

Review: Factory Fictions

Reviewed Work(s): Call the Darkness Light by Nancy Zaroulis

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“It is the narrating Paley voice that is the open destiny. That voice is an unblinking stare, it is modern art, it fills the canvas.”

These sentences are born of a concentration in the writer that runs so deep, is turned so far inward, it achieves the lucidity of the poet. The material is transformed in the sound of the sentence: the sound of the sentence *becomes* the material; the material is at one with the voice that is speaking. What Paley knows—that women and men remain longing, passive creatures most of their lives, always acted upon, rarely acting—is now inextricable from the way her sentences “talk” to us. She is famous for coming down against the fiction of plot and character because “everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life,” but her women and her men, so far from having an open destiny, seem hopelessly mired in their unknowing middle-aged selves. It is the narrating Paley voice that is the open destiny. That voice is an unblinking stare, it is modern art, it fills the canvas. Its sentences are the equivalent of color in a Rothko painting. In Rothko, color is the painting, in Paley, voice is the story.

Like that of her friend Donald Barthelme, Grace Paley’s voice has become an influential sound in contemporary American literature because it reminds us that although the story can no longer be told as it once was, it still needs to go on being told. The idiosyncratic intelligence hanging out in space is now the story: and indeed it is story enough. I felt safe in its presence in a Berkeley bookstore thirty years ago, it makes me feel safe today. As long as this voice is coming off the page I need not fear the loss of the narrative impulse. I need not, as Frank O’Hara says, regret life.

# Factory fictions

by Jeanne Schinto

Call the Darkness Light, by Nancy Zaroulis. New York: Soho Press, 1993, 560 pp., \$15.00 paper.

**H**ISTORICAL NOVELS have extraliterary purposes. Many purists (myself included) disdain them for that reason. We cringe at their authors’ insistence that accurate depiction of the historical period is more important than good characterization, subtlety of symbolism, or a plot mechanism that doesn’t creak and groan as it cranks away toward its historically appropriate climax. Yet, for the same reasons that even the best of these tales aren’t art, they are ideal vehicles for what might be called personified history.

Nancy Zaroulis’ *Call the Darkness Light* is a prime example of the genre, as true to form as a Shakespearean sonnet. The story of a textile mill girl in mid-nineteenth-century Lowell, Massachusetts, the book was published in 1979 and allowed to go out of print; it was recently reissued by Soho Press as part of its Hera Series, which specializes in reprinting historical fiction “classics.” Zaroulis’ portrayal of the life of Sabra Palfrey is worthy of that distinction. Overcrowded with people and props, its language uncannily Victorian, the book is nonetheless an effective dramatization of the decisive role that thousands of New England farmers’ daughters played in assuring the “success” of the Industrial Revolution—an experiment whose long-range consequences are still being suffered by many a dying factory town (Lowell is one) across the Northeast. Indeed, anyone interested in this critical period in the history of work, especially women’s work, should overlook the book’s melodrama and artlessness and reap the extraliterary rewards.

The book begins as the teenage Sabra arrives in Lowell to begin her mill-girl career; it follows her through her common-law marriage—to a young idealist, a believer in American dreams who dies while mining gold in California—and the births and teenage years of her two children. At least, that’s the main story line of this ambitious and wide-girthed book. Divided into five parts, just like a serialized Victorian novel, its plot and subplots cover broad categories of historical experience, including the beginnings of mass European immigration and radical organized labor as well as the emancipation of the slaves (it makes the connection between Southern cotton plantations and Northern cotton factories grimly obvious).

Zaroulis also nimbly touches on quirkier sociological phenomena. The rest cure, for example, is administered to a well-to-do friend of Sabra’s who tries to bring labor organizers to Lowell. She even manages to comment on nineteenth-century publishing trends. “A month or so ago, Eliza had given [Sabra] a romance to read,” the eminently omniscient narrator tells us at one point. “The heroine had repeatedly escaped from her predicaments by fainting at the crucial moment.”

Luckily for us, Zaroulis has given Sabra lots more pluck than that. Finding herself homeless after she leaves the mills, she disguises herself as an Irish immigrant, reasoning that if she is perceived to be merely an American who has taken a wrong turn, she will get less support. More crucially, at the novel’s climax, she “rescues” one of her daughters from the mills of the even more oppressive textile town of Lawrence, ten miles north of Lowell (the other daughter—thanks, also, to Sabra—has completely escaped mill life).

**Z**AROULIS IS NOT the only writer to create a fictional mill girl, though to compare her book with those of two authors who did not choose the historical-novel genre is to see how precisely Zaroulis’ form fits the content; it also makes it easier to appreciate the true historical value of what Zaroulis has wrought.

Judith Rossner, in writing *Emmeline* (Simon & Schuster, 1980), faced the same dilemma that Zaroulis did. It’s the problem anyone who writes about factory workers as factory workers—of any kind—must resolve: how to get them away from their noisy machinery and into some more interesting complications without violating the central fact of their lives: their occupation. Rossner, for her part, resorts to fourteen-year-old Emmeline Mosher’s seduction by a mill overseer, pregnancy and departure from Lowell in shame. This solution is not only much more typical of a romance novel, it is also historically misleading. It shortchanges the mind-numbingly monotonous work that the mill girls did and misrepresents the moral climate under which they did it.

Zaroulis, on the other hand, finds historically faithful ways to spring Sabra from her mill-girl routine, at least temporarily. For example, though Sabra, like Emmeline, has a love child with whom she leaves Lowell for a while, she conceives it not in a moment of passion but after a “ceremony” that she and her idealist lover devise. It also seems clear that Zaroulis has included this plot complication not just because she needs a love angle but so that she can portray mother and child going to live with the Shakers, in one of the new utopian communities created in reaction to the social upheavals of life in “a world of men’s inventions,” a world “where women worked for wages.”

More to the point, Zaroulis, unlike Rossner, never forgets that mill girls were typically chaste, the worst said about most of them being that they’d been caught reading their Bible instead of tending their loom. Here is Zaroulis’ sardonic description of a group of Lowell’s hardworking virgins—at rest for the moment, since they are being trotted out for President Andrew Jackson, who has come to see “the eighth wonder of the civilized world”:

The proprietors of the mills paraded their female operatives for Old Hickory and he marveled to see them, a mile and more of lovely women, all in white, each carrying a green parasol, preceded by a banner bearing the motto: “Protection to American Industry.” He enjoyed himself immensely, so it was said. Never had he imagined such a spectacle. They walk! They talk! And they spin and weave twelve hours a day for the greater profit of the Corporations! And glory to God, hardly a one has lost her virtue!

(p.124)

As students of the industrial age well know, the mill owners monitored their girls’ moral lives so assiduously because these nineteenth-century men of God felt responsible for them: they were, after all, young unmarried women on their own in Lowell. The precaution also made good business sense, however: single females of the era did not ordinarily live apart from their parents, who needed to be assured that their daughters would be safe before letting them go. Never mind that factory girls earned more than the schoolteachers of their day; if the girls were regularly “sullied,” few parents would have been willing to put their Sabras or Emmelines aboard the wagons that cruised the New England countryside looking for recruits.

And so the mill owners built the famous boardinghouses alongside the mills for “their” girls. (And yes, indeed, they were all girls—easier to control than boys, the mill owners reasoned.) Here they lived with a watchful housemother who cooked their meals and waited for the clock to strike their curfew. Actually, it’s a life better portrayed by Rossner than by Zaroulis. That is, it’s explored more thoroughly in *Emmeline*, but

only because Zaroulis is so busy moving Sabra in and out of life with the Shakers, with the immigrants, with a mill manager’s family, the better to cover all aspects of the historical territory she has claimed as her own.

**K**ATHERINE PATERSON’S *Lyddie* (Lode-star Books, 1991) is another novel about a mill girl that tells its story at the expense of history, since Paterson often chooses literary values over historical ones. She makes Lyddie, a sixteen-year-old, far more of a heroine than a real-life Lyddie could ever have been. At one point, Lyddie unsticks a wagon wheel while the “hapless gentlemen” riding in the wagon with her can only look on. She also learns to read and write beautifully in what has to be record time. Lyddie doesn’t stay in mill work, either. She is dismissed for “moral turpitude,” supposedly after she catches a supervisor sexually harassing another girl. The dismissal is a stroke of good fortune, however; when she returns to Vermont to discover that “nothing had changed except herself,” she makes plans to attend college.

It’s the upbeat ending you would expect of a young-adult novel, especially one that’s being assigned to students, as *Lyddie* is. And it’s a fine fate for fictional Lyddie. But what about more ordinary mill girls who weren’t clever enough to escape into the world of middle-class learning? A better book would suggest more strongly that Lyddie had left them behind.

As for Zaroulis’ Sabra, she, too, eventually leaves; she had never expected to stay forever. The mill owners’ moral plan called not only for close supervision of their young female charges but for a succession of such workers, because they didn’t want to establish a permanent labor class here, as there was in England. The girls were to work for four years or so, then go back home, to marriage, to children.

The men who founded Lowell were, after all, interested in new ways of making cloth, not new ways of configuring society. And yet the work did become permanent. The immigrants who followed the girls into the mills had no farms to go home to. American girls also chose to stay: they and their families had become addicted to the factory wages that were surer than the income got from farming.

Zaroulis’ Sabra nearly doesn’t escape Lowell:

She remembered, with a sharp twist of her heart, that once she had promised herself that she would stay in Lowell for only two years. Now she had lived here almost half her life. [Her daughter] Clara must have a better chance. She will not go into the factory, thought Sabra. She had a brief vision of the noise, the choking dust, the endless strain of matching one’s movements to the machines. No: never.

(p.469)

But, of course, Clara does go into the factory. What is more, she nearly dies in a mill collapse and only recovers her senses after her mother puts them both on a train headed back into the green country. It’s “pastoral” in the extreme, but only a dolt would fail to be moved, or fail to catch the potent irony: that the train that “hurtled on into the bright day” is yet another machine. The means of escape is the thing they are escaping, the darkness is the light, and it continues to shine on the world today.

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