



And Wherever I Go: Here's A Jolly Bold Weaver Again

Roy F. Brown Jr.

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I have written a book. It's probably not a novel; it never felt like a novel while I was writing it. On the other hand, I couldn't swear under oath that every word is true. Perhaps an embellished memoir is what it is; a narrative based on selected memories of actual people and events, tarted up slightly and with the inevitable gaps filled in esemplastically. (Sorry, I've been reading Coleridge.) The title comes from a song, a broadside ballad called "The Weaver and the Factory Maid", that dates from around 1815, the Waterloo Luddite Industrial Revolution times. I've had this song in the back of my head somewhere for the last 40 years. What's extraordinary about it is that it's ostensibly about the displacement of the cottage industry hand weaver by the factory steam looms and the attendant turmoil. But it's got people in it: a weaver who loves a factory maid, the maid herself, and the weaver's father who disapproves. Instead of a cold set of abstractions, it has living breathing people with blood in their veins and mud between their toes. And that's the sort of book I wanted to write. Most fiction ignores those people who work with their hands. Which is just as well, because when working people are allowed in books (Wipe your feet!), they are portrayed as suffering ciphers, soulless, faceless victims of history, capitalism, blah blah, wretchedly waiting for, who? Marxists or intellectuals or somebody to come along and liberate them and give them faces. A young man falls, or is pushed into the fiery furnace of productivity i.e. he gets a job. And subsequently discovers the ambiguous pleasures of hard work. (Those aren't beads of sweat, those are tears of joy!) All he ever wanted to be was an able-bodied welfare recipient, stickin' it to the taxpayers. Our protagonist, who happens to have the same name as the author, is a bookish, physically lazy young man, shy and self-contained almost to the point of autism. His gradual emergence is greatly facilitated by the sheer ease and relaxation he encounters in the factory. The joking, horseplay and all around camaraderie of people with little to lose or gain and almost no desire to impress anybody. So the first thing to say is that he has found the right people to work with, or with whom to work. Unfortunately there was also work to be done. The boy-man's negotiation of the mind- and soul- crushing monotony of the work is complicated by his attitude which, when he remembers to have one, is bad. He used to be a sort-of hippie and a radical and had that whole rich sub-spiritual tradition of counter-cultural nincompoopery behind him. But not even all that nonsense could have prepared him for the living death that was the Assembly Line. The Assembly Line is what happens to history, custom and tradition when they die and go to hell. It's Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same, or maybe Rilke's lamentation that our part in the meaning of existence must always be danced to the rhythm of sorrow. I had a vague notion when I started writing this book that I might be able to discover something profound to say about work; its nature, its essence. But all I found was that there isn't anything to say about work except A) it's gotta be done, B) someone's gotta do it, and C) we can run, but we can't hide. I can't claim to have planned it all, but it looks to me at this end as if the various human idols and distractions - work, politics, therapy, sex, drugs, money, power, fame, are paraded only to be knocked down until all that's left standing at the end are human beings and the love and camaraderie between them. Even when they are long gone and all you can do is remember them and wave to them on the other side of life. As I say somewhere, "A sure sign of the ultimate purification of the soul is when you can no longer remember the places where you worked, and you can no longer forget the people you worked with."

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