

## “No More Obscene than the Truth”

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*Philip Castille*

### ERSKINE CALDWELL'S *GOD'S LITTLE ACRE* AND SOUTHERN INDUSTRIAL PROTEST

More bluntly than any white southern writer of the 1930s, Erskine Caldwell (1903-1987) used the economic blight of the Depression to dramatize the dehumanizing effects of poverty in America. Caldwell's climb to nationwide popularity after the publication of *Tobacco Road* in 1932 was crucial both to the rise of proletarian writing in the United States and, paradoxically, to national awareness of the southern Agrarians, a conservative literary coterie to which he was often linked. At its core Agrarianism was a traditionalist movement, beginning in the post-World War I years in places like Nashville and New Orleans, which extolled pre-industrial plantation life even as smokestacks rose across the New South. Rejecting their historical nostalgia, Caldwell accused the Agrarians of casting a blind eye on antebellum slavery as well as continuing white supremacy in the twentieth-century South, expressed in the brutal Ku Klux Klan revival and the horrid tenant farming system. Unlike the Agrarians, Caldwell wrote next to nothing about the southern past and saw no wistful splendor in it. He focused instead on the sorry southern present and its suffering underclass, white and black. At least as a young author, he believed that he could intervene in this environment of oppression and that what he wrote could improve the lives of the hungry and mistreated. Caldwell thus became the first southern white male author to extend the social protest tradition of naturalistic American novelists like Stephen Crane, Jack London, Upton Sinclair and Theodore Dreiser. In his most productive years, Caldwell's originality sprang from specifically regional sources, especially Depression-era agriculture in the South. Less well known but of continuing relevance is Caldwell's treatment of southern factory work. In *God's Little Acre* (1933) Caldwell offers an indictment of the South's anti-labor business culture, its opposition to industrial unionism, and its authoritarian textile mills. Yet he also gives hope for regional economic uplift and social betterment in the struggle for a democratic workplace.

Caldwell's third novel but first to be brought out by a major firm was *Tobacco Road*, published by Scribner's in February 1932, when he was a 28-year-old largely unknown writer. *Tobacco Road* is a harsh left-wing satire written to protest southern tenant farming and absentee landlords. During his early years as an author, Caldwell had become thoroughly conversant in

leftist politics after dropping out of college, leaving the South, and settling in Maine (Miller 99). In 1929 he opened a bookstore in Portland and formed a close friendship with Alfred Morang (1901-1958), a Maine native and a charismatic painter, violinist, and author with leftist sympathies. Morang's proletarian short stories came to be praised in both mainstream journals and the *New Masses* (Wiggins 17). Caldwell also made contact in the early Thirties with rising young left-wing New York writers such as Nathaniel West and the literary circle who frequented the Sutton Hotel. But the main influence in turning Caldwell to the Left as an author in the early years of the Depression was Michael Gold (1893-1967), whom Caldwell came to know well in 1931. Then at the height of his influence, Mike Gold was the most famous Red writer in the country and a leading member of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). He was an ardent promoter of proletarian literature, a designation he took credit for coining (Folsom 62). To Gold, proletarian literature required the author's first-hand knowledge of the laboring class and willingness to promote resistance-formation. From his editorial positions at the pro-Bolshevik *Liberator* and later the Communist monthly the *New Masses*, Gold urged American authors on the Left to write anti-capitalist stories portraying working-class life in harsh detail and urging labor organizing. His call to "literary leftism" was answered variously by many center-left writers. Among these, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and Ernest Hemingway were particular favorites of Caldwell's. His sympathetic contact with Gold and other East Coast leftists like West and Malcolm Cowley during this time was uncommon among white male southern writers — although Katherine Anne Porter, Olive Tilford Dargan, Grace Lumpkin, and Myra Page were southern women novelists with ties to the New York literary left. Caldwell's association with urban radical writers stirred his social conscience, sharpened his sense of class injustice, and gave him purpose as a young author. He resolved to write truthfully about the downtrodden South in which he was reared. By 1931, when Norman Macleod urged Caldwell in the pages of *New Masses* to "go left," Caldwell was already writing *Tobacco Road* and ready to comply. By 1932, the year he wrote *God's Little Acre*, he had joined the League of Professional Writers and endorsed the Communist Party ticket in that year's presidential election.

For "Red" Caldwell (as his friends called him) and for many other Left writers during the early Depression, the interpretation of what was meant by proletarian literature wavered, although the concepts of class exploitation and state subjugation seemed to offer the only coherent explanations for the widespread misery of the time. As Robert Shulman observes, few radical

American authors read Marx deeply; they "may not so much have followed Marx as discovered that Marx was on their side" (16). This was true of Caldwell, whose true gift was as a muckraker and reformer, not as a revolutionary writer — as he acknowledged (quoted by Platt, 91). But as much could be said for writers as different in background and region as James T. Farrell and John Steinbeck, radical intellectuals who also wrote important Naturalistic social protest novels of scarcity, hardship, and injustice. Literary radicalism took many forms during the Depression and was energized by the Communist movement, which served in the U.S. as "the major source of militant struggle to eradicate oppression by race and class" (Wald 192). Caldwell was always clear about his hatred for southern aristocrats and bigots and understood the fear they inspired. In his hometown of Wrens, Ga., the Klan operated with the cooperation of local authority and publicly lynched a black man when Caldwell was in his teens. The Klan also warned Reverend Ira Caldwell, Erskine's father, against trying to aid hungry black sharecroppers, speaking out against prisoner chain-gangs, and sermonizing "about the need for greater aid to the poor and the Christian responsibility of every individual for his fellow man" (Miller 31). Rev. Caldwell was branded a "'a nigger-lovin' S.O.B.'" and threatened with violence if he challenged Klan authority in east Georgia (Miller 264). Later, as a young reporter for the *Atlanta Journal* in the mid 1920s, Caldwell witnessed the spread of Klan popularity into the cities and its brutal intimidation of urban blacks. Thus, when he emerged as a national figure in the early 1930s and reported in the *New Masses* on lynchings in Georgia (Denning 263), Caldwell had been preparing for years for the role of southern expatriate and literary agitator for social change.

Caldwell's increasing popularity strengthened his dedication to radical literary causes. When the play version of *Tobacco Road* opened in 1933 in New York, its box office success quickly led to numerous road shows, making it "one of the most widely distributed proletarian-based works of the thirties" (Platt 91). Caldwell soon became actively involved in the left-wing theatre movement (including the Theatre of Action) to present socially-conscious plays and advocate mass action. In 1935 he joined the Communist-led Popular Front organization, the League of American Writers, and was one of 62 pro-Soviet Union signatories to sign a petition calling for a U.S. workers' revolution and the end of American capitalism. Although Caldwell did not formally join the CPUSA, he remained a committed anti-capitalist throughout the decade. He contributed pieces not only to the *New Masses* but also the *Daily Worker*, the *Anvil*, the *New Anvil*, and other left-wing journals, even while gaining the commercial success that eluded most radical writers. That

he attracted criticism from both left- and right-wing editors and critics during the Depression suggests Caldwell's willingness to experiment with accepted representations of class, race, and sex in pursuit of unconventional approaches to reform literature. As the current reconsideration of Red literature from the Depression continues to redirect attention to radical writers during the period between the world wars, Caldwell's contribution to American proletarian writing, especially in *God's Little Acre*, should not be overlooked.

Early in life Caldwell gained sympathy for the southern working class from his father, an itinerant Presbyterian preacher of the Social Gospel (Mixon 9). Although at first *Tobacco Road* sold poorly, it was widely reviewed and admired on the Left. *God's Little Acre* soon followed, brought out by Viking Press in February, 1933, a month before Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration, when the Depression seemed at its worst and the viability of capitalism was in doubt. Because of several sex scenes (much influenced by D. H. Lawrence's fiction), it was labeled pornographic by some reviewers, and obscenity charges were filed in New York by the prudish Society for the Suppression of Vice. In a shrewd observation that underscored his awareness of the hypocrisy of critics who lashed out at presentations of graphic sex but not graphic poverty, Caldwell defended his novel by stating simply that it was "no more obscene than the truth" (quoted by Miller 201). Dozens of well-known writers rose to his defense — including Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson, well-known authors who had already written about economic subjugation in the southern textile belt. After a brief trial in 1933, a New York magistrate ruled that the novel was "literature," not pornography; Caldwell felt vindicated, and the notoriety made the novel Caldwell's first best-seller. The legal tension over *God's Little Acre* was matched by the uncertain aesthetic responses of even sympathetic critics. Reviewers were unsettled by the book's strange combination of economic complaint and marital farce. Those on the Left felt that the serious theme of historical formation was poorly assimilated into the bawdy material — certainly, no proletarian novel of the period presents sexual desire as provocatively as *God's Little Acre*. Reviewers on the Right refused to see beyond the sex scenes — or used the sex scenes as a pretext — and dismissed the book as trash. Yet Caldwell himself had high and complex literary ambitions for *God's Little Acre*. In 1931, a year before he began the book and while he was spending time with Mike Gold in New York, Caldwell set forth his intention to write an inclusive "novel of proletarian life" in the South. "My sympathies lie with the millions who do not know what to do" (quoted by Miller 159), he announced. He proposed that *God's Little Acre* would tell

their story in a sweeping narrative portraying both farm and factory misery in the contemporary South. Indeed, *God's Little Acre* represents a significance advance beyond *Tobacco Road* in its treatment of desperate South Carolina textile workers, the "lintheads," who are portrayed realistically and sympathetically in the novel.

The proletarian themes of *God's Little Acre* are explicit in the industrial part of the novel. The setting is "Scottsville," a fictional milltown located in the Horse Creek Valley between Aiken, S.C., and Augusta, Ga. This area, which included thousands of millworkers in the early 1930s, lies just across the Savannah River from Caldwell's East Georgia fictional world. Although Caldwell, as a minister's son, did not come from a working class family, he had personal experience with poverty and declassing. As a teenager he worked the night shift with a mostly African-American crew in a cottonseed oil mill in his hometown near Augusta. At age 18 he took to the road and hit bottom in Bogalusa, La., jailed for loitering — meaning he had no money — and for being suspected of being a labor organizer in the sawmills. From this incarceration episode Caldwell learned "an understanding of victimization and oppression that he could never forget" (Miller 49). Caldwell also had first-hand knowledge of southern cotton manufacturing, as Augusta was home to several large textile mills. Labor strife between millowners and textile workers there dated back to the 1890s — marked by frequent strikes and financial panics — and had continued into the 1930s, when Caldwell was writing *God's Little Acre*. Strife was prevalent throughout the region, and "Scottsville" appears to be a composite of several milltowns such as Graniteville, Warrentonville, and others in the Horse Creek Valley. Millhands in the Valley, part of the general labor unrest in the textile South, had gone out on strike in 1929 and in 1932. Caldwell probably also had in mind the 1929 mass walkout at Ware Shoals Manufacturing Company, located near Greenwood in the South Carolina upcountry. This large labor action brought out the National Guard by order of the state's pro-business governor. Despite the ultimate failure of the Ware Shoals strike, dozens of wildcat textile strikes against long hours and low pay rippled through South Carolina. When Caldwell was writing *God's Little Acre*, the militant Horse Creek Valley workforce "represented the vanguard of the southern cotton-mill working class" (Simon, *God's Little Acre*, 384).

Furthermore, nearby North Carolina had witnessed even more violent labor protest. Most notorious was the Gastonia textile mill strike of 1929, which drew international condemnation for its brutal convergence of private wealth and state power employed against workers. Gastonia, outside

Charlotte and near the South Carolina line, was home to the Loray Mill, the largest in the South. Setting the pattern for out-of-state ownership, Loray had been operated for years by the Manville-Jenckes Company of Rhode Island. Even though the Southern Piedmont led the nation in textile production at the beginning of the Depression — it had overtaken Massachusetts during the 1920s — union organizing lagged far behind other sections of the country (Simon 52). Most millhands were homeless refugees from failed southern farms; the region from Virginia to Alabama was one of the most severely eroded agricultural sections of the nation due to cotton over-farming (Tullos 80). Even though their textile wages were the worst in the nation, these millhands were desperately afraid to walk off their jobs because the company milltown was their only home. Further, northern unions largely had written off any hope of successful organizing in the rural South and by the late 1920s were devoting few resources to labor organizing. Because mill churches and ministers were supported financially by the company, mill owners received strong support from fundamentalist Christianity in opposing union membership. “CIO means Christ Is Out” was shouted from many southern pulpits during the Depression (Goldfield 186). In the face of such entrenched opposition, only desperation and dire poverty could spur textile workers to walk out. Such spontaneous labor actions — as depicted in *God’s Little Acre* — often expressed an indigenous radicalism without professional union leadership (Rosigno and Danaher 78).

The Gastonia action was the first major U.S. strike to be led by American Communists (the National Textile Workers Union, affiliated with the CPUSA), and it received international publicity. In strong allegiance to the owning class, local newspapers decried the coming of Communism into the South and warned whites that its spread would empower African Americans to rise up in rebellion. In this politically-charged atmosphere, northern organizers were unprepared for the fury of the white Carolina mill hands and lost control of the labor action that erupted. Nearly all workers at the Loray mill walked off their jobs, demanding union recognition, a reduction of the six-day workweek, an end to 12-hour days, a minimum wage, and a stop to the dangerous “stretch-out” system of forcing one employee to tend dozens of looms at once to reduce labor costs. The company retaliated by locking out the strikers and evicting them from the company-owned mill village. In turn the strikers set up picket lines around the plant to prevent the mill from reopening and settled into a strikers’ camp on vacant land. North Carolina Governor Max Gardner, himself the owner of a textile mill in nearby Shelby, entered the dispute on management’s side. A violent turn-

ing point was reached when he called out the National Guard against the strikers. Soldiers smashed picket lines with rifle butts and fixed bayonets and escorted scab workers to restart the mills. Many of the strike organizers and participants were women, and they were targeted for special abuse by the municipal police and Ku Klux Klan, often acting in collusion. A mob of masked men destroyed the union's headquarters, torched food supplies, and terrorized the strikers' tent city. Labor organizers were kidnapped and flogged. The strikers fought back. There were shootings on both sides, including the fatal wounding of the county sheriff, and the ambush murder of the female strike leader.

But no match for the combination of business might and state firepower, the Gastonia strikers submitted. Workers won a few concessions, such as the eventual abolition of night work for women and children. However, the harsh tactics of the mill operators raised a national outcry and led several left-leaning southern novelists to address the need for economic reform in the industrial South. At least six protest novels were inspired by the Gastonia strike. The most authentic of these are by three southern women writers with Communist ties — Fielding Burke (*Olive Tilford Dargan*), *Call Home the Heart*; Grace Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*; and Myra Page, *Gathering Storm*; all were published in 1932. The best-known author to publish a Gastonia-inspired novel was Sherwood Anderson. His *Beyond Desire* also appeared in 1932, during Anderson's pro-Communist phase, when he took an active interest in the plight of poor southern whites. Shortly after the publication of *Beyond Desire*, Caldwell proclaimed Anderson in December 1932 to be "the best writer in America" (quoted by Miller 85), a strong indication that Caldwell had read Anderson's Gastonia novel and endorsed its proletarian message. Yet all these Gastonia novels condemned labor conditions in southern industry, and all were in circulation among East Coast radicals when Caldwell was writing *God's Little Acre*, which did not appear until 1933.

*God's Little Acre* is not based directly on the Gastonia strike, which Caldwell had not witnessed (Caldwell had settled in Maine in 1927). However, Caldwell's main biographer, Dan Miller, is mistaken when he concludes that *God's Little Acre* has little in common with the body of writing generated by Gastonia. During the period leading up to and including the composition of *God's Little Acre* in the second half of 1932, Caldwell read a wide range of pro-labor authors. His reading included proletarian novels by Anderson, Lumpkin and others, even as he insisted publicly that dogma should not overwhelm artistic judgment in protest fiction (Miller 414n44). Caldwell

knew of the Gastonia strike as well as another notorious mill action of 1929 in the western North Carolina town of Marion. In *God's Little Acre* Caldwell conflates details drawn from both Gastonia and Marion, or more specifically from written accounts of both incidents.

In Marion, the workers had gone on strike in October 1929 at the Baldwin and Clinchfield mills and set up picket lines. Again, there was state counter-mobilization as Gov. Gardner sent in troops. Union members were evicted from the mill villages at rifle-point, and the mills were reopened under martial law. Although militancy was discouraged by the local leadership of the weak United Textile Workers (UTW) union, labor violence continued in Marion. A wildcat second strike ensued at the Baldwin Mill when workers took control of the plant, turned off the power, shut down the equipment, and re-closed the mill; this action traces in reverse the plot of *God's Little Acre*. When the Marion strikers tried to prevent scab workers from entering the mill gate, sheriff's deputies and company guards fired tear gas into the crowd and fatally shot six strikers in the back as they ran away from the plant; another 25 were wounded by bullets. One of the strike leaders was James Randolph (Randall) Hall, age 22, who was fatally shot three times in the back, chest, and a leg. Photographs of his bullet-riddled body were published in the *Labor Defender*, the journal of the International Labor Defense and the American Left's first photographic magazine. Hall left behind a young widow, whose photograph also appeared in the papers. His burial in a cemetery next to the mills attracted a huge procession as well as widespread publicity. These details of Hall's defiant leadership, murder, and mass funeral bear close resemblance to the tragic career of Will Thompson, the worker-hero of *God's Little Acre*.

The "Marion Massacre" attracted national notoriety. Doing field research for a pro-labor novel he planned to write (but never did), Sinclair Lewis, then at the height of his fame, traveled to Marion as a correspondent for the Scripps-Howard newspapers. He wrote a series of six articles on police violence and economic hardship; these would be reprinted as a book pamphlet, *Cheap and Contented labor: The Picture of a Southern Mill Town in 1929*, which was widely circulated at the time. Written in a tone at once sympathetic to labor and critical of state counter-mobilization (Schorer 522-23), Lewis' detailed portrait of Marion is the most likely literary source for the Scottsville section of *God's Little Acre*, along with material from Anderson's *Beyond Desire*. While *Beyond Desire* grows from the Gastonia tragedy, it is also a composite portrait of the southern textile belt and shows Anderson's awareness of other strike sites such as Marion, which he mentions specifically (258).



In *Beyond Desire* the fictional Gastonia is named Birchfield, an echo of Clinchfield, where the Marion Massacre occurred. Caldwell had for years much admired both older authors, and from Lewis he particularly absorbed the technique of satiric realism. Indeed, Caldwell complained that southern literature had never produced a protest author of Lewis' stature, thereby appointing himself to fill Lewis' shoes (Miller 73-74, 400n33). However, despite the attention Lewis drew to the Marion Massacre, he could not prevent the local whitewash in which the sheriff and 14 other defendants were acquitted at trial of murder for gunning down the strikers. Nor could he stop the mill owners from bringing in new scab workers from rural areas and black-listing strikers and their families. After the bloody failure of the Marion strike, textile unrest continued throughout the region, with "some 175 strikes in Carolina Piedmont mills from the late 1920s through the mid-1930s" (Tullos 187), throughout the period in which Caldwell was writing *God's Little Acre*.

The industrial narrative of *God's Little Acre* centers on Will Thompson, a white loomweaver. Will along with the rest of the male Scottsville workforce has been idled for a year and a half during the early 1930s because management has refused to negotiate demands for shorter hours and better pay. Although Caldwell's impressionistic technique in the novel is to withhold specific physical description of the characters, Will emerges as tough and lanky with huge, powerful hands. He is proud to be a factory man and scorns farm life as backward and unrewarding. Like all the occupants of the mill village, he and his wife Rosamond occupy a flimsy yellow, four-room company-owned house, set on supports in a grassless plot with a privy out back and no sewerage. The unpaved village streets send clouds of red dust through the windows. Cotton lint and smoke pour from the three-story brick mill lined with tall windows. Management's never-ending demands for Tayloristic efficiency have turned Will into a man of resentment. He complains bitterly about the cause of the strike, the stretch-out system of forcing one employee to do the jobs of several, and the scant \$1.10 per day that the mill paid for a 55-hour workweek (five 10-hour days plus 5 hours on Saturday, ending at noon). He rails against the greed of capitalist management and the collusion of the churches and quasi-religious organizations such as the Red Cross, which doles out only enough flour to keep the strikers alive. But he rejects alienated communication with the owning class, and he scorns the union (a local of the American Federation of Labor), which has done little to help the locked-out men and urges only patience. Pellagra is widespread because of malnutrition, and lung fibrosis (or "brown lung," caused by inhaling cotton lint) debilitates many millhands and makes them spit blood.

In this atmosphere of prolonged hopelessness, only Will of all the characters in the novel shows any political consciousness. He perceives the ugly reality of the emergent southern industrial class as well as its callous unconcern for the laboring class that technological innovation has created. He despises the millowners who underpay and overwork their industrial employees to pump up earnings and indulge themselves in luxury (*God's Little Acre* 52). But he is also aware that economic oppression extends from the mill to the fields as greedy cotton brokers "suck the blood" out of southern farmers by encouraging overproduction to force prices down and inflate the profits of speculators (75). In a novel sharply divided between farm and factory, only Will can make the connections and see the entire economic cycle of exploitation (imposed by owners, bankers, brokers, and investors) that keeps labor frightened, fragmented and poor in the South. In sum, Will can perceive that the capitalist system itself is the core problem and main obstacle to workers' control of their labor enterprises.

In Caldwell's roughhouse imagination, Will's ability to work the looms is linked to his manhood. Being idled by the strike has weakened him and, he fears, will emasculate him like the exhausted agricultural workers of the South (memorably depicted in *Tobacco Road*). He refuses to be "nothing but a piece of company property" (153), a human correlative to the flimsy shack he lives in but can never own. He suspects that the company soon will evict him and other striker-families, bring in replacement workers from the Carolina upcountry, and restart "his" plant without him. Will's fears about strikebreakers are well founded. As the historian Bryant Simon has documented, during the time Caldwell was writing *God's Little Acre*, Carolina farmhands were being brought down en masse by mill owners into Horse Creek Valley milltowns to act as strikebreakers (*God's Little Acre* 392n29). Aware of this threat, Will seeks to rise above economic helplessness, rekindle his masculine energies, and seize the mill for the workers. To remasculinize himself, he works himself into a sexual frenzy in which he tears his sister-in-law Griselda's clothes to bits. Yet Will's attack is not on Griselda but on her cotton dress and underwear, which he ferociously shreds back to the original lint from which they were woven in mills like Scottsville's. As Sylvia Cook observes, the scene reveals more of Will's obsession with manufactured textiles than with Griselda's body — ripping apart her garments is a rehearsal for ripping apart the locked gates of the textile mill. In what is the most controversial scene in the novel, Will has adulterous sex with his sister-in-law while astounded family members (including his wife) look on through the open bedroom door. Yet this transgressive union is presented not as a violation but as a physical liberation. This defiant

physical act frees the lovers and their onlookers from "the oppressiveness of the normal" (Cook 123) in an idle milltown and readies them for the social rebellion of the following morning.

This sex scene enacts what is a common pattern in "tough-guy" fiction and film of the early Thirties — the celebration of male force accompanied by female worship of phallic might. To the modern critical eye, this episode also suggests the "Depression-era gender anxiety" (Abbott 23) of the economically disempowered male, for whom idleness raised fears of impotence. But Caldwell's version of this hardboiled pattern in *God's Little Acre* ambitiously places tough-guy sex in the service of labor resistance — that is, a sexual act becomes the catalyst for an economic one. Feeling his masculine powers restored after sex with Griselda, Will leads the men and women (including Griselda) of Scottsville in a workers' rebellion as they march on the mill. It is a classic moment of leftist resistance-formation as the determined workers push "forward, stronger than the force of the walled-up water in Horse Creek below" (168). In an assault similar to his recent sexual aggression, Will tears apart the steel fences and barb-wire surrounding the building, pushes through the heavy doors, throws open the windows, turns on the electric power, and rules the plant. The machinery roars into life: "For a moment, Will feels alive once again. Stripped to his waist, sweat pouring from his wiry, thin body, he stands in front of a row of pounding, fast-moving looms" (Simon, *God's Little Acre* 385-86.) However, while sexual assault may be acceptable in the impoverished South, economic assault is not. Will's transgressive industrial act has been leaked to management, which has brought in carloads of armed gunmen to subdue the insurgency. The uprising fails when these pistol-carrying company goons shoot Will three times in the back (much as Randall Hall was shot in the back at Marion). Now leaderless and demoralized, the other rebellious Scottsville workers shuffle out of the mill. In the defeated aftermath, Will is mourned by the entire village but especially his widow and two sisters-in-law, all of them his lovers. With Will's death the spirit of resistance drains from the strikers. His martyrdom apparently has been in vain; he has failed to save his people — a downbeat ending that resembles the shooting death of Red Oliver during the failed strike portrayed in Anderson's *Beyond Desire*.

In one of the few literary analyses of *God's Little Acre* published in the last 15 years, Laura Hapke (1995) has focused on what she sees as Caldwell's disapproving attitude toward female millhands. These comprised at least a third of the southern textile workforce. She notes that Caldwell positively associates men like Will Thompson with the dynamic power of the factory:

male masculinity and machinery are equated in a phallicized union. However, women workers are portrayed differently in *God's Little Acre*: rather than being stimulated by the machinery to want sex with men, Caldwell's mill women actually "prefer the machines to men as sexual surrogates" (Hapke 21). Because the women have taken jobs operating machinery while the men are on strike, Hapke argues that Caldwell portrays women as traitors who have betrayed their men and sided with the rich owners. These women may gain freedom from economic subordination to the male millhands, but they only prolong the economic domination of the owners. In her analysis male strikers thus endure both economic and sexual defeat, displaced economically at the looms by women and rendered sexually impotent by idleness. Their masculinity flattened, the unemployed men watch the newly financially-independent young women stride confidently to and from the mill, their bodies alive with their new sense of power and freedom. But despite their confidence, these women remain victims of male hostility on the streets and endure physical beatings at home. Everybody loses.

Caldwell's portrayal of women in *God's Little Acre* has been criticized ever since the book's publication. However, the widespread post-Victorian cultural project of formulating "awakened" female desire as a positive consequence of male sexual aggression — thereby legitimizing assault — had scarcely begun with Caldwell and reached back into the nineteenth century (Sielke 46). The *fin-de-siècle* poetics of sexual violation appear in Naturalistic novels such as Frank Norris' *McTeague* (1899) and quickly became a commonplace of popular and even avant-garde fiction. Caldwell belonged to the hardboiled school of American writing in the generation between the wars in which masculinity was constructed both through whiteness and thrilling sexual privilege. Emerging during the post-war cultural and economic upheaval of the Twenties, pulp detective novels blurred the line between violator and victim, pleasure and pain. Narratives of sexual conquest dramatized a gendered dynamic of identity formation and gender individuation, creating "realistic" literary figure of male control and female submission. The stylized celebration of sexual violence in tough-guy novels ultimately led to the presentation of assault as a male rehabilitative act, a rebellion against oppressive cultural and political authority, as in the crime novels of James M. Cain (McCann 20).

The trend extended from pulp fiction to Modernist "literary" novels from some of the best publishing houses. For example, avant-garde authors such as Anderson associated male sexual appetites with "natural" animal-like

desire, uninhibited by outmoded pieties and social restraints. In *Poor White* (1921), the farmboy John May becomes aroused by young Clara Butterworth and tears open her dress, an act presented as robust and essentially innocent. After she pushes him away and is alone in her room, Clara is portrayed as taking pleasure in her sudden sexualization — Anderson thus construes this episode “as an ultimately positive experience in Clara’s development” as a young woman (Bender 202). High- and low-brow treatments of aggressive male sexuality may be seen to merge sensationally in William Faulkner’s crime parody, *Sanctuary*, published by Cape & Smith in 1931, the year before *God’s Little Acre* was written, and an obvious source for Caldwell. Drawing upon influences as apparently distant as Modernist aesthetics, intellectual Freudianism, and masculinist detective thrillers, Faulkner presents and re-presents rape from a series of canted angles in *Sanctuary*. In one, the gangster Red — acting as a sexual substitute for the impotent mobster Popeye — has rough sex with Temple Drake, an upper-class teenage kidnap victim held captive in a Memphis brothel. The delusion that rape makes him powerful eroticizes her and leads Red to overestimate his might. Much like Will Thompson, flush with sexual self-importance, Red is shot to death by thugs.

These examples of early twentieth-century rape ideology do not make *God’s Little Acre* less sexist. But it should be noted that Caldwell’s celebratory treatment of the renegade white male who resists containment is part of a larger Thirties cultural project of shoring up working-class masculinity in order to resist unfair bosses, politicians, and capital systems (Breu 62). In this regard Caldwell illustrates how Depression-era proletarian fiction drew upon and influenced the American hardboiled novel by reorienting masculinity during the Depression as the honest individual’s “struggle against the capitalist machine” (Abbott 207n9).

Although the two books vary widely in setting and style, *God’s Little Acre* also shows the influence of Gold’s *Jews Without Money*, which appeared in 1930 and achieved considerable success; both novels associate male assertiveness with economic resistance. *Jews Without Money* is Gold’s autobiographical protest about “the tenement struggle for life” (158) on New York’s lower East Side, an immigrant slum brutal yet vibrant. When he wrote it, Gold was an orthodox Communist in his thirties; but the realistic narrative is not explicitly political. It describes the childhood of a boy who grows up amid the poverty, crime, and sexual exploitation of the ghetto. *Jews Without Money* presents styles of violent masculinity witnessed by the young protagonist “Mikey” as he struggles to survive in an America without equality or justice. It is a bigoted, sexist, and chaotic cityscape where cruelty

thrives in many forms, and all forms of authority are venal and pitiless. Many characters are gangsters, pimps, and prostitutes; beatings and gunfire are routine. At the close of the novel Mikey has dropped out of school and seems likely to fall “like my father in poverty’s trap” (308). But when he listens for the first time to a soapbox speaker proclaiming the workers’ revolution, he awakens to political consciousness and perceives a militant, masculinist way out of immigrant isolation.

In this realistic *bildungsroman* Gold employs the hardboiled styles of Twenties crime fiction to introduce proletarian themes and Communist ideology. In his survey of American radical fiction Paul Garon calls attention to Gold’s striking originality: “Michael Gold constructed the notion of proletarian literature as an almost completely masculine enterprise by drawing on standard rhetorical stereotypes wherein . . . the proletariat was linked to ideas of masculinity, strength, and purity” (20). Thus, in *Jews Without Money* overthrowing capitalism is projected to be the job of tough, virile, undaunted young men steeped in street life who assault the bourgeois confinements of class, race, and gender. From an aesthetic standpoint, this audacious project implies a sweeping rejection of 1920s literary Modernism, cultural decadence, and “feminine” introspection.

For Gold to write a novel of such brutal experience, as Mark Schoening observes, is in itself “a politically progressive act” (62). To value hungry men who fight oppression is to reject conventional identifications of class and masculinity. Caldwell’s characterization of Will Thompson similarly merges proletarian maleness with progressive politics. To remain powerless is a fatal course that ensures alienation and stasis. Will’s sexual aggression in *God’s Little Acre* thus is figured as recuperative and potentiating, a preparation for mass action. Physical desire rouses him from economic torpor. It prepares him to seize control of the textile mill, whose bosses meant to destroy him through exclusion. Turning on the power implies the revolutionary possibility of redirecting it — not to sustain the system that works men to death but to create another system that gives life and hope. This hope is betrayed at the end of *God’s Little Acre* as the power goes off again.

Although it closes in failure, *God’s Little Acre* shares none of the Modernist preoccupation with cultural impotence and decline shown by Faulkner, the writer to whom Caldwell was most frequently compared in the Thirties. Both southern writers went to university and were well-versed in the intellectual trends and artistic issues of their time (despite their mutual posturings as unlettered farmers). But during the Thirties, while Faulkner drew on

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and fit the Modernist aesthetics of defeat and decay to southern soil, Caldwell aligned himself with the New York literary Left and embraced the populist-Marxist aesthetics of power and disruption. Given Caldwell's effort to combine proletarian content with expressionist technique, the favorable treatment of male aggression in *God's Little Acre* should not obscure our appreciation for the novel's scathing attack on laissez-faire capitalism or its earnest commitment to social betterment.

Other texts from the Thirties show that Caldwell's labor politics, if not his gender politics, were sharpened by the Depression into a fierce hostility toward economic exploitation. In his pioneering documentary travelogue *Some American People* — the original "I've seen America" book of the Thirties — written in 1934-35, Caldwell repeatedly stresses the need for national worker solidarity in opposition to the domination of the owning class. Textile workers, North and South — and by implication male and female — will find "no friend among mill owners" (136) and must not sell each other out for temporary advantage. This staunchly pro-labor sentiment comes out during a conversation Caldwell recorded not in the Southern Piedmont but in Lawrence, Mass., on the eve of a textile strike there in 1934. One of the militant millhands insists that the worker can count only on "the man who works alongside him" in his fight for a better life; without loyalty to each other, strikers are doomed to defeat and continued misery. Further, even those factory workers who believe themselves unaffected by the labor troubles of lowly lintheads also must support the strike. As one worker points out, when textile workers can be forced to toil for only fifty cents a day, "it won't be so very long before we'll be getting fifty cents a day ourselves." In other words, all labor is discredited by the starvation wages paid to textile workers.

In addition, in *Some American People* Caldwell is able to look beyond the hapless textile industry and see links to wider American manufacturing abuses, especially in the automobile industry. The right of workers to organize was not established until the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (the Wagner Act); it required employers to accept collective bargaining. In 1934 Detroit was still in the pre-United Auto Workers period and not yet unionized. Auto manufacturing led the nation in worker exploitation by promoting Fordism — "scientific" assembly techniques to standardize labor and promote mass consumption (Harvey 125-26). In effect Fordism strengthened corporate power in the United States by fragmenting work tasks and speeding work flow, turning workers themselves into interchangeable parts in an automated system. In *Some American People* Caldwell blames Henry Ford for

inventing “the most inhuman system of extracting labor known in any industry” — that is, the “speed-up” on the assembly line, which caused workers literally to run themselves to death to hold their jobs. It was the speed-up, Caldwell points out, that became replicated throughout American manufacturing and “was later introduced into the cotton mills as the stretch-out” (*Some American People* 158). This is an acute observation on Caldwell’s part. In the Southern Piedmont during the economic slowdown after World War I, the stretch-out was used to shrink workforce by making millhands operate dozens of looms at once, thus segmenting workers’ labor and reducing their numbers and power. Thus Fordism reached from Detroit to Gastonia and beyond.

In Caldwell’s stark description in *Some American People* the Fordist system has become the cold mainspring of American capitalism and created a cruel *danse macabre* for non-union labor. The speed-up “drives men insane” and reduces them to manic puppets who “must actually hop, skip, and jump” to their own ruin. Forced to “hurry, hurry, hurry” (159) all the time and race the stopwatch under the surveillance of company overseers, workers “are so wrecked physically that they can never work again.” When Ford’s employees become addled or hurt, their bosses send them to the company hospital, where the medical costs are higher than the wages they earned. When those still able to work speak out against the speed-up, they are fired outright and blacklisted. Thus, from auto plants to cotton mills, American workers are little more than economic serfs in the neo-medieval “Kingdom of Henry I” (162), a *laissez-faire* realm where labor’s grinding choice is between overwork and no work. But even those who keep their heads down and try to comply with the speed-up soon lose their jobs anyway when their fingers are torn off by the over-gearred machinery. Such injured workers then are cast away and barred from the Detroit auto plants that mutilated them and made them derelicts in what Caldwell calls the “Eight Finger City,” a brutal synecdoche for devastated American labor.

Caldwell’s originality in *God’s Little Acre* lies in his remarkable ability to fuse this astute economic critique of Depression-era American industry with a distinctive fictional aesthetic that bestows worth and even beauty even on the oppressed workers of Scottsville — and by extension, all of American manufacturing labor. Caldwell combines a realistic, first-hand knowledge of the misery of southern textile workers with a jarring, evocative language to render them vital, even poetic. Caldwell’s melodic, repetitive prose creates impressionistic images of the lusty vitality of these battered mill hands of both sexes and the strange splendor of their hard industrial world. In



particular Caldwell depicts their sexuality as a force that resists the regimentation imposed by Fordist mechanization. Rather than bodies compelled to run at a pace set by machines, the bodies of young men and women in Scottsville pulsate to a sense of time based on the rhythms of erotic experience. Caldwell seems to offer a counterpoint to Antonio Gramsci's argument in the *Prison Notebooks* that the Tayloristic mechanization of work must lead to the restriction of sexual desire. Caldwell suggests instead that the sexual instincts of the Scottsville workers are potentiated by the thrumming industrial workplace — the industrial setting of *God's Little Acre* intensifies physical desire rather than numbs it. In Caldwell's earthy imagination sexual energies can then catalyze efforts toward economic disruption and reform. Factory labor need not crush human well-being or turn people into automatons. In a more humane system than laissez-faire capitalism, factory work actually might intensify and uplift bodily experience.

So, in Scottsville, the women who have replaced the men at the looms are strong young bodies awakened by the machines they handle. These women stride into the mill expectantly and come out happy when their shift is over, powerfully stimulated by the rhythms of their bodies at work. Caldwell writes, "In the mill streets of the Valley towns the breasts of girls were firm and erect. The cloth they wove under the blue lights clothed their bodies, but beneath the covering the motions of erect breasts were like the quick movements of hands in unrest. In the Valley towns beauty was beginning, and the hunger of strong men was like the whimpering of beaten women" (69). The milltown husbands in their enforced idleness may lash out in misdirected resentment at wives who work outside the household. They may attempt to reappropriate female bodies through domestic domination and violence. But male force cannot dissolve the newly-formed bond between women and machines, for "the girls were in love with the looms and the spindles and the flying lint. The wild-eyed girls on the inside of the ivy-walled milled looked like potted plants in bloom." Caldwell thus associates women's bodies at work with the grace of total activity and the stirrings of self-consciousness. This association expresses his political-aesthetic effort to romanticize factory labor rather than in any political-scientific way to address sexual individuation, the gendered hierarchy of labor in turning cotton into cloth, or the privileging of (white) male pay (poor as it was) over the salaries paid white women and blacks of either sex in the textile mills. Caldwell's main point is that subjugation and alienation are not inevitable for industrial workers. His artistry is highly innovative in proclaiming that the machine itself can be empowering — although Sherwood Anderson perhaps had implied as much in his pro-Left novel *Beyond Desire*, which

preceded *God's Little Acre* into print and also extols female worker physicality. For example, Anderson describes a young southern mill woman as seen through the gaze of a male coworker: "her firm young breasts, their forms showing though the thin dress she wore. . . . she was like a bird in her quickness. Her hands were like wings" (52). Her nimble erotic power thus rises from her physical intensity and dexterity gained as a mill hand — however much her labor is exploited by the owners. Her strength also foreshadows her potential for militant labor action against the owners — although in *Beyond Desire* she and other workers are thwarted by state intervention on the side of capital, and she is imprisoned for participating in the failed strike.

In his earthy and colorful descriptions of work and life in a Carolina mill village, Caldwell seems to be following Mike Gold's proclamation in the *New Masses* in 1930 that proletarian literature will do "Away with drabness, the bourgeois notion that the Worker's life is sordid" (quoted. by Folsom 207). Caldwell seems to mean that the irrepressible energy embodied in these strong young women and in young men like Will Thompson is stimulated and released by their factory work and expresses the struggle of life over death. This energy need not be destroyed by coldly "logical" Taylorist devices such as the nightmarish stretch-out or dissipated through strikes and lockouts which idle the workers. Instead, the power of work-hardened bodies might be harnessed into a more productive temporality based on desire and pleasure — that is, American bodies aroused rather than deadened by their labor. Indeed, when Caldwell proclaims that "the girls were in love with the looms and the spindles" and were sexually aroused by fusing with them in physical union, he appears to anticipate Donna Haraway's suggestion in "The Cyborg Manifesto" that merger with the machine implies sexual regeneration (rather than reproduction) and the reaffirmation of erotic desire. Cyborgs emerge in late twentieth-century literature and film as hybrids of machine and organism to blur the distinction between mechanisms and bodies, tools and agents, built and natural environments. In Haraway's analysis, cyborgs become oppositional figures of historical transformation who appear under late capitalism to overturn the racist, male-dominant socio-economic structure and subvert its modes of reproduction (Haraway 176). But something similar may be seen in the transformative imagery Caldwell uses to limn Scottsville and its dominated yet unruly workers in the early twentieth century, impoverished southerners seeking regeneration through factory labor in a blighted agrarian region.

In a similarly hopeful way, Caldwell portrays scruffy Scottsville as a place of immanent spatial beauty, a potential "ivy-walled" Eden. Under the rule of

laissez-faire capitalism, Scottsville is a place of scarcity and sickness. But as Gold had promised, "this is not the last word; we know that this manure heap is the hope of the future; we know that not pessimism, but revolutionary élan will sweep this mess out of the world forever" (quoted by Folsom 207). Caldwell's startling overlay of beautiful, expressionistic images on gritty scenes of industrial strife has been described as his "hybrid realism" — a generally unacknowledged aesthetic innovation, perhaps a precursor to the "magical realism" of later twentieth-century fiction (Vials 5). Caldwell draws on his direct contact with the squalor of southern industrial poverty yet transforms the bleak facts of textile life in the early Thirties into a lyrical invocation of latency and potential emergence. Fixed neither on the long dialectical vision of the Marxists on the Left nor on the backward gaze of the Agrarians on the Right, Caldwell saw through to the bruised beauty of the present — the southern cotton manufacturing world of the Great Depression — and expressed it in strikingly abstract, nonrepresentational imagery. Rather than portraying the lintheads as lumpen proletarian victims who endure their misery and await an external catalyst, he presents the workers as a teeming, pent-up, indestructible force for change, reform, and renewal. They are not crushed by the terrible things that happen to them but maintain a vigilant sense of community and social possibility.

Caldwell's vision appears in strange, even shocking images, none more so than when the young women millworkers press their bodies against the side of the ivy-covered red-brick factory and kiss the wall with their lips (68). This cryptic, passionate gesture recalls the transformative kiss described in mythology and fairy tales, as in the story of the beautiful princess and the Frog Prince: The princess must kiss the ugly frog, a regenerative sign that suddenly turns him into a handsome prince. So with a similar shock of recognition, we may find that beneath the kaleidoscopic white sun, black smoke, green ivy, red dust, pale lint, shimmering water, yellow arc lights, blue night-lights, and bloody spittle of Scottsville lies an enormous human immanence. In some respects Caldwell's vivid symbolic technique recalls the Depression-era artistic Precisionist movement — painters such as Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), a Pennsylvanian — which featured scenes of factories, railyards, and slag heaps rendered as sharp, bright geometrical forms to suggest the underlying beauty beneath the hard shapes of American industry. Even in the worst of economic times, Sheeler seemed to perceive an inherency almost larger than art itself or, certainly, the individual workers whom he pictured either not at all or only as mites on the shimmering industrial landscape. The hopefulness of Sheeler's visual language is echoed in the optimistic process-of-becoming depicted in the fantastic,

expectant imagery of *God's Little Acre*. Caldwell's faith in human transformation has roots not only in Marxist dialectics but also in the nineteenth-century Protestant conversion narrative. This transfiguring story of revelation and uplift was deeply familiar to Caldwell from his years of hearing his father preach the collectivist, salvational message of the Social Gospel from the Presbyterian pulpit in dusty towns across the Mid-South. Of course, it is true that in *God's Little Acre* everybody loses and nothing changes for the better. But Caldwell's insistently repetitive and rhythmically sensual poetic language implies that just beneath the tattered surface of milltown debasement, disease, and demoralization lies a mighty potential for direct action, collective control, physical fulfillment, and social betterment.

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