

Dangerous Work: Risky Jobs in Labor Literature

Janet Zandy. *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

reviewed by Russell Harrison

This is a complex book involving a number of issues concerning the relationship between work and literary texts. As Zandy writes in her introduction: “Through a sequence of essays and intersecting collages, I construct a form that seeks a dialogue between the tactile world of work and the textured world of the academy.”¹ “[A]cademic practices,” she notes “tend to elide the laboring body. But by examining the great symbolic weight of the human hand, by recognizing labor’s stamp on the body, we can begin to claim the complex epistemology embedded in the body” (2). The book is original and thought-provoking. At least in the immediate aftermath of reading it, one approaches literary texts with a different mind-set, especially with respect (and I use the word advisedly) to those textual aspects that represent bodily labor.

Zandy mixes analysis of literary texts with, for example, memories of her working-class father and his job as a worker at Trubeck Labs, a chemical plant in East Rutherford New Jersey in the 1940s/1950s. as a kind of preface to her analysis of the women Dialpainters; Audre Lord’s memoir of work as an x-ray technician (which may have caused her death); and Muriel Rukeyser’s poem on the Hawk’s Nest industrial “accident.” Another chapter movingly discusses “Fire Poetry on the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911.” There is also a chapter on the painter Ralph Fasanella and an analysis of the difficulties conventional criticism had in treating his work seriously for much of his career.

But the book is more than a series of studies on various artworks; it argues for a place in academe for working-class studies, *per se*. Zandy writes that:

“Working class studies is resistance against human fragmentation and the acceptance of inequality as normative. It positions itself against the control of wealth by the few in relation to the continuum of labor of the many. Its pedagogical strategy is to address the exclusion of worker epistemology from academic institutions, to recognize the colonization of our (Western) minds by consumption and capitalism, to provide a historically conscious standpoint from which to build alliances with others, and to see the struggle for justice as a deliberate, creative, and necessarily collective action.” (145)

While much of this is not new, it bears restatement. But, its call to include working-class writing and working-class experience in academe is especially important. This Zandy surely does in her own teaching, to judge by the references she makes to her work in the classroom. And *Hands* should certainly prove useful from that perspective. I don’t want to detract from the usefulness and achievement of this book, which are great. But reading it, I found myself questioning some of its underlying tenets. Perhaps this becomes clear in discussing one of her case studies.

In 1988 Penobscot Poultry, a broiler-processing plant in Belfast Maine closed with about four hundred workers losing their jobs. An “ensemble text,” involving oral histories and photographs of “workplace, homeplace, and community” was created (114). One of the laid-off workers became the focus of the text (which also traveled around the state in exhibit form). This was Linda Lord, a twenty-year employee. The text was entitled “*I was content and not content*”: *The story of Linda Lord and the closing of Penobscot Poultry*. The

book's photographs "suggest . . . the stench, blood, pace, heat, and noise of the labor of slaughtering and processing poultry" (115).

Zandy wants to make the point that (quoting Raymond Williams) "the most uneventful life would take a library of books to transcribe" (116).² No one would argue with this. Zandy writes that:

"This text successfully creates a space that simultaneously acknowledges the corporate body in global search for the cheapest hands and insists that ordinary workers are more than slaughtered chickens or rendered byproducts. This is accomplished because of the complexity, stamina, and resilience of Linda Lord. First of all, there are multiple Lords: caretaker to aged parents, skilled worker who "sticks" half-killed birds (slices the neck vein), helpful neighbor, the only female lifting 100-pound bobbins at Belfast Rope, volunteer firefighter, drummer in a band, motorcyclist, gardener, union steward and negotiator, certified EMT (Emergency Medical Technician), restaurant helper, fisher and hunter, lover of nature and dogs, single, self-supporting divorcee, and one-eyed worker." (116-117)

While one admires Lord's multi-faceted life, the point Zandy makes, seems a truism: workers are more than their jobs. It also seems to me irrelevant. That workers have lives outside of work cannot be denied. Acknowledging their humanity should be a no-brainer. But all of the above achievements have nothing to do with her job. I certainly stand in awe of someone who can do all the things Lord does and work the jobs she holds. But her multi-faceted personality and life change nothing in the exploitative system to which she is harnessed. Sometimes Zandy comes perilously close to the idea that we should accept this dichotomizing of our lives into work/non-work. It was this that Marx so eloquently argued against in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German Ideology*. I am sure she would deny it, but it sometimes seems to me as if Zandy is accepting alienated labor, only with the proviso that bosses acknowledge workers as human beings.

I think I understand where this feeling comes from. It seems to derive from the completely understandable desire to deny the horrors and dead-end quality of (I would argue) most jobs. It is psychologically too stressful to live with and have to acknowledge, day in and day out, that what one does for eight-plus hours a day is too awful for words. The phrase "wage slavery" didn't come into the language for nothing. Such denial inevitably takes a toll on one's inner life.³ No matter how much one accomplishes outside of work, the hard-core horror of work remains.

Acknowledging/admiring a person such as Linda Lord effects not an iota of change in the hard-core horror. To the extent that it enables the worker to tolerate her job, it might even be seen as counter-productive in effecting change. Commenting on an essay by Carolyn Chute at the end of the exhibit, Zandy writes: "The essay is a call for a democracy of work and a democracy of recognition of the value of all work" (119). This seems to come perilously close to a restatement of the Protestant Ethic, the notion that work is in and of itself good. But this is patently false. Clearly some (much?) work is bad. Granted, some bad work has to be done; but certainly the amount of such work should be diminished to the greatest extent possible. Zandy has a moving passage on prisons and their connection to capitalism. Would she want to "recognize the value" of the prison work of both guards and inmates? The problematic aspects of the book lie in this privileging of work (by which in our society I mean alienated labor). Towards the end of this section of the book, Zandy writes, for example:

Linda Lord's work ethic certainly belies sociologist Stanley Aronowitz's announcement that "the great impulse of the working class . . . is to do as little work as they can." Arriving at the poultry plant at 4:00 a.m. to set up a production line that started at 7:00 a.m., checking the machinery, hooking up pipes, coming in on weekends to do maintenance and painting, Lord seems incapable of shirking; besides, she needed the overtime pay. Whether in the blood tunnel or as the only woman lifting 100-pound extruder bobbins loaded with polypro, Linda says, "I'm one that won't half do anything" (118).

The implied criticism of Aronowitz's statement, quoted above, suggests another problematic aspect of Zandy's position. On the empirical level, the citing of Lord's work ethic is merely anecdotal and Aronowitz would not dispute the fact that some workers refuse to slack off. What his statement refers to is (in Harry Braverman's formulation) the result of the essential antagonism of the worker from her job⁴. In most waged

labor, the worker, with little to no investment in the product of her labor, sees no reason to work any harder than she has to; her wage remains the same whatever her level of effort.. Indeed, it makes perfect sense (to anyone not beholden to the work ethic) that they will do as little work as possible, short of getting fired.

This “refusal of work,” as it was termed in the 1960s and 1970s is one response to the capitalist work ethic, an ethic that, as noted above, Zandy seems to endorse. While one may question the effectiveness of such a response, it does seem a legitimate response to the boss-worker relationship under capitalism. This impulse to refuse work is not just something that came out of the 1960s as part of the counterculture.⁵ Nor is it restricted to American literature. One of its most charming expressions is the Swiss (!) novelist Robert Walser’s 1908 novel, *Der Gehülfe* (*The Assistant*). Around the same time we have Jack London’s powerful hobo memoir, *The Road* (1907). Early in the book London tells of winding up in Reno, Nevada and going from house to house, begging for food:

There was one house in particular where I was turned down that evening. The porch windows opened on the dining room, and through them I saw a man eating pie—a big meat-pie. I stood in the open door, and while he talked with me, he went on eating. He was prosperous, and out of his prosperity had been bred resentment against his less fortunate brothers.

He cut short my request for something to eat, snapping out, “I don’t believe you want to work.

Now this was irrelevant. I hadn’t said anything about work. The topic of conversation I had introduced was ‘food. In fact, I didn’t want to work. I wanted to take the westbound overland that night.”⁶

The Road was published in 1907. Some sixty-eight years later the classic statement of the refusal-of-work theme, Charles Bukowski’s *Factotum* (1975) appeared. It is a veritable compendium of horrible jobs and various malingerer responses. One might almost open the book at random and find various expressions of the “refusal-of-work ethic.” One of my favorites has always been Chapter 55 where not only is work refused but unemployment privileged:⁷

The Florida State Department was a pleasant. It wasn’t as crowded as the Los Angeles office which was always full. It was my turn for a little good luck, not much but a little. It was true that I didn’t have much ambition, but there ought to be a place for people without ambition, I mean a better place than the one usually reserved. How in the hell could a man enjoy being awakened at 6:30 a.m. by an alarm clock, leap out of bed, dress, force-feed, shit, piss, brush teeth and hair, and fight traffic to get to a place where essentially you made lots of money for somebody else and were asked to be grateful for the opportunity to do so?⁸

Now Linda Lord, of Penobscot Poultry, is undoubtedly aware of all that Henry Chinaski, the fictional protagonist of Bukowski’s novel, states above. She has chosen to accept it and, in spite of the horrendous exploitation, “give it her best.” For the individual this may well be, psychologically, the healthier response. Chinaski, after all, sinks deeper and deeper into the morass of low-waged and even casual labor. But politically the alienated slacker is more of a threat to the labor market and thus (hopefully) to the system than the reconciled one.

Bukowski rarely appears in the more prominent anthologies of American literature and when he does make an appearance, it is not in his refusenik guise. But there is one more, extraordinarily undervalued American poet who doesn’t even make it that far. He uses the pseudonym Antler. His most impressive poem is the sixty-two page poem, *Factory*⁹ It is a critique of consumption (and in this fits Zandy’s rubric for working-class studies) as well as of production. It is an unforgiving critique of capitalist relations of production. It is not a poem that lends itself to quotation in a review. But to give the reader a taste of Antler’s writings I quote the titles of several poems from an anthology of his poetry (which also includes *Factory*). The section is entitled, “Reworking Work”: “Factories Are Boxcars Full of Jews,” “Zero-Hour day Zero-Day Workweek” and “Truncheons of Work-Ethic Bludgeoning.”¹⁰

Clearly I see the tenets underlying some of Zandy’s more generalized statements as problematic. But it is necessary to say that, on balance, this is a very valuable book and with respect to its achievements deserves to

be influential both with respect to teaching and writing about literature. Zandy's analyses of work poetry especially deserve a broad reception.

One final note. Almost all the writers Zandy discusses are women; my four examples of refusenik writers are men. Granted such an approach is anecdotal, not even social science. Nevertheless the gender breakdown does not, to me, seem random. Work itself was, earlier, something of an achievement in itself for women-- good work even more so. One thinks of *Rosie the Riveter*. When men returned from the war, they soon reclaimed their old positions and the women lost decent employment. To the extent that men were compelled to work to support families, to that extent they were more likely to consider refusal. For them it was an obligation, not an achievement. It will be interesting to see whether, as work becomes a necessity for more and more women, women will start (writing about) refusing work.

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Notes

¹ Janet Zandy, *Hands Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2004) 2.

² I don't want to nit-pick here but I think what Williams meant and certainly what Zandy means is that such lives are *worthy* of being transcribed.

³ I reference here my experiences living in Eastern Europe, specifically a stint in Minsk, Belarus from 1996-1998. Salespeople were sometimes a dour lot. My colleagues and students often felt called upon to apologize for such workers' lack of enthusiasm. I replied that I was fortunate to have a decent job but that if I had a job such as most people, in Minsk and in the U.S. have, I would be just as unenthusiastic (probably more so) as the Minskovite sales staff. Needless to say, I met with incomprehension.

⁴ See Harry Braverman, "Labor and Labor Power," in H.B., *Labor and monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

⁵ It's most famous academic expression is E.P. Thompson's 1967 essay, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." *Past & Present* 38 (1967): 56-97.

⁶ Jakc London, *The Road*. The Peregrine Press. [N.D., N.P.]

⁷ *Factotum* is a challenge to teach. Though the jobs the novel describes are the jobs the students are in college to avoid, they may well be working such jobs while they are in school and in that sense Bukowski's novel cuts a little too close for comfort. They are, of course, implicitly antagonistic to the protagonist's lack of ambition and indeed often made quite uncomfortable by it.

⁸ Charles Bukowski, *Factotum*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1977.

⁹ Antler, *Factory*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1980.

¹⁰ Antler, *Last Words*. New York: Available Press, 1986.

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