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Confessional labour: Teaching with drafts in the non-fiction classroom

Abstract:

This essay reflects on my experiences teaching a module on confessional writing (2017–2020) and student responses to studying the labour, craft, or work of non-fictional writing, particularly poetry, diaries, and letters on themes of heartbreak, sex, grief, and other heightened states. In order to highlight the labour of writing that either writers or critics call confessional, I taught the most famous writers – Sylvia Plath, Oscar Wilde, Anaïs Nin – with or through their drafts, materials which received mixed reactions from students. Thinking about confession as an already contentious framework for non-fiction, as well as the ever-present discourse of authenticity as a marker of non-fiction's success, this essay reflects on the difficulty of valuing these texts as complex sites of labour and creativity in the classroom.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Confessional writing, drafts, Sylvia Plath, Trump, post-truth

From 2017–2020, I taught a module called ‘TMI: Confessional Writing from Rousseau to Present’ as an option for final year undergraduate and master’s students in English Literature. It was my second year of a permanent job at the University of Birmingham, UK and ‘TMI’ was entirely new material, proposed during the first year of a very unlikely academic job. Although I’d taught sessionally and precariously for several years, I was, in many respects, very green; I hadn’t proposed a research-led module before and still thought the object of module design was to appeal to as many students as possible. By this logic, I gave the module a zeitgeisty title and advertised with a flyer of Kim Kardashian crying, attracting around 60 students in the module’s first year and teaching 180 total over three years.

With hindsight, the module ran through several transitional moments. In 2016, I had been hired to teach contemporary American literature and culture as part of a rapid expansion in Birmingham’s English programme, which ended soon after I arrived; student numbers peaked in 2019 and, along with a national contraction of humanities subjects, have shrunk every year since [1]. ‘TMI’ was and, I think, remains the only module devoted to non-fiction on our degree programme. It was popular, yet students had little background in studying non-fiction. Drawn to the module’s combination of biography, gossip, celebrity, scandal, and extreme emotions – aspects which I’d encouraged through its title and flyer – many students were less prepared to critique non-fiction as a form of calculated, artistic writing. It was also a weird time to be teaching non-fiction as a UK specialist in American Studies. ‘TMI’ began the week of Trump’s inauguration, six months after the UK’s referendum to leave the EU, running through the beginning and end of #MeToo, the final years of Twitter before Elon Musk, and ending just before the Covid-19 pandemic. When I proposed the module, I had grand ideas about teaching declaredly intimate forms of non-fiction as an exercise in media literacy, highlighting the work that goes into producing *any* non-fiction narrative. In particular, I wanted to use the study of non-fiction, historic and contemporary, to point to the potent versions of testimony and truth being circulated by populist leaders and other public figures who, like Trump, Musk, and the UK’s Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, were becoming folk heroes for their spontaneity and supposed authenticity. In contrast, I wanted the module to highlight the “immense labour” it takes “to turn man into a subject”, as Huck Gutman (1988, p. 102) writes of Rousseau; to show that non-fictional writing should always be read as a laborious technology of selfhood, perhaps especially when it seems the most immediate, unfettered, and confessional.

This essay focuses on one strategy I used to highlight the craft of non-fiction: assigning writers’ drafts as part of students’ reading. My intention was to teach the most famous writers on the course – Sylvia Plath, Oscar Wilde, and Anaïs Nin – by focusing on their process of revision, showing the different ways in which these authors constructed their texts’ intimate and supposedly confessional voices. This is a personal essay, first and foremost, that largely reflects on the gulf between my expectations, the aims and methods of the module, and the large number and range of student experiences it brought me into contact with. Drawing on my own experience as well as anonymised anecdotes from the classroom, I discuss how teaching writers’ drafts in the non-fiction classroom both brought up repeated questions about authenticity in self-representation and further demonstrated a limited interest, which some students directly voiced, in considering non-fiction as a form of writing that required any kind

of work or revision. In a political moment when authenticity and proximity to the truth often seemed like non-fiction's main bargaining chip for validity and attention, these moments of disconnect between the labour of writing, which I wanted to highlight, and the onus put on believability and authority in the reading of confessional work often came to the fore, in ways that, as I discuss below, were difficult to prepare for.

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Confession is a hard topic to write about or teach outside of air quotes. Critics like Miranda Sherwin (2011) only ever use the term in quotation, in part because many writers that we call confessional “despised and resisted the label” (p. 7), considering their work to be “only nominally autobiographical” and more resistant to notions of shame than the moniker implies. Confession has always been broad as a description of writing, reliant as it is on a dynamic that positions the author as writing out of sin, shame, or guilt and the reader as a kind of confessor. For M. L. Rosenthal (1959), who named confessional poetry in a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, confessional writing reads like a “series of personal confidences” (p. 154) that implicate the reader with the “shameful” details of the author's life which they feel “honor-bound not to reveal”. Yet critics overwhelmingly categorise women's writing as confessional. The novelist Joanna Russ (1984) claims that what was deemed “improper” (p. 29) for women to say in the nineteenth century was directly substituted for “confessional” in the twentieth. As Christopher Grobe (2017) points out, there is also an “unbearable whiteness” (p. 40) to what many people read as the confessional canon. Despite confession itself being a continued requirement of many religious, legal, and medical institutions, confessional writing is often seen to foreground interiority in ways that make white men profound, white women trashy, and anyone else uninteresting.

A major aim of ‘TMI’ as a module was to centre these debates, but also question why confessional dynamics remain so central to our supposedly secular contemporary culture. I wanted to avoid the module becoming a discussion of whether a piece of writing was confessional or not and, from the beginning, made it clear how imprecise the label can be. Confession, I argued, could help us group literature of personal revelation, texts that mediated themes of extreme heartbreak, sex, grief, and other heightened states, and often played with while interrogating feelings of shame, sin, and guilt. Yet it could also be, as Melissa Febos suggested in 2017, the year my module began, “a tired line of sexist horseshit” used to minimise the non-fictional writing of women and minorities or associate that work with the sin and shame their work so often refuted. Critical discussions of confessional writing hold a positive potential to foreground the self as what Kamran Javadizadeh (2019) describes as a “socially and politically – contingent and shifting site” (p. 476), one that emphasises rather than excludes on the basis of difference. And I wanted to teach it that way.

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I organised the module around form over historical eras. We began with a first week reading the kind of theories that would encourage a healthy scepticism around confessional as a simple

label and a second week reading confessions, with extracts from St. Augustine and Rousseau's *Confessions* (1786). Confessional poetry followed in our third week, with examples from mid-twentieth and contemporary cohorts; then a week on letters through Wilde's *De Profundis* (1899). I taught two weeks on different kinds of confessional memoir, reading Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982) and Christina Crosby's *A Body Undone* (2016), followed by a week on diaries with extracts from Sei Shōnagon and Anaïs Nin. The module concluded with a week on popular music, Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016), and another on blogs through the Iraqi blogger Salam Pax, taught alongside a range of social media posts.

Once the module was approved, I became afraid of how to teach Sylvia Plath. Mostly, I distrusted her outsized cultural reputation, which seemed to get in the way of nuanced close readings. As Jacqueline Rose (1991) writes, Plath is often used as "a literary object on the battleground of cultural survival", referred to primarily for the "intensity" of people's "investment in her" (p. 25) rather than the substance of her writing. Perhaps unfairly, or with some projection, I felt wary of what students might enter into the classroom already thinking about Plath; in particular, that they might read her death backwards in ways that oversimplify and pathologise a highly skilled and thematically complex poet. Something similar had happened in my first month as an undergraduate. Reading "Ariel" in our first-year poetry seminar, one boy, who later told me, while he was drunk, that I'd been "shit" in that class, said he'd initially dismissed Plath as someone writing Tumblr-core emo poems [2]. "Ariel", he could see now, demanded more respect.

As the most famous confessional poet, Plath's final and influential collection, *Ariel* (1965), was published posthumously, infamously by her estranged husband, Ted Hughes, who changed the order of the poems, removing and adding others [3]. For teaching, I drew from *Ariel*'s restored edition published in 2004, which reinstated Plath's intended order and arrangement, including a facsimile of the manuscript she left when she died and "working drafts" (Semanki, 2004) of the title poem. An example of Plath's creative process, this version of "Ariel" is republished with four handwritten and six typed drafts, as well as one set of proofs for the poem as published in *The Observer*. Each draft is numbered; the handwritten variants are written on the back of pink memorandum paper from Smith College, the heading faintly visible and backwards underneath Plath's writing. Drafts 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9 are dated 27 October 1962, Plath's thirtieth birthday, and the typeset *Observer* proof is from 14 December 1962. It therefore seems likely and indeed has become part of the poem's legend that Plath wrote and redrafted the poem very quickly on the morning of her birthday, finalising it for publication by the end of the year. Plath would die in February of 1963, with "Ariel" yet to be published. Interestingly, the restored edition adds to its mythos, claiming the poem was eventually published in *The Observer* in November 1963 under a "variant title" (Semanki, 2004), "The Horse", when there is no evidence that the poem had any name other than Plath's own mare, Ariel.

In my class, I perhaps wanted to do what James Wood (1991) said in his review of Rose's book: to transform "an existential dilemma (which is how most people read the Plath life and work) into a problem of knowledge". Teaching "Ariel" through comparison of Plath's drafts

showed how richly but also how quickly her ways of writing the poem had changed. It felt like something of a concession to major debates in Plath scholarship as well as a general cultural suspicion that Hughes' rearranging of *Ariel* had reshaped it in his favour, despite his protestations that he did so to protect Plath from the "vast potential audience" who wanted "her blood, hair, touch smell, and a front seat in the kitchen where she died" (T. Hughes, 1971, p. 164). As well as detailing her process, the restored edition re-established the order of poems Plath intended, notably, reinstating the opening and closing words of the collection as "love" and "spring". By comparison, Hughes' order had reframed *Ariel* thematically into something more linear and less cyclical, beginning in maternal love and domesticity before descending into and ending in depression and suicidal ideation. By teaching the drafts, I intended to demystify Plath, highlighting the creative decisions and labour that had gone into the poem and to remove at least a little biography from an overly biographied writer.

In practice, many students found it difficult to see confessional poetry and perhaps particularly Plath's work as something that could be drafted, edited, and re-drafted. For one poor girl, I had "ruined" the experience of reading one of her favourite writers, though I think – or hope? – this was an exaggeration. For others, despite the fact that the drafts of "Ariel" were likely all produced on the same day, the exercise devalued Plath's status as a genius for whom inspiration and technically accomplished poetry should arrive fully formed. This was a battle that they knew was hard won, as Plath, and many young women's love of the poet, has long been dismissed for a supposed excess of emotion. I'd already told them that Rosenthal, the critic who had named the confessional poets, described Plath as a writer with a "narrower range of technical resource and objective awareness" than her male counterparts but an "absolute, almost demonically intense commitment by the end to the confessional mode" (1959, p. 154). Yet sometimes, as a teacher, it felt difficult to hold all these truths in the same room. Plath could be undervalued as a writer, her work historically overshadowed and shaped by the estranged husband and critics who outlived her, and still have laboured to write and rewrite her poetry. She could be a genius, whatever we took that to mean, and a confessional writer, someone who represented great truths about her own emotional life that resonated with many people in the class, yet the meaning of that poetry and the process by which it was created could still remain enigmatic.

We could both know too much about her as a person and find the writing she produced obtuse or difficult to relate to her life. She could be preternaturally gifted, but she might also have had to work for it.

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In a different week of the module, another student suggested that in a world currently debating if and how we might live in a post-truth society it was unethical to focus on the laborious and creative construction of any form of non-fiction. Shouldn't we, he said, be defending the truth from the Trumps, the Nigel Farages, and the Boris Johnsons of the world, rather than admitting its essential subjectivity?

I didn't have a succinct or satisfying answer. The contradictions were what I found interesting; I loved thinking about how craft and, particularly, contemporary labour practices shape and constrict modern and supposedly intimate modes of story-sharing. On 'TMI', I particularly liked thinking about this labour in different contexts and literary forms and how all of these authors, in their different times and modes, could tell the truth in artful ways. In our week on diaries, we discussed how Anaïs Nin spent a lifetime writing and editing her journals, often keeping two at the same time to both "live" and "write doubly" (Bair, 1995, p. 83), only for critics to later denounce her journals as "liaries". In our week on letters, we looked at how Oscar Wilde addressed *De Profundis* to his former lover, acknowledging that he may only have used the letter form because Reading Gaol banned the famous author from writing anything else whilst he was incarcerated [4]. We compared the kinds of controversies surrounding Nin and Wilde with our contemporary moment, when poets like Rupi Kaur were being critically eviscerated for publishing on Instagram because of a perceived lack of craft, editorial oversight, and institutional platform.

Yet I worried that, by its end, the module might have placed just about everything in quotation marks. It was a module about confessional writing, a term that I said from the beginning was problematic and variously claimed and rejected by the authors we looked at. We were reading representations of the truths of people's lives, all of them highly constructed and not the immediate, intimate, and authentic documents they might at first appear to be. This tension often looked, to me, like a painful disillusionment amongst the students who desperately wanted this kind of writing to be honest, directive, and true; who might also have taken the course to read the testimonies of historically marginalised people they felt allied with or belonged to in a supremely tense political moment. We might say that a work like *De Profundis* shows the despair of a queer person under persecution for the publicness of his private life, but it was also incredibly hard to read and understand, both emotionally and because the circumstances of its production from prison made it depressed, repetitive, and often delusional. The module, in other words, was not a triumphant rejection of the evangelical damnation of many far right discourses in 2017–2020, but a confirmation that memory is partial, persecution morphs and endures, and writers can write many versions of themselves even within the same document.

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The module was too large to know for certain if the comments I best remember were ideas working their way through, or the sound of 180 students' literary balloons deflating. I retired the module in 2020 and when I teach non-fiction now, it's part of modules designed around other topics and alongside works of fiction. It remains true that some, and sometimes many, students find the labour of non-fiction difficult to acknowledge. Not only that, but many find it anathema to a celebration of non-fictional story-telling's validity and power. It's a question of trust, authority, and increasingly of authenticity: who, out of all the millions of personal stories we can access today, is the most quickly produced and does this make their story more authentic? Whose account is the most fully formed and vital; who is giving the reader the unfiltered and guaranteed truth without revision?

By that logic, it might indeed be unethical to teach students that nothing about non-fiction is stable or even true; that facts might be subjective, disputable, and constructed. But the discourse surrounding post-truth remains corrupted by what Alison Hearn (2023) describes as false perceptions of institutional authority and a belief that our “traditional arbiters of truth ... have been dismantled”, when they’ve “simply been recast” (p. 174). To ignore the artistic and creative labour of writing non-fiction, particularly confessional works like poetry, diaries, or letters, is therefore to ignore not only the skill, revision, and labour that goes into personal writing, but also the political work apparent in our contemporary moment, reconstituting the truth in increasingly sinister ways.

Notes

[1] Birmingham is the UK’s second largest city and the University of Birmingham is a founding member of the Russell Group of British research universities, with a student population of 24,585 undergraduate and 12,250 postgraduate students as of 2023/24 (HESA, 2023).

[2] Thanks, Glen.

[3] The couple’s daughter, Frieda, wrote the foreword to the restored edition, admitting her father was “dismayed to see their private business made the subject of a poem” when work from this period began appearing in newspapers and that he had changed the make-up of the collection to “make it more acceptable to readers” and to protect family members (F. Hughes, 2004).

[4] Scholars including biographer Richard Ellman (1988) claim that Wilde wasn’t allowed writing materials until near the end of his imprisonment in 1897, when they were tightly controlled: he could write letters, but only one page at a time, and Wilde – supposedly, though this is disputed – couldn’t reread previous day’s pages (p. 479).

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