

A Hell Called Ohio: The working class and American fiction

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In a cultural environment that often prefers fantasy to reality and tends to judge a book by its author's skin color, gender or sexual orientation, a realistic novel about flawed characters (as opposed to "strong" role models) in a working class setting would not seem to stand much of a chance. One such work to emerge from the literary hinterland, however, was John M. Hamilton's self-published *A Hell Called Ohio* (Greenside Books, 2013).

A Hell Called Ohio sold decently, reaching Amazon's bestseller ranking of 8,527 in the literary fiction category. This relative success, especially for a self-published book, must be seen as an indication that a readership exists for unvarnished fiction about working class life. Hamilton's novel is engaging and depicts factory work in detail not often seen in published fiction today. But the novel, now ten years old, presents ideas about work and workers that, especially in 2023, should not go unchallenged.

A Hell Called Ohio centers on the life of its narrator, Warrell Swanson, an employee in a metal factory on the Maumee River in Defiance, in northwestern Ohio (population 16,500). Warrell has mastered every job in the shop and works as a substitute, never doing one job for too long and, as Hamilton asks us to believe, able to decide to an extent when he will show up in the morning. Already we have strayed from the common reality of factory routine, but this element of individual exceptionalism is a motif that dominates Warrell's characterization throughout the novel.

The book opens with an injured Warrell being bandaged by his coworker and best friend Mario. Warrell has accidentally hit himself in the head with a shovel, is embarrassed and throughout the novel will blame his disappointments and misfortunes on himself. Success and failure in *A Hell Called Ohio* are matters of individual choice, effort and moral worth. This is not a promising ethos for a novel about factory life, which is characterized by a distinct lack of choice.

When he is not at the factory, Warrell takes his dog Ginger and goes down to the river, walks the woods, sits with a gun in wait for a rabbit or a pheasant. In his home, a refurbished

former gas station, he works at building a model of the German battleship *Bismarck*, which reflects an admiration for things military that runs throughout the novel. Warrell dropped out of officer training school for the Marines, he relates, because of a lack of decisiveness, a failing that will haunt him on a number of occasions.

Warrell is romantically involved with two women, the emotionally open Rochelle, a waitress at the local diner from whom Warrell is trying to distance himself, and the more reserved but also loving Emily, a student intern at the Defiance public library who is about to move on to graduate school. In both of these relationships, Warrell vacillates and exhibits, as Emily will point out, a rather obtuse selfishness. Although he tells the reader that he wants a permanent and domestic relationship with Emily, the novel suggests that such a relationship would be particularly difficult for him.

In Warrell, Hamilton is working with a familiar American type, the individualistic man who is most at home outdoors and away from the demands of society. Huck Finn and Biff Loman of Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* come to mind. Unlike these literary precursors, though, Warrell has made a sort of peace with the industrial workaday world. By one way of reckoning, the nature of this peace is the most important aspect of the novel.

Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom* and thousands of their literary kin have explored the spiritual emptiness and moral torpor of middle class American life, where one is urged to create oneself through buying and selling. Less common is fiction about those with only the commodity of labor-power to sell, in industrial work.

Such fiction necessarily presents not just a portrait of a class but the naked interface of the working class with the owning class. Even if it only appears in the form of a worker's relationship to the workplace management, such depictions are significant for their engagement with ideas—be they progressive or regressive—of the class struggle.

Hamilton's Warrell is a flawed character, as Warrell himself acknowledges, but he is not presented as being so flawed that we are not to take seriously his frequent

commentary on work. In this commentary Hamilton and his protagonist touch on an important paradox of industrial labor under capitalism. Warrell loves to work, to be occupied, to transform things with his hands. Reading the Arts section of the *New York Times*, an intellectual activity by which Hamilton intends to set Warrell apart from his coworkers, Warrell comments,

Much was considered art by many and I didn't agree with their estimation. When craft is labeled art why couldn't anything requiring manual dexterity be thought of as such. Why couldn't my welding and grinding be considered art? It seemed more reflective of the human condition than the example in the article.

Yet work in a factory is compulsory, repetitive and uniform. There's the danger here of making a virtue out of necessity. When the moment of admiration for one's activity, such as Warrell's admiration for his welding, has passed, the work is still there to be done. To his credit, Hamilton writes about this as well.

Is this earthly heaven? With hands busy and mind content to drift from subject to subject exploring all meaning and substance? Have I found my perfect place? Certainly not! As I spun my die grinder around the cut steel I knew my very short and supposedly precious life was passing on the hands of the time clock. Yet this was what was. For many small reasons this was my life.

The factory worker, a creative human with energy and a desire to be useful, watches his or her very life ebb away into what may seem to be an insatiable maw of meaninglessness. The body becomes another of the factory's machines, the mind searches "subject to subject" for distraction and escape. And the product of the hands, careful or careless, is bound for who knows where. In places, Hamilton captures this reality.

Warrell calls himself "an evangelist of work, of toil and the redeeming value of unending defeat." But where is the redemption in unending defeat, in industrial martyrdom? For Warrell, it is found in the idea of "progress," in the fact that roads get paved. "Progress was the call and production its foundation," he asserts.

If Warrell's ideas about employment and progress seem

muddled, it is largely because capitalism has foisted a muddle upon him. The novel understands that workers have a social and psychological need to find dignity in their work, in the passage of their time on the job.

But the terms of work under capitalism—the alienation, the arbitrary authority, the sheer exploitation—are accepted in the novel as a given, a natural set of circumstances. The novel suffers from this limited vision. What response can the worker give to such a hostile universe other than, like Warrell, a form of stoicism or abnegation of self? (What about revolt?) At times Warrell even considers suicide.

Hamilton's biography on the book jacket makes known that he "served in the US Navy as a Seabee and is a veteran of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars." It is important to note that at one point in *A Hell Called Ohio*, as Warrell and a coworker press metal to be used in a military vehicle, the coworker asks, "Does this make us part of the American war machine?" Warrell responds, "'I think it does,' I said with a comfortable grin." Elsewhere Warrell disparages the forty-hour week ("the sacred forty") and those workers who ask whether they will be paid overtime *for working overtime*. Hamilton shows his cards in such moments.

Yet an author is not entirely to be blamed as an individual for holding regressive sentiments, and certainly not for falling short of a socialist perspective, in representing working class life. The crimes of Stalinism, decades of state-sponsored anti-communism and the foul role of the class-collaborationist trade union bureaucracy have taken their toll not only on the social consciousness of working people in the United States but on artistic thought as well.

Nevertheless, *A Hell Called Ohio*, with all its political flaws, remains a valuable novel by dint of its unusual character and subject matter. Few contemporary novels put us in factories and contemplate for hundreds of pages the meaning of factory work.

But as the working class in almost every field—from nursing to teaching, working retail and working the line—continue to engage in strikes, and more—so readers will want to see *more broadly, historically realistic* portrayals of the lives and struggles of workers in fiction.



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