

Toward Redemption

By H.L. Hix

Book Reviews:

A Sinner of Memory, by Melita Schaum. Michigan State UP, 2004.

Trains in the Distance, by Paul Zimmer. Kent State UP, 2004.

I once had a colleague whose joviality and quick wit made him popular with his peers. It didn't hurt that he was young, smart, and good-looking. He came from a wealthy family; he held a secure job that paid well; he wanted to marry and have children. Yet in the years I knew him he never progressed in a "relationship" past one or two dates, because one debit exceeded the sum of all those credits: he was narcissistic. He talked always and only about himself.

The "personal essay," the most common form of the latest generic category, "creative nonfiction," is popular these days; but does that make it the sort of work one wants to get deeply involved with? The "personal" in "personal essay" marks its risk of narcissism, a risk it shares with other forms of autobiography. What keeps a personal essay from being narcissistic? Or to put the question in a different way, *who* besides myself should be interested enough in my life to read an essay focused on it, and *why* should that reader (those readers) be interested in the essay?

That narcissism is possible—that, in other words, telling one's own story can be vain and valueless—implies that telling one's own story does not have intrinsic value. However, there might be many qualities the possession of which, or ends the pursuit of which, would lend value to the telling of one's own story. When Augustine tells his own story in the *Confessions*, he thinks the telling valuable not in itself but because it has two specific qualities: It is an instance both of prayer and of praise. Its value comes not from its narrating his experience, but from being addressed to God and being about God. If Augustine's other significant premises are true,

such as his belief in a benevolent deity who causes the events of this world and cares about the well-being of individual humans, then those two qualities or forms of discourse, prayer and praise, do have value. *Confessions* matters not because it is autobiography but because it is prayer and praise. Similarly, when Freud has his patients tell him their own stories, the telling pursues an end: If, with the help of the doctor, the patient's story can be reassembled from its fragmentary and distorted to its intact and transparent version, the patient's neurosis will be cured. In this case, too, the telling does not have value because of its subject but because of its end: If others of Freud's premises are correct, then telling one's story in that context to that person makes possible a cure to illness.

In both cases, the telling of one's own story is justified by the redemptive character attributed to it, and I think the examples are representative. The worth of autobiographical writing (memoir, confessional poem, personal essay) will be determined by whether, and by the degree to which, it offers redemption. This amounts to saying that, though the *interest* a personal essay piques may be determined by the events of the life being told, its *worth* will depend on the truth or falsity of its underlying premises. Paul Zimmer, in *Trains in the Distance*, and Melita Schaum, in *A Sinner of Memory*, both want the telling of their own lives to be redemptive for themselves and for the reader, though their assumptions about how and why their work moves us toward redemption differ substantially.

Zimmer writes in what Northrop Frye called the "ironic mode," in which the protagonist is presented as a little slower and bumbler than the rest of us. He repeatedly depicts ways in which he didn't measure up, wasn't quite good enough, or wasn't as good as others. When he writes about an auto mechanic in his childhood neighborhood, Zimmer says the mechanic would "try to explain some of the work he was doing," letting the young boy Zimmer "help him by turning a screw or bolt" and assuring Zimmer he was being a big help. But when with "greasy fingers he would draw with a pencil stub pictures and diagrams on the back of old bill

forms to illustrate connections and working parts," Zimmer couldn't catch on. "I never understood how engines worked." Implicitly, the justification for the life story is that such self-deprecation establishes community, invites the reader to come to terms with her or his own personal failings and inadequacies, as the book suggests that Zimmer himself has. For the book to avoid narcissism, the premises that must hold are that misery loves company, and we're all miserable. It's not self-indulgent for Zimmer to ruminate on his particular inadequacies if we're fallen creatures, all of us by nature inadequate.

For such a persona (a fallen person, one who hasn't got it all figured out yet) it is fitting that the book should exhibit perplexity about itself. Zimmer seems unclear about the basis of his writing, asking himself, "Why have I reconstructed these old miseries? Is it the urge to confess? Do I seek revenge? On whom?" His explicitly formulated answer is not very satisfying. "I deserve something for enduring [the loneliness and disgrace, the constant feelings of inadequacy]—perhaps if it is only to banish bad dreams." Were that the only form of redemption the book offered, it would be worth little to Zimmer, and worth nothing to the reader.

That the speaker in the book shows no awareness of his own premises means that the reader must infer them, and that therefore the book will gain momentum as it goes along. In the beginning, the speaker falls often into fustian: The disappearance of steam engines on trains was personal (it "gave me a helpless feeling") and monumental ("things have never been quite the same"). He suffers nostalgia: "Perhaps I should admit that I long for another time." And he is predictable, the very stereotype of a person his age: "We did not have computer games or virtual reality in 1946, but we had imagination."

Then, in its second half, the book begins to manifest its uniqueness. The reader comes to realize that the book is about normalcy as an aesthetic ideal. Zimmer depicts poetry as a normal thing, an urge like any other that might serve a centering, quasi-salvific function in a normal life. "Words carried me through my

various crises. If I felt threatened, words made some sense of things. . . . [W]ords are my faithful tools and best hope." One sees by the end why the start had to be slow, and why the train is for Zimmer so evocative a metaphor: "It seems that I am on a journey toward evanescence, taking a thousand or ten thousand miles to unravel, the dispassionate narrative droning on invariably through its tepid beginning and middle" toward a "cheerless" but more interesting and insightful end. One learns through the story of Scobey, the grocer whose store is run out of business by the new Wal-Mart but who then works earnestly stocking bins at the very Wal-Mart that ruined his own business, that the book is about perseverance in the face of irrevocable loss, about the call to internal, spiritual dignity in a world unlikely to match that internal state with rich external rewards.

If in Zimmer the reader must infer the terms according to which the book seeks/offers redemption, in Schaum those terms are explicit from the beginning. In an "Author's Note," Schaum argues that the personal essay is "one of the more important [literary forms] for us today," because we live in "a culture that overwhelms with ready-made opinions and pre-packaged desires." She seeks through the personal essay "a return to authenticity" made possible because "through telling and reflecting we have a chance to revisit emotional truths, to reclaim the subtleties of experience." If Zimmer's book is about human abjection, and if in it the task of redemption is to elevate us, Schaum's book is about human perplexity, and the task of redemption in it is to clarify our lives for us. Schaum sees emotional truth as a condition of authenticity, but she believes that emotional truth is hidden in and by the facts: It must be *discovered*, and that discovery happens through telling and reflecting on one's story.

Those premises lead to a certain kind of insight. In her essay "Grace," one of the short sections tells about the first time she and her lover slept together. But the fact of intercourse is not the event of emotional truth. "As his hand traveled over my belly for the first time," Schaum says, "I could feel the resistance in him." His

disclaimers, “fears of inadequacy” and “the need for his body to learn to respond to mine,” were lies. He was resistant, she supposes, because “he hadn’t yet chosen” me, so his fingers’ “conversation with my skin” could only be “aimless.” She responds with resistance of her own, but still longs for “the truth” from him, a specific emotional truth. “The truth I wanted from him was choice.” The lovers fulfilled the fact of intercourse, but did not arrive that night at the truth Schaum desired. “The act was only a ceremony, beautifully superfluous, a celebration of event, but not the event itself.”

The books have commonalities. Both Zimmer and Schaum are interested in secrets. “I never told anyone,” Zimmer confides, “not my parents, my friends, my schoolmates.” The publishing of secrets, of his “arcane life,” becomes one (paradoxical) project of his book. Schaum is interested in the ways secrets come to light. “The earth,” she observes, “is bad at keeping secrets,” and it regularly tenders evidences of past lives, as when it shows the wife of Schaum’s neighbor Ray, who died of a stroke, “tiny mass graves of forbidden cigarette butts and little airline bottles of whiskey” that had been “buried behind the shed.” Both books report an early recognition of language as a protective resource, as when Schaum describes thinking in childhood that “language made a bubble in which you could survive. A weightless stillness, a clearing.”

The books’ approaches, though, like their premises, are different. Zimmer takes events or stories as discrete entities, turning them over in his hand and scrutinizing them one at a time. Schaum weaves events and stories together, expecting the juxtaposition and association to disclose the emotional truth she seeks. Zimmer sees loss as what happens to us. “I would give a great deal now to hear that mournful hooting [of train whistles] in the woods,” but, he says, the trains went away despite his willing. Schaum sees loss as what we do. “I will tell you a story about leaving things behind.”

The premises behind—and the approaches to—their narratives are neither unique to Zimmer and Schaum, nor confined to application in the personal essay. Zimmer’s approach, for instance,

the complaint about abjection, has been a widely practiced mode in the major monotheistic religions throughout their histories, beginning long before the category “personal essay” had been invented. Zimmer’s premises and approach may have been more popular, but I find Schaum’s the more fruitful way to resist narcissism, to make, in other words, the personal essay personal to the reader as well as to the writer. The earnestness, though, is equal, and Schaum speaks for both when she says, “we try our best to sanctify and accomplish.”