August 17, 1997

The Displaced Person

By BENJAMIN DEMOTT

Shunned by virtually everyone, this novel's 19th-century heroine builds a life for herself

Read the First Chapter

UNRAVELLING
By Elizabeth Graver.
298 pp. New York:
Hyperion. $22.95.

First I was loved, like my name," says Aimee Slater, the heroine of this grave, winter-wise and absorbing first novel. "Then I was unloved."

A New Hampshire farm girl, Aimee lights out for the local factory at 15 -- the time is the 1840's -- becoming a mill "operative" in Lowell, Mass. She's smart and lively -- and naive and unlucky. Within months a co-worker makes her pregnant with twins, and her mother forces her to give up the babies. Back home, shamed, she can't find bearable shelter except in a hunting shack on a bog pond at the edge of her father's land. Here, seen by village eyes as a madwoman or witch, she commences building a life, nurturing a village orphan, becoming in time the lover of Amos, the "village cripple." Inside her shack's strengthened walls, a quarter-century after moving in, she sets down her story, her lost twins her

imagined audience.

The story is partly about provisioning, survival, pride in self-sufficiency. Elizabeth Graver's heroine has powerful sexual appetites and a developed taste for bog wine, which she ferments at home. But as Aimee approaches middle life, her first aim is self-command. "I have my rabbits who give me fur to spin into yarn," she writes. "I have my house, built to last, chickens who leave me eggs, clear vision and a strong back, a mother I never see." She earns coins by selling homemade brooms and baskets; she bathes in icy bog pond water and has broken herself of repugnance: "If I raise my leg to see the kiss of a black leech or feel a water snake circle my ankle, I do not shriek the way I would have as a child, do not flounder and splash and make the birds cock their heads toward my voice. A leech is a leech; a water snake, a water snake. I am in the habit."

At its core, Aimee's story is about the slow cumulative registering, over years, of the weight and meaning of one's own misjudgments. The heroine winces at her recollected credulity -- her shock at the unconcern of the factory mechanic who impregnated her, her beamish enthusiasm for the mill that employed her. When Washington bigwigs arrived for a glimpse of the country's smashing profit-laden future, Aimee became a poster girl for Happy Labor and carried a banner that read "Welcome to the City of Spindles." She recalls: "We wore white muslin dresses with blue sashes that day. We carried parasols edged in green. We marched singing to the factory: 'How Doth the Busy Bee.' Afterwards they made us give the dresses back." Protest was on her lips. She wove that cloth, she wanted to say. "I knotted the knots when the thread broke, and ran from one crashing loom to another, and threaded the 2,000 weft threads until my fingers swelled like rising dough. Mine, I wanted to say."

But the protest wasn't uttered.

She's also abashed at a larger misjudgment: her fierce condemnation of her elders. For years she's furiously unforgiving of her mother: "The mere thought of her filled me with a rage so distilled I felt it like a fine-ground powder in the marrow of my bones." The rage stems, of course, from "the pure, hot grief of missing babies," but from other sources as well: her mother's unresponsiveness to the death of Aimee's beloved brother, her mother's hostility to Aimee's "godless and deformed" lover, her mother's lifelong terror of respectable opinion. The movement forward from unforgiving rancor is humanly erratic, never sanctimonious, and is interrupted time and again by re-engagement with loss -- as when Aimee realizes that she's stopped inventing names that her twins might bear because "every name rings too solid" for their "ghostliness."

Yet there is movement. The heroine recovers moments of household labor shared with her mother that speak to her, on the slant, about the intricate meshing of childish demand and parental withdrawal. She's reminded often that her elders were victims as well as victimizers -- endlessly manipulated by worldly others. (The pages of "Unravelling" resound with authentic period sleaze -- voices of company men, precursors of corporate shysterdom, labor recruiters suckering parental rubes.) And she's taught by her own difficulties with the discipline of loving detachment -- the bewildering cycles of delight and frustration that for her, as for nearly everyone else, lie at the center of the nurturer's experience.

Occasionally in "Unravelling" a major or minor character's self-pity needs sharper ironic measuring than it receives. And the book would have been richer if Graver's familiarity with mid-19th-century constructions of motherhood matched her resourcefully deployed knowledge of labor history. But her accomplishment remains exceptional. Many stories in Graver's first book, "Have You Seen Me?" (1991), a collection that won the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, deal tellingly with themes of nurture; this new

book deepens her approach. As its heroine battles bitterness, taking revenge on public cruelty by scouring her private self clean of meanness, "Unravelling" creates a home-on-the-margins beyond cant -- a kind of exiles' utopia, intensely imagined, right-valued, memorable.

Benjamin DeMott's most recent books are "The Trouble With Friendship" and "The Imperial Middle."

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