

LYING IN ALL HONESTY: CAPTURING TRUTH IN WOMEN'S CONFESSIONAL MEMOIR

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the requisite of truth-telling in confessional memoir, looking specifically at the female confessant's ability to simultaneously capture and evade the 'truth'. Framed through a case study of Lauren Slater's controversial memoir, *Lying* (2000), the article explores how Slater's narrator, Lauren, uses the metaphor of epilepsy to describe her own predilection for exaggeration. In exploiting the fallibility of the child narrator, Slater insists on the legitimacy of metaphor in attempts to capture the 'truth' of lived experience: in this case, childhood illness. The result is a confessional text that is more concerned with figurative truth than historical accuracy.

Lauren Slater's controversial memoir, *Lying* (2000), reads ostensibly as the author's account of childhood epilepsy. The work recounts what Slater describes insistently, and often convincingly, as her earliest experiences as an epileptic. From the outset, however, Slater also confesses her own unwillingness or inability to tell the truth, suggesting instead that *Lying* is testimony to the formless and sometimes fragmented nature of neurological illness. The memoir, which is aptly titled and provocatively, too, given the formal terms of the genre, combines the fallibility of memory with the slippery nature of illness and diagnosis. In doing so, the work raises questions about the ethical implications of using metaphor to capture figurative truth in confessional memoirs that assert metaphorical fact over medical veracity.

Slater, who is a clinical psychologist, narrates her story from the perspective of ten-year-old Lauren: an imagined version of her childhood self who she describes casually as a "wrong girl" (27). Speaking from the shadowy intersection of adolescence, Lauren uses the metaphor of epilepsy to describe her own predilection for exaggeration. That is, she employs the figurative meaning of epilepsy, "the falling, auras, seizures and memory lapses, not to mention the celebrity connections to van Gogh, Dostoyevsky et al", to render wordless experiences from her childhood into shapes and sounds (Maslin, par. 2). As Slater herself explains, she writes about episodes of her strange and fitful illness to express past "subtleties and gaps and horrors" for which she has never been able to find the words (219).

In Slater's *Lying*, as in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), the author employs metaphor in an attempt to capture the unspeakable: in *Lying*, that is the habit of lying, in *Magical Thinking*, the death of a husband. A metaphor, of course, is a rhetorical figure that creates some kind of relationship between two seemingly different phenomena. For example, the root metaphor 'research is a journey' suggests a resemblance between systematic inquiry

and travel, specifically the passage from one stage to another. Such an analogy, while perhaps overused in creative writing, fits the view of metaphor as a comparative obscurity. As Alexander Bain explains, “A metaphor is a comparison implied in the mere use of a term” (159). In imagining how two dissimilar things belong together in a fundamental way—that is, lying and epilepsy—Slater creates a comparative obscurity that emphasises the trope’s necessity as a device for meaning-making. As the physician David Biro points out, “We don’t voluntarily choose to speak metaphorically; we are forced into it” (75).

Perhaps the primary use of metaphor in confessional memoir is to serve a creative or constitutive purpose rather than a mere illuminative function, since whatever it is a metaphor expresses cannot be said directly. In other words, the truths a metaphor conveys cannot be expressed otherwise. For Sallie McFague, this dependence on metaphor emerges frequently in heuristic theology, a system of knowing “that experiments and tests, that thinks in an as-if fashion, that imagines possibilities that are novel, [and] that dares to think differently” (*Models of God* 36). Religious language, like poetic language, is deeply metaphorical because the users of both, from Auden to Cohen, can only speak in human language, which is highly symbolic. This reality asserts itself in metaphor, and thus, the trope may be read simply as a thinking about ‘this’ in terms of ‘that’ (McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* 16). Interestingly, this indirection from the known to the unknown is most evident in “the crisis or epoché of pain” (Biro 130). As Biro explains,

When asked by a doctor to describe the pain in her leg, one patient responds that it is *burning*. A man with chronic emphysema says he feels like he is *being choked*. A young girl with abdominal discomfort speaks of *shooting* pains. A young woman with pelvic pain believes something inside her is *tearing* (70).

Pain threatens to destroy not only our language but our cognitive abilities as people. “Grief has no distance,” Didion writes in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. “Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life. Virtually everyone who has ever experienced grief mentions this phenomenon of *waves*” (27). For Didion, metaphor is not a poetic device for decorating prose, building drama or adding rhetorical colour. Rather, metaphor is a conceptual vehicle that provides a relatively comprehensive and coherent way of voicing the unspeakable: in this case, the experience of pain. Typically, a person in pain does not use metaphor for effect, but rather, because she has no literal language to communicate her suffering. This is not to suggest that one cannot understand the felt experience of pain, but rather, that one cannot formulate it: that is, structure and purpose it for representation and sharing.

In *Lying*, Slater’s decision to use metaphor is especially tactful since the dual scripts of ‘the child’ and ‘the pretender’ create a space for the protagonist to bend and stretch the truth. In this discursive setting where truth is recognised through its proximity to risk, Slater’s narrator undermines the requisite of truth-telling by creating a space where she can

deliberately distort and even silence what is deemed readable or 'real'. In this space, and according to the prescribed rules of the confessional genre, "one is authorized to question and the other is bound to confess", or, the reader is required to ask and the narrator is expected to tell (Gilmore, *Policing Truth* 54). Accordingly, Lauren announces her evasion of truth from the beginning. She acknowledges in the opening chapter that she is not to be trusted. "I exaggerate", she warns (3). She explains the rudiments of her alleged condition circuitously rather than candidly. "I have epilepsy", she confesses. "Or I wish I had epilepsy, so I could find a way of explaining the dirty, spastic glittering place I had in my mother's heart" (6). The main function of Lauren's narration, which is simultaneously confessional and self-concealing, is to habitually interrupt herself and disrupt a 'normal' mode of selfhood. The result is that Slater frequently confuses the separate agencies of the child narrator and the adult storyteller in her attempt to capture the 'truth' of her condition, which of course may be epilepsy or her predilection for lying. In fact, Lauren's insistence that she is a self-acknowledged "maker of myths" creates and maintains further uncertainty as to what is fact and what is fiction, or more specifically, which parts of her condition are physical and which parts are imagined (Slater 6).

Elizabeth Donaldson, in *Metaphorical Memoir and Pathological Pathography*, asserts that Slater "would like to have it both ways or, rather, as many ways as possible" (par. 19). Lying then, with its double connotation, captures Lauren's proclivity for dishonesty and her confinement to bed after seizing. Both forms are inextricable from one another as the neurological and the psychogenic, and the real and the imagined, are merged together. Although Slater introduces recollections with phrases that entice her readers to believe—for example, "here's what's true" or "what we did"—she frequently questions the historical validity of her own claims, admitting "it could have all been fact" or "it could have all been fiction" (14). This establishment of a reader relationship that is based on trust but from the outset acknowledges its own flaws and fallibilities makes it possible for Lauren, once the telling of her story has started, to keep her audience enraptured. As Lauren explains,

I had always believed there could be two truths, truth A and truth B, but in my mind truth A sat on top of truth B, or vice versa. In this instance, however, I had epilepsy, truth A, and I had faked epilepsy, truth B, and A and B were placed in a parallel position, instead of one over the other, so I couldn't decide (94).

In the reader's superfluous and sometimes frustrated attempts to separate fact from fiction, the question arises as to whether metaphor in memoir is simply a narrative gimmick. Indeed, for many critics of the genre, the key question for consideration is whether the employment of metaphor to capture figurative truth is an alternative form of honesty or simply an evasion. In confessional memoir, in particular, the possibility arises that an authorial insistence on metaphorical truth might be an elaborate plan designed intentionally to poke holes in the official discourses of the genre. Donna Lee Brien explains that readers of life writing will often suspend belief, even if what is written is largely unverifiable and unable to be tested or

fact-checked. She adds, however, that “such deferral of belief is impossible when someone is continually suggesting, bald-facedly, that they are (or might be) lying to you” (par. 15). Alternatively, Slater insists that what matters is “not the historical truth, which fades as our neurons decay and stutter, but the narrative truth, which is delightfully bendable and politically powerful” (219). Although Lauren never reveals whether she is in fact an epileptic, she uses the metaphor of learning how to fall while seizing to illustrate her belief that the greatest lie of all is what Kierkegaard calls “the feeling of firmness beneath our feet” (163). Slater writes,

We create all sorts of lies, all sorts of stories and metaphors, to avoid the final truth, which is the fact of falling. Our stories are seizures. They clutch us up. They are spastic grasps, they are losses of consciousness. Epileptics, every one of us; I am not alone (197).

In blending a coming-of-age story with an exploration of truth, Slater illuminates the liar paradox apparent in confessional memoirs that are more concerned with capturing narrative truth than historical accuracy. This paradox is, in Jeanette Winterson’s words, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (*The Passion* 5). The two-sided stance, which simultaneously conceals (“I’m telling you stories”) and discloses (“Trust me”), introduces the narrator of the work as a storyteller who has no difficulty intoxicating her readers with her tales, however tall. Winterson, of course, is a writer who is clearly uninterested in preserving any kind of tangible divide between fiction and fact. As the author, in her own words, says,

Categories of fiction and non-fiction, poetry and the novel, stage and text, hardly serve us anymore. The interesting work is being done among the rubble of this collapse. We have to be building new forms, finding new ways of working (Winterson par. 13).

Winterson’s claim is interesting because her statement draws attention to the slippery space where the liar paradox abides. “Is *Oranges* an autobiographical novel?” Winterson asks. “No not at all and yes of course” (*Oranges* xiv). “I admit I sometimes faked my epilepsy”, Lauren confesses, “but I also really had it” (Slater 91). In the midst of this double bind, the confession emerges from, and is situated firmly at, a constant site of struggle. It is both a self-reflective text and a constructed fiction: one that is constantly engaged in a process of self-making through self-narrating, in producing rather than expressing truth, and in capturing rather than reflecting self. Tangled in these knots of difference, the confessional memoir often arises from “the subjective experience of problems and contradictions as encountered in the realm of everyday life” (Felski 85).

Indeed, Lauren’s confinement to the domestic space is implicated as a part of her condition. The various beds that Lauren is confined to are usually located in clinical settings that support and cushion her lying habit:

The doctor came into the room. It was Dr. Patterson, my paediatrician. I liked him, even though his stethoscope was always cold.

‘Am I going to die?’ I said to Dr. Patterson.

He came over to my bed. He looked down at me. Then he smiled, took out his stethoscope, and put it on my nose. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said, listening to my nose. ‘I think you’ll be just fine’ (Slater 30).

While this scene reads as a realistic account of a doctor tending to his young patient, subtextually Dr. Patterson’s placing of his stethoscope on Lauren’s nose is reminiscent of the story of Pinocchio and mythological associations of the nose with lying. In other scenes, Slater explicitly acknowledges the narrative as false. After attending a funeral, Lauren describes how she seizes by the graveside and collapses “down into the deep hole, the empty grave, where the coffin had yet to be lowered” (Slater 58). Later, Lauren tells the reader, “I didn’t really fall into the grave. I was just using a metaphor to try and explain my mental state. The *real* truth is I went to the funeral, the hearse had engine trouble, the coffin was late, I looked into the grave and I thought about falling in. I imagined myself...” (Slater 60). In this uncertain space where the self is always sliding, the narrator invokes interplay between the material and the metaphorical by undermining the truth-telling requisite of memoir. “The neural mechanism that undergirds the lie”, Slater writes, “is the same neural mechanism that helps us make narrative. Thus, all stories, even those journalists swear up and down are ‘true,’ are at least physiologically linked to deception” (164).

In confession, the tension that arises from this problematic is linked to the traditional aims and functions of autobiography as the genre where the confession is usually placed. Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, and his well known definition of the genre as “a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence” is problematic for the female confession as the traditional view of women is antithetical to one of the fundamental motives of autobiography: that is, the desire to see one’s life as a whole (4). Consequently, the female confessant who breaks the contractual nature of autobiography by exaggerating or even fabricating the truth is positioned within confessional discourse as a ‘liar’. Regardless of the parallels between the author’s life and the author’s narrative, her confession is judged according to the criteria of fiction rather than fact.

In counteraction, Slater engages a reverse discourse by speaking within the confessional text as the sole arbiter of what is deemed truthful and how it is known. In this way, the confession can be read as “a canny raid on the discourses of truth and identity” because it operates as a political rhetoric that claims to speak the truth of an alternative subject, who in this case is a sick woman (Gilmore, *Autobiographics* 226). By purposefully avoiding the filtering mechanisms of objectivity and detachment, the female confessant *herself* and her confessional text *itself* become *self*-conscious, perhaps even as “hyperconscious as the prisoners of the panopticon” (Gilmore, *Autobiographics* 225). In this space of heightened self-awareness, the female confessant undermines the act of truth-telling by challenging what the dominant culture values as ‘truth’. As Alicia Ostriker explains, “‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’ speaks

for writers who in every country have been inhibited both by economic and legal dependence and by the awareness that *true writer* signifies assertion while *true woman* signifies submission” (6).

Slater shapes her truths not only through metaphor but through the employment of a number of literary tropes and techniques that blur the boundaries between fact and fiction: the inclusion of abstracted language, the compression of time, and the deliberate distortion or silencing of what is deemed readable or ‘real’. The resulting transgression, which is the misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth, not only reveals the constraints and contradictions of gender but also breaks the traditional rules of the confessional genre, specifically: tell the truth, respect privacy, and display normalcy (Eakin 114). These rules, which double as the rules of identity, are learned in our quest for selfhood; they are understood but remain unspoken, and they become visible only when broken because their violations have consequences in our lives. While this idea that self-narrative is governed by a set of obligations is not new, the rules have become increasingly “rumpled” for confessional writers who wish to interrogate “the limits of autobiography at a time when the only rule governing its study is ‘breaking the rule’” (Smith and Watson 2).

Indeed, in Slater’s attempt to discover or recover a ‘truthful’, ‘respectful’, and ‘normal’ self, the possibility arises that multiple selfhoods may exist in confessional narrative. As a result, the genre itself is destabilised as the boundaries between the memoir and the novel are blurred. In one chapter entitled *How to Market This Book*, which takes the form of a memorandum to Slater’s editor at Random House, Slater attempts to justify the non-fiction classification of her work. “When you try to sell this little book, I suggest you pitch it to the public as such... a book that takes up residence in the murky gap between genres and by its stubborn self-disposition there forces us to consider important things” (161). At several points in the narrative, Slater considers the confusion surrounding the categorisation of her work. She writes,

We have to call it fiction or we have to call it fact, because there’s no bookstore term for something in between, gray matter. If you called it faction, you would confuse the bookstore people, they wouldn’t know where to put the product, and it would wind up in the back alley or a tin trash can with ants and other vermin. You would lose a lot of money (160).

In her attempt to capture the ‘truth’ of her illness, Slater walks the fine line between ambiguity and deceit. The memoir itself begins with a fake introduction penned by a fictional philosophy professor, Hayward Krieger. According to Krieger, “What makes [*Lying*] disturbing is its incrementally rising refusal to state the facts of the illness about which Slater writes” (Slater par. 1). The foreword, which is presented without qualification as a preface, is in fact a literary hoax. “Lying reeks of rat from the very first page”, Rebecca Mead writes. “I was on the telephone to U.S.C. to confirm my suspicion that there is no such person as Hayward Krieger before I’d even begun the first chapter” (par. 7). Slater, however, maintains that Professor

Krieger is not a mere figment of her imagination. "I just heard from Dr. Krieger the other day", Slater says in a recent interview with Sandra Allen. "In fact, he sounded very overworked" (Allen and Slater 26). Anecdotally, in the same interview, Slater also says, "If James Frey never spent a night in jail, who gives a rat's ass" (Allen and Slater 26).

Structurally, Slater's memoir also assumes an alternative narrative form that is framed as a metaphor. The story is divided into the four parts of a 'grand mal' seizure: Onset, The Rigid Stage, The Convulsive Stage, and the Stage of Recovery. "Epilepsy is a fascinating disease", Lauren writes, "because some epileptics are liars, exaggerators, makers of myths and high-flying stories. Doctors don't know why this is, something to do, maybe, with the way a scar on the brain dents memory or mutates reality" (6). The danger, of course, in appropriating another disability to stand in for her own, is that Slater mystifies her alleged experience of a still stigmatic disability. One of those risks, as Margaret Price observes, is "playing into the accusations of 'malingering' so often levelled at disabled persons" (20). Yet in gesturing towards the untruth of her illness, Slater insists on the legitimacy of metaphor by refusing to become the candid narrator of the traditional confession.

Thus, as the narrative progresses, Slater continues to undermine the truth-telling requisite by exploiting the bedroom space in an attempt to expose the strained and deteriorating relationship between her "bitchy and depressing" mother and her "ineffectual" father (141). While holidaying in Barbados, Lauren sneaks into her parents' hotel room and describes their estranged relationship. She writes,

They were lying on their separate sides of the bed. My mother was curled on her side, my father on his back in boxer shorts. What was it that gave this moment its particular horror for me? They were two people in bed, bored in bed, hardly a tragedy, nothing like Northern Ireland or Panama.

But I froze...

Slowly, my mother turned, opened her eyes. She seemed to be entirely awake, as though she'd been waiting for me. She seemed monstrous. She did not say a word. Just saw me standing there and stared, as if to say, 'So now you see' (16).

In this context of power and surveillance, Lauren's confessions are generated in the discursive relationship between the speaking confessant (the narrator) and the listening confessor (the implied reader). As Michel Foucault explains, "One does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile" (61).

While Peter Brooks agrees with Foucault that the confession always "implies a listener, however impersonal", he challenges Foucault's separateness of the confessor and the confessant (95). The confession, Brooks argues, actually dismantles constructions of identity

by dissolving the boundaries that separate self from other. “The form of address to a listener found in confession”, Brooks says, “is similar to a prayer, which addresses itself directly to God” (95). In this situation,

The speaking *I* necessarily implies a listening *you* who can in turn become the *I* while the speaker becomes *you*... Saying *I* implies and calls to a responsive *you*, and in this dialogic, transferential relation consolation and self-definition are to be found (Brooks 95).

For Lauren, to lie and then to confess does not lead to an affirmation of the self but to an erasure of its boundaries. Capturing a young, sick, female voice becomes synonymous with capturing an alternative voice that undermines conceived notions of truth by insisting on the legitimacy of metaphor. In this way, Lauren voices her own version of reality: one that is not fixed and specific but ambivalent and uncertain. In doing so, she challenges fixed assumptions about narrative ‘fact’. Specifically, she encodes boundaries and warning signs in her narrative that signal her desire to create a safe space where her personal stories can be shared. This authorial reaction against the constraints of both gender and genre defies the confessional entrapments that seek to contain her. This evasion is particularly prevalent in women’s memoir since confession itself is usually read as a female discursive practice or gender-specific discourse. Certainly, “Women are seen as effusively confessional creatures in a way that men are not” (Guenther 89). Often, the confession is self-affirming when applied to male texts and self-effacing when applied to female. Indeed, “The realm of the personal and sexual has always been literary for men (Saint Augustine, Rousseau, Michel Leiris, Henry Miller) and confessional for women (Colette, Erica Jong, Anaïs Nin)” (Saint-Martin 28-29).

The requisite of truth-telling, then, which is the most familiar of rules we associate with autobiographical discourse, is a site of constant struggle for the female confessant. Lauren’s difficulty in disclosing ‘the truth’ is rooted in a complex process of authorisation, as truth itself is a cultural product that is dependent on specific notions of what truth is and who is authorised to judge it (Gilmore, *Policing Truth* 55). The task of capturing ‘truth’ is also hindered by Lauren’s various displacements in the text as well as the passing of her confession through a cultural process that both reflects and reproduces social authority. As Leigh Gilmore explains,

The truth is entwined with our notions of gender so completely that even the structural underpinnings of truth production are masculinist; that is, the maintenance of patriarchal authority and male privilege follow from the formation of rules in confession to the installation of a man as judge (*Policing Truth* 57).

Consequently, the confessant is engaged in a constant struggle to divulge whatever is most difficult to tell, but also, to confess according to a standard of truth or in some proximate relation to its value. Slater insists that she is telling the truth while simultaneously frustrating

that goal through the structural demands she places on her narrator as an authoritative producer of truth. In the scene where Lauren finds her parents in bed, her discovery functions as a screen that allows Lauren to filter various guises of the 'normal' world and finally see what she describes as the "fears and holes" of the adult realm (Slater 198). In this way, Lauren's illness, whether it is epilepsy or lying, comes to symbolise her journey from childhood to adulthood by signalling a movement from naivety to understanding, and from innocence to shame. When the teenage Lauren is accepted into the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, she becomes involved with a famous writer whose name and identifying features she has to change because of "the unhappy and damning events that came to pass" (Slater 119). Here, Slater presents epilepsy as sex: another kind of malady that symbolises her estrangement, not only from her childhood, but also from herself. Lauren confesses,

And yet, the first person I was ever physically close to did not know about my history with epilepsy. Why is that? Sex itself is a convulsion, a kind of tortured twist when, for a few seconds, your head arced back, you're ugly. Sometimes, later, when I did have sex with Christopher, I would find him staring up at me, a look of distaste in his eyes (Slater 127).

The result of this exercise in rule breaking, which sanctions playfulness, unorthodoxy, and general misrule, is that Slater writes herself into a double bind: on one side, she is the child narrator who inadvertently misrepresents events and misdirects readers, and on the other side, she is the untrustworthy author who purposefully employs metaphor as a licence to lie. In the midst of this seizure, somewhere between the polarities of fact and fiction, Slater uses metaphor to capture the truth of her illness. This acquisition generates a safe space for her narrator that doubles as dangerous terrain for the reader. For some readers, this not-knowingness about what is real and what is imagined may serve as either "postmodern fun and games or pure exasperation between hard covers" (Maslin par. 6).

In fact, in reading Slater's memoir, many critics have accused the author of being a mythomaniac: a brazen exhibitionist who employs metaphor to approach the truth but never intends to meet it. This conditioning may be cultural, since the female confessant is often socialised to believe that she is "an aggressive, loud bitch if she talks too much" (Landy 18-19). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson agree that the confessant is usually dismissed as "a shameless self-advertiser" who flagrantly exposes herself by betraying her presumed responsibility to capture the 'real' (12). Of course, the confessant's desire to represent herself as a 'real' entity is complicated by the fact she is always looking at herself through the eyes of the other and "always aware of how she is being defined by the dominant male culture" (Manisty 273). Perhaps this cultural alienation is what compels the female confessant to divulge her secrets, and, by extension, to capture the peculiar intimacies of her lived experience.

In *Lying*, Slater has succeeded in creating "a slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text, shaped, if it could be, like a question mark" (221). "The truth is bendable", Lauren warns. "What you wish is every bit as real as what you are" (Slater 5). By connecting her illness to a

longing for things in the past she never had, and to things in the future she was too afraid to try, Slater's memoir is essentially an account of the "sliding and fragmented sense she had as a child not fitting into the world" (Slater 9). In fact, the work is testimony to the problems that still claim Slater's adult imagination and body. "My whole life has been a seizure", Lauren says (Slater 9). Whether or not Slater has epilepsy may be beside the point, if metaphor is a valid strategy for capturing figurative truth. If metaphor, however, is merely a narrative trick designed to mask intentional dishonesty, then Slater is certainly guilty of lying. Nevertheless, in Lauren's strange, warped world where the truth is slippery, her epilepsy makes literary, if not literal, sense.



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