Course sample

Writing 2: Imaginative Non-fiction

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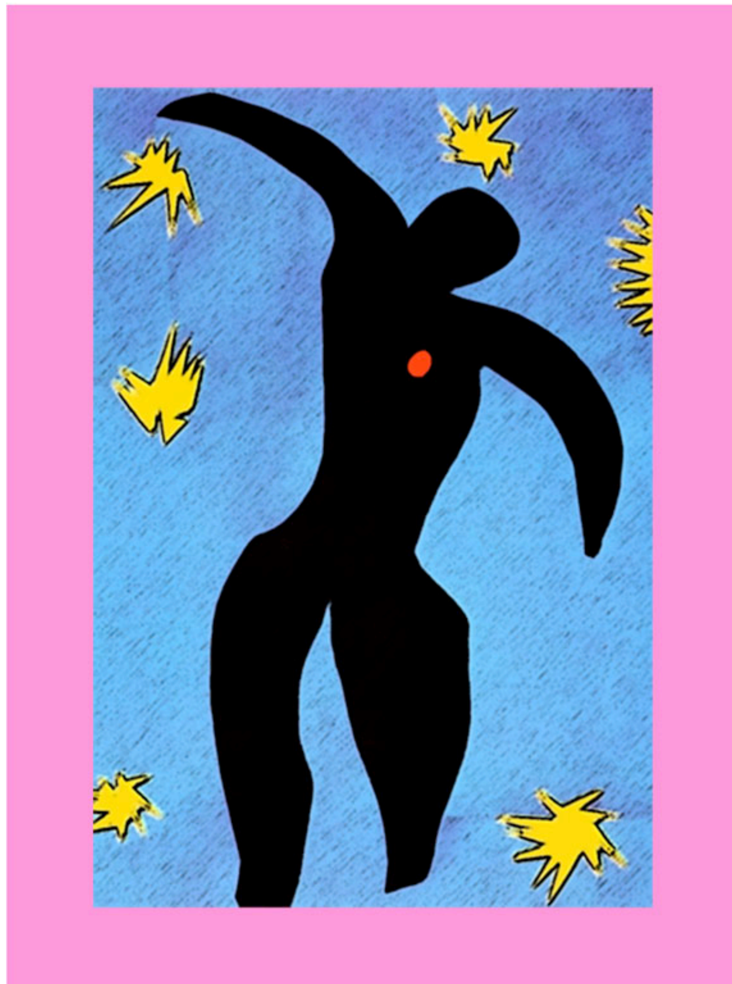

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Registered charity number: 327446
ISBN 1 872147 67 4

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Document Control Number: Document4

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Registered Office, Open College of the Arts, Michael Young Arts Centre, Unit 1B, Redbrook Business Park, Wilthorpe Road, Barnsley, S75 1JN, United Kingdom

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1 Introduction

Writing 2: Imaginative Non-fiction has been created as a second level course in imaginative non-fiction.

"Imaginative non-fiction" is a made-up and slightly bumbling phrase because we are not sure what to call the sort of writing that this course is going to be about. I understand "imaginative non-fiction" in this case to mean any writing in which the writer, the "I", is a central character or subject. For example:

- autobiography
- memoirs
- travel writing
- adventures (physical or psychological)
- "confessional" stories

are all obvious areas.

Some personally voiced approaches to the following topics might also be appropriate:

- local history
- natural history
- family history
- gardening
- cookery (see *Alice B. Toklas' Cookbook*)

Academic history, how-to books, technical guides and such like are not.

The important distinction is whether the personal experience of the student will play a central role and whether the authorial "I" will be honestly claimed.

This course is designed to parallel *Storylines* and *The Experience of Poetry*. The levels assessment criteria and proposed outcomes are similar. The theoretical foundation – that creative writing flows out of personal experience reflected on and edited from drafts – is identical. Course delivery – 5 postal assignments drawn from ideas in the course and specialist tutors – will be the same and will require similar levels of time and commitment. The course will be designed to match the accreditation levels of the other two courses.

Writing 2: Imaginative Non-fiction has been created as a further course, at a second level, for students who have already completed the OCA creative writing foundation course *Starting to Write,* or have finished *Lifelines* and want to take that form of writing further. It is a sister-course with *The Experience of Poetry* and *Storylines*. It has been introduced because we believe there is an important area of writing which is neither poetry nor "fiction" but is still truly a literary form, rather than journalism, technical information or scholarly texts. There do not seem to be many courses available which address this area of literature, which - like all forms of writing - has its own rules, customs, traditions and patterns.

The philosophy underpinning *Starting to Write* is that all good writing proceeds from personal experience which has been transformed through the imagination and writing skills which can be taught and learned. All the second level courses have been designed to build on that framework, by developing specialised skills for particular forms of expression. At one sense *all* writing is based in real experience and so *all* writing will have an "autobiographical" element, but in this course we intend to focus on that element.

There are many ways of working the transformation of experience into art, but a very ancient one, which is currently enjoying a rebirth, is "telling it how it is", telling the truth and using one's own life directly.

You might start out feeling that this is “easy” or “natural”, but if you have already attempted to write down even the simplest “true story” in ways that attract other people to read it, you will know that it is just as difficult (in some ways more difficult) than “making things up.” In this course you will work with the “true story” – any story where the writer is presenting him/herself as the central subject or theme of the work.

This is a course for people who want to use their writing to explore their own identity; and the events which have shaped it. However “true” the material may be it still needs to be organised into a narrative shape; it still needs to be written clearly and beautifully; it still needs to engage with the reader. It still needs all skills and techniques of fiction and poetry, but deployed somewhat differently.

All second level OCA courses grow out of the first level. Although this course offers the student more autonomy and control, it is still firmly rooted in *Starting to Write*. You will probably find you need to refer to that course during this one. We have not repeated any of that information here, but your tutor may well use “technical language” from that course; and will expect you to understand and utilise the ideas you learned there – about language, structure, characterisation, dialogue and controlling your text for example. It is probably a good idea to review *Starting to Write* before you begin this course in any case, but if you have arrived here via *Lifelines* or Direct Entry then it is essential to do so.

One difference between this and the other Level 2 courses is that many writers will have come onto this course with a full-length project they already know they want to tackle. While the other courses can be broken down into five independent units, this is often not the right focus for this sort of writing: after all, the five assignments will have the same subject at their heart – YOUR experience. We have tried to design the course so that it can be used by people working on a wide range of writing – from the classical autobiography through to travel writing or single incidents. For this reason there is more in this course about laying down and working through a long text, and then editing it from that larger perspective, than in the other Level 2 courses.

Nonetheless it is worthwhile exploring the form as widely as possible, remembering that all forms of writing have a great deal in common. We hope that you will not just skim through this course looking for the bits you think you can use, but that you will read and enjoy it all.

At this level of study it is really important to *read* as well as to write. When working in any literary form it is important to understand the range of work that has already been written, since any new work will stand in some sort of relationship to that. A growing sense of what "works" for you and what doesn't will enable you to discriminate about you own writing.

Exploring the solutions that other writers have found may give you new ideas.

Noticing what is bad or dull in even well established books will train you in avoiding those errors yourself. Interestingly, although you might think that wide reading would rather restrict or reduce your originality and "natural voice", the reverse appears to be the case. Almost all experienced writers will say that the wider your reading in a literary tradition, the more likely you are to develop real originality and innovation.

Writing 2: Imaginative Non-fiction has been devised and written by Sara Maitland. She is a "multi-form" writer, who has published prize winning novels and short stories and several non-fiction works, including a number of autobiographical essays usually in anthologies: for example on motherhood, on being a writer, on menopause, on her father. She has also worked as a feature journalist. This range of writing has led her to see the things that different forms have in common, as well as the way certain subjects "fit" certain genres.

The structures of this course are similar to those of *Starting to Write* and *Lifelines*. The course consists of five assignments, which you will send to your tutor; we recommend a slightly longer period between tutorials at this level than we did for *Starting to Write*. We suggest about six weeks to complete

each piece of work, which will give it time to brew and mature and will give you time to read around the topic as well. At least one of your assignments will involve you in “research”. This might involve reading, visiting a museum, interviewing someone or making a journey to or back to some relevant place. The emphasis here will not be on academic or journalistic “fact collection”, but on how to use new material, how to deepen and expand your factual knowledge so as to enrich your writing. You and your tutor will want to discuss this particular element, so that your project is suited to your individual needs and interests. More information on all this will be found later in this course, specifically in the sections called *Finding out more* and *Creating and presenting your assignments*.

3 A short history of creative non-fiction

When Graham Mort wrote two other OCA Level 2 courses, *The Experience of Poetry* and *Storylines*, he began with a history of the form that those two courses are inviting students to study. I thought that this course should do so too, but it has turned out to be very hard to write such a history. This is partly because the form is so diffuse that it is probably impossible to reach a universal agreement about what ought to be included in such a history. It is also difficult because, no matter how I look at it, the history does not seem to have a smooth evolution from ritual or oral story telling into a sophisticated literary form, which - although of course it grows and changes as poetry and the short story do – nevertheless keeps faith with itself somehow.

Graham Mort suggests that while poetry grew out of religious ritual, the telling of stories began around the tribal fire: part entertainment, part gossip, part information for the next generation put into a memorable form. In these circumstances, it is unimaginable that these stories did not include at least *some* that began,

“No, honestly it’s true. I really did. . .”
or “I’m not making this up.”

Perhaps the elusive skill in finding and using that apparently natural voice, which persuaded the rest of your group that this one really was true, began to develop right there. But we have no way of knowing whether, in general, *that* sort of story was thought of as more or less interesting than the ones that were proudly “made up”.

Of course, in an oral tradition, there were many stories told that were neither “true” in this personally authorised way, nor made up, but were the pattern and fabric of life. Myths both described reality and explained it. Nobody

"made them up" and nobody claimed them as personal experience. They were history and science and psychology all rolled into one, and most critics now believe that these stories rather than the "personal experience" or the fictional story are the original kind. Like poetry they grew out of religion and ritual.

The sort of writing we are looking at in this course is the sort of story-telling that must have evolved – although we have no evidence for it – in those nomadic hunter-gatherer clans or groups, which valued the *direct* experience of its members over the hero tales and fantasies and dreams in which other groups specialised. Such stories would have been more than gossip and more than just useful information. They would have been *stories* – they would have forms and structures and shapes which allowed their hearers to test their authenticity and at the same time to enjoy and profit from their telling. Just because a story is "true" that does not mean that it is "natural", that all you have to do is "tell it how it is". This is still the case. "It's not what you tell, it's how you tell it" applies even more to the personal anecdote than to the fictional story. Look at the pub-bore: some people have a "natural" ability to make the most riveting events into completely dull stories. *There is no material that cannot be ruined by bad telling; there is very little that is human that cannot be made fascinating by good telling.*

But although "true personal stories" have "rules", or codes like fiction and poetry do, they are different from either of these. If you doubt this, try the following experiment: tune your radio in to any "talk" channel (BBC Radio 4 works very well for this). It usually takes less than twenty seconds to work out whether you are hearing a "drama" or a "discussion", a story or a true life account. How have these rules developed, so that it hardly matters whether you are hearing a first person account of child-birth, polar exploration, mystical encounters, the speaker's grandfather or their first day at school? All these will have as much or more in common with each other as any of them do with a novel or poem on the same topics.

The history of these forms has not unrolled smoothly, nor can it be traced back to beyond the beginning of recorded language. The earliest *written*

records we have got are, I'm sorry to have to say, mainly financial accounts, legal codes, and totally functional information. These are followed by histories and genealogies (often related to gods and heroes but, nonetheless, clearly understood as "history" in the modern sense.) The earliest *literary* forms we know of are poetry usually from some religious or ritual context. The personal non-fiction story and the made-up fiction story have had to find what place they can in different cultural contexts.

However there are some dates, some individual books or periods of literary history that show this imaginative non-fictional type of writing emerging.

Fiddling while Rome burned

In 397CE the bishop of a minor North African city wrote a completely new sort of book: something we have since come to call "autobiography". His name was Augustine and his book was called *The Confessions* (or perhaps a better modern translation would be *The Testimony*). The startling originality of the book was recognised immediately – on the whole his colleagues and friends were rather shocked by it (as people often are by highly original works).

What was unusual or different about the book was not that it told the story of his own life – there had been such stories told and written before – but that it examined the conflict between the "inner" and the "outer" life of an individual. It showed the way a person was shaped by his childhood, by his parents, by his education, his sexuality and his habits. It also told how he went on changing even once he had become an adult, shaped by external forces in very deep internal ways. Not simply shaped towards some inevitable high destiny, but shaped into a deeply complex and divided person. Previous biographies and autobiographies had been "exemplary"; they were designed to teach young men (*sic.*) how to become virtuous adults: good emperors, philosophers, saints or warriors.

Augustine would not have understood his own book in the way we do now. He did not think he was writing "about" himself, but "about" God. He would

(quite rightly in a sense) have called his book "theology", not autobiography at all. Nonetheless he created a completely new form of literature. *The Confessions* showed people a way of writing about something – almost anything – *from the point of view of personal experience*. If one thinks about it, the best creative non-fiction even today is seldom just about the individual. It is always about something bigger (The War, Climbing Mount Everest, politics, literature, the family, childhood, life styles) but given emotional engagement, authority and authenticity through the writer daring to bring his or her own experience right into the centre of the story – to admit to involvement. Historically, Augustine's *Confessions* come before anything we can think of as a novel or prose *fiction* more generally (bearing in mind that myths, especially biblical myths were, at this time, treated as true historical accounts.) Although, of course, compared to wider non-fiction or to poetry and drama this sort of writing is a mere baby.

Historians have debated endlessly why this new sort of book, and in some ways new sort of person, emerged in North Africa at this particular time. It has been suggested that it was because Christianity had become successfully established – if no-one was going to be martyred anymore the moral struggle had to move inwards. Or that Augustine wrote this way because he could not read or write Greek so he knew he could never be taken seriously as a theologian. Or because the times were so unstable – the empire was divided; Rome, the symbol of security and order, was under threat from the Goths and with the next decade would be captured and burned for the first time (410 CE); the only safety that people could find was inside themselves. It has even been suggested that Augustine could write *The Confessions* because the skill of reading silently had just been discovered. With this amazing new skill – it explicitly amazed Augustine when he first saw someone doing it – words could live inside a person, unspoken, unheard and that meant there had to be an inner person, as well as a public *persona*.

These reasons only matter because, in joining this course, you have decided that writing from your own personal experience is something that you want to do. All writers should ask themselves *why* they want to write what they want to write. Both "Why write at all?" and "Why write this sort of thing?"

However there is something comforting about Augustine's invention. He was not very famous; not at the peak of his profession; he did not live somewhere glamorous or central; he was not directly involved in world-shattering events. Nonetheless to-day he is probably the best known individual from that period of history, just because he wrote that one book. It is not what you are or do, but how well you write it, that makes your writing live into the future.

After Augustine

It has to be said that Augustine's brilliant literary innovation did not catch on immediately. The shadow of the so-called Dark Ages was deepening and Europe did not have a lot of time to spare for inner conflict, self-exposure, or indeed the very idea of the "individual voice" or vision. The "barbarians" from the North had robust literary traditions of their own – mainly oral poetry with huge dramatic narratives and highly sophisticated verse forms that celebrated heroes and victories rather than the inner self and direct personal experience. Literacy declined: King Alfred the Great, trying to re-establish Christian civilisation in his war-ravaged state in the 7th century CE complained that he could not find six literate priests in the whole Kingdom. It must have felt more important to hang on to the ragged tatters of a past culture than mess about with private voices.[1] It was not a good time for literary innovation.

But more importantly, perhaps, it is extremely difficult for us post-Enlightenment, post-Freudian Europeans, at home with the language of "Human Rights" and "the sub-conscious" to understand how radical the very *idea* of an "Individual" or an individual voice, or even an "artist" was throughout the Middle Ages. The word "individual" itself meant something totally different from what it means now – from its etymological roots it meant *two things (originally separate) that have so grown together that they cannot be divided*, for example a happily married couple. Only in the 18th century did it come to mean a single person, different from all other persons, and having an undivided and unique unity or integrity of body, spirit and mind.

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[1] In the last book of her Roman trilogy, *The Lantern Bearers*, Rosemary Sutcliffe makes this point poignantly.

From their writing we can glean virtually nothing directly about the backgrounds, personalities or lifestyles of most of the great early English writers. Even someone like Julian of Norwich who is writing about an intensely personal experience sees no particular need to tell us anything about *herself*. She records her fourteen “shewings” as a direct revelation from God, and clearly sees no especial individual role for herself as the visionary. What we know about her, as a personality, we know from other sources. Modern literary and historical techniques – both linguistic and psychoanalytical – can reveal a good deal about the writer, in the same way as they can reveal things about the modern poet or fiction author. But the notion that the “I” and its personal experiences could be proper stuff of literature would have seemed bizarre to most people before the Renaissance and Reformation.

It is worth remembering that even though Shakespeare appears to have “invented” the fully rounded, psychologically complex, fictional character he remains himself so shadowy, so impersonal and so private that there is considerable doubt as to whether he ever existed.

The reinvention of the self

The Renaissance “invented” the idea of the artist, the genius. For the first time, having a personal vision of the world and expressing it in one’s own “voice” became not a symptom of madness, but a sign of superior sensibility and spirit. (You may notice that the separation between being “mad” and being an “artist” is still not clear in many people’s minds!) Now it was not enough to retell old stories, rework old themes both in form and in content – with technical ingenuity being the highest mark of excellence. The cultured public (a very small group still) began to perceive a brand new difference between artists and craftworkers and to want artistic “authenticity” – they wanted to feel that their artists (be they painters, architects, musicians, mystics, or in this case writers) were putting themselves on the line.
The Reformation “invented” the idea of inner doubt and division. Religion became an “emotional experience” – a person might “do” all the right things, believe the right things and act according to the Law, both of God and Man and *still* not be certain of salvation. Protestant Christians had to constantly

examine not just their actions (sins and virtues) and their thoughts (orthodox or heretical) – both of which the Roman Catholic Church was prepared to do for you if you were not doing it adequately yourself – but equally importantly their emotions, feelings, dispositions and personal development. Gradually this led to a new ability and fluency in writing about one's self and one's own experience for other people to read.

A classic example of this development is John Bunyan, the popular Protestant religious writer. His first major work was fictional: a "novel" called *A Pilgrim's Progress*. Allegory was a popular genre in 17th C, and most readers both then and now would have little difficulty in identifying the journey and the various dilemmas of the protagonist, Christian, with Bunyan's own spiritual experiences. But Bunyan seems to have felt that he had not gone far enough in establishing his own spiritual authenticity and turned his hand to a work of creative non-fiction: *Grace Abounding.* Like Augustine more than a thousand years before him, Bunyan used his own deeply felt experience and his own personal history as the base material for theology. *Grace Abounding* is not simply an autobiography. It does not say "this is me", but uses a strong individual "me" to talk about something far more general. In many ways it is odd that today we are more likely to know about *A Pilgrim's Progress* than about *Grace Abounding*. The first is a moralistic allegory of an almost mediaeval kind; the second is a very modern psychological exploration of an individual's life. Despite its obsessive fixation on damnation it seems closer to the "confessional" victim/survivor genre, which attracts so many contemporary readers, than *A Pilgrim's Progress* does to the modern novel.

Renaissance ideas about individuality and Protestant ideas about personal salvation were coupled with growing literacy and an emerging "scientific" interest in the material and emotional world. In the 16th and 17th C these together threw up a vast range of new ways of writing non-fiction for a readership that was neither theological nor philosophical, but whose interests were more than just practical. For instance since the Middle Ages there had been gardening manuals, herbals and helpful horticultural guidance; now suddenly there were books about garden design, and books describing the writers' and their friends' gardens. There were personal accounts of

individual gardens, instead of abstract lectures on the perfect garden, according to classical authority.

The changing times led to other literary innovations too. Since before Marco Polo there had been an abiding interest in the exotic foreign places that bold travellers might go to, but the opening up of the Americas for colonisation and settlement meant that people had a new need to know what was *true*. It ultimately does not matter if there are or are not large birds called phoenixes in countries you are never going to visit: they make a great story. It matters a great deal, however, whether there are or are not large edible birds called turkeys in a country you are considering going to live in. First-hand reports became valuable, especially as the traditional (classical) authors had given no guidance at all on the New World. To have authority, such an account had to be by a named individual who had clearly been to wherever it was you were considering going. A distinct non-fictional kind of writing developed that gave not just practical guidance, but emotionally rich descriptions – attempting to give people some idea of what it *felt like* to live in so strange and distant a place, to meet native people, to endure unimaginably severe winters or eat strange foods. Travel writing in the modern sense was born – something "more true", "more reliable" than the old "traveller's tales", but more intimate and revealing than academic geography.

At the same time, poetry, sermons and biographies (still most usually obituaries) became more personal: the writers were expected to reveal in public real and "original" feelings, rather than merely perform the routine formal role of "lover", "parent" or "widow" with as much elegance and appropriateness as possible. These biographies were now frequently written by a friend of the deceased, designed to illuminate the "inner" or private man, to fill out the individual background behind the public facade. When Cromwell told his portraitist to "paint him warts and all",[2] he was following a new but strong impulse of the moment. He wanted a picture of the authentic individual Oliver Cromwell, not an abstraction of a noble "Protector of the

[2] He didn't actually. This is a myth. Sherlock Holmes never said, "Elementary, my dear Watson." And no one in the film Casablanca ever says, "Play it again, Sam." The line between fact and fiction, myth and reality is always a finely drawn one.

Commonwealth" (which would have been in any case tricky for the poor painter as there had never been any such thing before).

The new general reader wanted new sorts of books. In English not Latin, chatty not academic, but none the less intellectual, informative. About this time we see the emergence of the periodical to meet that need. And where these magazines led, full length books quickly followed. A surprising number of the books for this new market have demonstrated a remarkable "shelf-life". Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1638 has just (summer 2001) been reissued as a popular market paper back. Francis Bacon's *Essays*, personal jottings about this and that, his garden, his friends, his library, his thoughts, have never been out of print since they were published in 1624. John Donne, the great metaphysical poet, also published his sermons – which are not theological treatises but careful examinations of the human heart through a detailed and highly literary exposure of his own. Perhaps most important for this course, because it shows how far creative non-fiction can move from autobiography and still be recognisable, Isaac Walton, who was Donne's biographer, also wrote a little book called *The Compleat Angler*.

The Compleat Angler presents itself as a "how to" course book for leisure fishing. But it is no more a textbook on the subject than *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a textbook on gamekeeping! Isaac Walton developed a novel way of talking about his own responses to the English Countryside, the joys of nature and the beauty of life. It does not tell us about his childhood, his family or his psychology, but it is a book warm with personal experience and a deeply personal response to that experience. By the end of it you know as much about Walton as you do about angling. You don't know it by subtle textual analysis or historical speculation: you know because he deliberately tells you.

I think it is possible to draw a direct "family tree" from Walton's *Compleat Angler*, down to some highly successful modern writing like Annie Dillard's Pulitzer prize winning *A Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek* and even massive best sellers like *A Year In Provence*. This line of development would take in works like Wordsworth's *The Prelude,* Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal* and Thoreau's Walden; plus innumerable other nineteenth century local natural histories

and twentieth century personal scientific explorations. In all of them, specific place and natural history are taken seriously as both science and philosophy, but presented entirely through personal experience by authors who are both highly skilled writers and not afraid to open themselves to their readers.

The Romantic vision

Throughout the second half of the 17th and then the 18th century these sorts of books continued to be written. Boswell's *Life of Dr. Johnston*, which is almost entirely about Boswell and why Johnston became his friend, would be a famous example. But the innovative thrust of prose literature now became dramatic: in 1662 with the return of the monarchy, the theatres were reopened, and many writers found, in drama, a new and exciting form for prose and self-expression. The exploration of "character" and dialogue led to the growth of the novel, another "brand new" literary idea. The novel allowed writers to explore the nature of the individual, the psychology of different people under different circumstances, the inner relationships between the sexes and the struggle between the "authentic" or "natural" person and the pressures of social order and manners. But it allowed them to explore these very new themes without abandoning the god-like anonymity and disinterest of the old authors, without having as it were to put themselves on the line. The development of creative non-fiction was "put on hold" for a while.

Towards the very end of the 18th century however, the Romantic Movement challenged this idea. The Romantic writers and painters refocused attention on the individual and in particular the individual artist. Art, they taught, was artificial, authenticity and the "natural" were the ideal. Once again, literary fashion followed, and was associated with, social instability: with a long period of European war, the American Revolution and with a huge social shift, from a predominantly rural to an increasingly urban society. Throughout Europe and in America new ideas about Human Rights and freedoms found an expression in the romantic vision of natural self-expression, which manifested itself in every art form. Suddenly it became the duty of every serious artist not just to make art, but to show out of what stuff

the stuff of him- (and increasingly her-) self that art was made. Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude*, one of the most striking accounts of childhood and its relationship to nature ever penned; Coleridge produced his *Biographia Literaria*, a prose "explanation" or soul searching into the personal ideas behind his poetry. De Quincey went further and in *The Confessions of an Opium Eater* came up with perhaps the first modern "confessional" story. He was quickly followed by Lord Byron boasting of his sexual conquests in poetry and James Hogg boasting of his multiple vices in *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Robert Burns took his own local accent and dialect into immortal poetry – a claim for personal authenticity perhaps stronger than any of these others. Both Keats and Shelley died too soon to order their own personal statements, but Keats' extraordinary letters in which he explored his own life-as-poet were first collected and published in 1848 – when he would have been in his early 50s had he lived. All these works, and many more like them, built up a culture in which the "private" life of a writer was as interesting as his "public" works, and often seen as more "authentic" or truthful.

The Prelude is written in Blank Verse, the traditional form for the classic epic poem, and the *Biographia Literaria* has a Latin title and is a deliberate satire on eighteenth century writing. Therefore, it is not quite clear why we feel that these works are somehow more "spontaneous", natural and revealing than other forms of writing, except that they openly place the personal, indeed private, experience of the writer at the core of the project.

Authenticity, authority and the modern author

Throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, although people continued to read novels and poetry as their main recreational reading, more and more they wanted to know who the writer was; why the writer wrote these things, were they autobiographical (authentic) or "just" made up? After Freud readers did not just want to know who the author was but how they came to be that person. Feminism and post-colonialism accelerated this move towards individual identity. There was no "universal man" who could speak on everyone's behalf. It was therefore necessary to

know who was speaking and why so that the reader could evaluate what was written.

For reasons which I think we cannot yet understand fully, towards the end of the last century the novel began to "fail" its readers. Fiction no longer met the need of people to understand and make sense of what was going on around them. More and more readers seem to require the reassurance of knowing that these events are real. The expansion of creative non-fiction in every possible direction is perhaps the most noticeable trend in literary culture as we move into the 21st century. From reality television to the literary memoir; from personal stories about abused childhoods (as opposed to clinical or fictional accounts) to exotic travel adventures; from the personal (as opposed to political) columnists in every newspaper to *Hello* magazine getting "inside the private lives" of minor celebrities.

Many of our most eminent novelists are turning away from fiction. One thinks of Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in Ten and a Half Chapters*. Most of the book is flamboyant fictioneering and then suddenly, in mid-flow, the "half chapter" is an intimate, beautiful, lyrical personal non-fiction about his wife. Penelope Lively has turned not to literary memoir but, in *A House Unlocked*, to a personal history of the house she grew up in, and thus of her family and place. An excellent example of this tendency would be Andrew Solomon's own anatomy of melancholy, *The Midday Demon.* His account of depression acknowledges Burton's earlier work and is nearly as compendious; causes, cures, histories, notions, ideas all flow from Solomon as they did from Burton four hundred years ago. But Burton never sees fit to comment on the personal reasons for his own, fairly obsessive, interest in this particular mental illness. Solomon, movingly and without excessive self-pity, takes us in detail through his depressive breakdown, the efficacy of different cures for him, and his personal encounters with other sufferers. This is no criticism: I think Solomon's book is extremely fine, and could be used as a model by many of the writers who want to tell the story of their own experiences of mental illness. It is however worth noticing that the barriers between the personal and the public are growing ever weaker. The project of

the personal "true story" is taking its place as an equal alongside other more established forms of literature.

The stress on authentic feeling, and "reality" has some problems. "Telling it like it is" suggests that the whole thing is easy and natural. So much so that we do not even think of it as a literary "form". There are "how to" books on writing almost every possible shape of literature – prose and poetry and song writing and script writing and journalism – except this one. This has created an odd problem. Writing courses, including ours at OCA, all tell you to write from real experience, from personal observation, to "write what you know" in a physical sense. Then they immediately veer off almost to tell you how transform these sensory experiences into "art". And to encourage you to get away from the "over personal". But the personal voice is now in the ascendancy. The autobiographical novel (the *explicitly* autobiographical novel) has come in from a despised sub-literary zone and taken up its place in the centre of literary fiction writing. At every level of the publishing market – from newspapers to academic works – the personal engagement of the author is prized as never before. Individuals from every sector of society are being authorised to tell their own tales.

I have come to believe that, although the "rules" aren't at all clear yet, **writing directly out of personal experience, in ways that make other people want to read about it and "believe" it, is as much a craft and an art as any other form of writing**. I hope that this course will not only help you to tell the story you want to tell. I hope it will also help us all to understand this kind of writing better. We have looked at its long development, and discovered a literary form so shy that it doesn't have a proper name, and yet so popular at the moment that it consistently outsells all other forms of literature.

There is something interesting going on here – I hope you will enjoy finding out just what it is.