Silent Struggles: The Graphic Radicalism of the Woodcut Novel

Jennifer Camp

During the 1930s, radical artists fashioned the woodcut and the wood engraving as a locus of struggle. In the face of mass social suffering brought on by the Great Depression, incensed American printmakers found political potential in the graphic arts. Responding to Soviet cultural prescriptions denouncing the "art for art's sake" mantra of modernist easel painting, communist and other socially-concerned artists championed printmaking—both for its ability to reach the masses and for its distinct material and aesthetic qualities.[1] The radical power of the graphic arts lay implicit in the artistic declarations published by the American communist periodical *New Masses*: "We call upon [artists] to align themselves with the working class in its struggle against capitalist oppression and exploitation….We urge them to join with the literary and artistic movement of the working-class in forging a new art that shall be a weapon in the battle for a new and superior world."[2] The strong, clear, and sharp aesthetic of wood engraving enacted in bold black and white reinforces these demands for social justice.

This paper explores the radical potential of Depression-era wood engraving within a cutting-edge artistic medium: the woodcut novel. Though recent years have seen a renewed scholarly attention to leftist American printmakers, the woodcut novel remains understudied by art historians, perhaps because of its resistance to classification.[3] Situated in a nebulous territory between popular fiction, art, and illustration, the "novel in woodcuts" offered artists a vital medium for the promotion and support of the working class. By focusing on the work of American artist Lynd Ward, a communist sympathizer and early pioneer of the woodcut novel, this paper seeks to understand the appeal of the medium for socially-concerned artists like Ward working during the 1930s.[4]

In October 1929, just days before the infamous stock market crash, Ward published his moody, Faustian tale titled *Gods' Man: A Novel in Woodcuts*. Through a sequence of 139 prints, Ward's book delineates the story of a painter's rapid rise and fall within a malevolent universe. A first in the history of American art and literature, this woodcut novel or "wordless novel" condemns the corruption of art and society at the hands of capitalism. A communist sympathizer committed to the plight of the working class, Ward looked back on the 1930s and remembered "a never-ending story of strikes, lay-offs, lock-outs, demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, and parades."[5] During the stormy years of the Great Depression, Ward created not one but six wordless novels engaged with the tempestuous times. His graphic pictorial narratives told tales of injustice, corruption, and brutality—through images alone.[6]

Through a critical focus on the story, materiality, and aesthetics of *Gods' Man*, Lynd Ward's graphic tour de force, this paper probes the relationship between Depression-era narrative relief printmaking and broader leftist conversations about the role of the artist in society. *Work* is a crucial touchstone for understanding the woodcut novel. Both audience and artist perform a kind of labor that is specific to the medium—an artistic labor that abstracts, in visceral terms, the labor of the working classes. *Gods' Man* not only questions the purpose of art under the conditions of capitalism, but it also offers a vital new medium for mobilizing the masses and envisioning a form of artistic and political resistance.

In an essay published in the November 1932 issue of *New Masses*, Russian art critic Anatoly Lunacharsky outlined a set of observations on the relationship of art to class ideology: "During the period when [a] class is striving to find a political form for its class interests, its art is characterized

1 For more on the influence of Soviet Communist cultural policies on art produced by politically radical American artists, see: Cecile Whiting, "Propaganda in Print" in *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 8-33.

2 "Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Clubs," *New Masses* (June 1932): 14.

3 For recent scholarship on leftist American printmakers, see: Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) and Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

4 For a general introduction to the work of Lynd Ward, see: Art Spiegelman, "Reading Pictures: A Few Thousand Words on Six Books Without Any," in *Lynd Ward: Six Novels in Woodcuts*, ed. Art Spiegelman (New York: Library of America, 2010), ix-xxv. For an introduction to the woodcut novel, see: George A. Walker, Introduction in *Graphic Witness: Four Wordless Graphic Novels* (Richmond Hill, ON: Firefly Books, 2007); 9-31 and Martin S. Cohen, "The Novel in Woodcuts: A Handbook," *Journal of Modern Literature* 6, no. 2 (1977): 171-195.

5 Lynd Ward, "On Prelude to a Million Years," in Spiegelman, *Lynd Ward: Six Novels*, 643.

6 Lynd Ward's six wordless novels include: *Gods' Man* (1929), *Madman's Drum* (1930), *Wild Pilgrimage* (1932), *Prelude to a Million Years* (1933), *Song Without Words* (1936), and *Vertigo* (1937).

by storm and stress, and its forms are restless."[7] Capturing this spirit of restless turbulence and agitation in the opening scene of *Gods' Man*, a small sailboat tossed at sea emerges on the crest of an inky, black wave (Figure 1). Lightning cuts across the troubled sky in sharp, white flashes, illuminating the relentless rain pummeling the tiny, helpless ship of Ward's protagonist. Through this first print the viewer is introduced to a world of powerful binaries; of light and darkness, of good and evil, of violence and resistance. Wood engraving favors the high drama of bold blacks and vivid highlights; acute lines and staccato markings. Without caption or textual narration, the reader is left to ponder the identity of Ward's distressed sailor.

The bold, cutting aesthetic found in *Gods' Man* as well as Ward's subsequent wordless novels provided a fitting answer to communist calls for an art like a battle-axe that could cut through capitalism's injustices. In Lunacharsky's essay, he advocated a militant art in the service of revolution, asserting, "[Art] is not merely an instrument for apprehending reality; it is also a weapon for propagating definite viewpoints, a definite approach to reality."[8] However, as art historian Andrew Hemingway explains, exactly what form this revolutionary art should take proved to be a subject for deliberation. *New Masses* critics like Stephen Alexander denounced the perceived dishonesty of Regionalist painters like Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, while also decrying the "sterility" of modernist abstraction.[9] Meyer Schapiro took artists to task in his criticism of a 1933 exhibition by the John Reed Club; these artists, he declared, failed to produce "genuinely militant" works.[10] Schapiro's vision of a truly revolutionary exhibition would include art that "reenact[ed] in a vivid, forceful manner the most important revolutionary situations… [in a] series of prints, with a connected content, for cheap circulations; cartoons for newspapers and magazines; posters; banners; signs; illustrations of slogans."[11] For Schapiro, the revolution could be transmitted more appropriately through paper and ink than canvas and paint. The medium of printmaking, unlike painting, allowed for mass distribution and purchase by the populace; as Helen Langa observes, printmaking was envisioned as a "vitally democratic type of American art" particularly suited to communicating social concerns.[12]

In *Gods' Man*, Lynd Ward ponders the implications of painting through the medium of print. Ward's protagonist, whom the viewer soon discovers is an artist, finds himself facing a series of trials. After buying an extraordinary paintbrush from a dark and mysterious stranger, the artist achieves rapid success and critical acclaim (Figures 2 and 3). The success proves to be hollow, however, and the artist falls into a pit of despair when his artworks are sold to benefit greedy entrepreneurs—a not-so-subtle jab at the commercial gallery system (Figure 4). After becoming romantically involved with a woman whom he later discovers (to his dismay) is a prostitute, the artist proceeds to wander the streets of the city in loneliness and isolation (Figure 5). The artist eventually finds love after leaving the city, only to have his dreams dashed when the shadowy figure reappears to collect his dues, forcing the artist to fall to his death. In the chilling, final scene, the shadowy figure is unmasked, revealing the face of death itself (Figure 6). The novel reworks the classic German legend *Faust*, in which a scholar makes a pact with the devil in exchange for fame and earthly pleasures.

Ward's pictorial narrative specifically critiques modernist easel painting as a socially disengaged art form that can quickly succumb to the caprices of the market. Many artists and critics during the 1920s and 1930s lamented that the arts had drifted precariously far from public life and social responsibility; as art historian John X. Christ writes, public intellectuals like John Dewey saw art as a "profound but also ailing" vehicle of communication.[13] Ward's novel in woodcuts offered an alternative medium for social commentary: a medium that denied the perceived authority and autonomy of painting in favor of an art more fully embedded within the public sphere. Less than a decade later, the German Marxist theorist Walter Benjamin would articulate his vision of the death of the "aura" of art at the hands of technological reproduction (i.e., printmaking, photography, and cinema): "As soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics."[14] Benjamin championed cinema as a revolutionary art form, and Ward's woodcut novels drew upon a distinctly cinematic visual language.

For example, Ward may have been inspired by director F.W. Murnau's silent film adaptation of Goethe's tragic play *Faust*. Ward's aesthetic recalls the dark, moody atmosphere of the 1926 German expressionist classic, as well as the bizarre and distorted sets of films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). Ward explained that his woodcut novels accessed the exaggerated visual language of silent cinema, "a medium…where facial expression, gesture, and movement of the whole body were so completely the language

7 Anatoly Lunacharsky, "Marxism and Art," *New Masses* (November 1932): 13.

8 Ibid., 12.

9 Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 25.

10 Meyer Schapiro, writing as John Kwait, "John Reed Club Art Exhibition," *New Masses* (February 1933): 23.

11 Ibid.

12 Langa, *Radical Art*, 1-5.

13 John X. Christ, "Stuart Davis as Public Artist: American Painting and the Reconstruction of the Public Sphere," *Oxford Art Journal* 37, no. 1 (2014): 69-70.

14 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 24-25.

of telling a story."[15] Like the dizzying, nightmarish instability of these early silent black-and-white films, Ward's protagonist—enveloped in distress—sways precariously, his bodily instability suggestive of an inner, psychic turmoil (Figure 5). Ward would have been particularly familiar with these films after studying art in Germany during his 20s, a time during which he was steeped in the aesthetics of German Expressionist film and printmaking.[16]

Modern German masters of the woodcut medium, like Kathë Kollwitz, Otto Nückel, and the Belgian Frans Masereel offered powerful, graphic social commentaries that deeply affected Ward.[17] Ward acknowledged inspiration from Masereel and Nückel, earlier pioneers of the wordless novel who also looked to German Expressionist film for aesthetic inspiration. While training in Germany during the 1920s, Ward came in contact with Masereel's *Die Sonne* (1919), among other works. *Die Sonne*, like *Gods' Man*, tells the story (through pictures) of a man's struggle against both internal and external demons. Scholar Perry Willett elucidates the paradoxical potential of the novel in woodcuts: "The irony at the center of these narratives lies in their exploration, entirely without words, of the power of language and the language of power."[18] Their prints—bold, direct, dramatic—arrest the viewer's attention through a deep, pre-verbal aesthetic language.

Indeed, because of their reproducibility and ability to be "read" regardless of the native language of the viewer, Lynd Ward's woodcut novels, like silent films, could be disseminated to a massive viewing public. Unlike painting, which tends to privilege viewing by the few or the wealthy, woodcut novels could be purchased and experienced by people of relatively modest means. Ward himself considered the wordless novel to be a vital new medium for modern artists, a medium that he deemed "better suited to the life of our times and capable of reaching larger numbers of people."[19] *Gods' Man* proved a testament to the goals of mass dissemination; it sold over 20,000 copies in only four years.[20]

As an early precursor to the contemporary graphic novel, *Gods' Man* merges both literary and artistic concerns.[21] Each carefully carved woodcut receives its own space on the page, framed by smooth, white margins (Figure 7). Page by page, the "reader" experiences the story through a process of active looking. Rather than accompany each print with a caption, Lynd Ward challenges the viewer to discover and interpret the book's visual narrative content. The viewer *works* to understand the novel and effectively performs a type of intellectual labor. Wordless novels grant a level of creative agency to their audiences; the viewer becomes an active participant in the creation of meaning. They are a collaborative effort between artist and audience—an audience unbound by the dictates of language.

Communist critic Thomas Willison, in an article of 1935 titled "Revolutionary Art Today," described his vision of a new form of radical art that sounds strikingly similar to the wordless novel. After criticizing painters who attend primarily to considerations of form or subject, Willison argued that art must "embody more than meets the eye…no single scene by itself can be wholly adequate or the highest goal of [the artist's] realistic imagination. He must develop, if he wishes to attain the desired intensity or comprehensiveness, formal devices which, while foreign to the snapshot appearance, are capable of widening and deepening the scope of meanings in a representation."[22] Willison concludes, "[The artist] does not merely desire the masses' respectful approval as a sign of his technical success; he desires their critical absorption of his work as a sign of its real effectiveness."[23] Wordless novels, as a medium that the viewer must necessarily spend time with, think about, and critically absorb, answered this call for a new kind of art *work*.

This level of critical absorption is perhaps what was lacking from the art produced by Ward's protagonist in *Gods' Man*. As a painter, his works succumbed to the vagaries of the market. In one scene, the viewer sees an unruly crowd, vying to purchase one of the artist's paintings (Figure 8). Commenting on the fetishistic commodification of art under the conditions of capitalism, sinuous, bony hands stretch upward in an attempt to be the highest bidder. Ward here has painstakingly described every muscle of these emaciated arms that wildly gesture for the opportunity to buy. In another scene, these same tense, gripping hands raise their glasses

15 Lynd Ward, "On 'Gods' Man,'" in Spiegelman, *Lynd Ward: Six Novels*, 781.

16 Ward studied printmaking at the Staatliche Akademie für graphische Kunst und Buchgewerbe (National Academy of Graphic Arts and Bookmaking) in Liepzig during 1926 and 1927. "Chronology" in Spiegelman, *Lynd Ward: Six Novels*, 803-804.

17 Frans Masereel is considered the inventor of the woodcut novel with his 1918 publication, *25 images de la passion d'un homme* (25 Images of the Passion of a Man). Cohen, "The Novel in Woodcuts," 179-182. Ward wrote of Masereel, "During my year in Germany I encountered one of the early books of pictorial narrative by Frans Masereel, the twentieth-century Belgian artist who was, I believe, the first to go beyond the idea of a short sequence of pictures with a limited narrative concept." Ward, "On 'Gods' Man,'" 780.

18 Perry Willett, "The Cutting Edge of German Expressionism: The Woodcut Novel of Frans Masereel and Its Influences," in *A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism*, ed. Neil H. Donahue (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005): 111.

19 Lynd Ward, "The Eye and The Mind," *New Masses* (17 December 1935): 42.

20 "Chronology" in Spiegelman, *Lynd Ward: Six Novels*, 805.

21 For more information on the woodcut novel as a precursor to contemporary graphic novels, see: David A. Beronä, *Wordless Books: The Original Graphic Novels* (New York: Abrams, 2008).

22 Thomas S. Willison, "Revolutionary Art Today," *New Masses* (1 October 1935): 17.

23 Ibid.

to the man of the hour (Figure 4). The artist, isolated amidst a circle of disembodied arms, stares downward in despair. Verging on melodrama, the prints communicate through exaggeration of line, composition, and body language.

An expressionistic emotional weight bears down upon each print. Heavy, black shadows stretch ominously across the page as the artist wanders the empty city streets—the dark gravity of story matched by its heavy aesthetic (Figure 9). Reflecting on his experience creating *Gods' Man*, Ward wrote, "The woodblock, whether cut with a knife or engraved, develops its image by bringing details out of darkness into the light….In a sense, what is happening is already there in the darkness, and cutting the block involves letting only enough light into the field of vision to reveal what is going on."[24] Ward's vision of carving light from darkness visibly abstracted the goals of communist artists who sought to "enlighten" the proletariat class to its own revolutionary potential. This process of wood engraving, known as the "white line" method offered the artist a more direct relationship with the block of wood. Contemporary historian Herbert Furst said of the woodcut, "the tool is driven with more or less force into the surface of the material from which a physical restraint of varying degrees on the freedom of the line naturally results, a restraint which the draughtsman, the painter and the etcher experience hardly if at all."[25] Because the wood engraver must painstakingly cut away from the block all the shapes and lines that he does not want to print black, the white line method enabled forms to have a more expressive connection to the artist's hand.

Indeed, hands reoccur frequently throughout *Gods' Man*. Whether, as seen before—in the raising of hands as at an auction, in a toast, or as the artist signs away his soul (Figure 10), Ward focuses on hands as the place of making, the location of aesthetic work. The bones in these hands seem to strain against the very skin that contains them, each line cut with unhesitating clarity.

Ward, in an essay explaining his affinity for the woodblock medium, emphasized the material's "human qualities," its anthropomorphic relationship to the human hand. "There are aspects of working in wood that are quite unique…. Part of it is a feeling for the wood itself, that material which, unlike the metal and stone of other graphic processes, was once a living thing."[26] Ward described his interaction with the medium as like that of a "struggle between antagonists" and a "battle of wills," writing, "With wood, every movement of the tool involves overcoming resistance and demands the use of a certain amount of sheer physical force. Every block and every subject is a new challenge."[27] By imagining a kind of artistic practice that required a blunt, physical strength, Ward effectively drew a metaphorical connection between the narrative struggles depicted in his wordless novels and the artistic struggle of creation. Ward presented himself as a worker whose "tools"—the burin, the knife, the gouge—not only stand for the tools of industrial and agricultural labor (the hammer, the sickle), they also stand for the weapons of collective protest and revolution.

Photographs of Ward at work show him carving and pressing, engaging his whole body in the act of making. Fellow radical printmaker Ralph M. Pearson, described the printmaker as "a workman among workers….He prints his etchings, lithographs, or woodblocks with hands which know ink and the rollers and wheels of his press. He works. He produces. He lives."[28] For Lynd Ward, the time consuming, deliberate, and physically demanding task of carving hundreds of woodcuts for his wordless novels engendered a bond to those agricultural and industrial workers whom he and other radical artists hoped to spur to political action.

Communist artists worked, produced, and lived. They saw themselves not as separate from—but as part of—the proletariat as members of a broader working class identity. In later wordless novels, Lynd Ward would adopt the imagery of public protest and struggle, of strikes and union organization.

In a speech given in 1941 before the Writers and Artists Congress, Lynd Ward initiated a call-to-arms: "The Artist is a Fighter," he declared in the title for the speech, "No matter how dark the night, the forces of progress cannot fail."[29] Lynd Ward, radical printmaker wielding knife and gouge, declared his commitments to a revolutionary art of the people, an art that he believed could impel social transformation through the promotion of collective action. *Gods' Man: A Novel in Woodcuts* created a vital space for the artistic work of both artist and audience. In this wordless novel, the silent struggles of labor found a voice.

University of Virginia

[24] Lynd Ward, "On 'Gods' Man,'" in Spiegelman, *Lynd Ward: Six Novels*, 783.

[25] Herbert Furst, *The Modern Woodcut: A Study in the Evolution of the Craft* (1924; repr., Liechtenstein: Quarto Press, 1979), 8.

[26] Lynd Ward, "The Way of Wood Engraving," in Spiegelman, *Lynd Ward: Six Novels*, 775.

[27] Ibid.

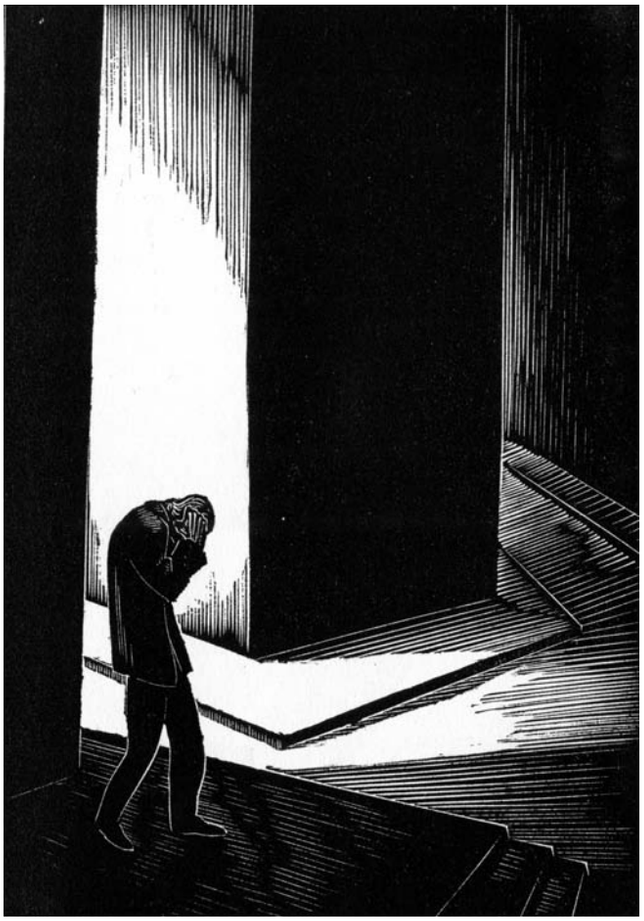
[28] Ralph M. Pearson, "These Prints and the Public," in *America Today: A Book of 100 Prints* (New York: American Artists' Congress, 1936), 7.

[29] Lynd Ward, "The Artist as Fighter," *New Masses* (1 July 1941): 30.

Figure 1. [*above, left*] Lynd Ward, print from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 6 x 4 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.

Figure 2. [*above, right*] Lynd Ward, print from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 4 x 3 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.

Figure 3. [*right*] Lynd Ward, print from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 4 x 4 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.



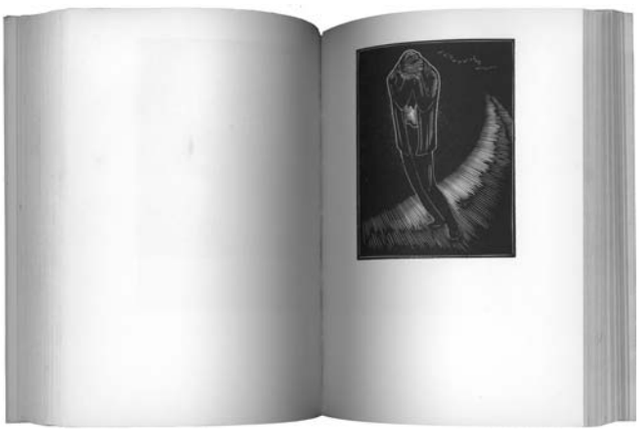


Figure 4. [*top left*] Lynd Ward, print from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 5 x 3 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.

Figure 5. [*top right*] Lynd Ward, print from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 5 x 3.5 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.

Figure 6. [*left*] Lynd Ward, print from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 6 x 4 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.

Figure 7. [*above*] Lynd Ward, page spread from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 7.75 x 10 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.

Figure 8. Lynd Ward, print from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 5 x 4 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.

Figure 9. [*bottom left*] Lynd Ward, print from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 5 x 3 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.

Figure 10. [*bottom right*] Lynd Ward, print from *Gods' Man*, 1929, wood engraving, 3 x 3 inches. By permission of Robin Ward Savage and Nanda Weedon Ward.