The Invention of Solitude

This memoir is like a fine piece of orchestral music, enriched by its different movements and moods.

What makes this a particularly compelling work, though, is the way in which Henry creates from the grounds of personal experience a work of larger proportions, a philosophical work, a speculative work—seeking out what’s down-to-the-bone true of our human condition. Abstract ideas are linked to concrete experiences, mostly by indirection, making the reader work for meaning. One might recall Paul Auster’s The Invention of Solitude (1985)—the second part, “The Book of Memory”—the way in which Auster explores abstractions in a style that is often disconnected, highly analogical, discursive at times, yet brilliantly dramatic. I find a similar approach in Henry’s work when he breaks from the straight narrative path. Prose style alternates between straight and elliptical, heightening the meditative mood. Following a chapter called “Bungee,” where Henry narrates his inaugural Bungee jump at the Squaw Valley Writers’ Community, he writes in “Gravity”: “I think of the word, weight, floating, falling.” Henry imaginatively explores the meaning of gravity, the pull of the earth, the attraction of being here. Henry’s mentor and good friend Richard Yates suffered serious emotional breakdowns. What happens, what is felt, what is deliberated on, is told with unflinching candor, the text laid bare for anyone, everyone, including all those who people this book to pick it at the book to have it, to re-experience—which is always, of course, the risk, the sensitive point, with a memoir, at least with a completely frank and honest ones—as is this one. This memoir is not in the standard hot, best-seller vein, depicting the dire emergency-driven life we encounter in a work like Augusten Burroughs’s Dry (2003). Henry’s is not a life once wrecked, the author now recounting his attempts, and re-attempts, to get things back on track. But there’s emergency here, need, anguish, anxiety. There’s redemption too, in family, friends, and the devotion to his art. The author has found relief in life’s “safe suicides,” in the flash. The meaning of life, as Henry suggests in the memoir’s closing passage, is a matter of subjective weights and measures: “Life itself is our glory and ordeal, our measure of heart, and of passion. We do best when there is no finish line.” None, at least, in terms of a universal, objective standard—no final Aristotelian end, no telos inherent in the natural order. Metaphysically, epistemologically, Henry’s take on life is conditioned on postmodern uncertainty, on our inability to predict with accuracy—think quantum mechanics here, not Newton. If things turn out well for Henry himself professionally, personally, they might not have. They didn’t have to. They wouldn’t necessarily in the end. This matter of uncertainty, lodged in the age-old dyad of expectation/result, comes through quite forcefully in this memoir.

Beyond philosophical inquiry, what makes this work additionally compelling is Henry’s social ethic, transformative in its power to call the reader to a higher level of social conscience—an ethic of service. As personal needs, desires, and aspirations are pitted against the other, Henry shows that one finds oneself best in the service of others. Family members should pull for each other, reordering personal priorities. Professors should honor the professor, giving their best to students. Naturally, we fall—and we seek redemption. We have our small crimes, all of us; we have an industry of therapists to help us restore perspective, to see small as small and life as large.” Then, Henry pushes the envelope: “But the large crimes? The atrocities?” Reflecting on the issue of war and death at the hundredth birthday conference on Ernest Hemingway, Henry states, “I like the idea that art protects in order to expose us.” Henry reminds us that art, in Kenneth Burke’s terms, is Perseus’s shield, giving us the truth in palatable form—but what, then, about art for art’s sake? Is literature the cathedral, and do the people who work there, worship there? And as to himself, “What am I to you?” Is this memoir itself self-absorbed? In questioning his own other-directedness, Henry gains even more force for his frankness, his freshness. This memoir is not in the standard hot, best-seller vein, depicting the dire emergency-driven life we encounter in a work like Augusten Burroughs’s Dry (2003). Henry’s is not a life once wrecked, the author now recounting his attempts, and re-attempts, to get things back on track. But there’s emergency here, need, anguish, anxiety. There’s redemption too, in family, friends, and the devotion to his art. The author has found relief in life’s “safe suicides,” in which one can enjoy the risks of human experience—or is is simply being human—while suffering no fatal loss. Not yet anyway. But as Henry says in that notable chapter “Bungee”: “We are saved, as promised, this time. Or maybe not. Falling.”

Jack Smith is the author of Hog to Hog, which won the George Garrett Fiction Prize and was published in 2009 by The Texas Review Press.