

## The Art of Reading Lauren Slater

MEMOIR OF A TRUTHFUL LIAR

**A**MONG Oscar Wilde's matchless nonfiction, his 1889 essay "The Decay of Lying" is notable for being faultlessly Wildean, which is to say a perfect amalgam of bulletproof erudition, sublime aesthetic sensibility, exquisite personal taste, and the subversive, antagonistic tendencies he never could resist. The essay includes this memorable bit:

Bored by the tedious and improving conversation of those who have neither the wit to exaggerate nor the genius to romance, tired of the intelligent person whose reminiscences are always based upon memory, whose statements are invariably limited by probability, who is at any time liable to be corroborated by the merest Philistine who happens to be present, Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar.

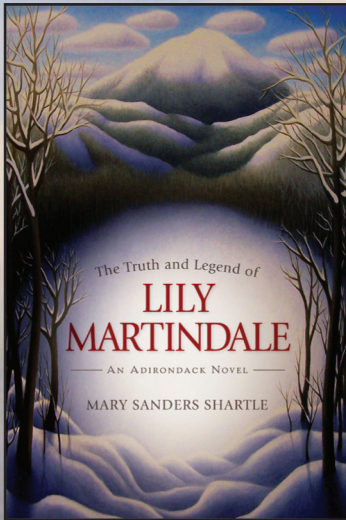
After numerous nuggets of wisdom you'll want to write down—"No great artist ever sees things as they really are" and "The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything," for instance—Wilde goes on to conclude that "the final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art." That assertion is an earthquake beneath the feet of those staid realists who contend that literature is supposed to reveal ourselves as we truly are, to uncover something they've dubbed "the human condition." It's also an assault upon our instincts, since even a toddler can tell you that lying is wrong. "You're a liar" is everyone's favorite indictment because each of us has a stake in the truth. Of all the platitudes by which we are daily molested, "the truth matters" is the one we should never tire of hearing. But that doesn't mean that imaginative literature can't be replete with "beautiful untrue things," with its own particular cosmos of truth, a psycho-emotional truth every bit as vital as the facts we've been taught to laud, and that's exactly what Wilde means by "the proper aim of Art." The truth should trump the facts.

None of us wants to be reminded of the James Frey scandal of 2006, but if Oprah Winfrey's people had possessed the discernment to choose Lauren Slater's masterful *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* (Random House, 2000)



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A Stunning Debut from

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## THE TRUTH AND LEGEND OF LILY MARTINDALE

An Adirondack Novel

Mary Sanders Shartle

"...Shartle's memorable novel will find a ready audience with readers who are already fond of the Adirondacks, but it is so studded with rich detail and scenery that others will want to transport themselves to this wild, dangerous, yet achingly lovely place."

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over Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (Nan A. Talese, 2003), Winfrey's legion of apostles would have been treated to a narrative of startling truth, beauty, and intelligence rather than the embodiment of their opposites. Featuring a tempestuous, hard-driving, semi-delusional mother; an uxorious schlub of a father, mostly absent; an epileptic illness at once thrilling and life-threatening; a young girl dazed in a world that writhes between shadow and light, *Lying* becomes, in its coy and mythomaniacal execution, a dynamic reverie on truth and art. Slater—the author of seven books, including her earlier, straightforwardly nonfictional *Prozac Diary* (Random House, 1998)—is so charismatic and wise, with such a gift for phrasing, that you won't much mind that the nucleus of this memoir, her debilitating epilepsy, is utter fiction. Slater never had epilepsy—she faked herself into its electric grip because she wanted "an illness so existential, so oddly spiritual," because she wanted to be "stuck out in the stratosphere with Sartre and Kierkegaard"—but the descriptions of her bucking ordeal are among the most convincing you'll ever come across.

The first chapter contains only two words: "I exaggerate" (bear in mind Wilde's formulation "the wit to exaggerate"). Later, she would like us to know: "Epilepsy shoots your memory to hell, so take what I say, or don't." And the facts? "The facts, the facts, they probe at me like the problem they are." Her mother's maddening role in all this? "From my mother I learned that truth is bendable, that what you wish is every bit as real as what you are." Prior to a surgery to slice her corpus callosum—a procedure that lessens the severity of seizures by cleaving the brain—Slater is terrified because she knows she has embellished and outright aped her symptoms: "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." The name we have for faking the truth is the title of this memoir.

And then there's the cemetery scene, when at ten years old Slater attends a funeral for a neighbor, and, to everyone's chest-punching horror, she collapses into the empty grave, six feet into the newly dug earth. You can imagine for yourself the screams, the scrum of mourners clamoring to rescue this child from a pit of death. The scene lasts three pages, and then there's this:

This is a work of nonfiction. Everything in it is supposed to be true. In some instances names of people and places have been changed to protect their privacy, but the essential story should at least aim for accuracy, so the establishment says. Therefore, I confess. To the establishment. I didn't really fall into the grave. I was just using a metaphor to try to explain my mental state.

Therein lies the quiddity of *Lying*: a heterodox excavation of the psyche through metaphor. Or, put another way: fiction.

Soon you'll see excerpts from mock medical papers written by fictional physicians—written by Slater herself; most doctors don't write that well—and published in fictional journals. Then she fibs about being struck by cancer in order to get invited to a popular girl's party, and just as you begin to suspect that what ails Slater is not epilepsy but Munchausen syndrome—a condition in which an individual feigns sicknesses for attention—she anticipates your suspicion and complicates the picture:

Now we get to a little hoary truth in this tricky tale. The summer I was thirteen I developed Munchausen's, on top of my epilepsy, or—and you must consider this, I ask you please to consider this—perhaps Munchausen's is all I ever had. Perhaps I was, and still am, a pretender, a person who creates illnesses because she needs time, attention, touch, because she



Lauren Slater at her home near Harvard, Massachusetts.

knows no other way of telling her life's tale.

There's the admission, less than half-way into *Lying*—a “hoary truth,” two very loaded instances of *perhaps*, that crucial term *pretender*, and the final clause that vanquishes all doubt: “because she knows no other way of telling her life's tale.” Chapter seven consists of Slater's letter to her editor, a letter she might or might not have sent, nineteen bullet points about how to market this wily book wedged between genres. That letter and the stunning afterword, taken together, are the best encapsulation you'll ever find about the fiction-fact combat in literature.

As the book proceeds effortlessly to its denouement—as we learn of a toxic affair with a much older, married writer, and then of Slater's hilarious stint in AA pretending to be an alcoholic—the narrator-protagonist discloses more and more of the murky and metaphorical truth: “Is metaphor in memoir, in *life*, an alternate form of honesty or simply an evasion?” The answer, of course, is both—the evasion *becomes* the honesty.

A feigned epilepsy was Slater's notice-me retreat from the pressures of an overdetermined world, pressures infamous for cracking many a troubled teenager. Her life of “thrash and spasm,” those days of “the real and

the reflected,” was a life in hiding from an existence essentially “ahuman,” by which she means an existence hostile to human happiness and striving, an existence whose stipulations oscillate between the ineffable and the interminable, “a place where the real turned to waves, and washed away.” At one vital juncture in the narrative, she does not say “I remember” but rather “I think I remember,” and knowing what scientists now believe about the protean nature of memory, “I *think* I remember” is the only accurate way to preface our recollections.

Despite the title and the admissions of fraudulence Slater does grant us—epilepsy is “just a clenched metaphor, a way of telling you what I have to tell you: my tale”—she almost admits that everything in *Lying* is untrue. There need be few guessing games as to what really happened and what didn't, because she flirts with the possibility that none of it happened. The prose tells us so—it always does—when the prose begins its novelistic describing in the process of a supposedly factual recall. Of course it's glaringly improbable that an adult writer would remember verbatim conversations from her childhood, or the multicolored specificity of certain scenes, details down to size and time and smell. This is what critics of autobiography mean when they

claim, quite rightly, that there's never been a consummately honest memoir, that all memoirs are fictionalized to one degree or another. The memory's intrinsic fallibility makes an accurate book unattainable from the word go.

So we are not meant to trust Slater's telling when she remembers that someone's car “smelled like cigarette smoke and strawberry lip gloss,” or that an appointment with a doctor was “one Tuesday at 3:00 PM.” Or this detail, during the surgery to sever her corpus callosum: “I felt him sawing at my skull, Jesus, and then the suck of something lifted, like the lid from an airtight cookie jar.” Those are the novelist's details, not the memoirist's, since it's unlikely that a grown woman would recall such facts from her tenth year, to say nothing of the difficulty of believing that such an operation would be performed on a conscious girl who was quite obviously feigning her epilepsy. In college, when a male counselor informs her that she never had such an operation as a child, Slater becomes incensed and tells school authorities that the counselor attempted to fondle her.

But Slater will confess, too, that maybe “it's just certain narrative demands” that compel her to link events that might have no nexus, to forge details that never were. This artful, ludic weaver of yarns who, when speaking of



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her kleptomania, says that she "never once stole from a store," immediately afterward admits in a parenthetical, "All right, once." At one point she writes, "Understand, I am mentally ill," and anyone who reads *Lying* and her other memoirs will witness the medieval grip mental illness has had on her days. Still, for someone so battered by the brain's chemical storms, she is a source of remarkably sane and lucid wisdom, a craftswoman of finely calibrated and memorable sentences: "The sun went down in a pool of red, and all the flowers smelled like lotion," and "Churches are places for the two-tongued and the fainters," and "Dignity counts more than delight."

Students are simultaneously enthralled and enraged by this book. They don't like guessing games. They would prefer not to read puzzles. If Slater is lying about only some things but not others, how are they to know which? They feel bamboozled. And how, they would like to know, is Slater's memoir any different from the deceitful shenanigans of James Frey? But the title, I remind them, is *Lying*, the subtitle *A Metaphorical Memoir*. No bamboozlement is under way here, no false advertising, no intent to deceive. Slater everywhere confesses to her chicanery, confessions both veiled and bald. Still, students wish to read a true story. True stories are worth more than...than what? What is the opposite of *true* in their minds? *False*, of course. False stories are the opposite of true ones, and everyone knows that truth is preferable to falsehood. And that's when I have to tell them, my delicate charges: Slater's is the truest story you'll ever read.

We must acknowledge the conceptual and semantic difference between a fact and the truth: The opposite of the truth is necessarily a falsehood, but the opposite of a fact is *not* necessarily a lie. The scientist or detective asks, "What is true?" but the philosopher or writer must ask, "What is truth?" The distinction between the adjective and the noun is more than a mere linguistic discrepancy. In other words: Episte-

mology is at its center a semantic pursuit, which is precisely what Hobbes means in chapter four of *Leviathan* when he asserts that "True and False are attributes of speech, not of things."

**Y**OU'LL recall what Algernon quips in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "The truth is rarely pure, and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!" That's a sentiment Slater has annexed, expanded, made her own. In *Don Juan*, Byron begins stanza 37 of Canto XI with: "After all, what is a lie? 'Tis but / The truth in masquerade, and I defy / Historians, heroes, lawyers, priests to put / A fact without some leaven of a lie." Stanza 38 begins: "Praised be all liars and all lies!" You might say that Byron was being typically Byronic, exuberant and seditious, if not for the fact that the sanest man in letters, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote in his peerless *Journals* that "truth is beautiful, without doubt; but so are lies."

Shakespeare's sonnets are unambiguous about the beauty-truth dance: In Sonnet 14 he writes, "truth and beauty shall together thrive," and in Sonnet 54, "O, how much more doth beauty beauteous seem / By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!" Herbert beat Keats to the dance by nearly two hundred years: In his 1633 poem "Jordan (I)" he asks, "Is there in truth no beauty?" But it's the Keatsian belief in truth's beauty—indeed in the interchangeability of beauty and truth—from "Ode on a Grecian Urn," that has endured. Two years before he composed "Grecian Urn," Keats wrote a superb letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey in which he speaks of "the truth of Imagination. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not." Keats here sounds impressively like both artist and scientist when you consider mathematician Ian Stewart's 2007 claim that "in mathematics beauty must be true—because anything false is ugly."

Pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey believed that the truth always produces correct results—the truth *works*, in other words—whereas falsehood is typically broken, slanted, skewed. Kant, for one, asserted that lying is a personal and social wrong because a lie can't help but hurt someone; he thought it “the formal duty of an individual” always to tell the truth, and yet he knew that not all lies are poisonous. Everybody lies, every day, for reasons large and small. We're lying animals, and the behaviorists and evolutionary psychologists will tell you that our ability to lie, to deceive ourselves and others, is an outcrop of our intelligence and one of the adaptations that enabled us to survive in a world of tumult and tricks.

But what could Mark Twain have meant, in a 1907 speech, when he said, “I don't know anything that mars good literature so completely as too much truth”? He meant what Slater means when she writes, “Just because some-

thing has the feel of truth doesn't mean it fits the facts.” In George Santayana's 1935 work *The Last Puritan*—a mostly unreadable book that carries the maddening subtitle *A Memoir in the Form of a Novel* and in which Santayana tries and fails most miserably to channel Marcel Proust—one character says, “We must change the truth a little in order to remember it.” Or, to put it more precisely: *in order for it to be meaningful*. We alter and we adorn the truth because the truth seldom, all by itself, makes for a compelling story.

In a piece titled “Truth of Inter-course,” from his 1881 essay collection *Virginibus Puerisque*, Robert Louis Stevenson scribbled this: “A lie may be told by a truth, or a truth conveyed through a lie. Truth to facts is not always truth to sentiment,” and you can hear Slater quite clearly in that contention. Stevenson goes on to say that “to tell truth, rightly understood, is not to state the true facts, but to convey a true impression; truth in spirit, not truth to letter,

is the true veracity.” *Truth in spirit*: That remains Slater's nagging, steadfast concern—“my emotional memory, which is not the same as my factual memory.” And to those for whom Slater's smoke and mirrors will always be deception? Too bad. The truth of our lives is always smoke and mirrors.

Christ's admonition in the Gospel of John, “The truth will set you free,” is both dogma and doggerel, as meaningless as saying, “The free shall set the truth.” And yet that word on a book's cover, “novel” or “memoir,” is a contract with the reading public, a dignified taxonomy to which all readers are entitled, be they seekers of the sublime or chance consumers. And the only method, the only hope you have of getting away with a memoir that isn't really a memoir is to mobilize the originality and ingenuity of Lauren Slater, who had the fearlessness to write “a slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text, shaped, if it could be, like a question mark.” ∞

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