WHAT IS A WORDLESS NOVEL?
TOM SMART

The wordless novel is a unique form of storytelling that communicates a narrative entirely in images, without the use of captions, speech bubbles or other ancillary forms of text. First published in Europe during the early decades of the twentieth century, when public concern around issues to do with social justice and the rife potential for abuse in a capitalist economy was prevalent, wordless novels came to be associated with stories that furthered contemporary political and social agendas, particularly from the wistful perspective of the dispossessed.

The images in wordless novels are not, typically, colourful, of the sort you might expect to see in children's picture books, but they often embrace the comparative starkness of images that are created using nineteenth-century relief printmaking techniques. Relief printing requires artists to draw pictures in reverse onto blocks of wood or linoleum, then to cut away areas that are intended to remain white in the final print. The raised portion of the finished block, which contains the image to be printed, is then coated with ink before being pressed onto paper, resulting in a black-and-white image. Various types of relief printing include wood engraving (in which the image is worked into the endgrain of maple or boxwood with engraving tools), woodcut (which uses parting tools, knives and gouges on the plank of the wood) and linocut (in which the image is cut into a piece of linoleum).

Individual images contain visual elements that allow attentive

readers to establish contextual information such as time, place and mood. When presented in sequence, these elements coalesce with visual allegory, metaphor and symbols to communicate meaning. By deciphering the visual clues in each image, readers can follow the plot of the narrative and trace character development as well as begin to develop an understanding of whatever message it is the story may be trying to impart.

Wordless novels require a certain basic proficiency in visual literacy to be able to 'decode' the thread of the narrative as it unfolds. Readers must be able to deploy a variety of skills including observation, comprehension, analysis, order and sequencing and visual assessment. Readers must also be willing to employ a degree of creativity in order to develop and refine their interpretation of the events depicted. Readers are not, however, constrained in any way by language. Since wordless novels do not rely on text to communicate meaning, the stories that they tell are equally accessible to those proficient in any language, at any level of reading or learning ability.

As an art student[1], George Walker boarded in what he has described as a 'rundown apartment building in the heart of Toronto'. When Walker and the other tenants were given notice by the bank that they would be required to pay double rents for one month, owing to the unfortunate circumstance that the previous landlord had absconded with their rent payments, Walker gave voice to his and his neighbours' frustration and anger by printing a poster with the image of a vulture

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1. This text is adapted from a longer feature on George Walker that first appeared in the *Devil's Artisan* 68, Spring 2011.

on it, an unflattering reference to the bank. The boarding house was 'plastered' with these prints as a way to protest and to attract the attention of the bank inspectors. In the end, and owing in no small measure to the impact of the vulture posters, the bank relented and did not force the issue of double payment with the tenants.

Walker discovered in this episode a lesson in just how effective a poster image could be in exposing and challenging abusive authority and injustice in a society, even one as small as a group of tenants. A cogent image, matched with a purpose and cause, that was printed and disseminated, proved to be an effective way to encourage change; the lesson Walker learned in the boarding house inspired him to look further into the use of wood engraving and woodblock printing in the service of social protest. The capacity of printmaking to be an agent of protest, and to tell a visual narrative, inspired Walker. The recognition that a print could bear witness to injustice enticed him to research the history of the graphic novel, and in particular the work of twentieth-century Belgian artist Frans Masereel (1889–1972).

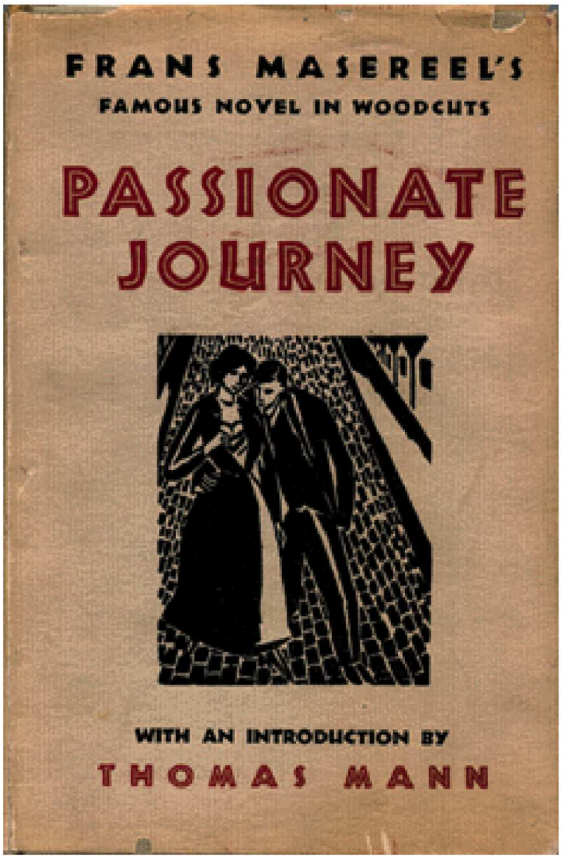
Walker had first encountered Masereel's work in a 1982 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario. His reaction to the wood engravings was immediate and profound, and persuaded him to reassess his own creative production and direction. Walker also started to collect Masereel's graphic woodcut and engraved novels that had been published in Germany in the 1920s by Kurt Wolff. Through Masereel, Walker, not unlike the fictional Alice, dropped into a veritable rabbit hole of wonder and enchantment as he immersed himself in the milieu of the graphic novel through the window provided by this Belgian master of the medium.

Preparing a block for engraving.

Commonly regarded as the first master of the wordless novel, Frans Masereel came of age as an artist in post-World War One Germany, a time of severe austerity, social upheaval and political unrest. Born in Belgium, he fled the war-torn country in 1916 for Paris and then Geneva where he joined the international pacifist movement. Shortly after his arrival in Paris, Masereel turned his artistic talents to creating hundreds of anti-war drawings. *25 Images de la Passion d'un Homme* (*25 Images of the Passion of a Man*), his first graphic novel, was published in 1918 in Geneva and became an inspiration for a generation of artists in Germany and abroad who were seeking the means to condemn the decay in society around them in a pure, visual language. The scope of the graphic novel form inspired other artists, animators, writers, musicians and, especially, filmmakers. In 1923 Masereel settled in Germany, where he became close friends with Expressionist artist George Grosz (1893–1959), a kindred spirit in the anti-war protest movement. Grosz and his German contemporaries were vocal and strident opponents of the war, its after-effects on German

society and the consequent much-reduced standard of living that had left many in the country impoverished, disenfranchised and perilously close to despair. In the two-year period 1925–27 Masereel created nearly one thousand wood engravings, many of which were published by the Munich-based Wolff, who also released German editions of Masereel's graphic novels. Wolff paired Masereel's wordless novels with introductions penned by notables such as Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse; Mann, for example, characterized Masereel's work as 'silent film in black and white without titles'.

The reader of a Masereel novel, dropped into the quagmire of hopelessness that he describes, turns the pages and becomes increasingly outraged at the abuses the protagonist is forced to endure. This, of course, is Masereel's point, and this is the lesson Walker took from his Flemish mentor. By drawing attention to the assaults and corruption that propel the story, Masereel gave an imagery and narrative to a contemporary readership who, suffering greatly from want, found in him an author and artist who described their anxieties. He also pointed to the nameless and faceless villains who embodied the sinfulness that had created the calamitous society in which they existed. A consequence of the visual rhetoric of authoritarianism was to encourage people to react. Masereel intended not just description and narrative; his goal was provocation. He was an agent of agitation. Masereel conscripted his work to the cause of righting social injustice by drawing attention to evil and the harm it does to the individual and society. He burdened his readers with a moral obligation to redeem the tragedy that afflicted his protagonists, and frequently this took the form of direct action in society. This dimension was not lost on Walker.



Passionate Journey, or *My Book of Hours*,
is a wordless novel published in 1919 by Flemish artist
Frans Masereel. The story is the longest and best-selling
of the wordless novels Masereel made. It tells
of the experiences of an early 20th-century everyman
in a modern city.

Anger and action, by-products of the reading experience, were delivered all the more potently because, at heart, Masereel's books are inflamed by passion. His masterful *The Passion of a Man* is a remarkable and tragic visual exegesis of heroism in the face of authority and repressive political systems. In it Masereel depicts the figure of an everyman who, in confronting repression, offers himself up as a sacrifice and is executed. Decidedly anti-religious, *The Passion of a Man* is a secular testament and reinterpretation of the gospel story of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ. The style of Masereel's engravings shows an artist with a firm command of his medium. The figures are depicted in starkly contrasting blocks of dark and light, giving a sense of immediacy and urgency. An artist adept with the devices of composition, pictorial structure, draughtsmanship and dynamic symmetry, Masereel uses the various means of picture-making to lend drama and cadence to the narrative as it unfolds on the successive pages. Gesture and expression drive the emotive energy—the passion—of the story. Masereel has an extraordinary ability to convey emotion through attitude and gesture with an economy of means. His characters, while individuals in the class struggle, have an archetypal quality. The visual poetry comes from the lyricism of the progression of imagery, the potency of the visual metaphors and symbolic language and the pure essence of the types that are carved into his blocks and printed on his sheets. In brief, Masereel possessed an uncommon ability to depict the deeply felt, and to embody it in a modality that rang true to a wide readership.

The Canadian graphic novelist Laurence Hyde (1914–1987) was born in England, then emigrated to Canada and settled in Toronto in 1928 where he later joined the National Film

Board. As a filmmaker, he developed a keen understanding of the sequencing of images required to propel a narrative forward, a skill that enhanced his graphic work. His masterful *Southern Cross* (1951) is a critical testament of the United States government's testing of the hydrogen bomb on Bikini Atoll in 1946. The one hundred twenty engravings comprising the visual narrative lay bare the human and social costs of the decision to evacuate the atoll prior to the detonation of the device.

Unlike his earlier peers, whose work often portrayed the consequences of economic hardship, Hyde bluntly castigates military authoritarianism. His is a tale based on historical fact, framed in the imagery of the expulsion from Eden, with the added exponents of love, murder and death in a post-nuclear apocalypse. Although *Southern Cross* is fiction, its first readers would not have missed the allusion to current events, nor would the forceful critique have been lost on them. Rockwell Kent, in the novel's introduction, describes Hyde's work as 'a story of love and happiness culminating in immeasurable disaster. While not a war story it is at once a warning of the horror that war might visit on all life upon this earth, and a revelation of the cruelties that are present and the disasters that are imminent in the maintenance of peace by threat of war.'

Fundamentally, *Southern Cross* is a visual excoriation of military might, an indictment of the arms race and an anti-American tract. Its steep, tragic arc is rivalled only by Otto Nückel's masterful *Destiny* (1926). Together these two books exemplify a dark trope of the developing genre. Their 'morbid and tragic' stories, 'tales of poverty and crime and the hopeless trap in which many people find themselves from a depressed economic stratum', served as graphic critiques of abusive power. Their mode of presentation, emphasizing the darkness of

their fictional worlds, reinforces the desperate plight of their protagonists. An empathetic reader could not help but be moved to action, projecting the fictional plight to the everyday sphere. The graphic novel tradition, extending from the neo-Expressionism of Frans Masereel through the American Lynd Ward and Laurence Hyde, developed as a visual literature of despair, of fall and redemption, of protest against abuse, of militarism, of the arms race and of poverty. Through the work of these artists, the graphic novel became a form of agitprop, a call to challenge the status quo, and—at the extreme—to overthrow power structures preventing personal, social and political determinism.

George Walker is a contemporary heir to this tradition. To look back on his career from the mid-1980s to the present is to see the manner in which he understood, fully absorbed and embraced the tradition that is traced through these artists.

Wordless emblems, visual narratives, stories without words, these comprise the complex xylographica that is the art of George A. Walker. Over the course of some three decades of creative pursuits, there has emerged this clear purpose: to develop, create, fashion, engrave and disseminate a visual alphabet that codifies the grammar of an imaginative and deeply personal iconography. From the beginning of his career as an artist, Walker has been drawn to the expressive capacity of the limited-edition print, the processes of wood engraving and its various forms and conventions—image, emblem, device, illustration, interpretation, parallel text and graphic novel, among many distinct derivations and combinations of all of these. His practice is characterized by an acknowledgement of craft and historical antecedent, careful attention to process and method, technique, and the nuances of working

within the parameters that each of these imposes. Paradoxically, by working within the boundaries of each of these rubrics, Walker has creatively sought to convey the antithesis of order and methodical process. His is the pictorial world on the other side of the mirror—the irrational, the dream, the unconscious whether individual or collective, madness, lunacy, angels and witches, these comprise his expressive lexicon. Although called up from the intimate well of the subconscious, Walker's art is meant to express a social meaning. It gives viewers—readers—a different kind of literacy to understand their condition as either completely enfranchised free agents, or as victims of authoritarianism. Walker's wordless narratives are not mute statements of self-referential meaning. They give a clear prospect of the world in all its dimensions from the other side of the looking-glass.