

# Nonfictional Drama: Autobiography on Stage

Brian Richardson

## 1. Nonfictional Drama

During the last seventy-five years or so, a number of genres of nonfictional drama have emerged. These include documentary drama, autobiographical dramas and performance art, and, to a certain extent, biographical plays. The notion of nonfictional drama may strike many as unusual or even contradictory. This may be due in part to the fact that almost all dramas implicitly invoke the poetic license and nonreferential privileges of fiction. It is therefore not surprising that most people normally consider drama to be an analogue of the genres of fiction and poetry. But such a conception is incorrect since it categorizes a genre distinguished by its style of representation (prose narrative) *and* the referential status of the represented events (fictional), while the other two simply refer to the mode in which the work is produced. The proper analogue for drama is prose narrative; both genres include fictional and nonfictional works. One is typically written on a page, the other enacted on a stage.<sup>1</sup> Both represent a series of connected events, either may present itself as fictional or as nonfictional, and, in the latter case, is thus subject to being falsified.<sup>2</sup>

This is perhaps most evident concerning documentary drama (or film): The author may make mistakes, get facts wrong, make false assertions, or even lie. Such works can be falsified by reference to other nonfictional works, documents, and evidence. It is the question of falsifiability that differentiates nonfictional from fictional works, that is, works such as autobiographical novels or traditional historical dramas that can include invented scenes and characters. Thus, most of the events involving Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* actually happened to the young James Joyce, but when there is a discrepancy, it does not matter, because fiction does not make referential claims. Joyce lived for a time

---

<sup>1</sup> This relation between fictionality and nonfictionality does not change in the cases of oral narrative or unperformed drama.

<sup>2</sup> By this formulation I mean both practical falsifiability by comparison to external nonfictional evidence and, following the ideas set forth by members of the *Wiener Kreis* concerning verifiability, *falsifiability in principle*, including cases that cannot currently be falsified given our current state of knowledge or technology. Thus, the statement "Homer was born in Ithaca" is currently unverifiable given our state of knowledge of ancient Greece, though it could be verified (or falsified) if we had (or if we discover) more relevant documentary evidence. See Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952), 36-39.

in a Martello tower in Sandymount with Oliver St. John Gogarty, the real-life model for the character Buck Mulligan. In the novel, Stephen pays the rent for the Martello tower he and Mulligan inhabit. In actuality, it was Gogarty who paid the rent. In a biography, it is essential for this information to be correct, otherwise there is an error of fact. However, it does not make sense to say that Joyce was wrong or deceptive in his novel: There, Stephen pays the rent, and that is that. In the fictional world of *Ulysses*, Stephen exists and pays the rent; no external evidence can disprove this statement of events—it is not falsifiable in the way that an actual autobiography would be.<sup>3</sup> Lubomir Doležel explains that “actual-world (historical) individuals are able to enter a fictional world only if they become possible counterparts, shaped in any way the fiction maker chooses”;<sup>4</sup> thus, “the actual Napoleon can be transformed into an unlimited number of alternate [fictional] incarnations, some of them differing essentially from the actual world prototype.”<sup>5</sup>

I wish to point out that the primary analogue of most traditional historical dramas from the Renaissance to the present is the historical novel rather than nonfictional narrative histories. This means that these plays may claim the ultimate fictionality of the subgenre they work in. Shakespeare knowingly changes the ages of the principals and invents scenes that could not have occurred in *1 Henry IV*: Instead of a climactic one-on-one duel between Prince Hal and his rival, Harry Hotspur, at the end of the battle, the historical Henry was shot in the eye with an arrow at the beginning of the conflict and did not fight the rest of the day. Shakespeare is not lying here, but rather using the full resources of the ultimately fictional narrative to produce effective drama. Such referential indifference is also evident in many modern works, such as Pam Gems’s *Queen Christina*, about the irreverent eighteenth-century Swedish monarch. The author freely admits that “the play is not a documentary, thus characters have been concertinaed, and some events changed.”<sup>6</sup>

An even more evident demonstration of the ultimate fictionality of standard historical drama appears in Jean Anouilh’s play *Becket*. Written after he has consulted a standard historical treatment that argued that Becket was a vanquished Saxon, he completed the play and then gave it to a historian. That man informed him that for over fifty years they had had proof that Becket was not a Saxon but a good Norman who came from Rouen and was called “Bequet.” Since a large part of drama revolves around Becket being of the vanquished ethnicity, the play would have had to be entirely rewritten for it to be accurate at all. But Anouilh had grown to like the story he had composed much more than

---

<sup>3</sup> see Brian Richardson, “Nabokov’s Experiments and the Question of Fictionality,” *Story-worlds* 3 (2011), 73–92.

<sup>4</sup> Lubomir Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 225.

<sup>6</sup> Pam Gems, *Plays: One* (London: Oberon, 2004), 179. https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb  
Open Access - CC BY - https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/agb

its pretensions to historical verisimilitude; “for this drama it was a thousand times better that Becket remained a Saxon,” he wrote. “I changed nothing; I had the play performed three months later in Paris. It was a great success and I noticed that no one except my historian friend was aware of the progress of history.”<sup>7</sup>

If it is objected that these works nevertheless strive to be as accurate as possible within the limits of their forms and do in fact contain much accurate historical matter, I argue that, as Dorrit Cohn astutely points out, “when we speak of the nonreferentiality of fiction, we do not mean that it *can* not refer to the real world outside the text, only that it *need* not refer to it.”<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, the question of how the imaginary Natasha in *War and Peace* can lose her fiancé in a war against a historical Napoleon is answered by Marie-Laure Ryan’s clarification that “the attribute of fictionality does not apply to individual entities, but to entire semantic domains: the Napoleon of *War and Peace* is fictional because he belongs to a world which as a whole is fictional.”<sup>9</sup> There is no actual ontological commitment in fictional works; they cannot be falsified the way a work of nonfiction can be.<sup>10</sup>

The ultimate fictionality of historical drama only means that these works do not claim to make accurate real-world reference claims any more than historical novels do: Characters can be invented or combined, their motives can be altered and their psychologies fabricated, events may be manufactured, decades compressed, and so forth—all things that no historian can do. These are also things that the genre of documentary drama resists; as Eric Bentley says of his documentary drama *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?*, an edited version of the transcripts of the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation into the entertainment industry.<sup>11</sup> In a parody of the New Critical-sounding bit of legalese that prefaces the work of novelists anxious to avoid potential libel

<sup>7</sup> Jean Anouilh, *Becket, or the Honor of God*, translated by Lucienne Hill (Signet, 1960), vii f.

These issues are discussed at greater length in Brian Richardson, “The Status of Historical Characters in Drama: Ontological, Aesthetic, Verisimilar,” *Letras de Hoye* 52.2 (2017), 110-114, accessed 20 Nov. 2019, <http://revistaseletronicas.pucrs.br/ojs/index.php/fale/issuetableofcontents/1182>.

<sup>8</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 15.

<sup>10</sup> This raises the interesting question of the status of unintended factual errors in a realist work of fiction, such as getting a historical date wrong. It is clear that such an error made by a novelist is very different from the same error made by a historian, even if it seems equally embarrassing to each. The difference is that the historian must be accurate, while the novelist may be or may not, as he or she chooses. Such a mistake in a work of fiction is more analogous to a continuity error in a film or even a typographical error in a book or, a botched line in the production of a play.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Bentley, *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

suits, Bentley notes instead in his preface that “no resemblance between the [dramatic character] and the actual person is coincidental. These characters wrote their own lines into the pages of history.”<sup>12</sup> The dialogue (except for portions “tidied up” by Bentley) is not a plausible depiction of plausible or fabricated exchanges; actors on stage instead speak the identical lines uttered years before by the original men and women they portray.<sup>13</sup> We further note that constructing these types of works has caused Emily Mann to be criticized for being more documentarian than playwright.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. *The (Pre-)History of Autobiography in Drama*

Though autobiographical prose has been around for centuries, the history of autobiographical drama has been extremely sparse until the last half of the twentieth century. This does not mean that playwrights have not found numerous ways of inserting themselves obliquely into their dramas, either in more serious or largely parodic ways. In this group we may include characters subsequently associated, at least in part, with their authors, such as Manly in Wycherley’s *The Plain Dealer*: Wycherley was later pleased to be referred to as “Manly Wycherley.” There are also characters who are designated authorial spokesmen, such as Aristophanes’s choragus, or the presenters of Ben Jonson’s inductions like Cordatus in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, who is described as “the author’s friend, a man inly acquainted with the scope and drift of his plot.”<sup>15</sup> There is also the case of the early sixteenth-century English playwright John Bale, who casts himself in the role of prolocutor in many of his dramas.<sup>16</sup>

We also note here the partially parodic self-presentations such as the humorous character “Moliere” in Moliere’s *Versailles Impromptu*. This relation that has been repeated in Eugene Ionesco’s *Improvisation, or The Shepherd’s Chameleon*. In this play, the character named Ionesco says that in the piece he is currently

---

<sup>12</sup> Bentley, *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?*, ix.

<sup>13</sup> See Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: A Historical Survey of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Dawson, *Documentary Theatre*, 52. Dawson defines a documentary play as “a form of persuasive theatre that comes as close as possible to an actual event with the exclusive reliance upon documentation from historically accurate materials” (Dawson, *Documentary Theatre*, 17). It is not clear to me that persuasiveness is an essential criterion of this form of drama.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Complete Plays*, Vol 1 (New York: Dutton, 1967), 60.

<sup>16</sup> It was formerly thought that the Roman drama *Octavia*, which includes scenes depicting the philosopher and playwright Seneca, was written by Seneca. Contemporary scholars now believe the play was written by someone else after Seneca was dead. In any event, this shows what an autobiographical play might look like.

writing, he is going to put himself in the play. To this, his critic responds, “That’s all you ever do.”<sup>17</sup>

The general situation began to change with the emergent celebration of the figure of the author at the onset of Romanticism. Byron was particularly delighted to include a heroic or scandalous version of himself in many of his plays, including his anti-Christian masterpiece *Cain*, where he clearly appears as Cain, a man who scorns God and persuasively defends his incestuous love for his sister Adah—Byron had a widely suspected affair with his half-sister Augusta Leigh. Later, both Strindberg and O’Neill would include obvious simulacra of themselves in many of their plays, as each sought the theatrical form that would make their self-presentations most effective. Here, the protagonist’s discovery in *To Damascus* that all the personages he meets bear a suspiciously close resemblance to himself can serve as an allegory of such authors’ inveterate urge towards self-presentation. Though these plays are fictitious and thus are not susceptible to the criterion of falsifiability, the presence of the author in the plays is nevertheless unmistakable.

This relation is still more evident in some other plays of the late nineteenth century. Sheila Stowell has noted that the “most common complaint of critics and audiences alike” about George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, “was that *all* [the] characters spoke just like their authors.”<sup>18</sup> Oscar Wilde is particularly interesting in this context: Bunbury, the famously fictitious non-character in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, derives his name in part from Bunthorne, the effete dandy in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta, *Patience*, who was modeled on Wilde himself. The other secret derivation of Bunbury (and, for that matter, Bunthorne) is of course from a side of Wilde that needed to be kept covered up in public: an autobiographical reference to homosexual practices that must remain simultaneously suggestive yet ultimately unprovable. This oblique autobiographical intertextuality rather resembles many of the hidden correspondences between apparently insubstantial lines in the play and mortally incriminating bits of evidence being produced in Wilde’s trial, parallels that Christopher Craft has divulged. Worthing’s witty riposte to Algry’s questions about the lost cigarette case, “you have no right to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case,”<sup>19</sup> secretly alludes to the inscribed cigarette cases Wilde would give to the young men he picked up for pleasure and which were later used as material evidence in his trial for

<sup>17</sup> Eugene Ionesco, “Improvisation: or, The Shepherd’s Chameleon,” in *Masterpieces of the Modern French Theatre*, edited by Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 397-438: 401.

<sup>18</sup> Sheila Stowell, “Rehabilitating Realism,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 6 (1992), 81-88: 81 f.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Craft, “Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*,” *Representations* 31 (1990), 19-46: 29.

sodomy.<sup>20</sup> Later, Tennessee Williams would be well known for compulsively incorporating imperfectly veiled autobiographical elements throughout his work; as he acknowledges in an interview: “some people accuse you of being too personal, you know, in your writing. The truth of the matter is—I don’t think you can escape being personal in your writing.”<sup>21</sup> Adrienne Kennedy’s work is at times more directly autobiographical, often painfully so: she requested the production of her first play be cancelled because it was too autobiographical.

### 3. Autobiographical Plays

Sherrill E. Grace has observed that “few auto/biography specialists have explored a range of auto/biographical plays or examined what exactly happens to the auto/biographical if it takes the form of a play performance.”<sup>22</sup> One might also add that there has been such critical enthusiasm for the deconstruction of the subject that some of the distinctive features of autobiographical performance have been neglected. Grace analyzes several works, including Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Fronteras Americanas*. In it, Verdecchia “tells us aspects of his autobiography by embodying and performing them himself.”<sup>23</sup> Grace further explains, “although this is a one-character piece, performed at its premiere and in several other performances and readings by Verdecchia himself, the character of Verdecchia is multiple.”<sup>24</sup>

Endesha Ida Mae Holland’s *From the Mississippi Delta: A Dramatic Biography* (1991), is an especially interesting work for discussing nonfictional drama. It begins as a biographical play about the playwright’s mother. The author’s note at the beginning of the text indicates her mother’s name, nickname, and basic aspects of her life; these are all faithfully dramatized within the play, including the mother’s death from a Ku Klux Klan firebombing of their house to punish Holland’s activism. There is a certain degree of creative dramatic mediation, as all roles are performed onstage by three female actors, and at times different actors represent the same individual. In addition to representing her mother’s life, the play also presents numerous scenes from the daughter’s life. These include representations of her childhood rape, adolescent troubles, descent into sex

---

<sup>20</sup> Craft, “Alias Bunbury,” 29 f.

<sup>21</sup> Tennessee Williams and Albert J. Devlin, *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 125.

<sup>22</sup> Sherrill E. Grace, “Performing the Auto/Biographical Pact: Towards a Theory of Identity in Performance,” in *Tracing the Autobiographical*, edited by Marlene Kadar, Linda Warley, Jeanne Perreault, and Susanna Egan (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 65-80: 65.

<sup>23</sup> Grace, “Performing the Auto/Biographical Pact,” 71.

<sup>24</sup> Grace, “Performing the Auto/Biographical Pact,” 71, 15.7.2024, 03:46:43

work, transformation into a civil rights activist, being a doctoral student in African American studies at the University of Minnesota, and becoming a successful author and playwright. Although the daughter is occasionally referred to as Phelia in the play, at the end the author claims the identity of the central character, as all three actors narrate a letter signed, “I remain, [...] Dr Endesha Ida Mae Holland.”<sup>25</sup> This enacts Philippe Lejeune’s postulate of honoring the signature<sup>26</sup> and posits a referential pact between author and audience, as I will discuss further below.

Intriguingly, Holland would go on to write a prose memoir, also entitled, *From the Mississippi Delta*, that re-inscribes virtually all of the same scenes as those in the play, often presenting the same details in the same language. It seems evident to me that both are equally autobiographical. Here, there is a seamless continuity between the drama and the prose narrative: Both are equally falsifiable, and they are ontologically opposed to both autobiographical novels like Joyce’s and to plays like Wilde’s or Strindberg’s that are infused with their authors’ lives but ultimately remain fictional. Thus, if a significant event were found in either work that had never happened, then it would be false, either a mistake or a lie. I also add that both of Holland’s works constitute part of the African American tradition of “testifyin’,” or bringing to light previously suppressed or obscured events and information.

Ryan Claycomb notes a number of other autobiographical plays; these include Lisa Kron’s *Well*, a staged account of the playwright’s life with her mother, and Emily Mann’s *Annula: An Autobiography*.<sup>27</sup> In this work, Mann dramatized the actual autobiography of Annula Allen, a Jewish woman who passed as Aryan in Nazi Germany. Vanessa Redgrave has also performed on stage Joan Didion’s autobiographical text, *The Year of Magical Thinking*.<sup>28</sup> These works are autobiographical exactly insofar as the enunciators of the experiences (rather than the dramatizers of those experiences) affirm the referentiality and truthfulness of the represented events. Claycomb also makes a strong case for the autobiographical essence of Sarah Kane’s last work, *4:48 Psychosis*, the subject of which is the suicide Kane committed after the play was completed.<sup>29</sup>

Sherrill Grace has explored the implications of Philippe Lejeune’s concept of the autobiographical pact when applied to drama and performance and offers appropriate extensions to and modifications to Lejeune’s concepts. Many aspects are the same, whether the genre is prose narrative or staged autobiogra-

<sup>25</sup> Endesha Ida Mae Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta: A Theatrical Biography in Eleven Scenes for Three Women* (Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 2005), 61.

<sup>26</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, translated by Katherine Leary (Ann Arbor: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ryan Claycomb, *Lives in Play: Autobiography and Biography on the Feminist Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012)

<sup>28</sup> Claycomb, *Lives in Play*, 92.

<sup>29</sup> Claycomb, *Lives in Play*, 99–111. DOI: 10.1543/nomos.2024.19783956505126-105, am 22.07.2024, 03:46:43

phy: there is an implicit contract where the author affirms the truthfulness of the material and the audience believes that the events represented are historical and did in fact occur. For narrative prose, this implies that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are the same in nonfiction, and different in fiction, which makes no referential claims.<sup>30</sup> The pact needs to be modified for application to the stage; for example, most plays are not seen as having narrators. Grace also stresses the role of the audience in the pact and insists on the importance of other potential players or important figures of the pact on a stage, especially the actor and the director.<sup>31</sup> It seems to me that this relation can be simplified conceptually. All we really need are the figures of the author and the protagonist: in an autobiographical play, these figures will be the same, just as in a prose autobiography the author is the same as the narrator. In an autobiographical performance, it is understood that the figure on stage is a truthful representation of the author and the events are reasonably accurate representations of actual events in the author's life.

#### *4. Autobiographical Performance Art*

Another relatively new dramatic form that creates a prominent space for autobiography on stage is performance art. This is especially true of feminist performance art where, literally embodying the thesis that the personal is the political, the performer deploys significant aspects of her life into an enacted event. This phenomenon has been widely remarked on; its significance for narrative theory and the theory of fiction and nonfiction, however, has not been reflected on as fully as it might be. One of the earliest examples of autobiographical performance art is Linda Montano's 1973 *The Story of My Life*, in which the artist, in Marvin Carlson's summary, "walked uphill on a treadmill for three hours while reciting her autobiography into an amplification system."<sup>32</sup> Building on the work of earlier scholars and theorists, Carlson also draws attention to the prolific production of such works since the seventies,<sup>33</sup> even as he complains that a number of theorists and historians of contemporary performance "have attempted to write such [autobiographical] work out of the historical record."<sup>34</sup>

The genuinely autobiographical nature of these performances is entirely evident and widely affirmed by other performance scholars and critics. Jeanie Forte affirms that the "intensely autobiographical nature of women's performance has evidenced the insistence on a woman's ability to 'speak' her subjec-

---

<sup>30</sup> Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 4-8.

<sup>31</sup> Grace, "Performing the Auto/Biographical Pact," 68 f.

<sup>32</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), 150.

<sup>33</sup> Carlson, *Performance*, 113-116; 149-155.

<sup>34</sup> Carlson, *Performance*, 150. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783956505126-105>, am 22.07.2024, 03:46:43

tivity” and observes that the “performance context is markedly different from that of the stage, in that the performers are not acting, or playing a character in any way removed from themselves.”<sup>35</sup> Claire MacDonald pushes these points further, and in doing so helps disclose the distinctive and original features of such works, including the generic expectations they elicit: “When a performance artist stands up in front of an audience she is assumed to be performing as herself. By putting her own body and her own experience forward within a live space the artist becomes both object and subject within the work.”<sup>36</sup>

It is clear that autobiographical plays and performance art can be effectively conceptualized by the theories of self-writing and autobiography. In addition to the work of Lejeune and Cohn already cited, we may also invoke the writings of Elizabeth Bruss<sup>37</sup> and Paul John Eakin,<sup>38</sup> both of whom insist on the referential function of autobiography. That is, the work of Endisha Ida Mae Holland, Linda Montano, and many others, in which the performers make first person statements about their past and present circumstances which are not contextualized as being fictional or the impersonation of another, raises the same ontological expectations are raised as in more conventional autobiographical discourse. These are that the “events reported in connection with the autobiographer are asserted to have been” the case and that the autobiographer “purports to believe” what she asserts.<sup>39</sup> Thus, if it were determined that Modiano’s monologue were full of statements about her life that she knew to be false, then the case would be that of a fake or bogus autobiography. This is also true of numerous other autobiographical performances.

The fact that no one can give a perfectly objective account of one’s life is not the issue here: As Lejeune observes (in Dorrit Cohn’s paraphrase), “the referentiality of the genre, far from being undermined, is much rather confirmed by the reader’s customary expectation that self-representation always involves a measure of misrepresentation.”<sup>40</sup> Pushing this opposition further, Eakin goes on to cunningly identify a paradox when he argues “for the presence of an antimimetic impulse at the heart of what is ostensibly a mimetic aesthetic. I have already observed that autobiography is nothing if not a referential art; it is also

<sup>35</sup> Jeanie Forte, “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Practice*, edited by Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 251-269: 258.

<sup>36</sup> Claire MacDonald, “Assumed Identities: Feminism, Autobiography and Performance Art,” in *The Uses of Autobiography*, edited by Julia Swindells (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), 187-195: 189 f. For additional analysis of the theory and practice of autobiographical feminist performance, see Claycomb, *Lives in Play*, especially 1-54; 91-114.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

<sup>38</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, 31.83956505126-105, am 22.07.2024, 03:46:43

and always a kind of fiction.”<sup>41</sup> This statement applies even more so to staged constructions of the self, since they involve actors portraying the autobiographical subject. We may also admit that the boundary between autobiographical and fictional characterizations is not always perfectly clean, unambiguous, or fixed: It will come as no surprise that many artists enjoy straddling this border, while some are more insistently self-representational than others, and all necessarily simplify, mold, or reconfigure actual events from their actual personal histories—just as more conventional autobiographers do.

My point is that we now have a recognizable dramatic form that, because of its referential component, contains the defining condition of autobiographical discourse. We might also note that dramatic enactment produces a number of forms of mediation, including, as has been noted, the presence of the actor, who may or may not be the same individual as the author/protagonist, and who may perform the part in a realistic, epic, or stylized manner. There is also the director (who may or may not effectively stage the play), and other production-oriented concerns such as lighting, sound, blocking, visibility, and so on. These factors, however they may affect the reception of the work by an audience, do not affect the fundamentally autobiographical stance and implicit claims made by the piece. Autobiographical performance art is a crafted enactment designed for public performance, though at the same time it is private, personal, and subject to the vagaries and randomness of the life it is staging. Most importantly for our purposes, it is falsifiable, as is any nonfictional work, however stylized it may be.

It is hoped that this account of autobiographical drama and performance art will help draw additional attention to other types of nonfictional drama, such as documentary dramas and falsifiable biographical plays, and encourage examination of still other more recalcitrant genres like poetry. According to Aristotle, verse form alone is not enough to constitute a poem. His example is a history written in verse; we might add a versified work of philosophy, such as Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. We also observe that much poetry is nonnarrative or minimally narrative; one usually suspects that the fictional or nonfictional status of such poems is largely immaterial or irrelevant. If Wordsworth’s autobiographical poems turned out to be amalgams of different thoughts he had in different places at different times or only in the poet’s mind, rather than all occurring at the time and place specified, there would be no strict violation of the autobiographical pact: poetic license is especially generous in verse forms, and poetry is always able to slide to a different ontological level such as allegory or self-reflexivity. Lejeune restricts his definition to prose narratives though he does concede that some autobiographical poems may be situated as marginal cases.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Eakin, *Touching the World*, 31.

<sup>42</sup> Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 4; 130. 9783956505126-105, am 22.07.2024, 03:46:43

But some poems, nevertheless, do make major referential claims and are falsifiable in a significant way. Ben Jonson was a stickler for accurate correspondence of word and object; he may well have intended his historical dramas like *Sejanus* to be falsifiable—in his edition of his *Works*, he includes 247 notes, most of which identify references to the Roman historians he draws on. His poems can also display a comparably insistent mimetic and nonfictional framework. Consider the beginning of his powerful elegy, *On My First Son*, written on the death of his child:

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;  
My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.  
Seven years tho' wert lent to me, and I thee pay,  
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.<sup>43</sup>

This poem would simply not work if it were learned that Jonson never had a son—unless he had indicated its fictionality by entitling it, for example, *A Man's Lament on the Death of His Child*. Without such an alternative designated speaker, such a text elicits an autobiographical reading.<sup>44</sup> The poem in fact goes on to affirm an autobiographical component: the explicit signature of the author's name within the text:

Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say, "Here doth lie  
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."  
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such,  
As what he loves may never like too much.<sup>45</sup>

Here, in Lejeune's words, "a clearly autobiographical 'I' [is] secured on the proper name of the author, in place of the traditional lyric 'I'."<sup>46</sup>

We may conclude that nonfiction is even more widespread than is generally recognized. We see it clearly in autobiographical plays and performance pieces as well as in the realm of documentary drama and the more slippery area of biographical drama. We can also trace it in the little explored field of autobiographical poetry and in still other mediums. The importance of an accurate and comprehensive determination of the nonfictional in all its forms can only increase as the many recent attacks on it continue.

## Bibliography

Anouilh, Jean. *Becket, or the Honor of God*, translated by Lucienne Hill (New York: Signet, 1960).

<sup>43</sup> Jonson, *The Complete Poems*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> I also suspect that Jonson's depiction of the estate in the poem, *To Penshurst* is also fundamentally nonfictional.

<sup>45</sup> Jonson, *The Complete Poems*, 48.

<sup>46</sup> Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 130. /9783956505126-105, am 22.07.2024, 03:46:43

- Ayer, Alfred Jules. *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952).
- Bentley, Eric. *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been? The Investigation of Show Business by the Un-American Activities Committee, 1947–1958* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
- Bruss, Elizabeth. *Autobiographical Acts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
- Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- Claycomb, Ryan. *Lives in Play: Autobiography and Biography on the Feminist Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).
- Cohn, Dorrit. *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
- Craft, Christopher. “Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.” *Representations* 31 (1990), 19-46. Reprinted in Wilde, 136-166.
- Dawson, Gary Fisher. *Documentary Theatre in the United States: A Historical Survey of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1999).
- Doležel, Lubomir. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
- Eakin, Paul John. *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- Forte, Jeanie. “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism.” In *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Practice*, edited by Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 251-269.
- Gems, Pam. *Plays: One* (London: Oberon, 2004).
- Grace, Sherrill E. “Performing the Auto/Biographical Pact: Towards a Theory of Identity in Performance.” In *Tracing the Autobiographical*, edited by Marlene Kadar, Linda Warley, Jeanne Perreault, and Susanna Egan (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 65-80.
- Holland, Endesha Ida Mae. *From the Mississippi Delta: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
- Holland, Endesha Ida Mae. *From the Mississippi Delta: A Theatrical Biography in Eleven Scenes for Three Women* (Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 2005).
- Ionesco, Eugene. “Improvisation: or, The Shepherd’s Chameleon.” In *Masterpieces of the Modern French Theatre*, edited by Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 397-438.
- Jonson, Ben. *The Complete Plays*, vol 1. (New York: Dutton, 1967).
- Jonson, Ben. *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1996).

- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*, translated by Katherine Leary (Ann Arbor: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
- MacDonald, Claire. "Assumed Identities: Feminism, Autobiography and Performance Art." In *The Uses of Autobiography*, edited by Julia Swindells (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), 187-195.
- Richardson, Brian. "Nabokov's Experiments and the Question of Fictionality." *Storyworlds* 3 (2011), 73-92.
- Richardson, Brian. "The Status of Historical Characters in Drama: Ontological, Aesthetic, Verisimilar." *Letras de Hoje* 52.2 (2017), 110-114. Accessed 20 Nov. 2019. <http://revistaseletronicas.pucrs.br/ojs/index.php/fale/issue/view/1182>.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
- Stowell, Sheila. "Rehabilitating Realism." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 6 (1992), 81-88.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest: Authoritative Texts, Background, Criticism*, edited by Michael Patrick Gillespie (New York: Norton, 2006).
- Williams, Tennessee and Albert J. Devlin. *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986).

