

TRANSPARENT THINGS

A Sinner of Memory. Melita Schaum. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004.

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An “Author’s Note” identifies *A Sinner of Memory* as a collection of essays in “Creative Nonfiction,” a genre that uses invention in the service of authenticity. Since all confessional narrative parses into fiction and non-fiction and all its narrators, in Shakespearean phrase, make sinners of memory, Melita Schaum’s unnamed essayist can be identified as her book’s Confessional Heroine (C.H.). At one point Schaum’s C. H., like (say) Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Doris Lessing’s *Anna Wulf*, brings us into the writer’s present:

I droop over my writing, palm these reluctant pages. For four months I have been trying to tell this tale. I have made it a comedy, a tragedy, an instructional piece, a jumble of aphorisms, a *palatum cordis*—like the medieval monks who needed to taste the word of God with the heart’s palate.

Elsewhere she makes occasional use of the present tense to execute her general design of containing multiple strata of the past—as memory or told story—within the narrative present. This procedure, of course, will recall Proust even (or especially) to those among us who have scarcely sampled *A la recherche du temps perdu*. A nearer comparison might be made with a slender fiction of Nabokov’s in which present objects are treated as “transparent things through which the past shines.”

In trying to *tell*, the narrator succeeds in a way that disposes of the Workshop canard about showing, *not* telling. The C. H. is less concerned that we see the figures haunting her memory than that we feel them as she does. Her parents, refugees from war-ravaged Germany, bloomed and faded in their adopted country, having made for themselves a “normal” life that elegantly illustrates that convergence of *heimlich* with *unheimlich* which Freud highlighted in his essay on “The Uncanny.” The father, a reserved, adaptive academic, seems at times conjured into existence by his daughter’s solicitude. The moral (not physical) dimensions of the mother are clearer. Early along, her retentiveness about *things* collides with the heroine’s carelessness. Later the impression of maternal severity is softened by the discovery that the “child of war and poverty” is haunted by her own mother, whose avatar,

the resident of a nursing home, she treats with filial tenderness. As offspring of stolid middle-class immigrants, the C. H. and her “beautiful” sister pass from rival responses to parental authority in childhood to a recognition, in middle age, that they have become prisoners of no regime but their own.

The heroine’s family make affecting but faint specters by comparison with the figure she calls “my lover.” He haunts all nine essays, appearing and vanishing, never fully present, a demystified *dæmon*. Submerged within the C. H.’s circumstantial account of this relationship—the discourse of nonfiction—are the two traditional plots of amorous narrative—Separation and Reunion, Seduction and Betrayal. Both express the ambivalence of love, but it is the latter that supplies the *dénouement* of the present romance. An ironically named “Epithalamion” concludes a long series of proleptic glances at the end of the affair. (Very early she tells us “I gave him my life and he let it fall.”)

The book’s calculated confusion about genre and mode could only have been resolved at the expense of authenticity. If its fragments of personal history had been assembled into a linear narrative the C. H. would have emerged as a female Quixote, or even a modern *picara*, itinerant, transgressive, but subject to the conditions of contemporary life. Since narrative is necessarily a plot-seeking form of discourse, the eponymous Sinner, on a hint from Wallace Stevens’ “World as Meditation,” tries to shape her experience into an epic *manqué*. It begins *in medias res* with a descent into the underworld, or catacombs, of Paris. (Balzac and Hugo anticipated Schaum in representing Paris as an inferno of the here and now.) As *Odyssey*, the heroine’s journey homeward is thwarted by the Zeno-logic that a destination always approached can never be reached. Through an attribute transferred from her mother, she figures also as Penelope, waiting, weaving and unweaving, her art analogous to Schaum’s text, a fabric so reticulated as to give us repeated glimpses of the void.

Readers enthralled by Schaum’s descriptions of place will object to the present review’s devaluation of the visual. After Paris, the epic itinerary includes Ann Arbor, artists’ colonies in southern California and upstate New York, the Italian alps, the Rockies, the High Sierras, the Scottish Highlands, the Coral Islands, a Princeton nursing home, her parents’ Arizona retirement community—that last a littered desert, not in bloom: “But there was violet light, as beautiful as anything dreamt of by Monet, and crows flying slowly, high and separate in the cold, dense air;” and by evening “the edge of the earth” is “just a line of orange, then beige, then blue. The palm trees are elegant black silhouettes against the disappearing sky.” On her way to Mesa she stops to watch a sunset (“the horizon’s wild apocalypse”) that competes

with a burning truck for the spectators' attention:

One minute the sky was eggshell green and the clouds the color of fresh blood; the next, the arroyos were suffused with purple and the air shot gold. We were all of us drop-jawed—cops, truckers, the young camera-toting woman, and me—watching these sublime conflagrations.

The most vivid moment occurs during the heroine's snorkling adventure in the Coral Sea—her second ambivalent immersion:

All at once, I am dazzled. A school of jacks, gift from the sea, has materialized all around me like a sprung slot machine, an avalanche of silver. For several long heartbeats I am caught up in their wild shine, their perfect dance, as they dart around me in unison, glimmer on all sides like spilled mercury. Unearthly phosphorescence; sudden, sheer harmony.

Then the school parts and I see the sharks. Three of them, eight feet long, thrashing as if to shake themselves free of their own skins, mantled in a backdrop of dark blue where the reef plummets into open ocean. I realize that they have been herding fish into the wall of rock and coral; now they are about to feed. One approaches me, swerves, then advances again—ten feet away, seven, six, then passes so close I could touch its emery-board skin, could cup the black, inhuman eye that rolls back at me like a savage new moon. My heart lifts in my chest, enters a strange, bottomless space, a swoon of fear. All laws fall away.

What the reader “sees” in such passages is not a series of objects in space but a demonstration, on the flat field of the text, of the transformative power of Style. In the confessional narrator herself, after all, we behold not the original but a reflection in the mirror of her consciousness, transposed into language. The authorial subject is always absent. Schaum calls her “reverie's exile,” haunting her own life. Any contrary claim would be Nonfiction's fiction. All memoirs, of course (but not *only* memoirs), are narcissistic structures. As signature of the artist-as-Narcissus, projected into the order of Nature, Schaum chooses an object that has been used to a comparable purpose in Mann's *Death in Venice*, Joyce's *Portrait*, and countless poems: “We stop to watch a white heron, the island's namesake, standing motionless in a small lagoon. A pale question mark, etched against the gloom of cypress trees and water, its slim beak a dagger, hungry to spear its own reflection from the deep.”

At the conclusion of the final essay Melita Schaum's Confessional Heroine, in a twilight sleep on her way to surgery, has a joyful vision of the end as imaginary beginning, the unachieved objective of her troubled and ecstatic (she *did* find a word for it)—pilgrimage.