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Being honest about lying: Defining the limits of auto/biographical writing

Debates about whether any writing is "true" and the relationship between literature and life have been current since Plato and Aristotle battled this out in *The Republic* and *Poetics* but, even in these days of postmodernist relativity, such discussion becomes most inflamed when talking about the so-called "literature of fact", and especially regarding biography and autobiography, where writing the "true" story of a life is still the popular definition of these literary forms.

A series of recent books, Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius: Based on a True Story* (2000), Lauren Slater's *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* (2000) and Edmund Morris' *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999) have, I think, helped define the outer limits of lifewriting when it comes to the incorporation of fiction, by crossing these boundaries. Picasso quarrelled with Gertrude Stein because she "lied" in the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), infuriated because Stein reportedly rearranged the seating plan at a dinner in her text, but this is very different from writing a memoir about having epilepsy when you do not suffer from the disease and being a biographer claiming to have known someone when you did not.

Reading Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* consolidated many of my ideas. When he was twenty-two, both Eggers' parents died of cancer. *A Heartbreaking Work* purports to tell the story of the life he and his eight-year-old brother shared in San Francisco after they left Chicago where they had grown up. Despite almost slavering reviews in the serious literary media, many readers found the book "over-hyped" and uneven, one reader on Amazon.com reviews calling it "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Patchiness".

Written with a US $1.4 million advance, the cover of this, Egger's first book, announces this is a "memoir" and features the subtitle "based on a true story". Although in the preface Eggers initially describes his work as "pure nonfiction", on the next page he is hedging, describing it as "a memoir-y kind of thing", and then admitting that "many parts have been fictionalised" and all the dialogue has been "manufactured" in order to create a realistic quality in print (Eggers ix, xx). At no stage does he make clear which parts of his story are reportage of what actually happened and how much is invention.

While Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson believed Eggers' "dramatizing and flaunting autobiographical conventions may well be at the outer limits of the practice of memoir" and that he was aiming "to expose the audience's perceived demand for uncalculated sincerity as posturing, a false pose" (Smith and Watson: 2, 10) - at one stage Eggers tells readers to "pretend it's fiction" (Eggers xxi) - others, including myself, thought the author had not only turned the real tragedy of his family into a money-spinning soap opera (Conrad) but had violated the memoirist's guiding principles of authenticity and sincerity.

Lauren Slater provocatively titled her third memoir (ostensibly about being epileptic) *Lying*, adding the subtitle *A Metaphorical Memoir*. In *Lying* Slater relates how, at 10, she began to take epileptic fits, saw shapes when her mother played the piano, and smelled jasmine when she cut her hand. Her mother sent her to a school for epileptics and she seemed to recover until, when she was 13, she started having seizures every day. At this time she discovered that she could will herself to have these epileptic-like spasms, and began to do so regularly, often in hospital emergency departments. Concerned about the number of fits Slater was having, her doctor decided to operate to disconnect the right and left hemispheres of her brain. Following this operation (she was still 13) the frequency of her seizures was greatly reduced, but she continued to have "auras" which disconnected her from reality, and it was during these episodes that she began to write. Later, not liking college, she began instead to compulsively attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, where she told such convincing tales of her alcoholism that when she finally confessed that she was not an alcoholic at all, no one believed her.

In interviews Slater said that if her book was taken literally, "like it was just one more true account of just another disease", then she had failed in what she had set out to do (Slater in Quamme), and instead suggested that readers should read Lying as the metaphorical, rather than factual, truth, as what she had meant to convey in her memoir was the way she felt, and whether the incidents she described are factual or fabricated was not important (Slater in Dallas). "I exaggerate," Slater confesses, or boasts, in the book's opening line, immediately setting herself up as an unreliable narrator and expressing the book's central theme: its untruthfulness. This is followed by further proclamations of her lack of belief in the possibility that memoir can ever be a vehicle for clarity or truth about the past.

We all know memory is imperfect, that we recall events that never happened, things than no one else can confirm and details about the past that turn out to be utterly wrong, but Slater takes this faulty nature of memory and exploits it, believing "the illusions we hold (and the lies we tell in recollecting our pasts) are more important than accuracy" (Jenkins 28). Slater takes as her starting point that it is common for memoirs to contain some reconstructed scenes and for fictions to contain literal autobiographical truths, and elides these together to say that defining one from the other is sometimes impossible and therefore, does not matter.

While initially persuaded by Slater's tale (the book is, after all, marketed as a memoir - and there are no warnings for the reader except that "I exaggerate"), her consistent statements about her propensity to lie soon drew me away from any real engagement with the story or the author, until I believed that everything she wrote was wholly invented. So much so that by the time Slater begs us to believe that she really had Munchausen's syndrome (where the patient pretends illnesses, and really suffers symptoms as an attention-seeking device), I not only didn't believe her, but I didn't care either.

Amanda Nash, writing in the *Women's Review of Books*, was seduced by the uncertainty,

> the more I read, the more I began to enjoy the not-knowingness. There is a giddy freedom, a buoyancy, to letting go of what is real in order to get a glimpse of the subject's essence. We believe the story because it is believable, not because we know it to be true. (Nash 14)

I, however, found myself quickly moving from asking, "Does Slater really have epilepsy? And if she does, how badly? Or does she instead have Munchausen's, or the borderline personality, bipolar disorders, and autism she claims?" to "Why am I continuing to read this?" Slater asks,

> Supposing I simply feel like an epileptic, a spastic person, one with a shivering brain; supposing I have chosen epilepsy because it is the most accurate conduit to convey my psyche to you? Would this not still be a memoir, my memoir? (Slater in Peregrin)

This is almost persuasive (Slater is a dazzling writer) but there is a great difference between the philosophical and practical problems of defining or relaying absolute truth of experience in writing and telling outright untruths - a difference which, for me, comes down to the considerable difference between having, thinking you have, or wishing you had, a certain disease: life and death for instance. Slater slides her oppositions together - but there is a huge distinction between Nabokov's acknowledgment in his memoir *Speak, Memory* that memory is faulty, and Slater's that this means the past can be (and, therefore, might as well be) completely invented. She even describes this slippery slope,

> A lot, or at least some, or at least a few of the literal facts are accurate... I have epilepsy. Or I feel I have epilepsy. Or I wish I had epilepsy... (Slater 4-5)

Readers of lifewriting will usually suspend disbelief (even though what is written is often largely unverifiable), but such deferral of belief is impossible when someone is continually suggesting, bald-facedly, that they are (or might be) lying to you.

Slater proposes that "What matters in knowing and telling yourself is not the historical truth, which fades as our neurons decay and stutter, but the narrative truth, which is delightfully bendable and politically powerful" (Slater 219); but the contract I, as reader, had with the memoirist was so irretrievably shattered, that when, after finishing *Lying*, I then read Slater's two earlier memoirs (the first focusing on her history of schizophrenia, the second on her experiences with depression) I found I could not believe anything she wrote - an effect intensified by the fact that some of the events recounted in *Lying* contradict those in her previous memoirs.

When Slater writes,

> 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... (Slater in Sims)

I am convinced, but I feel conned. While reading her work I often felt that, as a highly-trained practicing psychologist, Slater was manipulating me - and very unpleasantly so. She even croons,

> I am toying with you, yes, but for a real reason. I am asking you to enter the confusion with me, to give up the ground with me, because sometimes that frightening floaty place is the truest of all... (Slater in Jenkins 28)

but, as a biographer, I cannot give up my belief that although fact and fiction are often difficult to distinguish, they are not indistinguishable. Once Slater's central assertion in *Lying* revealed itself to be that it does not matter what is true or not, I was lost to her project and, more than that, frightened for the integrity of lifewriting as a genre.

Why this anxiety? With titles of reviews like "Tall Tales: A writer boldly invents her past" (Dieckmann: 47), *Lying's* amoral fabrication allowed critics not only to comment on "the slipperiness of all memoir" (Quamme) and its "colourful exaggeration" (Peregrin) but to wonder if the whole genre was spent, burnt out, decadent. There was even a moment when Slater's book seemed to have spawned a new genre: the fake memoir. Works such as playwright and performance artist Mike Albo's *Hornito: My Lie Life* (2000) - constructed to confuse the reader about whether his work was memoir or fiction - and Daniel Handler's novel, *Watch Your Mouth* (2000), prompted critics to see the whole genre of memoir writing as "sliding into cynicism" (Riley, 84).

In September 1999, Stanley Fish, the literary scholar/critic, wrote an article in *The New York Times* dismissing biography as "minutiae without meaning" - part of the title of his op-ed piece. This was no tirade against some kinds of biography or biographers, but an argument

that while autobiographers always tell some truth even when they are lying, biographers "can only be inauthentic, can only get it wrong, can only lie, can only substitute their own story for the story of their announced subject" (Fish: A23). Days later, the press erupted with hysterical stories about *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999), Edmund Morris' authorised biography of Reagan.

At first I took no notice of this. I wasn't interested in Reagan and suspect most authorised biographies. But Morris' *Dutch* could not be ignored. Certainly one of the most discussed and controversial US books of recent times, definitely one of the most high profile biographies of the past decade, this work attracted critical and popular attention for years before it was published, and is still a site of heated debate. Although numerous aspects of the book were discussed (including that Morris was paid an advance of US$3 million and took more than 14 years to produce his text) the most controversial was not Morris' interpretation of Reagan's character and actions, but that Morris had invented not only a narrator (and his family and friends) and inserted them into the text as real people, but that he had similarly created a fictional archive alongside the real one, and represented this in the book's footnotes, giving his made-up references as much authority as really-existing sources. His fictional narrator was, moreover, named Edmund Morris, but as some 30 or so years older than the author Edmund Morris was not only a contemporary of Reagan's but a co-student at college with the President-to-be.

Much of the debate swung around definitions of biography and memoir. I believe a memoir, if not about one's own life, to usually be a personal account of someone else by a friend or colleague of the subject. In the constellation of lifewriting, memoir is accepted to be a more intimate, more impressionistic and usually less comprehensive portrait of its subject than a biography, a portrait which is often drawn with some knowledge of the essential subjectivity of memory. But because Morris' narrator (as memoirist) was not real, this work is, to my thinking, more a historical novel than any kind of lifewriting.

The problem for me is not Morris' overall technique - I am, myself, writing a fictionalised biography in the form of an invented first-person memoir - but that Morris does his work dishonestly. He does not reveal what is invented and what is documented fact, and indeed, a close analysis of his much flouted 155 pages of notes reveal these to be slippery and deceptive. Although they seem (by sheer mass) to suggest all of Morris' fictionalisations are based on thorough research, they indeed, leave the reader no clearer regarding what is invented and what is not, and at times, as in invented letters between his fictional characters, seem intended to deceive and confuse.

Analysing my own difficulty with accepting *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, Lying* and *Dutch* as works of non-fiction revealed to me that my personal definition of any form of lifewriting is as a form of history writing. Dialogue and other details may be reconstructed and even, in part, misremembered, as it is, without doubt, impossible to be totally true to reality as it happened, but lifewriters will at least attempt this. Ethical biographers and autobiographers work with veracity as their aim (this is the motivation for all that research, after all) and this striving for veracity is respected, and expected, by readers. When Slater openly admits she has invented much of her story, this is honest, but being honest about lying is not the same as being truthful. It makes the book a well-written and interesting work of fiction, autobiographical fiction perhaps, but ultimately fiction. Many works of fiction, after all, tell complex and important truths, and this would be the definition for many readers and writers of the very value of fiction.

It is the difference, for me, between a sincere desire to tell the truth and a wilful, and conscious, propensity to tell that which Eggers, Slater and Morris know is ***not*** true. It is the wilfulness that is important. A sincere intention does not, of course, mean that what someone writes is right (there are probably Holocaust deniers who are sincere) but for memoirists and other lifewriters it seems, at very least, one of the basic conditions of the genre, and the pact that lifewriters have with their audiences.

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