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THE PERSONAL AS HISTORY

RICHARD OHMANN

When I summon up remembrance of my early teaching years, lively courses and fine students swim to the surface, but chiefly a feeling of inadequacy bordering on desperation. A 23-year-old standing in coat and tie before privileged 18-year-olds, I took attendance with gravity, carefully announced that papers would be due or would be returned at the end of the hour, passed around a list of conference times, said OK, please turn to Orwell’s essay, and withal sought to prolong the safe time during which there could be no question who was in charge. I knew the script. They knew the script.

“Mr. So-and-so” (no first names; students were “Mr.,” I was “Mr.,” our famous professors were “Mr.,” this was Harvard) “Mr. So-and-so, what is the assumption behind that first sentence?” My lesson plan spoke through me, but would it speak through Mr. So-and-so? If yes, back to the script, but suppose he got it wrong: should I put the same question to Mr. Such-and-such and keep going until someone hit the answer that matched my plan? Kindergarten stuff. Come back to Mr. So-and-so? Try to figure out the nature of his mistake? Tease the right answer out of him? Suppose he didn’t know what an assumption was? Suppose he hadn’t read that part of the assignment? A bad breakdown in the script. Do I reprimand him? By what authority? Suppose he wasn’t listening? Doesn’t care what an assumption is? Can’t see why he should be studying logic and rhetoric instead of writing like Thomas Wolfe or playing squash? A worse breakdown, especially if he should through an intonation or a gesture or glance at his friend in the next seat open up such vistas of indifference. Suppose, worse still, that he is unhappy, homesick, afraid, needs me to be something other than a nervous teaching fellow, trying to make it through this difficult hour, on script?

The hour might—usually did, I guess—include moments when learning happened. Certainly there were times I thought I had something to teach: how to explicate “The Unknown Citizen,” or which introductory paragraphs on a dittoed sheet from students’ essays were stilted or superfluous, and which purposefully taut. I remember one or two times (doubtless there were more) when students talked with animation to one another and to me, and the class felt more like a conversation among smart people about matters of serious interest than like a test of my skill at impersonating a professor. But the high point of
the hour was that of its cresting toward a close—of astonished realization that I could once again surf onto the beach with my hoax intact. Then the low-stakes busyness of giving out the next assignment, returning or collecting papers, perhaps sympathetically granting an extension, assuring a dutiful student that his missing next Wednesday’s class would not leave him in too deep a hole. Human exchanges. Then out the door and the rest of the way back to a life I could recognize as my own. Buoyantly if the class had gone “well,” with shame or relief if not. Two days or five days or a week before I had to stare down humiliation again.

How I spent those intervals: reading for orals, working on my dissertation, drinking with friends, being domestic. Work or play—at first with ease of mind, with teaching anxiety at a distance. It came nearer each day. Procrastination, then panic. Grading papers helped. A practical step, a manageable duty. But it, too, could let the spectre into my study if I relaxed my guard. Sure, I was way ahead of most freshmen (but not of a precocious few) in my command of grammar, usage, diction—the comp teacher’s trade secrets. On the other hand, why did I seem to be spattering as many “dics” and “grs” and “trs” and “awks” on each batch of themes as on the batch before? “Work harder on organization,” I would write, but hadn’t I said that last time? And when I peeked at my grade book before settling on a judicious C+, depressing to see that I had given him C+ last week, too, and every week except for the beginning-of-semester D–, which had terrorized him into paying attention. What was I teaching, really?

Back to panic, and a quick end to “the sad account of fore-bemoaned moan” allusively promised in the opening sentence of this essay. When panic got the better of avoidance, I began what I thought of as preparation for class—an activity so excessive and so poorly attuned to the challenge of helping students improve their reading and thinking and writing that there should be another term for it: depreparation? pedagogical disablement? I read tomorrow’s text as if it were Talmud, amassing enough commentary to fill a semester’s class hours and put the most rabbinical of students to sleep. A few years later, in my first regular job, the problem shifted: now I often taught about daunting Great Books (Homer, the New Testament, Dostoevsky), already encrusted with commentary I had no time to learn while trying to keep one chapter or book ahead of my students. Either way, nights-before developed along the same pattern. A gathering awareness that I could never build my teacherly fortress high enough; 1:00 am, 2:00 am, I’ll finish in the morning, can’t sleep, guzzle a quart (truly? so memory tells me) of cheap sherry, destroy consciousness; set the alarm for 5:30, shatter my coma with its ringing; waken consciousness again with a Molotov cocktail of coffee, shower, and fear; cobble
together a disorderly sheaf of teaching notes; proceed grimly to class, do the opening rituals, and launch my professor act one more time.

To be sure, another part of my memory says it can’t have been that dismal. Some students told me how much they thought they had learned from my classes. A few hung out in my office, seemed to value my conversation and even advice, became friends. The director of the freshman writing course, Harold C. Martin, visited my class, read my comments on papers,¹ said I was doing fine. Later he made me “head section man,” then invited me to collaborate in the making of two text books.² I came to Wesleyan (my first and only regular job) trailing clouds of pedagogical glory. Tenure was quick and easy, though I wonder still if I would have made the grade had my judges paid even the most perfunctory attention to students’ views of my teaching. There was no scheme of assessment in the early 1960s. Hearsay ruled. Wesleyan promoted those making a mark in scholarship, and assumed their teaching to be commensurate. We were “scholar-teachers,” with the teacher part in rhetorical boldface, but the scholar part dominant in tenure case law. No surprise, that, to anyone familiar with academic folkways and the economy of institutional prestige.

“Scholarship.” The word resounds with dignity, implies solidity and permanence. (“Scholarship sublime,” mocked Gilbert and Sullivan.) By contrast, “teaching” suggests interminable activity, pushing a boulder up the mountain, never reaching the top. The end of a course: respite, free time for scholarship. The end of a career: a fading hologram of Mr. Chips, while one’s scholarship endures, in print, on one’s curriculum vitae (a telling phrase), and in the edifice of knowledge—monuments of unageing intellect. These hyperboles seem to me to capture something powerful in the ethos I learned without being exactly taught. Scholarly writing was to be my real career. I was to pursue truth and get it into print when I found it. Fantasy whispered that I might become a hero of the intellect. Short of that, my fresh and yet solid contributions to knowledge would, along with the learning that grounded them, earn me repute and fund my authority.³

It is a common criticism of the academic institution that the privileging of research devalues teaching. I am after a related but different point: that one’s authority as a teacher is supposed to derive from one’s effort and achievement in research. That relation may hold pretty well in a research seminar for graduate students and post docs in biochemistry. And indeed it worked for me in similar settings: giving an MLA paper was a breeze compared to teaching an English 101 class. But universities house many renowned chemists who fail in introductory courses, and they at least “know” the whole field of chemistry, while for my generation (and to an extent still), advanced study and research in English added scarcely a tittle to one’s authority as a composition teacher. In a
liberal arts college like Wesleyan, there were in fact very few settings where advanced training and research translated into classroom authority. I was, in the early 1960s, amassing scholarly credentials at a good pace, while floundering in my courses in spite and because of the extravagant labors I have described.

Now clearly, something was askew in the expectations we bright boys had for unity of academic being. The ideology of research as guarantor of good teaching collapses for the reason just stated, and for a still more obvious one: scholarship and teaching are very different social relations. Among many dimensions of difference I will stress two. Getting ahead in research and publication is a matter of pleasing, impressing, and often contending with one’s peers and elders; teaching is chiefly a relation with less entitled juniors. And: scholarly intercourse takes place over spatial and temporal distances, through measured exchanges and with the personal mediated and defended by professional conventions and crafted styles; teaching, except in the mass-production format, happens live and on the wing, with the instructor’s plan and persona open to a thousand unpredictable responses (including dreaded indifference) and needing constant adjustment. The teaching moment can yield ease and even exhilaration, but neither those pleasures nor the enlightenment of students can be had by transposing relations of scholarship into the classroom.

To do so literally is impossible. Students are not journal referees or fellow specialists. Students are right there with you; they talk back in the middle of the exposition rather than framing a decorous response after it’s over (and of course you need them to talk back). So no teacher tries to be an expert with students in the modes of authority and discourse he or she has painstakingly learned through apprentice scholarship. But since those are the modes that have made you an authority—earned you the right to be teaching—the impulse to rely on them is powerful. How else do you signify and enact that right?

On this account, it’s not that teaching is personal and scholarship impersonal. No social practice can be entirely one or the other. But we screen and project ourselves differently in these two practices. Scholarly conventions—and I resume the past tense here—scholarly conventions demanded the etiolation or bracketing or erasure of much that pertained uniquely to the individual presenting research. Out of bounds were, for example, the writer’s gender (though we have learned since that it was unmarked and so male), his age and physical characteristics, his life history, the labor and conflict and perhaps uncertainty that went into production of the written or spoken text, how the writer was feeling at the moment (I’m cold and a bit edgy right now, but it’s unseemly for you to know that), how the reception of his writing mattered to him beyond acceptance of its contribution to certified knowledge, and so forth. He might imply such information through style; probably he couldn’t help conveying
some of it to the canny reader. But the conventions largely forbade its explicit communication, restricting the scholarly persona to a disembodied fund of old and new knowledge, mobilized in accepted forms of argumentation and circulated among other such disembodied personae.

In class it was a struggle to wall out so much of the personal, but it also seemed both proper and safe. Physical appearance was ineradicable, but we did our best by wearing the professorial uniform. I, like most, flattened the social field by being Mr. and calling students Mr. or Miss. Although during my early teaching years the legal barriers against sexy literature were beginning to crumble (Lolita, Tropic of Cancer, The Group, Naked Lunch, etc.), and although a style of reading all texts as sexual (via phallic symbols and the like) was wildly and naughtily popular, silence was to shroud our own sexualities—and, needless to say, the erotics of teaching. Political conviction, autobiography, family? I thought it permissible to voice anti-fascist or anti-communist sentiments, speak of having met a poet whose work we were studying, or accept congratulations on a newborn child, but beyond such admissions of a life outside the classroom lay risky terrain.

A remembered incident: I was teaching about seventeenth century poetry, which necessitated a good deal of annotation on everyday Christian theology. A student asked if I believed these things. With no pause to think through the implications of one or another reply, I said I couldn’t talk about that, but would be glad to discuss it with him outside of class.

In fact I disbelieved Christianity across a cool distance. Neither ambivalence nor sensitivity on the subject had anything to do with my reticence, which proceeded automatically, in response to a novel question, from the rules of impersonality as I had learned them. Only my professional self, stripped down for intellectual work, was to be present in class. And of course I was tacitly asking students to abstain, reciprocally, from the personal. No sloppy revelations here, please; we’re practicing objectivity together. Did I want their approval? Their affection? Certainly; but I could not be a person who wanted affection at the same time I was being a teacher.

It is embarrassing yet also therapeutic to write these things, to write personally. Retrieving experience and posing its authenticity against the dissembling and the public half-truths we let pass in accommodating our individual lives to myths of professional solidity: these are by now common manoeuvres. And when put forth in writing, such disclosures usually enable and are enabled by another common manoeuvre: my experience is not after all just personal. Maybe its idiosyncrasies, explored with a psychiatrist, would have come together in a healing story of neurosis. But read another way—almost always privileged—they tell a more social narrative, showing how the teller is like other people so situated, not distinct from them.
As I recalled my experience of teaching earlier in this essay, I found myself easing into the second mode, giving weight to the “so situated,” providing social coordinates for my discomfort, intimating ways in which it might be understood as exemplary. I referred it to the way academic authority was constructed, to the valuation of scholarship over teaching, and in general to professional ideology, which (especially then) muted the personal and charged experience with certain kinds of tension. Other elements of my social location surely helped constitute that experience. I will not explicate, just mention a few topoi for analysis. Maleness: the drive to be emotionally invulnerable. Middle class upbringing: the importance of scripted self-presentation, the undesirability of surprises, the imperative never to make a scene. The 1950s: boom time, rapid expansion of the university system, professional aggrandizement, Cold War ideology in the disciplinary form of literature freed from historical circumstance.

I could go on, but my aim is not to spin out such an analysis, only to remind readers how it conventionally goes. We evoke the personal, in venues like this one, to show how thoroughly social it was and is. The social may not exhaust the personal; there may be a residue of pure, individual difference; but we tell these stories to look through personal history at the ghosts of other, similarly situated people.

But where did this convention come from? How did it establish itself in academic practice? I will approach these questions, too, through personal history: my own is perhaps both odd enough and commonplace enough to launch a discussion of more general interest.

Like most of my academic cohort, I maintained an easy skepticism toward the building of US hegemony through the postwar years and the triumph of “business society.” We took Cold War pieties with a grain of salt, deplored McCarthyism, rooted for Stevenson, sniffed at commercialism and advertising—all from the platform of our allegiance to the best that had been thought and known. Needless to say, we also accepted the status and advantage afforded us by postwar economic arrangements. Some habitually but vaguely sided with workers and negroes and poor people—in my case, upbringing in a New Deal family had taught this affinity, which was then transmuted into parlor socialism by my immersion in G. B. Shaw’s work, on the way to a dissertation. But until Michael Harrington rediscovered poverty, it could seem that the rising tide of the economy was lifting these groups, too, along with us happy humanistic few. We championed Culture in our daily work. Politics, beyond voting liberal, seemed irrelevant. My one activist sally in the fifties, marching against the bomb, was in behalf of life on earth.
Oppositional politics moved closer in the early sixties. Two colleagues of mine at Wesleyan had been freedom riders; others flew down to march at Selma. I stayed on the sidelines, though with rising sympathy and anger. Vietnam pushed me by degrees into politics. Why was my government entering a civil war, backing the wrong (undemocratic, corrupt) side, using my taxes to slaughter peasants? I wrote in private rage to Congressmen, signed a public letter to Lyndon Johnson (“Mr. President, please stop the bombing”), withheld the portion of my income tax that went for war, turned in my draft card. The latter two actions made me a criminal with an FBI file.8

The law and its institutions of enforcement, made and adjusted over centuries by white men of substance, constitute people like me as good citizens. They draw around us an invisible circle of respectability and allow us to conduct secure lives—except when exceeding the speed limit—in no conscious relation to police and the courts. When such a person steps outside the circle, everything taken-for-granted becomes problematic. I felt myself to be in a new and unstable relation not just to the State and the FBI but to other ordinary people (most of whom, in 1966, would have thought me unpatriotic or worse, had they known) and to the institutions of daily life. Its elements came unstuck.9

Mine were individual crimes, though of course not of my own invention. In 1965 I had heard that Chomsky (whom I greatly admired) and others were refusing to pay taxes, and by 1966 many young men had burned or otherwise unburdened themselves of draft cards. But I did not act with them or belong to their groups, and when I did band with others in organized opposition, that was a sharper breach from apolitical habit. I phoned antiwar colleagues and asked them to sign a public statement of support for Wesleyan students who refused induction; this felt very different from politicking with them about, say, a change in graduation requirements. Prompted by a phone call from Mitch Goodman (see the beginning of Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* for an amusing account of the call he received from Mitch), I joined an action at the Justice Department before the 1967 march on the Pentagon. At the end of the rally, a few dozen of us (beyond draft age) filed across the steps of Justice, announced our names, and dropped our draft cards (in my case, a classification card, since I no longer had the other) in a sack of a thousand or so cards collected from draft age men around the country, and watched as the sack was carried inside and given in peaceful defiance to an official. My participation in this ritual brought me a predictable office visit the next Monday from two FBI agents, and some less predictable visibility. Walter Cronkite’s evening news ran a five-minute clip of our civil disobedience, including my pass by the sack and declaration that I was “Richard Ohmann, Wesleyan University.” This cameo appearance led to puzzled inquiries from two of our trustees that weekend at
the inauguration of a new president (I was by then Associate Provost), and a

call from my mother asking if I was all right—meaning was I under arrest yet

and also, I surmise, how could I have so departed from her tutelage as to make

a rude display of our family on national television?

Soon after, I helped found RESIST, an organization supporting various

kinds of resistance to the war, legal and illegal. I signed its “Call to Resist

Illegitimate Authority,” and went to work on its board. We were all on the

FBI’s radar now (my mid-1970s file included many RESIST bulletins with
every name on the masthead but mine blacked out), and some (the “Boston
Five”) were brought to trial for conspiracy. We encouraged civil disobedience

and committed it. I found myself part of an informal network helping draft

refusers and deserters leave the US, among other felonies that the FBI appar-
ently did not detect. But self-criminalization was by then as habitual as law-
fulness had been just a few years earlier. The change I felt most keenly in my
social activity and location was membership in a big, loose affiliation called
the anti-war movement, and soon the larger and looser one called simply
The Movement. In this heady, naive moment we saw it as embracing civil

rights and black power, women’s liberation, student power, youth liberation,
then gay rights, environmentalism, and so on, with a penumbra of sex rebels,
drop-out communards, drug advocates, left sectarians—everyone saying no
to the tyrannies and complacencies of the old order. In spite of deep and
ultimately insuperable rifts, around 1970 it was possible to see ourselves as
millions of people not only joined in opposition to “illegitimate authority”
but working together for a free and egalitarian society. The word “revolu-
tion” was in play.

New organizations came together, new forms of collectivity. In addition to
RESIST, I belonged for a while to SDS, worked in the New University
Conference (left and feminist academics), helped form professional radical
caucuses, checked out a couple of vanguard parties but couldn’t accept democ-
	ratic centralist discipline or adherence to “the line.” We tried to live democracy,
in New Left groups: the end would be our means. At the same time, many of us
sought to subvert or reshape existing institutions such as the National Council
of Teachers of English and the Modern Language Association—that they were
malleable or even (in the case of NCTE) friendly shouldn’t have been a sur-
prise, since many of their members had passed through the same revulsions
and illuminations as had activists from my quarter. Likewise the universities
where we worked: clearly they were part of “the system” (a common term
whose vagueness suggests the primitive nature of shared analysis at the time).
They were complicit in war-making, white supremacy, capitalist rule. Maybe
we could remake them to serve peace, justice, and ordinary people.
Here’s the part of my experience that was odd. While positioning myself with the disempowered and against “the system,” I had landed in its middle echelons, propelled by the momentum of my early career. In 1966, just when anger was spilling into protest, I took a job as Associate Provost in my college’s administration, and became editor of *College English* as well as a member of the governing committee for NCTE’s College Section, sponsor of the journal. I thought to facilitate reform at Wesleyan (reduced requirements, more interdepartmental studies, less autocratic tenure procedures, etc.) and a critique of the field of English (its aping of more scientific disciplines, amassing of endless New Critical explications, weakness in theory, inattention to its professional folkways). By 1970, when chaotic local events had elevated me to the post of interim Chancellor,10 I had passed through the estrangements described above. Not reform, but radical change was my agenda. Yet at work I was charged with holding things together *against* radicals like me, and as editor of *CE*, with sustaining the dignity of a profession whose structure and practices I now thought carceral.

At *CE* the contradiction was tolerable and often productive. Colleagues around the country were furiously rethinking literature, writing, culture, pedagogy, and professional ideals in a fluid mix with power, injustice and democracy, war and peace, soon gender and sexuality. Manuscripts tumbled in. I accepted many that more conservative editors would have found unmannerly or outlandish. I also contracted with guest editors for clusters of articles or whole issues on themes heretofore incompatible with a professional or scholarly context: feminism, marxist criticism, the rebellion in MLA, emancipatory curricula in community colleges, gay liberation. These projects made *CE* controversial and of course offensive to some; though I published conservative articles, too, the journal was hardly a model of “balance” through this period. But neither was it completely out of step with thought and action in the field, or with the interests and concerns of NCTE’s generally populist leadership, which at least tolerated and usually encouraged these editorial adventures.11 I and my associate editor Bill Coley made a habit of transgression, but in the supportive company of very many readers and contributors, also caught up in “The Movement” or sympathetic to it.

At Wesleyan the contradiction was intense. Not that the trustees or my administrative superiors condemned my activism or made my tenure precarious: to the contrary, they seemed ready to boost me up a notch in the administrative hierarchy whenever campus tensions heightened. A few of them hated the war as much as I did; some demurred but sincerely endorsed the value of academic dissent and debate; perhaps some thought my presence a palliative to student and faculty radicals. (The word “coopt” came unpleasantly to mind.)
The problem was one of structure, not antagonism. An academic administrator like me can put out a few ideas and rally support for them, but most of his time and energy go to negotiation and compromise. Collect the desires and demands of faculty members and students, try to reconcile them with one another, see what the budget will stand, patch together a proposal, see how it fares in committees, hope that the result will be at least an incremental improvement. Not much leverage in the process for one’s own passions against the weight of custom, institutional constraint, and other people’s entrenched interests. In daily work, I was a sort of conduit.

Worse, in those frenzied years I often did crisis management. Our administration would drop all routine when protest or disruption threatened, and huddle in endless strategic sessions. How would we respond to the black students’ occupation of a building? To the blockade of a military recruiter in the administration building? To a sit-in at the admissions office by Puerto Rican students demanding that more of their number be recruited? To a midnight assault by two black students on a white student who had written an insulting letter to the newspaper? To women faculty members and staff demanding that Wesleyan depart from its old, boys’ club practices? I might be put on assignment to negotiate or control damage or write a bit of judicious administration-speak to faculty and students. Given my job, this made some sense, but always my sympathies were with the protesters, if not with a particular expression of their politics.

Sometimes the ambivalence of my position worked out all right, as when I sat with the black students’ organization (after their takeover of a classroom building) to plan what eventually became our African American studies program; or negotiated with the women’s group—among other things, for the hiring of a woman associate provost, who turned out to be the admirable Sheila Tobias.12

More often the dissonance was somewhere between comical and shattering. Toward the comical end: insisting that a Grateful Dead concert not be cancelled for fear of riot; declining to host a national SDS conference (I knew that SDS was about to implode in revolutionary adventurism); missing a meeting of the Student Affairs Committee, which I chaired, while in jail after doing civil disobedience outside a Sikorsky helicopter plant; representing Wesleyan at the inauguration of a new president at Mt. Holyoke, and standing—red-gowned, back turned to him and the other platform dignitaries, in protest against a ceremonial address by the war criminal McGeorge Bundy; giving a talk in a rally at Southeastern Massachusetts University against its autocratic president, and seeing our own president, deluged with angry letters from alums, respond to the effect that I was not representing Wesleyan, just exercising my right of free speech. Not a bad place to work.
Far from comical: having to decide in the middle of the night whether to accept or reverse the Dean’s decision (he reported to me) to expel, without due process, the black students who had beaten up the white student;\textsuperscript{13} in the conflict that followed, being thrown out of Malcolm X house along with the President as we were trying to make peace; being sent to observe the blockade of the military recruiter and being mistaken by my antiwar friends there for a fellow blockader, with quite understandable recriminations to follow; going to negotiate with the Puerto Rican students in the admissions office and being held hostage there myself. I lived uncomfortably in two polarized milieux: the educational bureaucracy and the movement challenging its legitimacy, along with the legitimacy of almost everything else.

A prickly contradiction it seems, even today. But I think my two-world experience, though perhaps unusually intense, was deeply congruent with that of many other thousands caught in the same historical turbulence. Teaching assistants and instructors, only somewhat less than full professors and the occasional provost, had labored to win academic authority, to master professional decorum, to build the kind of invulnerability I have described. Teaching, we performed routines of talk, dress, gesture, and classroom order legitimated by the bodies of knowledge that grounded our disciplines. Researching, we enacted loyalty to those knowledges even when we sought distinction by contesting their received truths. Going to meetings, which is to say administering, we paid tribute to the dignity of the institution even when trying to modify it—however we might ironize its rigidities and chafe at its demands.

But by 1968 or so, those who had followed a trajectory from anger at racial injustice or protest against the war to a conviction that our society was laced together with bad power had come to question the solidities that underlay those routines of daily, working life. The knowledges we professed were honeycombed with pockets of inexcusable ignorance (e.g., of women and black people), or shaped to the needs of Cold War ideology. They served technocratic domination or (worse) surveillance, terrorism, and war. The beloved institution—the university—appeared now to be complicit as well. “Who ruled Columbia?” and “Who ruled America?” turned out to be two forms of the same question. Our enclave of free inquiry and emancipatory culture looked instead like a conveyer of ideas that made Vietnam possible, and of students into predictable slots in the social hierarchy. I report these discoveries laconically, but don’t mean to patronize them. They proceeded from feverish investigation and analysis, driven by both political and intellectual need—a “ruthless critique of all things existing,” in one of my favorite phrases from Marx—and they decisively altered scholarship and curriculum in all traditional fields except the sciences. That’s what the culture wars of the 80s and 90s have been about.
Through the time of these revaluations, the unbearable tension I have described between academic rituals and the injustice in which they were embedded began to look systematic. At first it read something like this: how can I be seriously deliberating whether to put a B or a B+ on this student’s paper while the government is napalming peasants in my name? As ruthless critique proceeded, however, the disjunction reconfigured itself into a perceived unity: my painstaking enactment of the rituals enables warmaking (or helps this student escape the draft and sends that one to Vietnam; or reinforces the whiteness of the university system; or perpetuates the habits of male supremacy; or greases the skids of class reproduction and makes it look fair—and so on). The caucuses and study groups and activist organizations and coalitions and professional insurgencies and consciousness-raising groups that were piecing together a dissident, wholistic understanding of U.S. society and its imperial outreach turned the analysis, inevitably, back in on the institutions in which we worked, and on our own unexamined practices.

Of those, teaching came under the most careful scrutiny. For the first time in my experience groups of like-minded college teachers gathered outside the context of staff meetings to talk about pedagogy, because we saw it as political, in the broad sense of the term newly salient. Every customary procedure that our professional training had naturalized now seemed laden with political relations, chiefly undemocratic: the lecture format, the inflexible syllabus, the canons it transmitted, the insularity of the disciplines, the exam, the unchallengeable paper topic, the gap between assignment and finished product wherein “process” later took up residence, the independence of each student’s work, the grade meted out according to immutable standards. Classroom etiquette, too: last names, formal dress, discussion dominated by the more assertive, the absolute distinction between instructor and student. Architecture itself spoke hegemony. The form of the amphitheater, the lectern in front, ranks of desks bolted to the floor, all enforced the “banking concept” of education.

As we knocked down the walls that had set apart profession, pedagogy, and politics, a fourth “p” came forward: the personal. Famously, the women’s movement legitimized public talk of the personal, in fact insisted upon it. That talk was in part a refuge from and assault on domination of antiwar venues by, well, us: by male “heavies” with “correct” political lines. But it also joined with and fortified a critique of professional detachment and scholarly objectivity already underway. To tell one’s own story and hear the stories of others, we were learning, was to restore differences hidden behind the instructor and the student and the reader. Provided with genders, class locations, and so on, these characters now garbled the professional script in which they had been asked to perform as universals. A pedagogy of the lyric poem, meant to open vistas of
timeless unity, might instead work for a first-generation student at a state college as a class put-down—the “laying on of culture,” in a phrase we took from John MacDermott. An actual female reader of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* might not willingly take up the part assigned to her by Lawrence or by the male instructor. The profession meant something different for an adjunct writing teacher in a community college than for an ivied professor. Such banalities were fresh in 1968 or so, and narratives of personal experience were as crucial to the interrogation of professional ideology as to the making visible of male supremacy in interstices of daily conduct.

I think it important that the personal turn of the late sixties happened in groups of people joined by common purposes and shared anger—for me, the MLA Radical Caucus, the New University Conference, various faculty and student groups at Wesleyan (including, later, the Women’s Studies collective), like-minded colleagues in NCTE and around my work for *College English*. In David Bleich’s term (*Know and Tell*, see especially pp. 13-19), ours were disclosures of previously silenced experience that showed one person’s discomfort or inadequacy or embarrassment or pleasure to be not after all unique, not inherently private. They expanded our affiliations and drove our activism as they deepened our understandings, and so helped “bring the subjective and the collective categories of experience together” (16). Sure, I recall explosions of runaway bitterness, indulgent confession, unusable ego—including my own. But the personal mode settled into movement process because it raised consciousness, and because it knit people together by clarifying the social relations in which we found ourselves and by hinting at how they might be changed.

Not that disclosure and political resolve automatically charted the way to worthwhile change. To speak only of teaching—my point of departure in this essay—the furious experimentation of the years around 1970 threw up a number of strategies that were largely stylistic. Wearing blue jeans to class instead of dresses or suits, using first names, meeting in informal spaces, sitting in circles or on the floor: these signalled eagerness to renegotiate authority in the classroom but did not forge new contracts, and by themselves led to “grooving in the grass”—structureless, feel-good pedagogy. Other strategies collided with invisible walls outside the classroom and the university itself. Take grading. Everyone saw that grades were invidious, poor incentives for learning, incompatible with serious collaboration, and (especially when linked to the military draft) consequential beyond anything intended by the award of a C rather than an A. So instructors tried no grades, pass-fail grades, giving all As, grading by lottery, self-grading, peer grading, and doubtless many other arrangements. All failed because students needed grades because in turn employers and graduate programs and draft boards required them. Our assignment was not just to
teach and to generate certificates of learning, but to rank students for purposes of social sorting—the “reproduction,” as we later would say, of class and race and gender systems. No socialism in one classroom, then, and we had to find other fields of battle.

This aside, in my view the ferment around teaching yielded healthy and lasting results. A democratic revolution in the U.S. was not one of them, but more democratic relations of instruction and better pedagogies did ensue. Collaborative learning, small group work, peer tutoring, flexible syllabi, responsiveness to the capabilities and needs and social positions that actual students bring with them to class, critical reflection on the learning process as it goes along, a humanizing of the instructor and demystifying of his or her authority (not abandonment of it), and many strategies to help students take responsibility for their own learning. The shift will seem old hat to likely readers of this volume because it has been most decisively achieved in women’s studies, in writing instruction, and to a lesser extent in literature.

These pedagogical discoveries certainly transformed my own relation to teaching. Even the grooving-in-the grass phase was therapeutic in loosening rigidities of authority that had earlier caused me such confusion and discomfort. Teaching became a field of innovation, not an inflexible heritage of conventions. I could try new formats, decenter my precious authority, let down defenses, rethink the ways learning might happen. This was possible because I now felt teaching must respond to political as well as professional urgencies—Vietnam cried out in every classroom—and paradoxically, those urgencies made it far more personal than before. Still more important, I believe, was the conviction that even in my own classes I was working daily with many student and faculty allies (and of course against powerful antagonists), not striving to meet some heroic standard of individual performance.

Teaching never became easy for me, but challenge, imagination, achievement, and sometimes joy flowed into it. Stress came now from feverish but cheerful overwork, not helpless repetition of my defensive professional routines. There were small collaborative victories, institutions built, pedagogies developed over time (see “Teaching as Theoretical Practice,” chapter 8 in my Politics of Letters), the irreversible movement by thousands of colleagues in English and American studies to demystify and remake the literary canon. All this amounted to a cumulative and cooperative project, very different from the desperate scramble to escape each semester and turn with relief to the “real” work of scholarship.

About which a word, now, because the upheavals of c.1970 and the assumption of historical agency they provoked made for an entirely different relation between teaching and scholarship from the one I described earlier in this essay.
Those on the left came to see research and writing as charged with political urgency. In caucuses and collectives we intensively reexamined scholarly practices, their theoretical underpinnings, their historical construction, and their institutional housing. (See Kampf and Lauter [1972] for such an effort, in which I had a small part.) Many of us now took up research that aimed to question disciplinary givens and set new directions. Black studies, women’s studies, working class studies, and gay and lesbian studies were the most visible expressions of that project, which not only created new subjects and won reputability for them, but changed what could reputedly be thought and written about the traditional subjects, The engaged scholarship that ensued has of course been a scandal to the right, and a main battlefield of 1990s culture wars. It was an intellectual liberation for us, and in my view for the disciplines.

Be that as it may, the transformation brought my own teaching and research together in a refreshing and unanticipated way. From about 1972 on, almost everything I wrote answered directly or indirectly to a felt political imperative. In my teaching (I was lucky to be at a flexible college), I transited from English literature to American culture, and from a formalist to an historical outlook, furiously learning about economic and social theory along the way. Politics informed my teaching, and my teaching now became the basis of new research and writing. I left behind my specialized training in linguistics and literature, taught what I studied, and studied what I needed to know to teach.

What I knew always trailed my need to know. And what I knew was always provisional, always in formation. This meant that my authority in class—earlier so precariously and often irrelevantly derived from scholarly credentials—now rested more on the openness of an inquiry whose difficulties I could happily admit, and to which students could contribute questions and insights that taught me things, as well as secure knowledge of their own, especially when the subject was mass culture, about which they inevitably knew more than I, at least experientially. So the social relations of scholarship and teaching overlapped and grew closer. The authority generated as the class moved along was as much as I wanted, and was the more satisfying because collaboratively built.

Did these changes bring on a personal turn in my scholarship as well? Certainly not of the sort that academic feminist writing took, in the early seventies. I did not “speak bitterness,” as the phrase went, about indignities and slights and oppressions that invaded my daily life from systemic inequality: how could I, or anyone situated as I was on the privileged side of most social boundaries? But I did let anger flow into my writing from the place it now occupied in my political life: this was a departure from the scholarly conventions I had previously learned, which permitted no tone more personal than huffy indignation at the stupidity of an intellectual antagonist.
America barely contained the rage that drove its composition—rage at war and oppression, of course, but also at what I took to be the complicity of my own discipline and its institutions. In criticizing these (“exposing” might better characterize what I thought I was doing), I did also give some authority to my own experience, and admitted more personal anecdote than I would have thought permissible before. After that (1976), I adopted a rather conversational academic style that felt personal to me at least in leaving behind the fortifications of tonal distance and disciplinary authority we had all used to guard our collective, professional capital. And more recently, taking advantage of the indulgence granted elderly folk, I have laced several articles with reminiscence. (Does experience somehow gather credibility and a claim on polite attention as it grows hoary?) This is by far my most personal essay, and, since it unsettles me, I doubt I’ll prowl farther along this path. In any case, the most important way in which I imagine my scholarship of the last 25 years to have been personal is by following imperatives of the movements in which I claimed membership. The personal is the political, yes, and I want to emphasize how social it has been for me, how saturated with affinities and alliances and conflicts both real and (no doubt) fanciful.

At the beginning of the last section I hoped that its first person story would ground “a discussion of more general interest.” That, I now attempt, with abundant reservations about what may be justly concluded from any such account—reservations, that is, about whether I’ve written anything of use to other people, these last many pages. What I’ve meant to do is historicize the personal turn that many academics have taken since 1970. But by means of my own history as I choose to tell it, or maybe can’t help telling it? What presumption lies in that strategy: that my experience has been paradigmatic, that I can in this way represent the many people assembled from time to time, without their consent, inside my “we.” I’m suspicious of the personal even as I practice it, about which more later.

But first, to draw out the inferences I want from this story: the rules of college teaching and academic writing began changing, around 1970, under pressure from activists in feminism and other movements, to admit a good deal more of personal experience and feeling than had been respectable or even tolerable before. The thinking behind this pressure was simple. Movement people identified rhetorics of impersonal authority with the lies our leaders told us about Vietnam, with the crackpot rationale for war, with the complicity of the corporate university, with cost-benefit analysis that left human suffering and harm to nature outside its equations, with social engineering that treated the
lives of poor and non-white people as problems to be solved from above, with male assumptions of privilege, with the bromide that in America we had no social classes, with curricula and pedagogies driven by professional imperatives and thus abstractly “irrelevant” to students’ needs, with scholarship that justified or took as natural the world as it was—in effect, with all that seemed ignorantly hierarchical and undemocratic in our supposedly egalitarian society. To recognize experience and speak from it was a step toward truth and decency. Furthermore, in the practice of dissident groups, especially feminist ones, the personal turn at its best delivered radical insight, strengthened sisterhood and solidarity, and helped build new institutions and ways of working together.

The specific conditions of historical possibility that enabled a liberatory personal turn three decades ago are attenuated or gone. The ferment of rage and opposition and experiment and discovery within which we learned to speak truth (personal and otherwise) to power has simmered down. “The movement” that never quite was, but whose idea stirred millions to transformative action, looks naive in retrospect about how much and what kinds of power laced “the system” together, and about what would be required to replace it with something better. Not that the movement disappeared: rather, it dispersed into more specialized campaigns, whose partial victories are everywhere embedded (sometimes precariously) in U.S. society now. Women become physicians, executives, Secretaries of State. Abortion is an embattled right. Migrant farmworkers are powerfully organized. African Americans attend previously white colleges and law schools in large numbers, travel where and how they will, buy homes in suburbs, are heard from in national media (and constructed as avid consumers in TV commercials, right alongside white yuppies). Gay and lesbian people have meager but previously unimaginable rights. Corporations cannot destroy the natural world with complete impunity. Vietnam is free of U.S. occupation, and what was known for a while as the “Vietnam syndrome” now apparently prevents us from invading countries (but allows us to bomb up to four per year) Anyone can add to this list, and although to do so is simultaneously to realize how incomplete and disconnected the advances have been, they are not nothing, either.

And my list omits the site where movement gains have taken root most deeply: the university—or rather, that part of it where we study the humanities and social sciences, and where we pursue and debate “personal effects.” Here, the change is tectonic. Look around at the various “studies” programs that were unimaginable in 1965, each the academic sedimentation of a social movement. Look at how we have changed the subject within traditional fields—the texts that appear on syllabi, the questions that can be asked about them, the vast enlargement (in the humanities) of what we take culture to be,
the intellectual seriousness and partial autonomy of rhetoric and composition studies, and the infusion of politics (broad sense) into all these studies. Look at the changes in teaching and scholarship that have been my topic in this essay. The liberal arts curriculum, understood most deeply as the texts and problematics and ways of thinking that we put on students’ and our own agendas—the curriculum has become quite another thing in three decades, gradually transformed by the urgencies of c. 1970.

It’s almost enough to cheer up a decaying leftie. But as I was saying before this optimistic swerve, history has left behind the conditions that brought personal experience into fruitful play back then. First, the academic movement that changed our work has grown apart from the activism that initially inspired it. (With many commendable exceptions, but still.) We now enact and dispute the personal in a conversation chiefly among ourselves, on terms that have more to do with academic politics or even fashion than with changing the world. Second, “the” movement that didn’t quite happen has fragmented into largely separate social movements, so that when the academic “I” does reach out beyond the academy it tends to make contact with identity politics, where who “I” am is most saliently female, or disabled, or Asian American, or gay, or... In this situation the personal tends to imply that identities are given and fixed, to reify difference, to veer away from disclosures that might strengthen a universalist solidarity or even point toward coalitions.

Third, the gains of sixties movements provoked a reaction from the New Right. By 1964, it had already come in from the fringe (the John Birch Society, and such) around Goldwater’s candidacy, and it took new strength from its opposition to what the sixties came to mean for much of “middle America.” Through the 1970s, it established right wing foundations, organized among Christian fundamentalists, contested for power within the Republican Party, and gradually re configured American politics. It vigorously challenged the liberal hegemony of the postwar decades, and in the process demonized the social movements that had built momentum within that hegemony. The culture wars of the 1990s were one manifestation of that conservative reaction, and in them the Right took aim as much at positions won by radicals in the university as at those won in Congress and the courts. Whatever weight the personal may still carry in our internal conversations, it seems to me ill-adapted to a defense of the university against charges of political correctness or of multiculturalism grounded in identities.

And finally: since 1970 our economic system and social formation have been passing through a fairly deep transformation. This is not a subject to be wrapped up in a paragraph. Let me simply gesture toward globalization: the rapid movement of capital (in a hundred new forms) around the world, the
proliferation of new products and services, the repackaging and incessant commodification of knowledge, the breakup of the old Fordist work force, the casualization of labor, the application of market logic to institutions of all kinds, and so on. These forces have been at work in and on the university, needless to say, producing there a crisis whose dimensions—from the erosion of tenure and collapse of the old job market to the marketization of academic services and research—are familiar enough to likely readers of this essay. Our profession (along with medicine, law and most of the others) is in decline. The personal turn was in part a challenge to its claims of authority, and those of the fat and complacent postwar university. Does it still have that meaning? Do we want it to, in our present circumstances?

Those circumstances are much on my mind: I imagine the tasks of and threats to a democratic left at millenium’s end to be starkly different from what they were in 1970. If I’m right, is that cause for those who share egalitarian and democratic goals to abandon the personal, to declare it mined out and anachronistic? It’s hard to separate that question from my own uneasiness with disclosure—doubtless evident enough to the reader of this mixed essay, so determined to become an argument or a master narrative, so uncomfortable in its personal moments, so burdened with its author’s male, middle class, childhood instruction in the shame of making scenes or showing vulnerability. No wonder such a person, even after decades of contrary instruction, tends to hear accounts of personal experience in academic or other public discourse as outbreaks of self-indulgence among the privileged, or competitive displays of victimization, or unsporting claims on sympathy, and in any case distractions from the urgent work at hand.

No, I do not think the personal vein is bled dry or politically irrelevant. But let me add two thoughts to the caveat embedded in my attempt to historicize it. The personal itself is not a stable category, any more than the “real” in literary representation. Conventions of privacy change. Richard E. Miller tells a nice anecdote of his Rutgers seminar for beginning teachers of composition. By request, he included a session on coming out as gay or lesbian in class, a topic not just taboo but unimaginable, thirty years ago. Excited discussion, revelation, story upon story, until one TA came out to the seminar as a Christian, and revealed her fear of doing that in her comp section. Consternation and silence. Miller comments that “what gets seen as merely merely personal and better left unsaid in the academy has shifted over time and across locations. . . ” (280). Globalization and the crisis of the university have brought coming-out stories by graduate TAs, adjuncts and other casualties of the new order, linked to organizing struggles on university campuses and in organizations like MLA. Are there other realms of what used to be “better left unsaid” to be explored now, by way of building new memberships and collectivities?
Second, it is easy to understand how the word “objective” sprouted cynical quotation marks, how “abstract” and “impersonal” became pejoratives, how “formal,” “linear,” and “adversarial” came under censure. No plea, here, for a return to the blindly self-assured, contestatory, male academic conventions of 1965. But the inheritors of sixties movements have real enemies who can’t be conjured away by forswearing the adversarial style. We need (maybe more than ever) new knowledge of this difficult world in order to try changing it; that knowledge will have to be in part abstract because real relations are not evident on the surface of things; and we can’t get there without working through the impossible ideal of objectivity. (Would “fairness” and “open-mindedness” be more acceptable terms?) The knowledge we need must be personal, too, but will not accord epistemological privilege to personal experience. Joan Scott: “When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject . . . becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built,” and “the constructed nature of experience” becomes invisible, along with the “given ideological systems” in which experience offers itself as pristine and natural (Scott 777-78). For all that, the personal turn has I think been more beneficial than not. It is in any case irreversible. I hope we can keep alive in it the social and the political, from which it has historically been inseparable, and without which it is at best incomplete and isolating.

NOTES

1. Here’s a symptomatic story: one paper was a third-person account, modeled on Henry Adams, of “the boy’s” first walk into Harvard yard. Hal Martin thought it was wonderful, and wanted to submit it to the alumni magazine (which did in fact print it). I had given it a B+, and asked Hal if he thought that a little ungenerous. Yes, he said. I changed the grade to A. Did the student benefit from my exquisitely high standards? A grad student colleague of mine, when asked why a grade was so low, would say: “For a B, you have to write as well as I do; for an A, as well as Hemingway.” Western civilization was safe in our hands.

2. Mentor and friend, Hal saw better than I what I could do, and launched my career.

3. No one spoke these lessons to me and my graduate student cohort; they were in the air we breathed. Yet in time I did actually take vows of scholarship, administered with great seriousness to inductees into Harvard’s Society of Fellows, by such as W. V. Quine, Wassily Leontiev, and my dissertation director Harry Levin. For example:
You will practice the virtues, and avoid the snares, of the scholar. You will be courteous to your elders who have explored to the point from which you may advance; and helpful to your juniors who will progress farther by reason of your labors. Your aim will be knowledge and wisdom, not the reflected glamour of fame. You will not accept credit that is due to another, or harbor jealousy of an explorer who is more fortunate. You will seek not a near but a distant objective, and you will not be satisfied with what you may have done. All that you may achieve or discover you will regard as a fragment of a larger pattern of the truth which from the separate approaches every true scholar is striving to descry.

A high vocation, a heady moment.

4. What a missed opportunity for discussion of literature and belief, of my and the students’ relations to the texts we were reading and the culture we were studying.

5. To have done so at the time would have been all but unthinkable, in a context such as the present one. I remember a few personal essays about teaching, for instance Theodore Roethke’s marvelous “Last Class” (College English, 18:8 [May, 1957], 383-86). But see: reminiscence was a prerogative of poets and novelists.

6. In the process I became more explicitly the interpreter, as well as teller, of my tale. It’s hard for the “personal turn” to displace lifelong habits of academic authority.

7. And have done: see my “English and the Cold War.”

8. When I obtained it in the mid-1970s, under the Freedom of Information Act, I was surprised to find how many tax dollars the FBI had squandered clipping my letters to the Middletown Press and to Wesleyan’s student newspaper, and also miffed that its agents had sized me up as a sincere but harmless protester, not a dangerous enemy of the State.

9. A friend stopped me on the street: his first grade kid came home from school with the news that I was likely to go to jail. I had tried to explain what I was doing to my first grade kid, and she disclosed her version of the story in “show and tell.”

10. Translation: academic vice president. Since our president more or less vacated the premises that year, I and the other vice president found ourselves in charge, though hardly in control.

11. Objections from readers of CE were plentiful, and I dutifully printed those that came in as letters. A few members of NCTE called for my ouster. But in the twelve years of my editorship, those in the Council to whom I was directly responsible grumbled aloud to me only once: not about unpatriotic or marxist or feminist sallies in the journal, but about a 1974 special issue on “The Homosexual Imagination.” Interesting.
12. And for a parental leave policy, the one idea too much before its time to be enacted.

13. I supported the Dean. He went on to become president of a big state university. I returned to teaching as fast as I was able.

14. The discussion spilled out into journals, as well, particularly in English. My own commitments are perhaps enough to explain the proliferation of articles in CE that reexamined pedagogy under the sign of the political, but the same interest invaded the pages of *College Composition and Communication*, whose editor (William Irmscher) espoused politics very different from mine.

15. For instance, the student-led course, “Towards a Socialist America,” which reproduced itself at Wesleyan through shifts in political climate, official opposition, a softening of purpose and of title, over twenty years. (See Arneson et al.) The course was accorded a surprising honor when Lynne Cheney attacked its catalog description (ignorantly) on the editorial page of the *Wall St. Journal*, March 14, 1996.

16. *Selling Culture*, my most learned work, germinated in a course I taught on American mass culture (with invaluable help from undergraduate TAs) in the late seventies, and gained momentum from several other courses that I devised along the way—courses very far from my early training and interests.

17. Yes, I doled out the grades; no escape from that. Two strategies eased the contradictions. First, I made grading a subject of explicit discussion, often in the context of power and social reproduction as these topics came up in the course. Second, in comments on papers I excused myself from the task of explaining the grades I had given. I credited students with having taken seriously an intellectual challenge and written something they stood behind, not just having tried to please me in an academic exercise. (This working premise was of course not always correct.) I framed my comments as responses to their ideas, often critical but not according to some paradigm of A-ness or C+-ness to which I had privileged access. If they wanted to know why I had assigned the grade I had, and how to get a better one, they could come and talk with me about that. Few did. And I came to take intellectual as well as teacherly pleasure in reading sets of papers.

18. Even so, I can hear the muse chiding: look at what you’ve left out—family, friends, health, sex, disaster, guilt, pleasure, everything really personal. True. By comparison with, say, Jane Gallop (whom I admire), I’m a timid hand at this.

19. For a lexicon inflected this way, see, e.g. Freedman et al., especially the introduction and the essays by Frey and Jane Tompkins. I agree with them but want to save some of what they object to, in both intellectual and political work.