Lynd Ward’s Wordless Novels, 1929–1937

This book offers the first multidisciplinary analysis of the “wordless novels” of American woodcut artist and illustrator Lynd Ward (1905–1985), who has been enormously influential in the development of the contemporary graphic novel. The study examines his six pictorial novels, each part of an evolving experiment in a new form of visual narrative that offers a keen intervention in the cultural and sexual politics of the 1930s. The novels form a discrete group – much like Beethoven’s piano sonatas or Keats’s great odes – in which Ward evolves a unique modernist style (cinematic, expressionist, futurist, realist, documentary) and grapples with significant cultural and political ideas in a moment when the American experiment and capitalism itself hung in the balance. In testing the limits of a new narrative form, Ward’s novels require a versatile critical framework as sensitive to German Expressionism and Weimar cinema as to labor politics and the new energies of proletarian homosexuality.

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Lynd Ward’s Wordless Novels, 1929–1937
Visual Narrative, Cultural Politics, Homoeroticism

Grant F. Scott
To the Memory of my Mother
Pamela June Scott
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Most of all, I thank Logan McCabe for convincing me that Ward’s novels deserved a closer look, David Rosenwasser for taking time out from the word and diving into the deep end of visual narrative, and Markéta and Oliver, who bear with me.
In the inauspicious year 1929 and at the unlikely age of twenty-four, Lynd Ward published his first of six wordless, woodcut novels, a genre new to the American cultural scene. The form had emerged a decade earlier in Europe, but had received scant notice in the United States. Ward was the first to transplant and adapt the new form on this side of the Atlantic. Judging by its appearance, Ward's book seemed like a conventional novel with a standard cover, the requisite number of pages and appropriate volume and weight. But on opening it the reader immediately saw that the words had been replaced by a series of black-and-white pictures, finely toned wood engravings no less, that were subtly framed and resembled individual artworks. It must have felt like someone had hijacked the novel, replaced its logical sequence of words with a portfolio of expressionist images. Once over their initial shock, readers would have noticed that the pictures did not stand alone as in a gallery. Nor were they illustrative, subordinate to a larger textual narrative. Rather, they unfolded as a carefully linked story that necessitated a different set of skills than a traditional novel, a greater alertness to spatial form, a heightened visual awareness. For all their unfamiliarity – they bore no resemblance to political cartoons or newspaper comics – the images were absorbing and dynamic. They depicted a character on a physical and spiritual journey who was caught in moments of dramatic conflict and psychic anguish. Rather than religious tableaux or staid portraits of bourgeois families, as the history of the medium would seem to prescribe, Ward’s woodcuts featured scenes of sex, violence and death woven into a unified and suspenseful narrative. It can be no accident that his first novel, *Gods’ Man* (1929), begins with the hero imperiled by a dangerous storm at sea, and that his last, *Vertigo* (1937), ends with two of the main characters clinging to each other as the roller coaster they ride hurtles into darkness. Ward was determined to subvert the expectations of the traditional woodcut and sever its historical relationship with the word.

One of the many ironies of Ward’s achievement is that as his skills as a wood engraver and print-maker improved and his novels became steadily

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more complex and sophisticated, the public’s appetite for them waned. *Gods’ Man* created a minor sensation, selling 20,000 copies in six editions in spite of the onset of the Great Depression. It was well-received by critics, and as a result of his sudden fame, Ward was flooded with commissions to illustrate books and requests to exhibit and speak about his work in New York City galleries. By contrast, his last novel was published to scarce reviews and modest sales. No doubt there were a number of reasons for this decline in interest, including the fading glamor of a curiosity, the deepening financial crisis of the 1930s and the growing appetite for film and the new “talkies.” In the event, Ward’s novels were soon forgotten and remained out of print and largely unknown until the late 1960s when World Publishing issued affordable reprints of *Gods’ Man* and *Wild Pilgrimage*. By the early seventies, the time was ripe for the art publisher Harry N. Abrams to bring out a compendium of the novels along with a generous selection of Ward’s individual prints. The result, *Storyteller Without Words* (1974), included important essays by the author and brief introductions to reproductions of each of his six woodcut novels.

It was not until 2010, however, with the publication of the Library of America’s two-volume boxed set of Ward’s novels that it appeared as if Ward had finally climbed back onto the stage and into the canon. Introduced by Art Spiegelman, the set was widely and glowingly reviewed and hailed as essential reading for all aspiring graphic and comics artists. Taken together with the inexpensive, high-quality reprints of Ward’s individual novels issued by Dover between 2004 and 2010, the Library of America edition made his work accessible to more people than ever before. Small wonder, then, that in 2012 an important documentary film appeared about his life and work. Given this resurgence of interest in Ward, it is surprising that so little sustained criticism of his woodcut novels has yet to materialize. Although graphic novelists and comic theorists like Will Eisner and Scott McCloud have long championed him as a pioneering figure in the genre of the visual novel, literary critics and art historians have been slow to acknowledge his importance. He is heralded as the forerunner and even father of the graphic novel; his woodcut books of the 1930s are seen as innovative in traversing genres and disciplines; and his body of work has served and continues to serve as inspiration for contemporary graphic and comics artists. Yet his novels remain largely unknown to the critical establishment. He stands before the tradition of the graphic novel as a public statue that everyone admires but no one looks at very carefully.

Part of the problem almost certainly lies with the difficulty of categorizing Ward’s genre-defying project. The six “novels” fall into a disciplinary gap, seemingly incompatible with the fields of Art, English, Comics and Film Studies. They are not quite paintings, texts or films,
though they share some attributes of each and lend themselves reluctantly to the analytical and interpretive methods of these disciplines. For Comics Studies and English they look too much like fine art; for Art History they read too much like novels. How best to approach and define them? Most critics have come to think of these works as “wordless novels,” but this oxymoron is oddly unsatisfying given that it bases the definition of a new genre on the fundamental negation of an old one. Would we be as quick to adopt “imageless pictures,” for example, or “soundless songs” to describe other trans-medial experiments? The modifier, “wordless,” disadvantages Ward’s artworks from the outset, much as Simonides’ famous equation distinguishing the arts – “A poem is a speaking picture; a picture a mute poem” – lends the appearance of equality but actually handicaps pictures at the expense of words. They are and will always be “mute,” while words happily go on performing the magic of ventriloquism forever. My point is that the term “wordless novels” defines Ward’s work by what it is not, limiting his complex foray into uncharted terrain before it gets going.

To be sure, it is tempting to see the convenience of such a strategy. His work is not a novel or a graphic novel, not a comic strip or a collection of engraved prints. Nor is it an art book, a three-dimensional example of the book arts (a “pop-up book”), or a flip-book that aspires to the real-time pleasures of film, though it might at first look like it seeks an analogous velocity. In a larger sense, it is not quite art or literature, though it is both, not quite a bound gallery, though it encourages the audience to “read” and to view recursively. The problem (or the beauty) of these creations is that the plot is as essential as the design, the kinetic as vital as the static element. Critics have called Ward’s work a “woodcut novel,” “visual novel,” “picture novel,” “novel in pictures,” and even “drawn literature,” but with the exception of the last, all of these efforts seize on the term “novel,” which comes with its own heavy freight of generic expectation. Similar attempts such as “engraved stories,” “picture stories,” “illustrated stories,” are also biased in favor of the word, and Thierry Groensteen’s “films dessinées” (“drawn movies”) simply takes us back to the flip-book. Will Eisner preferred the more neutral term, “sequential art,” for Ward’s trans-medial experiments, but for now at least it might be wise to use Ward’s own preferred label, “pictorial narrative,” which has the virtue of sidestepping the weighty overtones and history of the “novel” while appropriating its primary source of distinction, namely “narrative.” The salutary effect is to distinguish “stories” from the genres of children’s literature or fairy tales and provide a level of technical sophistication in the same way that “pictorial” elevates “picture.” Through a kind of semantic alchemy, then, we are able to move from the entertaining bedtime ritual of a “picture story” to the serious intellectual pursuit of “pictorial narrative.”
Introduction

In spite of disagreement over what to call Ward’s multidisciplinary artwork, the fact remains that it has too long been neglected and deserves much closer scrutiny than it has yet received. We simply do not have the kind of foundational study that his work and its subsequent influence merit. Because Ward created these pictorial narratives in a sustained effort over an eight-year period and because he later abandoned the form to focus on book illustration and children’s literature, I want to see these novels as a discrete group – much like Keats’s great odes or Beethoven’s piano sonatas. In his narratives, Ward is not only evolving a unique modernist style (expressionist, futurist, realist, documentary, cinematic), but also grappling with significant political and cultural ideas in a moment when the American experiment as well as capitalism itself hung in the balance. Since they investigate the limits of a new narrative form, Ward’s books require a versatile critical framework, one that is as sensitive to the ideologies and visual aesthetics of Romanticism, German Expressionism and Weimar cinema (Chapter 1) as it is to the primitivist strand of Modernism and the complexities of cultural appropriation (Chapter 2), as cognizant of the labor and race politics of the Depression Era as the energies of proletarian homosexuality (Chapter 3). Such an approach involves, among other things, an assessment of art’s moral, sexual and aesthetic responsibilities in the face of a national economic emergency (Chapter 4); an examination of Ward’s response to the growing threat of fascism and his rhetorical use of political and religious allegory (Chapter 5); and a discussion of his critique of advertising, entertainment and corporate power, a critique that leads ultimately to Ward’s skepticism over the integrity of textual inscription itself (Chapter 6). Such a multidimensional approach should begin to help us understand Ward’s six pictorial novels, each of them part of an evolving experiment in a new form of visual narrative and each offering a keen intervention in the cultural and sexual politics of the 1930s.

In the Company of Men

It will help us to understand Ward’s pictorial narratives if we know something about his formative years and motivations for pledging himself to the ostensibly anachronistic art-labor of wood engraving. Every biographical sketch of Ward begins with his father, and for good reason. He was the most powerful figure in Lynd’s childhood and early adult years and, as I will argue, played a significant psychological role in his decision to pursue wood engraving and the pictorial novel. Harry F. Ward (1873–1966) was a Methodist minister and Christian socialist who emigrated to America from England in 1891. He was an author, educator and orator as well as radical social activist and staunch advocate of the working class and labor unions. During his early years as minister of the Union Avenue Methodist Church in Chicago, he helped organize local
unions such as the Meat Packers and Teamsters, and also participated in their labor disputes and strikes. In his role as “labor evangelist” (Link 58), he was able to align the church more closely with the ideals of the labor movement. In 1920, he became one of the founders and first chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union and during the 1930s led the struggle against a rising fascism in Europe. Although he was a champion of workers’ rights and deeply sympathetic to socialists and the Communist Party, he never joined a political movement, a position that helped him evade the worst effects of blacklisting by Joseph McCarthy’s HUAC in the late forties and early fifties. If by his calling Harry Ward was a man of the Word, by profession he was a man who multiplied words, both in speech and in writing. He was a passionate public speaker, an eloquent minister who “spoke with evangelical fervor” and preached the “Social Gospel,” and he was also a prolific writer, who held two important academic posts during his long career, at Boston University’s School of Theology (1913–1918) and Union Theological Seminary in New York (1919–1941), and published twenty books along with nearly two hundred articles and dozens of essays and pamphlets. The young Lynd Ward would have attended his father’s sermons and listened with rapt attention to his public speeches. He would also have sensed the hush that descended on their family home when his father was writing. We know he read at least four of his father’s works, In Place of Profit (1933), Democracy and Social Change (1940), The Soviet Spirit (1944) and Soviet Democracy (1947), because he illustrated them, and there is little doubt he read more.

Lynd loved and admired his father, but he also felt intimidated by what Harry Ward’s biographer, David Duke, calls his “muscular Christianity” (13) and “workaholic warrior’s temperament” (58), which derived from a late Victorian ethic of manliness, a belief in fighting valiantly for a righteous cause and cultivating self-reliance as well as physical and moral strength (57). Lynd experienced this side of his father at Lonely Lake in the Canadian wilderness, the remote retreat the family trekked to every summer. In the early days they spent at least half their time focused simply on survival, repairing the cabin after the ravages of winter, chopping wood, replanting the garden, and hunting and fishing to ensure they had enough to eat. Because his father “devoted all the energy he possessed to social reformation” (Duke 58), which necessitated a good deal of travelling and lecturing, Lynd must have been keenly aware of his frequent absence from the family. Such idealism, commitment and singularity of purpose left little spare time for his wife and small children. “He was away from home so much,” writes Duke, “that [the children] rarely had significant contact with their father during the critical years of their childhood development” (82). As Lynd’s older brother Gordon once remarked, he often felt like an “appendage” (Link 83), a feeling his mother Daisy often experienced on her birthday. In a letter from the
1920s, she confessed to her son that “sometimes it is a bit lonesome when Dad forgets.” As far as we know, Lynd never complained or expressed his frustration directly, though he did come close to identifying the source of the problem many years later when he warned of “the tragic gulf between a man’s professional success and the reality of his family life” (Storyteller Without Words 78), an observation that perfectly glosses the dark central narrative of Madman’s Drum, where the son’s callous obsession with his career blinds him to the emotional needs of his wife and daughters.

During the McCarthy era, Ward was deeply involved in the family’s lengthy debate over his father’s lifelong commitment to radical causes, which was taking a significant toll on his children. A widely-read article that appeared in Newsweek for June 1947 listed Harry F. Ward as one of several activist ministers who was an avowed Communist and had “infiltrated” the Church with the “Party Line” (“What Communists are up to”). Although inaccurate, the article was taken seriously by authorities in the federal government and directly affected the career of Lynd’s brother, Gordon, an agricultural economist, who was denied tenure at Virginia Tech mainly on the basis of his father’s reputation. Soon after the article appeared, Gordon’s name came up before the Army Loyalty Review Board, which weighed his family association with Harry Ward and membership in several organizations on the Attorney General’s list of Communist organizations and pronounced unfavorably on his case. As much as he protested over the years and tried to have the board’s verdict overturned, the ruling stuck with him and for years barred him from federal employment and foreign service. In a series of letters to Lynd and the family between 1948 and 1954, Gordon describes the barriers he faced in applying for a number of important positions and complains about his father’s lack of compassion. “I feel it is not fair to the rest of us to endanger our livelihood when there is absolutely nothing to be gained by allowing the commies to use Dad as a front for them,” he writes to the family on November 8, 1950. A little over a year later he appeals directly to his father:

I feel impelled to remind you that one factor in their consideration of my loyalty was my guilt by association with you ... any continuation of association with Communists and Communist organizations by you is going to work further damage to my professional career. So I ask your consideration when you get further requests for speaking and writing from the Communists and their organizations and fronts.

(Jan. 17 [1952])

Apparently his pleas fell on deaf ears. Two weeks later he confessed to Lynd that “Dad has never acknowledged to me any recognition that his activities are part of my problem” (Jan. 31, 1952).
Introduction 7

By this time, and in his role as the middle child, Lynd was an accomplished diplomat when it came to family quarrels. His response to his brother’s misfortunes was sympathetic and to his father’s stubbornness gently critical. Whatever inchoate misgivings Ward harbored toward him as a child and guarded skepticism later as an adult, there is no question that his father’s strong personality and “dominant and often dominating views” (Link 83) left an indelible impression on him and served as a model for his future relationships with men. Substitute fathers and older male mentors figure prominently in Lynd Ward’s early life and become a recurring motif of his fiction. On entering the Teacher’s College at Columbia University in the fall of 1922, Ward studied fine arts with Albert C. Heckman and John P. Heins, who introduced him to etching, block printing and lithography. He later dedicated Gods’ Man to both men and invited them to join with him in founding a new press. After graduation, Ward was accepted as a special student at the Academy for Graphic Arts and Book Design in Leipzig, Germany, where he learned various graphic techniques under the tutelage of Alois Kolb, Georg Mathéy and Hans Müller, all established professional artists. In 1938 Ward would sponsor Müller’s immigration to America as he and his Jewish wife fled Nazi persecution, and help him secure a publisher for his book and a part-time teaching position at Columbia.

The pattern of admiration and respect for older male figures extended to his professional and commercial life, too. On returning to the States, and with the help of his father, he landed his first commission to illustrate a book at the Vanguard Press with George Macy, who thought well enough of his work to hire him again the following year to design a limited edition of Oscar Wilde’s The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1928). Ward’s twenty-five full-page mezzotints reveal the aesthetic influence of the film director Fritz Lang, another presiding male figure and inspiration for many of Ward’s visual effects here and in his pictorial narratives. A few years later, he followed Macy to the Limited Editions Club, where Macy became co-editor, and under his watch illustrated a number of successful books of classic and modern literature. In April of 1929, Ward met the publisher Harrison Smith, who had just formed a partnership with Jonathan Cape, and showed him thirty blocks from what would become Gods’ Man. On this basis, Smith enthusiastically agreed to publish the novel, and after it became a surprise hit, went on to publish Ward’s next two pictorial narratives as well. During the early 1930s, he also began a rewarding association and correspondence with the established writers Alec Waugh and Llewelyn Powys, eventually providing wood-engraved illustrations for a number of their books. In rounding out these formative early years, it is only fitting that Ward returned to his father, to whom he dedicated Wild Pilgrimage (1932), and who entrusted him with the execution of lithographic illustrations for his important study, In Place of Profit: Social Incentives in the Soviet Union (1933).
In commercial terms, these paternal relationships were vital in launching and sustaining Ward’s career. In the more personal and imaginative sphere, however, as we see evidenced in his pictorial narratives, they receive a more complex psychological treatment. On the one hand, the deference he shows to older male figures manifests itself in the novels as a form of homoerotic attraction; on the other, it emerges as a darker anxiety about the pull of their powerful authority. The typically youthful protagonist of his fiction is drawn to the company of an older man, stimulated by his proximity and conversation and yet at the same time troubled by the transition he experiences from a primarily homosocial to a gradually more homoerotic attachment. The hero’s resulting confusion eventuates in some form of flight or escape. While Ward’s illustrated books of this time period celebrate the male form, either nude or accentuated by tight-fitting clothing, and multiply visual attitudes of its muscular beauty, the novels in particular embody many of these characters as police or state authority figures and depict them in acts of violence against defenseless victims. Nowhere is this tendency more apparent than in the workers’ strike that concludes *Wild Pilgrimage* or the assault on a labor union newspaper staff by hired goons in *Vertigo*, in which the “Elderly Gentleman” exercises his wrath – and repressed sexual aggression – by proxy. Each of the father figures in his major works, in fact, from the Mysterious Stranger in *Gods’ Man* to the ruthless CEO of *Vertigo*, is driven by monstrous ambition, embraces some form of ideological absolutism and, as I say, resorts to often sadistic forms of sexually charged violence. Even a secondary male character in Ward’s shorter novel, *Prelude to a Million Years*, functions as a stand-in for the patriarchal apparatus of state power, serving as formidable obstacle to the artist-hero’s quest. When the main character encounters him at a patriotic counter-rally, the older man forces him to doff his hat before Old Glory and then humiliates him in front of the crowd by making him kneel before a military officer to kiss the flag. The suggestive choreography of this scene reveals a homoerotic act that is difficult to disassociate from a form of punishment.

In fictionalizing the father–son relationship, Ward was expressing his own reservations over its often harmful and lasting effects. The obedience, gratitude and respect he showed his own father and the series of surrogate artist and publisher fathers he worked with over the years becomes something different and often darker in these narratives. Playing out against the oppressively male atmosphere of German Expressionism and Weimar cinema, the relationships reinforce a male sensibility that threatens at times to become both claustrophobic and dangerous. As Ward produced one after another of his pictorial narratives he increasingly came to see that the charismatic attraction of these characters was balanced by the psychic damage that might result from their influence and authority. A recognition of this dangerous bind may be one reason
Ward never finished *Hymn for the Night* (ca. 1940), a woodcut narrative of twenty engravings that begins by depicting the larger-than-life face of Hitler presiding over a landscape of destruction in which mothers and children stand helpless in the face of an aerial attack. Could this image, which he obsessively revised and printed in no less than nine separate states, have represented an extreme metaphor for the memory of his early family life, the dominant role played by his father and the helplessness of his mother and siblings? Was it a way of reinforcing to himself how the toxic will of such a personality might eventuate in the kind of totalitarianism that marked the era? Of course, the comparison of Hitler with his father, a social reformer and disciple of Jesus, is absurd, a blasphemy that Ward must have sensed and rejected, at least subconsciously, perhaps leading him to abandon the novel. Still, the image remains a powerful psychic testament of Ward’s attraction to and Oedipal rebellion against his father, who, like the German Chancellor, could seemingly summon at will the oratorical power of language.

Since ambivalence is hardly the sturdiest foundation on which to build a successful career, let alone a self, Ward likely suffered a slow-brewing crisis of identity as he matured into adulthood. How was he to establish his own voice in the face of his father’s strong example, particularly given that Harry Ward’s unrelenting verbal stream always threatened to drown him out? And how could he impress him as a son without using the medium his father so effortlessly commanded? Rather than compete with him, almost certainly a losing proposition, the most effective way to respond might be through *silence*, the very state that his father’s speech compelled. Better yet, he might devise a creative rather than resistant form of art, one that matched his father’s eloquent arguments with a compelling visual rhetoric of his own. Perhaps he could thrive by making an altogether different kind of statement in a *wordless* book. On the outside, it would look like one of his father’s many tomes but on the inside contain virtually no language at all. It would be that most wondrous of paradoxes, a silent book. In this new form, he could communicate as eloquently without words as his father did with them. He could use the vehicle of pictures, not as illustrations for someone else’s words, but for his own silent visual stories. And they would have this important advantage over words – they would speak directly to the eye in a series of bold and sharply drawn black-and-white engravings that could be “read” by anyone, even those who were new to the United States, immigrants who spoke in a foreign tongue or who were functionally illiterate. In this way, he might measure up to his father’s talent for commanding a working-class audience by creating a new kind of proletarian fiction, a handmade book for the masses.

From a psychological vantage point, then, we can see the making of Lynd Ward’s six woodcut novels as a quiet form of protest, an act of aesthetic resistance. Taken together, these visual narratives might stand as
wordless testimony against Harry Ward’s powerful verbal torrent as well as the influence of a long line of symbolic progenitors. We might even see the very process of wood engraving itself as a subliminal form of aggression against this male collective, predicated as it is on a continual motion of violence against the solidity of the block. The boxwood is subject to a variety of instruments which rive and scour the surface, re-figuring its terrain in dramatic ways. The repeated gouging and cutting, piercing, carving and scoring slowly refashion the block, forcing it to receive characters and landscapes impressed from the artist’s mind and imagination. Ward himself provides evidence for this anthropomorphizing of the medium in his essay, “The Way of Wood Engraving,” where he states that “the woodblock has usually seemed endowed with somewhat more human qualities than the harder materials used in other graphic processes.” He goes on to extend this metaphor in ways that touch closer to home, suggesting that individual woodblocks have different personalities and that some are “far more twisted under the surface and seemingly far more hostile to the engraver’s wishes”; indeed, some are even “like old codgers who grow more cantankerous during spells of dampness, become warped and bent and increasingly uncooperative as the weather worsens” (15). With these comparisons, Ward lays the groundwork for the essential confrontation between artist and block that he now vividly describes, and for seeing this contest in Oedipal and generational terms:

Working with a woodblock takes on the aspects of a struggle between antagonists. The wood is reluctant, the artist determined, and it is reasonable to suggest that the battle of wills brings about a result quite different from those in media in which the hand of the artist moves brush or pencil or crayon freely over the working surface. With wood, every movement of the tool involves overcoming resistance and demands the use of a certain amount of sheer physical force.

(15–16)

We can see the cost of this primal struggle dramatically represented in the various photographic portraits taken of Ward over the years. In them, he confronts the camera with an intense, brooding face, Germanic in its seriousness and sculpted as if out of the finest, hardest wood. One flinches at the degree of fixity in his gaze, recognizing the sheer will it must have taken to maintain such an implacable façade. The psychic forces at war beneath these visual allegories of self-control burst forth with startling power in Ward’s novels where we witness firsthand the collapse of the social carapace. Rage consumes many of the characters, twisting and distorting their faces and wracking their bodies. Pent-up energies explode either in moments of self-torment or violent scenes of confrontation, for instance when the hero of Gods’ Man tries to assault his mistress, the
protagonist of *Madman’s Drum* spirals into madness after realizing he has destroyed his entire family, and the main character of *Wild Pilgrimage* savagely strangles a police officer (see Frontispiece). The red-toned sequences of prints in this latter novel, in fact, show that Ward was highly conscious of a private world of repressed frustrations and desires, an inner world where industrial workers could exact immediate and satisfying revenge on their capitalist bosses.

Even as Ward’s resistance to his father’s will is clearly evident in the process of wood engraving and in numerous scenes from his woodcut novels, we can nevertheless detect a curious form of homage in the habits that were instilled by the lifelong practice of his craft. For his wood engraving entailed a complex form of artistic subjugation in which he internalized the state of dutiful silence imposed on him by his father’s sermons and the moral example of his work ethic. Earlier in his essay on wood engraving, Ward confesses that the Sunday “strictures” his father required of his children “now seem not altogether negative in their results” (12), since for one thing they introduced him to Gustave Doré’s engraved Bible illustrations, and for another they taught him the great patience needed to perform the exacting routines of the workshop. In the years to come he would sequester himself in his studio like a hermit and carve block after block of elaborate designs, laboring for hours at an unforgiving visual medium. Ward was a meticulous craftsman and would discard woodblocks that he had nearly finished because of a slip of the graver or chisel. Such errors forced him to begin the process over again from scratch. Like his father, then, he was an “evangelical-perfectionist” (Duke 58), though a more secular one, and like him believed there was a right way of doing things. From this perspective, the activity of engraving took on the appearance of a long penance, the artist engaged in repeated rituals of monastic devotion. Small wonder that one of his essays features the reproduction of an Albrecht Dürer woodcut depicting a self-flagellating penitent among representative examples of the art (“Woodcut Renaissance”). In the patient work of gauge and graver, Ward disciplined and punished himself for his rebellion against his father, and the woodblock became his means of atonement, the symbolic cellblock where he did time for his sins. Yet the hard labor of engraving also honored Harry Ward’s dedication to the work of his parish and social reform as well as his yearning for the simple life in Nature. The woodblock itself, after all, “was once a living thing,” a perpetual reminder of summers in the Canadian wilderness (15).

As an outlet for protest, anger and resistance and a place of self-punishment and even homage, the woodblock became a complex psychological site where Ward physically grappled with the masculine influence of his father and the series of male surrogates he encountered or sought out after he left home. The medium became a charged space where Ward confronted the challenge of his divided loyalties and attempted to
reconcile them. There is no more eloquent example of the difficulties he faced in this task than his lifelong effort to square his own aesthetics with his father’s politics, his continental brand of elitism with a missionary egalitarianism. At the root of his career we encounter a provocative tension between his identity as an artist and his felt responsibility as an activist, the one involving solitary labor and the other the group labor required to enact social change. Could he find a way to retreat from the world and engage with it so as to effect some degree of meaningful reform and honor his father’s legacy? The publication history of his pictorial narratives provides evidence that he struggled to find such a resolution, at least early on. The democratic impulse to create a wordless book understandable and accessible to everyone strained against the artist’s desire to produce fine, limited editions printed directly from the woodblocks. These special editions would be available only to subscribers, sell at a steeper price and showcase the artist’s unique skills as an engraver. By contrast, the reasonably priced trade editions, mass-produced by electro-type, would reach a larger and more economically and socially diverse audience. What these books lost in resolution, they made up for in affordability. Although he later came to see the artificial scarcity of limited editions as unethical, making available all his individual prints in unlimited editions, his career in the 1930s reveals a fundamental contradiction at the center of his project. He authorized collector’s editions of all but two of his pictorial novels (Wild Pilgrimage and Vertigo).16

Evidence of Ward’s attempt to reconcile his formalist bent with his progressive politics emerges in two modest manifestos he published on book illustration nearly twenty years apart. In “Contemporary Book Illustration” (1930), he calls for a new vision of illustration that functions as an organic part of the book’s total design and rejects “the stifling practice … of commissioning a set of pictures to be scattered through the pages of the book a few minutes before binding” (5–6). As he states with a biblical flourish his father would have approved, the illustrations should be “a part of the flesh of the book in their technical creation, a part of the spirit of the book in the way they have come into being” (6). He bridles at the notion that the artist is conceived as “a mere complementary decorator” (8) and argues for the central place of literary qualities in “every unit of visual art” (9). In this making credo, illustration becomes “book work” (7), its relation to the text “intelligent activity” (9). If Ward’s revolt against traditional methods of book illustration here mirrors the assault he launches on the conventional novel in his graphic narratives, it also rallies the humble picture-maker to seek equality with the author. In “The Book Artist and the Twenty-Five Years” (1949), Ward pushes his argument a step further by elevating illustrators to “book artists” and emphasizing their “concern with communication” over more abstract, formal matters (375, 381). He laments the recent turn away from the mimetic world adopted by movements like Abstract