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The Ten Millionth Person to Think It

The Museum of Modern Art’s photography collection includes an image that the New York-based Lee Friedlander took near Pittsburgh in the winter of 1980.[1] The photo gestures toward a classic landscape, with the viewer positioned at an overlook and gazing out onto a distant ridge of dark trees. But something’s gone wrong with the composition. Between the overlook and the ridge lies a swath of mud, ending in three piles of soil and rock on the precipice. A truck has spun its wheels, leaving a gash in the foreground, half-filled with rain. Below, smoke rises from mills; the Golden Triangle is nowhere in sight. This isn’t the sort of picture that the *Places Rated*
Almanac team consulted when they dubbed Pittsburgh “America’s Most Livable City” five years later.

Three fictional Pittsburgh tales echo Friedlander’s photo, as they peer at the mills from a distance, sunk up to their ankles in mud. The University of Pittsburgh Press’s recent reprint of Marcia Davenport’s 1942 The Valley of Decision, Philipp Meyer’s 2009 novel American Rust, and Scott Cooper’s 2013 film Out of the Furnace set their narratives of family and work in area mill towns. All treat Pittsburgh as a place where production leads the way; all dwell on what happens when the city’s industrial jobs disappear. Considering them in unison creates an unflattering composite portrait of frustrated perseverance.

Davenport presents a multigenerational story arc of a family mill on the northern bank of the Allegheny River. The book opens in the 1870s, with Mary Rafferty becoming a maid in the Scott residence. William Scott Sr. is the stolid patriarch, diligent son Paul is destined to inherit the operation, and William Jr. is the family’s black sheep. Davenport’s descriptions of the city, with its gray rivers, its “tangle” of tracks and alleys, and its endless gullies complement a narrative of family growth, labor strife, and ethnic diversification. Late in The Valley of Decision, when Scott Sr.’s granddaughter Claire controls the fate of the mill, Davenport adds a subplot on the Nazi terror in Czechoslovakia. In the end, Claire announces that “organized labor is the single strongest force opposed to Fascism in the world” and that Pittsburgh is “the last hope of civilization” (pp. 697, 782).

American Rust conveys a more insular story, set in the recent past in the Monongahela Valley south of Pittsburgh. Two young men, nineteen-year-old Isaac English and the slightly older Billy Poe, reel in the wake of an accidental death at their hands. Billy spends time in jail, fighting off rival gangs. Isaac goes on the lam, riding the rails and stumbling along interstates on his way to California; he turns around near Toledo. Meyer’s book is largely about lost promise. Billy misses his chance to play college football when he refuses to leave his mother, Grace, who misses her own chance to work in Philadelphia when she refuses to uproot Billy. Isaac misses his mother, now dead five years from suicide in the icy river. A small-town police chief’s internal monologues about the past twenty years in this postindustrial valley provide readers with the big, grim picture. Each of these characters gets POV chapters, providing different perspectives on the effects of economic collapse and powerlessness.

The people in Out of the Furnace live in the same world as Meyer’s characters, in a flat spin of incarceration, precarity, and desperation. Cooper’s film covers five years in the lives of two brothers from Braddock, a Monongahela Valley mill town closer to Pittsburgh than Meyer’s fictional “Buell.” Russell Baze works in a mill that’s still hanging on despite the threat of Chinese steel. Younger brother Rodney refuses to play it straight, scrounging money through off-track betting. Russell is jailed for vehicular manslaughter, while Rodney joins the army and serves in Iraq. Five years later, Russell is back at the mill and Rodney, traumatized by multiple tours, courts disaster through unlicensed fighting. Derelict mills host clandestine bouts, watched by a gallery of rabid spectators that one finds only in movies with derelict mill fight clubs. The plot mines Nebraska-era Bruce Springsteen. Organized crime, executions, and sibling vengeance culminate in an ambiguous ending about Russell’s future.

As Friedlander might note, overlooks abound in these tales. Russell Baze and his ex-girlfriend climb a rusty pedestrian bridge for a bittersweet reunion above a shattered Braddock. Davenport’s characters gape from the Scott’s backyard at the “cluttered and ugly prospect, jagged with stacks and bulky with the crude sheds of mills and foundries, dirtied with the eternal pall of smoke” (p. 44). Everyone in American Rust stares at the river from parking lots or porches. These moments inevitably turn into pocket histories of decline. Grace Poe watches a dozen coal barges float by, thinking, “It was a beautiful place to live. But that did not put any more money into her pocket” (p. 42). Her son gazes at the river and predicts a regional recovery: “Only it would never be what it had been and that was the trouble. People couldn’t adjust to that…. He had not been old enough to see it fall is why it didn’t bother him” (p. 97). With these scenes, we pivot from individuals’ small worlds to wider intersections of society and economy.

The view is sobering, punctuated with dead dreams and limited choices. The look of Braddock sets the mood in Furnace. Long shots of empty stores, weedy lots, a falling-down Talbot Avenue sign, and houses thrown up next to industrial sites ringed by barbed wire establish the backstory. Cinematographer Masanobu Takayanagi presents a predawn Braddock in two dimensions, all buildings stacked on top of each other. The feel of postindustrial Pittsburgh is there: ivy climbing up plywood, interiors with dripping faucets and wood paneling, and Playmate coolers lugged out to rusty pickups. When Takayanagi shoots houses, he always frames the mill in the distance. Meyer, too, provides the details that build
worlds: the satin union jackets on bar patrons, the sporadic activity outside dialysis clinics, and the well-worn jokes about the smell of Clairton. As Judith Modell wrote about Homestead, Pennsylvania, in the years after the steel collapse, "Hope existed in a community outside the mill, the community of churches, schools, playgrounds, and bars."[2] Meyer and Cooper avoid all but the bars, and even then the "Rivers of Steel" precariat finds no community. Decay and disorientation characterize the new order, yet there’s a sense in the later works that everyone knows this, and that the knowledge helps no one. Everyone’s numb, hoping to avoid the appalling scene of former steelworkers bagging groceries, making $25 an hour less than in their previous lives. Isaac English’s sister mocks herself for concluding that rust now defined Pittsburgh: "A brilliant observation. She was probably about the ten millionth person to think it" (p. 132).

It’s hard to avoid a before-and-after dynamic when juxtaposing these works. Decision certainly shows many negative aspects of industrial life, but the book hints that a work ethic and a moral compass ultimately benefit both individual and nation. That offer was rescinded by the time that Meyer’s and Cooper’s characters entered the scene. Davenport knew this, prefacing the 1989 edition with the reflection that "life for the people in the Monongahela Valley steel towns and others nearby is cruel and seemingly hopeless" (p. xiv). In a foreword to the new edition, steel writer John Hoerr quotes Davenport’s remark, placing Decision in an intriguing partnership with Rust and Furnace. Causes and effects of the fall become less relevant than coping with the un gover nable. The threat of terrible working lives lurks everywhere. After backwoods gangsters assassinate Rodney Baze in darkest New Jersey, we hear his voice-over proclaiming that after one last fight, he’ll be ready to "shovel asphalt or dig for coal or work at the mill." Isaac and Billy grew up amid a loss of 150,000 jobs in the Monongahela Valley, and their police chief puzzles over the fate of high school graduates when any job worth having requires a college degree. The range of imaginable careers is very narrow. When Isaac skirts big-box stores by the river, he never considers that he could belong behind those counters or in those stockrooms. Billy turns down a job in dismantling closed mills, guessing it was a dead-end: “there would be no record, nothing left standing, to show that anything had ever been built in America” (p. 289).

Another way of asking what lies beyond rust? Is to consider if there was ever a Golden Age in the first place. Is rust actually "post-" anything, or is it part of the package? Claire, the "apathetic and restless" third-generation steward of the Scott mill, returns to Pittsburgh in the mid-1930s to find "cold black stacks and dead chimneys and echoing empty caverns" (p. 583). Notice of the boom/bust cycle was buried deep in the terms and conditions of the deal that the region made with Big Steel. Even the industrial heyday is less than rosy in Decision. Native-born homeowners flee in the face of incoming immigrants. Irish Americans scowl at turn-of-the-century arrivals. Czech immigrants speak of “doity Slovaks” (p. 315). Life might be brutal for unskilled steel workers in the Scott mill, but Davenport hints at even nastier things lurking to the southeast, in the "real steel boroughs" on the "whole gloomy stretch of the Monongahela. In those places you made steel or starved" (p. 387). Meyer shows the tail-end of that model, wondering about the dozens of ancillary industries ("tool and die, specialty coating, mining equipment, the list went on") that had staked their futures on steel (p. 8).

If it’s not novel to deploy the “rust belt” label as an explanatory device, then perhaps it’s more helpful to wield weed metaphors. The persistence of “happenstance plants" (in Zachary Falck’s phrase) captures something central to these stories.[3] One of Meyer’s characters drives past "vacant hamlets, abandoned service stations, an exhausted coal mine with a vast field of tailings that stretched on forever like sand dunes, gray and dry and not even the weeds would grow on them" (p. 40). But metaphorical weeds grow just about everywhere else, despite concerted efforts to eradicate them. Grace Poe, a dressmaker, had "done several semesters at college," but now she sat huddled under blankets in her mobile home, refusing to turn on her expensive electric heaters. She avoids work in fast food, "determined to live with a little dignity" (p. 41). That determination binds scattered characters, for Grace is motivated by the same hope to live the good life that drives workers in Decision and Rust. Davenport’s immigrant characters emerge from their “ramshackle hovels … barren cinder-crusted ground” to become figures of depth and inspiration when they speak for unions and against Nazi depredations (p. 6). Russell Baze keeps his head down and works, with a determination to play by the rules—until he senses that there are no longer any rules. The key characters in these stories scrape together ways to manage, and we’re meant to marvel at the pageant, even as we know too well the fate of weeds.

A final view of the city suggests the fiction that’s been displaced by these tales. On the wall behind the desk of a local loan shark in Furnace, T. M. Fowler’s 1902 bird’s-eye map of Pittsburgh hangs in the shadows. The illustration
features crisply lined buildings, rivers full of steamboats, and an almost pastoral pollution, set far back on the horizon. It stemmed from an era in which city boosters enthusiastically portrayed the city as a modern paradise of growth and profit. The optimism of boosters has not changed much in a century, but this trio of takes on the region suggests just how irrelevant developers’ dreams are to the people living on Pittsburgh’s periphery. In the reading group guide appended to Rust, the publisher asks, “Do you view the novel as ultimately grim, or do you see it as hopeful?” Historians won’t have definitive answers to this question, for they know too much about how these things can go. But if one must, one can imagine better times for particular characters who might ... with luck ... just make it. After all, even Lee Friedlander’s bleak overlook would make an acceptable “Lovers’ Lane” for the desperate and determined. The books and the film leave us grasping for such compromises, straining to see something inspiring from on high.

Notes

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