

Performativity, Confession, and the Female Writer

as illuminated by the lives and works of Sylvia Plath and Dorothy Hewett

The act of confession, originally fixed in religious practice, has led to confessing the self not only in psychoanalytic contexts but also on the page. Termed ‘confessional writing’, the written form of confession has experienced a “sudden resurgence” (Gill, 2006, p.6) in the second half of the twentieth century in the West, though opinions vary among critics regarding the causes and consequences of this development. It is becoming increasingly necessary to discuss and evaluate confessional writing, however, for the rising “prevalence of feminist confessional writing” (Felski, p.93), exemplified by works such as those of Sylvia Plath and Dorothy Hewett, both draws public attention to these life narratives and invites debate surrounding their value.

Women’s experiences in particular face scrutiny as authors’ genders influence assessments of their writing; the female writer risks being judged in accordance with gender stereotypes, and having her work perceived as “typically lachrymose and self-indulgent” (Felski, p.93) and pejoratively dismissed as “women’s literature” (Weigel, p.84). The value of confessional writing is often contested, therefore, and its ties to gender, performativity, and questions of authenticity can lead to the genre being belittled. Nevertheless, scrutiny of confessional writing can also entail renewed interest in re-examination of forgotten or disregarded authors, as well as providing a new lens through which to evaluate writers who have already achieved posterity. Sylvia Plath is a good example of the latter: described by

academic Jacqueline Rose as a figure who “haunts our culture” (Rose, p.1), Plath is revered and reviled in turns for her shamelessly confessional style, and has been both “constructed and contested by literary criticism” (Tripp, p.565) since her suicide in 1963. While much has already been written about *The Bell Jar*, her poetry, and her psyche, Plath’s published and unpublished works merit being revisited and contrasted, especially when one considers how notions surrounding “the purpose of autobiography [purported and otherwise] to deduce truth” (Berghegger, p.1) remain contentious. Indeed, exploring Plath’s performance of identity and the extent to which she divulges her self in her writing could engender a more nuanced understanding of the confessional genre as a whole.

Yet the past quarter century’s “renewed interest in autobiography” (English, p.83) and confessional writing has also entailed rediscovery of female authors lost to history, whose works were arguably overlooked or ignored owing to negative assumptions about gender’s impact on writing, and sexism at an institutional level. Resources such as The Orlando Project, operated through Cambridge University Press, aim to ameliorate recognition of such writers through “researching, republishing, re-evaluating and recontextualizing female authors” (The Orlando Project, 2016), and including them in a growing database centred on women’s writing in Britain. Australian literary historians such as Ken Gelder also appear to be seeking ““new diversity”” (Gelder, p.112) in Australian fiction by “looking at women writers again, as well as migrant or diasporic writers, gay and lesbian writing, Aboriginal writing, [et. al.]” (ibid.). It is through this modern culture of recovery and reparation, therefore, that authors like Dorothy Hewett may potentially undergo a revival. Born in 1923, Hewett was a near-contemporary of Plath, who was born in 1932. Hewett, however, lived two and a half times as long as Plath, writing novels, plays, poetry, and an autobiography, and yet has little of Plath’s posthumous fame. Indeed, despite having been deemed “one of Australia’s best-loved and most respected writers” (Moore, p.321), Hewett remains a largely

obscure figure within Australia's mainstream literary canon: her setbacks range from *Bobbin' Up* "never [being] reprinted" (Hewett, 1990, p.366) in spite of its popularity, and *The Chapel Perilous* being banned in Western Australia owing to defamatory content (Novakovic, 2009). Examining her work and her person by comparison to that of Sylvia Plath is consequently useful; not only insofar as it acknowledges a woman who is arguably one of Plath's closest counterparts, but also because it highlights the role of politics and persona in the mythologising of the confessional author.

That said, identifying an author or a piece of writing as confessional is in itself a difficult task, owing to the subjective nature of judgement and of confession. While "confession is always autobiographical, [...] autobiography is not always confessional" (Worthington, p.149), for autobiographies "cannot, and need not, escape fiction" (Attridge, p.94). As posited by scholar Timothy Adams, despite being widely perceived as nonfiction, "many readers fail to understand that autobiography is also a form of imaginative literature" (Adams, p.34). Such views acknowledge that all representations of truth are filtered through bias, whether in daily observations or via the translation of these into narrative form. Consequently, one can claim that the *manner* in which authors such as Plath and Hewett express their lives and views – "the confession's quest for truth" (Radstone, p.205), however that may be constructed – bears just as much significance as the 'truth' of their experiences itself, in its most objective form.

This issue of truth's constructed nature raises questions about performativity in confessional writing, and even in one's understanding of oneself. The works of Sylvia Plath, for example, are consistently imbued with elements of her life and experiences, ranging from beekeeping references in *Ariel* to the "semi-autobiographical" (Baig, p.5) portrayal of mental illness in *The Bell Jar*. Ultimately classified as works of fiction, however, Plath's poetry and novel arguably enable her to explore the self "through contradiction and ambiguity" (Evans,

p.76), finding liberation in fiction, without being constrained by “the controlling form [and portrayal] of the conventional autobiographical self” (ibid.) and adherence to truth. One might subsequently expect her letters and journals to be more true to the reality of her identity and her situation, and to present a more objectively honest – and unified – front. Yet this is not necessarily the case: as evidenced by personal writing such as her “Back to School Commandments” (Plath, Kukil, p.538), Plath was deeply invested in curating her own image, perhaps even to herself. Indeed, in words which critics have aligned with “theories on the divided self” (Egeland, p.2), Plath considers her own writing to be “a substitute for myself: if you don’t love me, love my writing & love me for my writing” (Plath, Kukil, p.448). These words demonstrate that to Plath, her writing created “a facsimile body, a textual double” (Jeansonne, p.82), and that she therefore never stopped expressing herself in a performative manner, even when writing her journals. The confessions she divulged were always tailored, consciously or otherwise, in accordance with perceived or intended audiences.

The act of confessing and its relation to truth is further complicated by the changing nature of the self. As expressed by academic Susannah Radstone, “confession produces self-transformation” (Radstone, p.205) through reflection and “purging of the past” (ibid.), meaning that each act of confession alters the writer and their views. This claim that the “process of continual self-transformation or ‘becomingness’ [is] the defining feature of confession” (ibid.) is particularly evident in the case of Dorothy Hewett, highlighting once again “the divided self” (Hewett, 1990, p.128); “the girl who moves” (ibid.) and “the writer who watches” (ibid.). Similar to Plath, who wrote that she “can never be all the people [she wants]” (Plath, Kukil, p.43), Hewett both experimented and struggled with “playing [her] version of the emancipated female artist” (Hewett, 1990, p.125). Her goals varied greatly throughout her life and regularly came into conflict with one another, as exemplified by her fear of having “fragmented [her] personality so drastically that [she] killed the poet [within]”

(ibid., p.176) through adhering to the “constrictions” (ibid., p.175) of Communist beliefs. In this sense, therefore, it is possible to claim that owing to the unknowable and changing nature of the self, ‘autobiography’ is a misnomer: the form may “[frame] the self, but its surroundings are what shape it” (Berghegger, p.1). This is important in understanding both Plath and Hewett, for it indicates that performance is required by the very genre through which they both operated – *The Chapel Perilous* is “semi-autobiographical” (Hewett, 1977, p.xvi), as are many elements in Hewett’s work, such as the mythologising of her life in *Alice in Wormland*. Specific styles and themes through which they performed thus merit attention; choices surrounding performance are in themselves a form of confession.

A notable quality which Plath and Hewett share is that of being provocative – or at least, of being *considered* provocative. Critics of Plath have claimed her mass audience is owed primarily to “her troubled personality” (Egeland, p.7) and shock value. Hewett’s writing, meanwhile, has been described through backhanded compliments as “recklessly autobiographical” (Petersen, p.ix) due to its embracing of “crudity, untrammelled female sexuality, foolhardiness, [and] proletarian leanings” (ibid.). This provocativeness of disclosure is arguably as much a cultivated stylistic choice for these two writers, however, as it is a natural form of expression. Plath, for example, displays a “gratuitous and humanly offensive appropriation of the imagery of Jewish martyrs in Nazi death camps” (Bloom, p.4), as visible repeatedly throughout *Ariel* in poems such as *Lady Lazarus* and *Daddy*. Her former roommate stated Plath “sometimes [...] chose words with disquieting connotations for their shock value” (Steiner, p.33), indicating Plath may have been aware that “the Confessional poem depends on [...] good old-fashioned shock value” (Silverberg, p.71) in order to magnetise readers and to be perceived as ground-breaking. Hewett demonstrates a similar fascination with atomic war: while she speaks against it in a poem on Hiroshima which she reads on the radio (Hewett, 1990, p.355), she still employs it as a political statement in *The*

Chapel Perilous, notably in Sally's 'Atomic Lullaby' (ibid., 1972, p.65). Yet the juxtaposition of a lullaby and atomic bomb imagery in "Hush my baby do not cry / The mushroom cloud is in the sky" (ibid.) – not to mention the detached imagining of a healthy baby as being dead – could be read as facetious and tasteless, especially considering the play's mixture of burlesque and serious tones.

Nevertheless, both authors also use such imagery to convey genuine sentiments and opinions on issues in which they were invested. Plath's Holocaust imagery stems from a "crisis of representation in the place of the father" (Rose, p.227); even her ongoing struggles to learn German, recorded in her diaries as well as *The Bell Jar* (Plath, 1963, p.35), reflect how alien and distant she finds both her heritage language and her father himself. Consequentially, it is this sense of disconnect from an austere paternal German figure which engenders "her identification with the Jew" (Rose, p.227), rather than a goal to self-aggrandise or add gravity to her work through gratuitous historical references. Furthermore, Plath's careful selection of the words "*like a Jew*" (Plath, 1965, p.55) and "*I may be a bit of a Jew*" (ibid. [emphasis added]) in *Daddy* shows that she is hesitant to substitute herself fully for a Jew, and that her identification remains speculative. While Plath could be perceived as writing in a deliberately provocative manner, therefore, to opine as much would be to form assumptions based on the stereotype of "confessional writing [being] a variable and provocative literary form" (Harris, p.20). Indeed, much of what Plath wrote – journals, as well as *Ariel*'s poems, written shortly before her death – was "cathartic self-therapy" (Agarwal, p.77): her confessions were as much for herself as for an audience. This implies that reception of Plath and judgement of her performativity is as dependent on readers' own expectations of her, and of the genre in which she wrote, as it is of her genuine intentions.

Reception of Dorothy Hewett's writing has also reflected preconceived notions surrounding the nature of performativity in confessional writing, and expectations that

memoirists produce “writing that titillates because of its shock value” (Kofman, p.172).

Compared to Plath, however, Hewett has received very little critical attention, which makes it possible that views on her based in assumptions and stereotypes have been less roundly contested. While Hewett’s daughter Kate Lilley describes her with affection as a “magnificently unabashed poet of female narcissism” (Lilley, p.1), Hewett’s contemporaries saw her as “an arrogant little bitch” (Hewett, 1990, p.124), “a filthy slut” (ibid., p.149), too “fucking honest” (ibid., 202), a “failed bourgeoisie girl” (ibid, p.207), and even “a monster” (ibid., p.128, p.271). She elicited such feelings not only because she was sexual, strong-willed, and part of a “radical, intellectual minority” (ibid., p.120) in a conservative era, but in particular because she never expressed shame about her actions, either via her writing on her decisions. Thus sexual confidence could be interpreted as salaciousness, and passionate political views as “shrill” (Birkett, Harvey, p.200) bids for attention. Indeed, as posited by numerous gender critics, a “rhetorical trick of male criticism of texts by women” (ibid.) in Hewett’s era was to use gender stereotypes to demean whatever they disliked, “especially [...] signs of female rebellion” (ibid.). Coupled with the fact that Hewett herself considered Australian culture conservative – she claims “Modernism in Australia [was] set back two decades” (Hewett, 1990, p.162) – it is possible she and her works’ merits were too progressive to be recognised in her time. She was consequently condemned by “lurid early reviews” (Williams, p.xvi) and accused of “self-display” (ibid., p.xi).

Nevertheless, reviews of Plath and Hewett which deemed the authors performative were not entirely wrong; while ascribing performativity to their work can be reductive, they did both desire an audience. Plath is described as having “above all things [...] desired fame” (Rose, p.3), and Hewett, outside of Communist Party influences over her views of the ego, harboured a yearning “to be as famous as Edith Sitwell” (Hewett, 1990, p.247). Viewed through the lens of confessional writing, one might liken these wishes to “narcissistic

preoccupation with the self” (Felski, p.89) in a post-war era characterised by loss of faith in authority and society, which triggered intense introspection (Lasch, p.xiii). They could also be further dismissed through gendered ideas about “the autobiographical narrowness and narcissism of female writing” (Stanton, p.132). Yet these forms of expression are arguably cries for help coming from authors seeking visibility in a man’s world, in “a period [of] repression and bigotry” (Hewett, 1977, p.xix). Plath and Hewett sought audiences not only in order to express themselves, but also so as to communicate the sense of entrapment they felt within their gendered societal roles. It is consequently unsurprising that their writing resonates with young women in particular. Plath continues to “[strike] a painful and recognisable chord” (Kirk, p.xii) with such an audience, and Hewett wrote of receiving letters from women “all over Australia” (Hewett, 1977, p.xvi) who felt a “strong sense of identity with the struggles” (ibid.) portrayed in her writing.

While Plath and Hewett grew up in different countries and different social classes, the struggles they faced were notably similar. Both were keenly aware of the expectations and limitations placed on them as women, for example, and the anxiety and tension which they consequently developed proved a strong influence on their works. Indeed, Plath’s words at age 19 which claim “Being born a woman is my awful tragedy” (Plath, Kukil, p.77) foreshadow a lifelong preoccupation with the conflict between womanhood and opportunity. Hewett rankles similarly at the knowledge that she is perceived as a “little lady” (Hewett, 1990, p.198) – “only a woman” (ibid.) – and is very conscious of the way this affects people’s views of her and her writing. This is exemplified by her noting how the success of *Bobbin’ Up* engendered misogynistic speculation that Les Flood was the author, and merely “‘allowed [her] to put [her] name on it’” (ibid., p.366). Hewett also shares Plath’s ambivalence towards motherhood: though she acknowledges the “terrible primitive pull between mother and child” (ibid., p.206) and goes on to have many children, she also

remarks after Clancy's birth that "the world has shrunk" (ibid., p.192) to her flat and childrearing. Plath's feelings towards motherhood are similarly mixed, with her writing to her mother about her "beautiful" children, claiming it to be "the richest and happiest time of [her] life" (S. Plath, A. S. Plath, p.455), only to disclose in her diaries that she "[has] none of the selfless love of [her] mother" (Plath, Kukil, p.98). Indeed, her statement that she is "in love only with [herself]" (ibid.) reflects her desire to retain an "outlet" (Plath, Kukil, p.99), and to keep "her own [...] identity and writing career" (Kottler, p.22) separate from motherhood; Plath feared that being a wife and mother might interfere with her work.

Yet in the same way Hewett willingly "gave up everything" (Hewett, 1990, p.317) to be with Les Flood, Plath also declares she "must have a passionate physical relationship with someone" (Plath, Kukil, p.99), and that marriage is a "necessity" (ibid.) for her. While "cultural pressure" (Wagner, p.521) on women and wives of the era was onerous, neither woman ignored it entirely, which explains their conflicted relationships with gender roles – Hewett questioning, for example, whether she had "failed yet again to be a 'proper woman'" (Hewett, 1990, p.303). Neither woman reviled typical manifestations of femininity, as evident through examples as simple as their mutual interest in fashion. Rather, both women "wanted it all" (Scigaj, p.15) – career and family – and their internal struggles thus mirrored the dilemma of *The Bell Jar*'s Esther Greenwood, paralysed by indecision and hopelessness at the base of a figurative fig-tree representing diverse opportunities (Plath, 1963, p.81). The fear of entrapment as a result of gender arguably fuelled these women's ambitions to write – rather than, as Plath confides, to be "well-educated, brilliantly promising, and fading out into an indifferent middle-age" (Plath, Kukil, p.524). From a retrospective viewpoint, critics have theorised that Plath "at times overreached" (Scigaj, p.15) as a consequence of her fears, "[feeling] she could handle it all, effortlessly and perfectly" (ibid.). The same could be said for Hewett, who barely escaped destitution on several occasions, suffered domestic violence,

had suicidal tendencies, and only “found [her] way back again to the country of the imagination” (Hewett, 1990, p.353) and writing after years spent bound by “doctrinaire Marxism” (ibid.) and difficult relationships. She posited that societal pressures and “compartments” (Hewett, 1990, p.246) made it “harder [for women than for men] to hold onto any real sense of [their] own identity” (ibid.), struggling as did Plath with reconciling her “multiple selves” (Maftai, p.69). In this sense, therefore, American and Australian societies’ gender-based treatments of the authors underpinned both their worldviews and their writing.

The authors’ attempts to escape entrapment are also noteworthy in the way that they anticipate certain strains of modern feminism. Both Plath and Hewett rail against “[cultural] associations between shame and femininity” (Manion, p.22), at least in their private words, when faced with pressures that they conform to a particular vision of femininity. This is especially true of Hewett, who is politically outspoken as well as promiscuous – and as she expresses in *Alice in Wormland*, she “didn’t care [about others’ judgements, for] she was liberated” (Hewett, 1987, p.33). Indeed, Hewett herself saw her casual acquisition and discarding of sexual partners as “revenge on [her] idealised concept of perfect love” (ibid., 1990, p.139), which she believed unattainable in an imperfect and limiting world. In this sense, she is reminiscent of the woman in Plath’s *Lady Lazarus*, a figure “rising against those who have confined her and bottled up her creativity and activity” (Daiya, p.168); a woman who “[eats] men like air” (Plath, 1965, p.19), and is reborn. Plath, meanwhile, expressed her feminist attitudes in her life less overtly than did Hewett. Their views are similar, as evidenced by poems such as Plath’s *Virgin in a Tree*, which criticises traditional views of sexuality and of women being “virgins for virginity’s sake” (Plath, 1981, p.67). This progressive stance is also reflected by Esther’s deliberate move to lose her virginity in *The Bell Jar*, by which she renounces its supposed “enormous importance” (ibid., 1963, p.240).

Plath herself had sexual relationships with numerous men, and did not berate herself for entertaining a “myriad” (Wilson, p.12) of boyfriends. Yet while she and Hewett shared similar ideas concerning the sexual emancipation of women, Hewett is far less publicly inhibited in her “career in promiscuity” (Hewett, p.137), hiding little and dismissing her notoriety as ““the university bike”” (ibid., p.143) by stating that “[one] didn’t really have to be too outrageous to upset [Perthites] in the early 1940s” (ibid.). It is unlikely that Plath, ever obsessed with others’ views and a “perfectionist” (Tobin, p.121) in curating her image, would have been comfortable with – or indifferent to – such a reputation.

This variation of expression between the two authors is arguably due to differences in class and social goals. Plath presented herself as the archetypal ““All-American Girl”” (Butscher, p.198), going so far as to suppress feelings ranging from frustration to depression in order to maintain a socially attractive and laudable “CHEERFUL FRONT” (Plath, Kukil, p.538). Hewett, meanwhile, seemed to take the pressure to please others as an invitation to challenge expectations, and displayed no shame in being politically outspoken and “sharp” (Hewett, 1990, p.344) in her manner. This is arguably because Hewett felt that she had less to lose and was fiercely committed to her concept of her own integrity, forever being “brutally honest” (ibid, p.202) – for example, she did not hesitate to tell Sam Aarons to his face that she had been sleeping with Les Flood while Sam was in Sydney. This demonstrates the very different forms of expression espoused by the authors, regardless of their shared feminist politics: Plath chose to play to society’s expectations in person and to subvert them primarily through the freedom of fiction and autobiography, rather than in real life.

Yet it is also worth noting that the most autobiographical texts of the two authors – Plath’s journals and Hewett’s *Wild Card* – were written at very different points in their lives. Plath wrote in her journals up until her suicide at age 30, and Hewett wrote her autobiography retrospectively, aged 77. Hewett’s “temporal distance” (Radstone, p.205) from her past self,

coupled with the knowledge that she had already established her career, may well have imbued her with the confidence to write without inhibition, and to write about herself as *being* entirely without inhibition. One can only speculate how Plath might have aged and reflected on her youth, so it is difficult to compare the two authors and the ‘I’'s of their autobiographical works. It can be concluded, however, that while Plath was never overtly scandalous within her society as was Hewett, she was equally preoccupied with questions of “female agency” (Gill, 2008, p.70). In this sense, both authors were ideological forerunners to feminist movements succeeding them, which sought – and still seek – to combat “sexual shame” (McDermott, p.140) and the pressure for women to present a socially approved front in order to be heard. Indeed, such movements ultimately look for means through which women can overcome or escape from the limitations imposed on them by gender roles and expectations.

In what concerns notions of ‘escape’, however, Plath and Hewett also shared a particularly troubling temptation: the lure of suicide. Plath herself committed suicide, and her works deal extensively with the theme, expressing a general “excessive preoccupation with death” (Chawdhry, Syeed, p.2) as a result of her “anxiety and alienation” (ibid.). Hewett, meanwhile, nearly died after deliberately swallowing poison in her teens, and found herself “seriously contemplating suicide again” (Hewett, 1990, p.219) on numerous occasions thereafter. Yet a further unsettling aspect of this commonality is that both authors nurtured a sense of performativity in their attitudes towards their own deaths. Plath, for example, “[felt her] life linked to [Virginia Woolf’s]” (Plath, Kukil, p.269), noting their similarities and writing that she “felt [she] was reduplicating [Woolf’s suicide] in that black summer of 1953” (ibid.). This supports the comment of one of her former boyfriends, Gordon Lameyer, who claimed Plath saw herself “in many mythic guises” (Wilson, p.12) and as “a figure approaching near-mythical status” (ibid.). One could consequently argue that Plath both

romanticised suicide and perceived it as a means of self-aggrandisement and of achieving posterity. Similarly, in behaviour harking back to the written and cultural “tendency of glorifying and romanticising suicides” (Eshkevari et. al., p.315), Hewett is tellingly performative in her suicide attempt, “looking at [the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*] for the last time” (Hewett, 1990, p.154) and quoting poetry before taking poison. She, too, imagines herself finding a place alongside other famous writers, and makes a “mythology” (Hodge, p.1) of her own life in works such as *Alice in Wormland*, where she declares “the world her myth” (Hewett, 1987, p.51). Though Plath died young, while Hewett lived to old age, both thus contributed to the stereotype of writers and artists being ‘tortured’ by nature through their relationships with suicide; indeed, the scientific finding that “female poets [are] significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness” (Kaufman, p.37) than any other writers has been dubbed “the Sylvia Plath Effect” (ibid.). What is potentially most noteworthy about identifying a relationship between female poets and suicide, however, is how it impacts the way authors’ works are read and received.

Plath’s and Hewett’s fates diverged, and this arguably affected the posterity of their works respectively. The aforementioned cultural tendency to romanticise suicide and tragedy – a trend extending even into tasteless contexts such as *VICE* magazine’s “fashion spread featuring models re-enacting the suicides of female authors” (*VICE* magazine, 2013), which included Plath – has fuelled Plath’s transformation into a “true cult figure” (Egeland, p.70). Hewett, meanwhile, has slid into near obscurity owing to a variety of possible reasons. Firstly, though Hewett has been briefly published internationally, her work is potentially too closely entwined with the distinct Australian environment, culture, and vernacular to be accessible and popular worldwide. Secondly, her refusal to moderate her behaviour and views – unlike Plath – in either her writing or her real life may have preserved her integrity, but it also engendered “wasted opportunity” (Hewett, 1990, p.347). She was repeatedly denied

access to creative spaces and opportunities under patriarchal management, and “[treated] like dirt” (ibid, p.310) by people who “[took] their cue from [her husband]” (ibid.). One can therefore conclude that her class and economic disadvantages prevented her from reaching her full artistic potential, and from finding support as a writer at all stages of her life.

Lastly, however, it is arguably her lack of mystique – by comparison to, say, Plath – which proved most detrimental to her posterity. Hewett ultimately overcame many of the problems facing her: her eventual marriage to Merv Lilley lasted until her death, and she was able to “[live] on royalties from her work” (Williams, p.ix) – her days of destitution and tragedy had passed. One could argue that this humanised her; and while humanising authors is not bad in itself, it potentially renders them significantly less intriguing than a tragic figure who died young and unhappy, and whose husband was said to have “destroyed” (Brain, p.209) her last journal. Plath is to many a “mythical icon or artist martyr” (Kirk, p.xii), and this illustrates the pernicious effect of an artist’s suicide on perceptions of their work: it casts a “cool, ever-present shadow” (ibid.), and elevates the writer into legend. Indeed, this has arguably proved the case for authors such as Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Anne Sexton, Sarah Teasdale, and Sarah Kane. Yet to define an author by their mental illness and to further idolise them for it is ultimately a dangerous trend revealing an idolising attitude towards suicide, and one which skews the very lens through which readers understand and appreciate confessional writing.

Readers’ interpretations of confessional writing are heavily influenced by the author’s identity, and by the author’s written performance of themselves. This is notably evident when examining the lives and works of Sylvia Plath and Dorothy Hewett. Though they led significantly different lives, both shared similar preoccupations and feminist ideas which underpinned much of their work. Analysing them not only offers an insight into the gendered perceptions of female writers, but also highlights the troubling impact of an author’s death on

the reception of their work. This can entail speculation over whether authors such as Dorothy Hewett have been overlooked, and potentially engender further interest in rediscovering and re-evaluating forgotten female authors. What's more, the modern "thirst for autobiography" (Heller, p.70) – coupled with social media advances and speculations over the era being one of narcissism – renders study of confessional writers increasingly relevant. Indeed, investigating the interrelation between performativity, confession, and gender in writing is today not merely an interest, but a necessity.

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