocking, revealing, and/or accessible. The cultural sources of this kind of writing are multiple and various. One, surely, is seventies feminism and its central insight that the personal is the political, which gave women—and then men—permission to make the private life public, to find pleasure and perhaps empowerment in sharing once unspeakable experiences. Literary or literate feminism by the way created new kinds of marketable literary products charged with sexual interest: Everywoman’s life, in newly explicit detail, went public and found readers. From another angle, writing about the literary-critical self was encouraged by very different groups of scholars, who analyzed readerly practices and responses, or critical canons and approaches, or the history and politics of English studies. When they emerged, identity politics and queer theory nourished writers who spoke “as” or “for” different groups, and others (sometimes they were the same people) who were moved to confess they hated theory and jargon. The simple human interest that professors, like everyone else, have in their own lives and words was encouraged by their admiring, envious, prurient students, and by the media’s embrace of some lucky academic stars, whose colleagues also aspired to cross over. Meanwhile, of course, off and on campuses, everyone was affected by confessional talk shows, the vogue for biographies of literary figures, politically motivated searches for sexual scandal, and the general tendency to let it all, sex especially, hang out. Forty years ago, no one dared talk about the erotics of reading Jane Austen in the manner of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick or my student Keith or Richard Jenkyns, who wrote wonderfully in The New Republic, about her enduring popularity, that “she has possibly given pleasure to more men in bed than any woman in history” (Jenkyns 33).
But bringing personal matters and personal feelings into the literature classroom is not new; neither is questioning the hierarchical relation between dignified professor and respectful student. Gossip has always been a staple of English departments, whose members after all have read Jane Austen. Graduate students have been calling even the professors they aren’t sleeping with by their first names since the mid-seventies—those heady years of student-faculty interaction when one man in my department regularly spent his first class walking around the room with his composition students, encouraging them to bump gently into one another and him, before sitting them down in a circle to discuss the experience, and write about it from their different points of view. Freshmen have been encouraged to write “personal experience papers” for decades, at least since the early sixties, when I started teaching—accounts of their summer vacations, descriptions of their relatives and their rooms, or responses to the ingenious essay topic that a colleague of mine devised, “How it Feels to be a Neat Child in a Sloppy Family,” or an otherwise X child in a Y one.

What’s somewhat new, perhaps, is the creation of a genre of professorial self-revelation, and the emphasis on performing selves rather than the earnest authentic one that was in vogue twenty years ago. Performing in their classrooms, on the page, even on the screen, teachers and critics stage a relation to other people. No matter how distanced or abstracted, whether or not it makes an outright claim to be representative of a group, this politicized self demands more than merely personal attention. Nevertheless it rests its claim to attention on the personal: the assumption of real intimacy, the insistence on a gendered, sexed, racialized self, the in-your-face physical body.

Personal criticism also appeals to writers whose impulse is not only or not exactly confessional—people with a taste for the revealing anecdote told almost, if not quite, for its own sake. Often offered in the first person, such an anecdote is not necessarily, not strictly, derived from a meaningful personal experience. It might be, rather, a story in search of a meaning, an insight, an irony, a perception, a connection that eludes flat-out, flat-footed exposition. Academics of my generation, especially those of us who “work on” fiction, are drawn to such anecdotes. In the late fifties, when I was in college, my friends and I made jokes about the existentialist at the local hang-out who explained he was an actor not a waiter, and for that reason slow in bringing the ketchup. Me, personally, I’m a novelist not a theorist. It’s a matter of style and taste, for which as we all know there’s no accounting. I write what has been called personal criticism because I’m most moved to say something by an incident that seems to me somehow telling, because I tend to reach for an anecdote when I think I have something to say.
The writing game is partly, crucially, a matter of deciding how much of your hand—of your self?—you want to show. Reading, we imagine ourselves to be intimate with other, real or imagined, people; writing, we aim—not only, perhaps, but always also—to connect. The best student papers—and dissertations—have always been the ones most strongly inflected by the writer’s voice, probably the ones that crystallize around a personal conviction or preoccupation, an idiosyncratic perception. The most memorable classes are those in which the people make connections with one another and with new sides of themselves around the book they’ve read. Discussions of what’s said and meant in a story, of other people’s motives, morals, and language, generally leads to some measure of self-reflexiveness, therefore of self-revelation. Book groups meet, authors read aloud to audiences, for these reasons; although we are baffled, as a society, by the question of what education is and what it is for, making connections with others on or around words is something that people seem to continue to crave. Contemporary analysts of taste and distinction, and gender and race, have made it hard to keep the awareness of bodies and persons, and unexamined tendencies to secrecy and sharing, out of even the most aestheticizing classroom—where they always have been. Interpreting texts, we cannot but hear ourselves moving in and out of character, performing our more and less representative selves. Isn’t telling yet not telling, telling by not telling, what English class has always been about?