



University of Dundee

Ethical Performance of Autobiography in Vicky Foster's Bathwater on Stage, on Air, and in Print

Gratzke, Michael

Published in:
Life Writing

DOI:
[10.1080/14484528.2020.1810406](https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2020.1810406)

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Gratzke, M. (2022). Ethical Performance of Autobiography in Vicky Foster's Bathwater on Stage, on Air, and in Print. *Life Writing*, 19(3), 407-421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2020.1810406>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Professor Michael Gratzke, University of Dundee

MGratzke001@dundee.ac.uk

Twitter @michael_gratzke

Funding details: The author did not receive funding to conduct this research.

Disclosure statement: No financial interests or benefits have arisen from the direct applications of this research.

Biographical note:

Michael Gratzke is Professor of Comparative Literature and Director of the Doctoral Academy at the University of Dundee in Scotland. He previously worked at Cambridge, St Andrews and Hull. His research covers genres of 'high' and 'popular' culture exploring representations of gendered subjectivity in literature, on film and online. He is particularly interested in the aesthetic representation of extreme experiences and altered states of mind such as in love, war and masochism. He is currently working on a comparative study of 'romantic' love and intimacy (erotically charged intimate love between non-related adults) in 21st century literature. His comparative work addresses German-, English- and Finnish-language prose. He is also a zine maker and facilitates community-based participatory research into love and 'healthy relationships'.

Ethical Performance of Autobiography in Vicky Foster's *Bathwater* on Stage, on Air and in Print.

Abstract

This article explores Vicky Foster's *Bathwater* in its three formats of stage production, radio play and book as an example of ethical autobiographical performance. Foster's narrative is concerned with her experiences of an abusive domestic relationship and her efforts to care for her child. The material is characterised by a dual perspective in which the autobiographer-performer and an actor embodying the author's son speak to the audience. The analysis makes use of discourses on liveness in performance studies, Susan Bennett's understanding of the body as an archive of experiences in autobiographical performance, and Deirdre Heddon's research into ethical performance practices. It highlights the respective merits of the three media formats chosen by Foster: the physical co-presence of the autobiographer-performer with a theatre audience, the sole focus on voice and sound on the radio, and the relative durability and reach of printed books. The conclusion argues that the three versions of Vicky Foster's *Bathwater* balance the demands of truthfulness and artfulness towards autobiographical performance utilising the specific communicative set-up of each media format.

Keywords:

Ethical performance, liveness, domestic abuse, *Bathwater*.

Introduction

Vicky Foster's *Bathwater* was first a one-woman show about the author's experiences in an abusive relationship, when she was in her late teens and early twenties. The author has since produced a radio play and published a book under the same title. The show was first performed at the BBC Contains Strong Language festival in Hull on 30th September 2018. Foster's adaption for BBC Radio Four was first broadcast on 4th March 2019. The two-piece Broken Orchestra devised

in collaboration with Foster soundscapes and music for the show and radio drama. The script and additional material were published in book format by Wrecking Ball Press in April 2019. Like most autobiographical texts and performances, *Bathwater* includes biographical elements because the self which gives account of their experiences relates to other people. The autobiographer as biographer, therefore, encounters issues of ethics by appropriating elements of other people's life stories. In the case of Vicky Foster's *Bathwater* (2019), which deals with psychological abuse, physical violence and murder, there are significant ethical issues regarding the rights of the author's child or children, another victim and the abuser which Foster handles with great care.

The slightly awkward phrasing of 'the author's child or children' expresses how Foster made a fundamental ethical decision about the narrative of *Bathwater*. Whereas her short story 'Me and DI Jones' (contained in Foster 2019) refers to two sons, *Bathwater* condenses them into the single role of Joseph. Foster gives voice to the child's or children's perspective, which in itself is an ethical choice to make, but she protects her actual child or children from being represented in her writing and performance. This abstraction towards a fictionalised voice of Joseph is not truthful but expresses fidelity towards the experiences of children in domestic abuse settings.

This article is divided into three main parts. It begins with an overview of the shared narrative of *Bathwater*. This is followed by a comparison of the three performances which is informed by close viewing, close reading and close listening. Finally, there is a discussion of the ethics of life writing in the context of performance, as there are three distinct modes of performance for *Bathwater* – on stage, on air and on paper.

With regards to performance studies and issues of life writing, this article argues that debates around live performance, reproduction and archiving have been helpful by throwing into sharp relief the power of live performance as well as its limitations. Instead of siding with any single

position in these debates, I argue that in terms of ethics and effectiveness each type of performance has its merits. Questions of ethics apply to the production of performance, the act of live performance and performances of archived texts such as recorded radio plays or printed texts. Each medium answers these questions in a different way which favours different types of audience engagement with the material thus allowing members of the public to choose in which way they prefer to engage with this narrative about trauma and healing.

The Bathwater Narrative

The story, which is the same in all three versions, is told in hindsight by Foster herself from a present-day perspective. In a second strand of narration, Foster's fictional son Joseph reflects on growing up fatherless and gradually becoming aware of his father having been both a violent criminal and a murder victim.

Bathwater also makes some use of the life story of Foster's abusive partner. He was put on trial for attacking a woman and leaving her for dead. While he was acquitted of this crime, he was convicted of and served time for attacking another woman and a man. In the short story 'Me and DI Jones', the narrator attributes his acquittal to a 'lack of evidence and a convincing speech to the jury' (53). In *Bathwater*, Foster quite scrupulously avoids giving away too much information about her former partner or his family. Finally, there is some reference in *Bathwater* to the woman who was left for dead. It is apparent that Foster sees a connection between the physical abuse the woman suffered and her own psychological anguish. However, in order not to appropriate the other victim's suffering Foster uses poetic language and abstraction to mark the connection.

The title *Bathwater*, which may contain an allusion to the turn of phrase ‘throwing out the baby with the bathwater’, is first explained to originate from her new partner Tom telling Vicky that he would drink her bathwater as an act of worship (10). An inverted form of the motif returns, when Vicky refers to ‘his filthy fucking bathwater’ in which she is drowning (24), meaning his threatening presence in town. Apart from water and bathwater (12, 14, 23, 34, 40), there are other productive and polyvalent motifs such as fingers, hands and hands holding tools or weapons (10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 24, 25, 26, 28, 31, 34, 35, 38), as well as towels, comfy blankets and bedsheets (9, 15, 16), and footprints in the house from police officers and social workers (20, 25, 33). (Soapy) water cleanses but gets easily contaminated with blood and dirt. Hands caress and hold, they build a home but the hammer they hold is also used in acts of extreme violence. Tom confides in Vicky that he once hit someone in the eye with a hammer (21). He himself is attacked and killed by men using hammers (28).

Maintaining and keeping a clean house is extremely important to the character of Vicky. This is present throughout the text. It starts with the new couple renovating a house (11), it is expressed in her scrubbing the floors after every intrusion from outsiders (26), and ends on a positive note, when she discovers she has a talent for DIY (38). However, there is a certain ambivalence to cleaning, when it is revealed that Tom used cleaning products extensively on his shoes and clothes so that the blood which was found on them could not be properly tested for DNA (22).

The house is a space of love and care. It holds fresh bed linen and cupboards full of soft towels (15, 16). The supermarket is the place where good housekeeping is made possible. That is why Vicky’s subsequent anxiety about being there has such a powerful effect on her (30). Her motivation for this seemingly excessive focus on housekeeping is revealed in a speech in which she addresses her teenage son:

The story of your life was never written

in newspapers.

It was written in breakfasts. In Friday night

takeaways and Sunday dinners.

It can be rewritten again by you.

I know there were mornings when my feet couldn't make the slow,

small journey from bed to floor.

When my shoulders weren't capable of bearing

their own weight away from pillows.

For these days, I'm sorry.

Those are the days that I trusted you to the warm rooms I'd prepared.

To the fullness

of the food cupboard and the fridge,

to computer rooms and TV screens,

to books and games and toys I'd bought for days like these. (37)

Depression, anxiety and fear have a firm hold on Vicky. Keeping the house safe, clean and well-stocked with supplies are coping mechanisms in which Vicky tries to exert some control over her life. In practical terms, these activities also create a material substitute parent, the home, which can care for the child, when Vicky is incapable of doing so.

From the beginning Tom struggles with the demands of parenting. His hands are rough and awkward in caring (12), 'his fingers grasp too tightly at fatherhood' (13). Vicky rationalises his lack of patience as caused by working nightshifts as a firefighter. He has a dark past (15) which torments him at night (16). Vicky does not want to know about the things he did in the past and the text moves on to positive memories of their love (17). However, Vicky soon worries that someday soon Tom will hurt her. This anxiety materialises as a physical assault in the supermarket. Tom grabs Vicky by the neck before storming off. Her main concern is whether anyone has seen the incident. She concentrates on consoling her crying child (18-9). Only when the police interview Vicky about Tom's behaviour following a vicious attack on a female sex worker in town, her mouth becomes 'a leaking tap', which expresses that she cannot contain her worries and suspicions anymore but also links to the motif of cleansing water (21). She is convinced that Tom attacked the woman, but her mind quickly returns to pleasant moments in their relationship (21-2). These sudden changes of focus may be understood as caused by the victim's reluctance to accept her victimhood. On the other hand, there is more to these scenes in that they express the difficulties in maintaining a stable sense of self throughout one's life. Tom's abusive behaviour and the police's subsequent inquiries into his alleged violent actions in the community produce both disnarrative and hypernarrative effects. Vicky's mind switches between contradictory memories and given the opportunity to speak about her experiences she cannot stop talking.

The dominant emotions in *Bathwater* are fear, doubt and shame. Fear fractures Vicky's sense of time (25). She tries to exude calm and confidence for the benefit of her son but having taken him to school her hands shake so badly she cannot drive the car (26). The threat of hammers invades the core of her being which is expressed in using the expression 'hammering heart' twice (28, 29). Foster uses the metaphor of prison cells to explain the difference between doubt and shame. Doubt

is a prison cell, whereas shame is explicitly not just a prison but a 'soundproof room' (22, 29). Whilst Tom cannot be contained in a cell, Vicky is trapped in one. What shame adds to doubt is being judged by other people. Their eyes 'slide over' her (22), she is being stared at (30). There are fresh footprints in her house because of the social workers who make her sign a commitment that she would not let Tom see his son (26). For Vicky, this official pledge reaffirms the community's judgement that somehow, she is responsible for her own victimisation. External judgement continues, when Tom is dead. Although Vicky is supposed to experience relief, she feels she needs space to grieve the death of her son's father. To Foster neither emotion 'cancels out' the other (29-30).

Anger is mostly addressed in the context of Joseph's teenage years. In describing an incident, in which Joseph breaks the TV set by punching it, Foster uses the passive voice to express that Joseph is not to blame for this (31). The present-day authorial voice explains that Joseph's grief does not fit into other people's 'boxes' (31) or preconceptions regarding the appropriate expression of such emotions. He suffers from anxiety and may be self-harming (34). This shows how careful Foster is in explaining and contextualising Joseph's challenging behaviour without revealing anything specific her actual child or children would not want to see shared in public. This respect for a young person's right towards their own biography is also at work in the poignant scene in which Joseph wet shaves for the first time, while Vicky sits on the floor outside the bathroom door. The bathroom is again the focal point with the now familiar motifs of (hot) water, soap and blood. The door separates mother and son. She cannot hear him over the sounds of running water and his music playing. When Vicky reflects on the boy's fatherlessness, she projects her thoughts and emotions. In this passage, Foster uses the pronoun 'his' frequently to denote how Joseph is

becoming his own person and specifically his own man (36). Foster also employs abstraction and poetic language in this passage:

Vicky:

I will cradle you.

Wrap your tender, growing bones

in pastel shades of love.

Pick them clean.

Wipe them free

of worry and anger

soap you up

in iridescent foam.

Rinse and repeat.

Jos[eph]:

Rinse and repeat.

Both:

Go back to the start and change the bathwater.

(36-7)

What strikes me in this passage is that Vicky feels she wants to extend her loving care to the deepest level of her son's body. She imagines cleaning his very bones and wrapping them in love

manifested in pastel colours which may very well be metonymic expressions for the soft towels and bedsheets she has been providing. There is a sense of shared understanding in Vicky and Joseph saying ‘rinse and repeat’. They jointly state that you can start afresh in life not defined by past trauma. However, the poetic use of language, metonymy and metaphor, as well as the separation by a closed door indicate clearly that Foster has made the ethical choice to let her fictionalised son as the placeholder for her actual child or children be a person in their own right with agency over disclosure of their life’s experiences.

The story of *Bathwater* ends in the present day with Vicky having found stability in life, a talent for DIY and writing. Joseph has grown into a young man who is, not without difficulty, making sense of his life story. The final scene is set on top of a multi-story carpark at sunset overlooking the estuary of the Humber. We will look into more detail of this in the following section which brings in aspects *Bathwater* performed on stage leading to an evaluation of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the final scene in the three media formats.

Bathwater performed

The stage version of *Bathwater* premiered at Hull College’s theatre which was filled to capacity. The audience comprised a large proportion of Hull’s creative writing scene, members of the general public, as well as around ten members of Foster’s family who took seat in the front row. The stage at this venue is level with the first row which means that Vicky Foster and Finlay McGuigan as Joseph were standing directly facing Foster’s family and a few other audience members. The stage set-up indicated that this would be a reading rather than a play. As there was no physical barrier between the performance area and audience, there also was no figurative fourth

wall established. The performers spoke to the audience (via a PA system) with natural timbre and volume. Plain, long curtains obscured the backstage area. There were music stands for the scripts in the performance area but no other furnishings. In terms of light design, there was some use of coloured filters to bathe the stage and performers in dark red (blood) and blue (water) at the beginning. However, for most of the performance lighting was reduced to clear spotlights. Foster was dressed in a shirt, knee-length leather skirt, opaque tights and moderately heeled shoes. Her attire conveyed the air of a slightly formal event such as going to the theatre or good restaurant. McGuigan wore loose fitting casual clothes which did not seem to represent a costume. Throughout the performance the performers largely remained in their positions stage left (McGuigan) and stage right (Foster). There were no physical scene changes to indicate changing locations in the script. Most of the narrative is located indoors, the houses where Foster lived at the time and an ASDA supermarket. Only the final scene is located on top of a multi-story car park overlooking the Humber estuary at sunset. Performing the final scene, Foster lifted her face to indicate a wider expanse of space beyond the stage.

The performance relied on the strength of the script, the voices, faces and gestures of the performers and the three-dimensional presence of two people, the autobiographer-performer and an actor. Where Foster's physical presence established an authentication effect regarding the fidelity of the narrative, the co-presence of McGuigan signalled the skilfulness associated with theatre performances which was in keeping with the venue and the situated behaviours it solicited. There is also an ethical dimension to such a sparse stage production and its associated focus on words which lies in the laying bare of the tension between authenticity and acting. The performance was in equal measures intimate and unobtrusive, thus creating emotional space for audience members in which to negotiate their chosen level of emotional engagement.

Still, a wide range of emotions was present in the performance. McGuigan conveyed as Joseph fond childhood memories, growing disquiet over his lack of knowledge of his father and some angry outbursts as a teenager. Vicky (Foster) expressed love for her partner and wonder over having a baby, rationalising abusive behaviour, being brave and keeping up appearances. The scenes in which her character makes a long statement to the police and where she contemplates a magic ritual to ‘send back’ negative emotions to her former partner were played with restraint and a hint of distant curiosity. Only the final scene was different in tone. The soundscape coalesced into something resembling a song. Foster adopted a more formal tone in keeping with the elevated emotional content of the script ending on a hopeful note. The ethical dimension being here Foster’s care for the audience’s well-being as expressed in an invitation to share a moment of hope.

Foster’s use of poetic language in the final scene further marks a connection with Tom’s alleged other victim without usurping her life story. In this scene Vicky communes with the city, nature and through them with the woman who was scarred for life in an attack in Hull’s red-light district. The scene is introduced as an outcome of Vicky’s return to writing ‘stories’ (40).

In the version performed on stage, the text is entirely spoken by Vicky:

In the road that used to be the heart of the red-light district, there’s a shopping centre. The women have moved on, but the car park’s still there. I’ve found it’s the best place in the whole city to see the sky. I like to go there at sunset, watch the prelude to night – the wash of mauve and orange – how it dances towards darkness. I look out across the rooftops, to the river. Witness as she lets go of herself, lets her water run out and reveals her scarred riverbed for a while; the marks left behind beneath the fullness as she ebbs. When the light

falls just right, the crevices fill with liquid gold, shine in the wetness. She's beautiful when you see her like that.¹

In the other versions, it is Vicky and Joseph who separately visit the spot at sunset yet share the lines both using the first person singular. They share an understanding of the situation, the emotions evoked by the experience, but they do not speak to each other about it. The composite first-person speaker marvels at the beauty of colours washing over the 'scarred' riverbed, when the water retreats. The red-light district is not mentioned, as the level of abstraction has increased. A healing process which encompasses Vicky, Joseph and the river ('she') is implied in the appreciation of beauty:

Jos[eph]:

In the centre of town there's a car park.

Both:

I've found it is the best place in the whole city to see the sky.

Jos[eph]:

I like to go there at sunset.

Vicky:

Watch the prelude to night. The wash of mauve and orange – how it dances towards darkness. I look out across the rooftops, to the river.

¹ The author shared her unpublished script with me.

Both:

Witness as she lets go of herself.

Vicky:

Lets her water run out and reveals her scarred riverbed for a while; the marks left beneath the fullness, as she ebbs. When the light falls just right, the crevices seem to fill with liquid gold, shine in the wetness.

Both:

She's beautiful when you see her like that.

(40)

The radio version achieves here more than the stage and printed versions because it is concurrently more and less abstract than the other two. All versions provide the audience (readership) with an opportunity to experience emotional relief in the shared imagination of limitless beauty which acknowledges damage (scarring) but is not defined by it. In print, this experience is made possible by the assignment of lines and the page lay-out which reminds readers to imagine voices. It is reasonable to assume that there is less emotional impact here than on stage or on the radio because more cognitive effort needs to be made to make these connections. On stage, the anthemic music and Foster's formal delivery add to the experience. The writer's physical presence may also assist, although there are no signs of physical damage to her corporeal integrity visible or implied. This strength of autobiographical stage performance also marks a weakness for the closing scene of Foster's narrative. The strong authentication effect of her physical body in the venue may prevent audience members from abstracting the portrayed pleasure in healing and beauty from Foster

herself. The radio version with its singular focus on hearing weaves the two voices and music into an aural experience which sits above the individual roles. The implied universality of aesthetic perception thus becomes more easily accessible to the listener whilst preserving the impression of faithfulness to the narrative through the presence of Foster in her recorded voice.

The printed version has the merit of relative durability. Some readers may also find themselves reading certain passages more than once or skipping other parts. This puts the individual reader in a privileged position of deep engagement which may not be easily achievable in the communal experience of the stage or the linearity of narration on stage and on the radio. Furthermore, the printed version comes with two additional texts which throw interesting lights on the story told. The first text called 'Joseph' gathers all lines assigned to Joseph into one narrative. That is the character's solo lines and the ones shared in the main part with his mother (42-9). This marks an attempt to strengthen his voice and to make his experiences more readily accessible as one person's story. Foster thus assigns an independent voice to the fictionalised figure of her son which projects his own narrative. This text therefore pushes the boundaries of autobiography to the point where the author becomes a writer of a fictional life story inspired by her understanding of her child's or children's real experiences. This tension makes the text in some respects stronger (Joseph's uninterrupted narrative) and weaker (fictionalisation removes the authentication effects of autobiography and biography). The second text, 'Me and DI Jones', is a three-page prose piece (51-3) which provides a microscopic view on shame. DI Jones represents not only the authorities which come to the narrator's house because she cannot protect herself or her children. Sam Jones has been coming to her house for three years. He has also read all her files and knows her better than anyone. In return, she watches his behaviours and speech very closely and assumes that over time her status as an equal person and potential romantic partner has been eroded. She thinks that

in the eyes of the attractive policeman she is reduced to a category which is that of victim. Having moved house again to avoid harassment from her former partner, she now lives in a deprived neighbourhood with no prospect of bettering herself. Initially Sam and the narrator were separated by a thin 'film' but that has solidified into a 'dividing wall' (53). The dirt of her partner's bathwater has finally contaminated her which is in this story expressed by her suffering from acne (53). Shame is corrosive. The narrator sees her shame reflected in the growing professional distance between the policeman and herself. It is also a sound-proof room, to use the expression from the main text, because there is no outside perspective to the first-person narrator. The reader does not actually know what Sam's view on the narrator may be.

Performance and the Ethics of Life Writing

On the most fundamental level, 'narrative' is the base category of cognitive 'self-experience' as it furnishes the self with a sense of 'continuous identity'. However, 'disnarrativia' and 'hypernarrativia' are common phenomena which are caused by events and experiences which disrupt the narratability of a life, as they push the self's sense of 'continuous identity' to a breaking point (Eakin 1999, 100, 101, 124, 130). We have seen these mechanisms at work in *Bathwater*, where Vicky's mind quickly switches between violent and peaceful imagery, and when interviewed by police she cannot stop speaking.

In term of ethics, research into life-writing has focussed on 'victimisation' (the misappropriation of someone's life story) and the issues of making the lives of 'vulnerable subjects' such as disabled children narratable (Eakin 2004, 10; Couser 2004). Eakin states that the ethics of life writing are about the control of disclosure (2004, 14). Claudia Mills distinguishes in this context between truth

and fidelity. Even if one does not write the complete and accurate truth the resulting text can be true to the story's essence. With the safety net of fictionalisation in place, she asks whether there are any limits to what an author is permitted to use as material for their writing and concludes: 'Thus, to be a friend is to stand to another in a relationship of trust, for the sake of one's friend; to be a writer is to stand ready to violate that trust for the sake of one's own story.' (Mills 2004, 105). Foster's *Bathwater* can certainly be seen to negotiate truth and fidelity with the composite, fictionalised character of Joseph being the strongest example, and the poetic abstraction of the final scene following suite. However, Foster does not fictionalise per se. Her text and performance are marked as authentic. Therefore, her readers and audiences are invited to trust her that she does not violate the rights of any of the real people she needs to address through her writing in order to tell her story truthfully.

Truthfulness is, however, not the only characteristic of life writing and autobiographical performances. We need to consider skilfulness as well. In his study of storytelling, the folklorist Richard Baumann sets out to show in which ways speech acts and performances differ, when they are marked as cultural or artistic performance. Baumann (1984, 11) asserts: 'From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence.' Cultural performances often are scheduled events with restrictions to attendance; there are established rules which govern the behaviour of performers and audience. There are, crucially, social rules over the 'eligibility' to become a performer (30) which are dependent on the perceived level of skill of the performer. Performances of Foster's *Bathwater* are first defined by the unity of the person, writer and performer Vicky Foster who has been given socially sanctioned access to three modes of performing autobiographical text. Two of these modes

are performed literature. The third is a set of written texts in book format whose performance is dependent on individual readers. I use the term performance to describe any audience or reader engagement with *Bathwater* in order to highlight the issue of live and reproduced performances which fuelled debates in performance studies for a long time. Towards the beginning of these debates, Peggy Phelan famously stated:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. (Phelan 1993, 146)

This has been understood approvingly or not as a statement against any process of reproducing and archiving live performance. Phelan denies that this was her intention but concedes that to invoke the notion of betrayal gives her position a luddite slant (2003, 294-295). Jill Dolan in her book *Utopia in Performance*, opens her case for the virtues of live performance by emphasising the emancipatory character of shared experience played out on stage: 'Utopia in Performance argues that live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.' (Dolan 2005, 2) Consequently Dolan is interested in 'audiences as participatory publics' (10) and the 'present-tenseness' of performance' (18) which renders utopian thought a (staged) and shared reality which can be experienced. Foster's *Bathwater* performed on stage quite literally turns the co-presence of the autobiographer-performer into a utopian moment of meaning making with the last scene set on top of the multi-story car park. We

need to consider, nevertheless, whether this experience is only possible in the medium of a stage performance.

The polar opposite to Dolan's argument is provided by Philip Auslander's critique of 'liveness'. Auslander argues that 'live' performance is only conceivable in conjunction with recording technology. Before recordings became possible, there was no 'live performance' just 'performance' (1999, 51). When audiences and critics praise live performances, they may cite complete sensory involvement as their outstanding and valorising characteristic. Auslander queries this citing communal audience experiences which are not dependent on liveness such as outdoor cinema or satellite-relay opera performances (55). Another point raised in praise of liveness, as done by Dolan, is the communal experience with the performer or performers in one physical location. Auslander sees this as a relatively weak argument, as there is virtually always a barrier between the performer and the audience. Otherwise there would be no performance with its associated situated behaviours. Instead there would be shared practice (56). This holds mostly true for the theatre performance of *Bathwater*. The venue does not have a physical barrier between the seating and performance space. Still, no-one crossed the virtual divide during the performance by addressing or approaching the performers. I did observe, however, that members of her family approached Foster right after the performance simply getting up from their front-row seats and taking a few steps forward. This was presumably not scripted and – in any case – did not involve other members of the audience. Therefore, there was no shared practice as such.

Ultimately, Auslander claims that liveness is about the symbolic capital of having attended a specific live performance, such as Woodstock (59). Phelan's counter argument stresses the potentially transformational effect a live performance may have on all parties where performer and audience are co-present. An audience may experience a strong response towards a transmitted or

recorded performance, but this response will never change the experience for the performer (Phelan 2003, 295). Community and participation are in this way of thinking to be understood as a community of performers and audiences rather than audiences separated from the performers by means of technology or architecture.

The middle ground of this debate is inhabited by critics such as Matthew Reason, Rebecca Schneider and Susan Bennett who with varying emphasis argue that live performance and reproduction depend on each other. Bennett (2006) employs Auslander's term 'liveness' in her analysis of printed and stage-performed autobiographical texts. She differentiates between purely text-based autobiography, autobiographical books with added photographs, the use of moving images in autobiography, and stage performances (34-5). Her main point is that the three-dimensional physical presence of the autobiographical performer brings the body as an 'archive' of experiences on stage and into dialogue with an audience: 'When there is a coincidence between the subject of the autobiographical performance and the body of the performer for that script, then the frenzy of signification produced along this axis has, for audiences, an unusually strong claim to authenticity.' (Bennet 2006, 35)

The examples given by Bennett go far beyond the use of body and theatre techniques in *Bathwater* which was written by a poet with a radio commission in mind rather than a playwright. Nevertheless, Bennett's conclusion has some mileage for an analysis of Foster's stage performance:

The singularity of autobiographical subject, author, and performer can hardly fail to create [...] an over-investment of spectatorial response in corporeal evidence against which me might better understand the narrative, by sifting through its more of less fictive truths. (Bennett 2006, 41)

On stage Foster embodied the ‘singularity autobiographical subject, author, and performer’ and thus invited an emotional investment of the audience in the perceived authenticity of the performed narrative. However, her slightly formal attire also created a distance between her physical self and the narrative. Had she worn a costume, possibly denoting a young mother, the effect may have been different. The authorial retrospective would have been folded into a more direct expression of the experience of the character of Vicky. Paradoxically, this would have potentially come at the cost of a weakened authenticity effect, as Foster in costume might have been perceived as performing a role.

What Bennett calls a ‘the frenzy of signification’ (41) has a clearly defined focus for Deirdre Heddon who stresses that autobiographical performance is a popular means of expression for women, People of Colour and people from a minority or oppressed background. It is a powerful way of demonstrating voice and agency (2008, 2). The political issue of female voices has been a driving force behind feminist autobiographical drama and performance from the 1970s onwards (20). Heddon acknowledges that experience is already led by scripts or narratives. Autobiographical performance is not about a simple representation of experiences or identities (26). It is about the complexities which arise such as layering of representations, performers who perform characters who are not quite themselves or scripts which highlight ethical issues of (auto-) biographical writing (41-2). Heddon cites as an ethically responsible performance a production by Lisa Kron. It reflects on ethical dilemmas of using its material by having an actor perform as Kron’s mother who argues with her over the way the play is crafted (153-5).

This perspective allows us to understand the role of Joseph in *Bathwater* not predominantly in terms of acting and inauthenticity but in terms of ethics. The publicity material for the stage production and the radio play highlighted the authenticity of Foster’s experience and the fact that

Joseph is a role. This duality opens the space needed to reflect on the tension between Foster's self-expression and her responsibility as a parent towards her real-life child or children.

These considerations of live performance and technical reproduction also come to bear, when we take a final look at the radio version of *Bathwater*. Stage performance and radio drama have in common the use of voice and dialogue. However, music and sound play a bigger role in radio drama than in stage performance unless these specifically include extra-diegetic soundscapes or as musical theatre form a separate genre. In terms of performing autobiographical material, radio drama is obviously set up in such a way that the three-dimensional, physical body of the writer-performer is not conveyed. The physical connection to the autobiographer is reproduced in technology and focussed on the use of their voice. This should not be framed as a deficit. It simply is a different genre in a different medium with a sole focus on sound and voice which arguably brings forth great refinement which deserves an active listener, as Tim Crook explains (1999, 118-119).

The vocal performances of Foster and McGuigan in the radio version are rich and nuanced. The latter is a trained actor, the former an experienced singer and performer. Studio technology allows the use a wider range of pitches, tones and volumes than the stage performance which used microphones and amplification but was for obvious reasons influenced by the size of the venue and its acoustics. One further aspect is the use of dialect. To a national audience, the Hull accent, which is quite distinct, sets a strong identity marker that the radio drama is set in a precise location which is usually perceived as 'northern' and 'working class'. In the context of autobiography and performance, there is another consideration: only Foster speaks with a Hull accent in everyday life. McGuigan does not. His performed Hull accent is nevertheless very accurate. The impression of authenticity can be achieved either by being authentic or by being skilful.

The music and soundscape for stage and radio was produced in collaboration with the Broken Orchestra. In an interview for BBC Radio 4 in 2019, the musicians describe the ‘layering of effects’ they employed and the intention not to overpower the performed words with music or sounds. Foster took the emotional scoring chart she used to write the scenes into the creative process with the musicians which resulted in a soundscape sympathetic to the linguistic content of the play. McGuigan mentions how the music and sounds helped him understand the character he plays which is further indication that authenticity is not the only driving force behind effective performance of (auto-) biographical material. Preparation and skills are equally as important.

The stage performance and the radio play have structurally a lot in common. There are authentication effects at play in both versions as well as abstraction, poetification and fictionalisation. We have identified skilfulness as an important factor of autobiographical performance regardless of liveness or lack thereof in the respective medium. The obvious difference between stage and radio remains unchallenged in this overview which is the absence of shared experience between the performers and audience of the radio play. This is offset, in my view, by the greater emphasis on voice and sound on the radio. Aural perception lends itself to intense audience engagement with the performed text. The use of a regional accent, be it authentic or acquired for the purpose of acting, grounds the narrative by virtue of a realness effect in a way which is not entirely dissimilar to the grounding of autobiographical performance in the physical body of the performer.

Conclusion

The three versions of Vicky Foster's *Bathwater* balance the demands of truthfulness and artfulness towards autobiographical performance by using the respective means of the media in which they are deployed – on stage, on the radio and on paper. Foster's starting point lies in her personal experiences of domestic abuse. She understands the traumatic events as individual but also as representative for other victims of coercion, harassment and violence. However, in writing and performing autobiographical material, she takes care not to reduce her experiences to the expectations of the general public and professional helpers towards the behaviours and emotions of victims like her. Neither does she seem to embellish her actions at the time or to sensationalise the assault on the other woman or the death of her former partner and abuser. She abstracts from real events by using metaphors extensively. Her use of poetic language serves a dual purpose of ethics and aesthetics. To amalgamate her child's or children's experiences into the role of Joseph played by a trained actor does the very same thing. *Bathwater* uses artistic skill in the preparation, presentation and performance of the narrative to create a safe space in which Vicky's story can speak for itself without violating the rights of other people to their dignity. By keeping visible the tension between reality and performance it offers entry points for audience (readership) engagement which benefits from truthfulness and autobiographical authentication effects without being consumed by them. Disnarrative and hypernarrative threats to the construction of a continuing sense of self are addressed in the text and its performances which prevents readers from imposing exaggerated expectations of grandiose redemption and deliverance on Foster's story. On the other hand, Foster takes great care not to leave audiences at a loose end or in an emotionally vulnerable state. The final scenes first thematise the act of writing as a critical process and then make an offer of sharing hope in the potentiality of positive outcomes.

All three versions of *Bathwater* have merits due to their respective media format. The stage production benefits from the physical presence of the autobiographer-performer, the verification of the truthfulness through the body as archive of experiences. The radio play benefits from a focus on voices and sounds which makes possible an intimate engagement with the words and their timbre. The script changes between stage and radio are about boosting Joseph's presence in the narrative without adding a lot of text. By having the character speak more lines throughout solo and together with Vicky makes up for the absence of McGuigan's physical presence. The final scene, which is shared in the radio version also exemplifies how voices and sounds can be spliced and woven to great effect. The book version lacks the immediacy of the stage production and the intimacy for the radio drama. The extra-diegetic author is implied, as in all conventional reading of autobiographical and fictional text but implication is less effective. The book makes up for it by presenting additional material which highlights the fictionalised perspective of the son and the undermining effects of shame. The use of prose rather than free verse for the last text may also enable more intimate and direct engagement from some readers. Structurally, the book version also allows for the most ethical practice of reception. The individual reader will encounter the narrative individually, assuming they are not reading the book to someone else. They will choose their pace, their pauses, their meditations and their omissions.

Ultimately, the liveness or lack thereof of *Bathwater* performances and readings is secondary to the question of voice and listening. Foster seized an opportunity to make herself heard in three formats at a time where mainstream media like the BBC are creating these opportunities for women, People of Colour and marginalised groups. There is also hope that Wrecking Ball Press succeed in bringing this book to people who would not normally encounter poetry.

References

Baumann, Richard. 1984. *Verbal art as performance*. Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press.

Bennett, Susan. 2006. "3D A/B." In *Theatre and AutoBiography: Writing and Performing Lives in Theory and Practice*, edited by Sherrill Grace and Jerry Wasserman, 33-48. Vancouver: Talonbooks.

Broken Orchestra and Vicky Foster. 2019. "I didn't think I'd be seeing the inside of a BBC studio", *BBC Sounds*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p072jkn7>

Couser, G. Thomas. 2003. *Vulnerable Subjects*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Crook, Tim. 1999. *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.

Dolan, Jill. 2005. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Eakin, Paul John. 1999. *How our lives become stories. Making selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Foster, Vicky. 2019. *Bathwater*. Hull: Wrecking Ball Press.

Heddon, Deirdre. 2008. *Autobiography and Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mills, Claudia. 2004. "Friendship, Fiction and Memoir: Trust and Betrayal in Writing from One's Own Life." In *The Ethics of Life Writing*, edited by Paul John Eakin, 101-120. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge.

Phelan, Peggy. 2003. "Performance, Live Culture and Things of the Heart." *Journal of Visual Culture* 2 (3): 291-302. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412903002003002>

Reason, Matthew. 2006. *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schneider, Rebecca. 2001. "Performance Remains." *Performance Research* 6, (2), 2001: 100-108. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792>

Watson, Julia, 1995. "Toward an anti-metaphysical autobiography." In *The Culture of Autobiography*, edited by Robert Folkenflik, 57-79. Stanford University Press.