

“What Will Be Changed?”: Maxwell Anderson and the Literary Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti

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The stage directions for Clifford Odets’s 1935 *Awake and Sing!* call for a “picture of Sacco and Vanzetti” to be hung in Jacob’s room.^[1] The picture signals the play’s investment in 1930s radical politics and foreshadows Jacob’s role: the aging Marxist who hopes to pass his communism onto his grandson. Placing Sacco and Vanzetti as a physical image that haunts the entire play is, of course, unsurprising for perhaps the most prominent radical dramatist of the period. Even eight years after their deaths, Nicola Sacco (1891-1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1888-1927) stood as symbols for the Left. The two men were arrested for an April 1920 burglary and murder in Braintree, Massachusetts. They spent more than seven years in prison as their trial and appeals played out and were executed in August 1927. The story of these two Italian anarchists captured the world’s attention, sparking widespread outrage. Many believed the men to be innocent and far more believed the guilty verdict emerged from a flawed legal process—in the midst of the era’s anti-radical environment, Sacco and Vanzetti were punished for being anarchists, not for any crime they committed.

The two immigrants became a *cause célèbre* for the literary Left, as their perceived mistreatment intersected with the interwar era’s interest in radical politics. In the late 1910s, radical politics were a dangerous proposition: the First Red Scare—culminating with the infamous Palmer Raids of 1919 and 1920—saw mass arrests and deportations that sent many American socialists, communists, and anarchists to prison or back to their home countries.^[2] This anti-radical environment set the stage both for Sacco and Vanzetti’s arrests and for the outrage that followed: as anarchists, they risked being arrested (and sent back to Italy) at any time, so their arrest for a burglary only a few months after the Palmer Raids appeared to many as too convenient. As their trial unfolded and their lives hung in legal limbo for years, the Left saw in these two purportedly innocent anarchists a rallying cry: their prolonged ordeal reinvigorated the Left, as ardent radicals and soft-hearted liberals found common ground. Amongst those drawn to their plight, we find a large number of the period’s well-known writers: Odets, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Mike Gold, Lucia Trent, Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos and countless others wrote about Sacco and Vanzetti. These writers—from a range of political positions—all cast doubt on the perceived justice of their conviction and eventual execution.

While Sacco and Vanzetti were still alive, many writers focused their attention on immediate goals: delaying their execution, winning a reprieve from Massachusetts Governor Alvan T. Fuller, calling attention to the trial’s injustice, and swaying public sentiment in ways that might influence the powerful figures who were still in the process of determining the two anarchists’ fate. In short, authors writing up to August 1927 mostly sought to help Sacco and Vanzetti—two men’s lives were at stake. After their deaths, however, writers’ goals shifted. It was too late to save Sacco and Vanzetti, but many Left-leaning writers saw in their ordeal a potent symbol of what was wrong with the United States. This process of interpretation—of establishing the lasting meaning of these events—left us with a number of texts that

lament the failures of the American legal system and call for major changes to ensure such a tragic miscarriage of justice would not occur again. None of these works, however, embrace the politics of their subjects.

Sacco and Vanzetti were anarchists; they believed the government was irredeemably broken and that no amount of reform could ever remedy the flaws of American democracy. In fact, they were followers of Luigi Galleani, an Italian anarchist who openly espoused violent anti-government actions.^[3] As radical and progressive writers interpreted the significance of Sacco and Vanzetti's plight, however, their anarchism tended to disappear—sublimated to other political agendas that rejected the extremes of anarchism. Despite the fact that many people believed Sacco and Vanzetti were treated unfairly precisely because they were anarchists, authors writing after their deaths minimized their politics, turning them into symbols for the writers' political and artistic visions.

In this essay, I focus on Maxwell Anderson, who wrote two plays about Sacco and Vanzetti: *Gods of the Lightning* in 1928, just after their execution, and *Winterset* in 1935, when the two men's legacy had been almost entirely sublimated to others' political agendas. Anderson is an interesting figure within the body of Sacco-Vanzetti literature. On the one hand, scholars have rightly recognized Anderson's dalliance with radicalism which makes him a natural author to take up the topic. On the other hand, Anderson underwent a dramatic, yet prolonged, political transformation—a significant shift toward the Right. His two Sacco-Vanzetti plays appeared in the midst of this transition, as Anderson—like many Left-leaning authors from the period—responded to the rise of fascism and began to drift away from the more strident forms of American radicalism. The plays, then, were written in moments when Anderson still saw Leftist politics and economic policy as potential answers to social injustice, yet they were subsequently inflected by a playwright who gradually distanced himself from the Left.

Interpretation of *Gods of the Lightning* and *Winterset* have been complicated by Anderson's political transformation (and, in fact, by Anderson's own understandings of the plays vis-à-vis radical politics). In what follows, I argue the plays—while different in key respects—demonstrate a consistent political fatalism that can help us better understand Anderson's relationship to the radical Left. In them, he finds little hope for radical politics, as the plays' plots turn away from anarchism to other, more personal matters and, in the process, tend toward hopelessness.

These two plays thus portend Anderson's disillusionment with the Left, which does not offer the answers he seeks and cannot redress the injustice he laments. At the heart of this fatalism, however, are his thinly veiled representations of two executed anarchists. Anderson builds his fatalistic political vision on Sacco and Vanzetti, an ubiquitous symbol of the nation's failures. Doing so required, to a certain extent, abjuring their radicalism. As anarchists, Sacco and Vanzetti rejected the nation outright. To them, there was no remedying legal injustice; the law itself was injustice. *Gods of the Lightning* and *Winterset* minimizes this anarchism, offering instead a *mélange* of vaguely Leftist politics and individualized, largely apolitical, personal strife. According to many, Anderson makes the anarchism that explained Sacco and Vanzetti's execution impotent, if not irrelevant, in the plays. In this respect, Anderson's portrayal of the men distills the broader evolution of their literary depictions: stripped of the specificity of their radicalism, Sacco and Vanzetti become generic symbols, manipulated for the political and literary visions of the authors who deploy their image. Ultimately, analysis of anarchism's appearance in *Gods of the Lightning* and *Winterset* reveals a fundamental rejection of their subjects' politics. Their anarchism is replaced by a sense of hopelessness, and then by a revisioning of the plays' import: these are not plays

about anarchism or anarchist plays; they are plays that happen to be about anarchists. My argument here thus offers us a better understanding of Anderson's oeuvre (and the role his politics play in it), but also a clearer look at the ways in which Sacco and Vanzetti were deployed by the era's literary Left as strikingly non-anarchist symbols of the nation's shortcomings.

Anderson's Uncertain Politics

Anderson's father was a railroad-worker-turned-itinerant-minister, so Anderson's childhood was marked by frequent moves, an uneven education, and a large dose of Protestantism (which he almost entirely rejected). Though his family often struggled financially and Anderson himself held a number of working-class jobs in his early adulthood, there are no meaningful radical influences in his social sphere during his formative years. He was early drawn to Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, from whom he learned a "distrust for 'big' government" and a "sometimes errant individualism."^[4] Then, while at the University of North Dakota, he studied Thorstein Veblen under a socialist professor.^[5] In 1912, Anderson, then 23, declared, "I have become a Socialist."^[6] A few years later, in a letter to his life-long friend Upton Sinclair, he describes himself as "Bolshevistic."^[7] During this period, it appeared the "champion of liberty and justice" might embrace the radical Left.^[8]

Only a few years later, while working for *The New Republic*, Anderson seemed uninterested in "politics, national or international."^[9] In the 1920s he was a "staunch" liberal "against monopolies and for organized labor."^[10] By the late 1930s, however, he felt forced to choose between "the evils of capitalism" and the "evils of collectivism."^[11] He chose capitalism, and by the beginning of WWII he believed "Communism [was] dangerous," and a threat to "democratic government."^[12] Eventually, Anderson aligned with Joseph McCarthy and others who contended that "any American member of the Communist Party was a criminal dedicated to overthrowing the government by force."^[13]

In Anderson's authoritative biography, Alfred S. Shivers describes the dramatist as an "individualist and a rebel," a man with "wide-ranging sympathies."^[14] These sympathies intersected with the Left at moments, but they hardly suggest a man who would write multiple plays about arguably the most famous anarchists in American history. Like many fellow-travelers—individuals who flirted with radicalism, yet never fully embraced the more extreme Leftist politics that largely define "radical literature" from this period—Anderson's politics transformed as he aged and as his political environment changed. In fact, Anderson's political journey makes him a paradigmatic example of one type of fellow traveler: he came to socialism early in the twentieth century, when it was the most prevalent brand of American radicalism; he approved of and was drawn to the rise of communism in Russia; he associated with Leftist playwrights such as Odets and the Group Theatre during the 1930s, the heyday of radical literature and theater; he dropped his pacifism during the anti-fascist, pre-WWII era; he turned to American democracy during WWII;^[15] and he fully rejected communism during the Cold War.

Perhaps predictably then, during the interwar period Anderson's politics are difficult to define at any given moment. His views were predominantly a mix of American individualism—an anti-institutional, yet malleable distrust for anything that intruded upon one's "liberty"—and progressive economic ideas (i.e., his prolonged, if incomplete, infatuation with socialism and communism). In some, these dual concerns might combine into an anti-statist, economically egalitarian anarchism (as they did for Sacco and Vanzetti and numerous others from the turn of the century to WWII), but in Anderson, they generated a pendulous politics swinging from radical to reactionary based on the historical moment's ideological climate.

If there is any consistency in Anderson's political stances, it comes from being "deeply distrustful of all institutional authorities."^[16] At times, this inclination manifests as a belief that the "American government is steadily encroaching on the individual's rights and independence."^[17] Anderson's *Both Your Houses* (1933), for instance, was "intended to be a blast at the Hoover administration."^[18] A critically acclaimed play that won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, it offers relatively overt commentary on the era's political milieu—especially the rejection of Hoover's volunteerism and the increasing sense, amongst radicals and progressives alike, that major changes to the American economy were necessary—even if it was not staged until after Hoover left office and the nature of the conversation had changed significantly. Anderson's anti-authoritarian stance has even led some to label Anderson a "libertarian" and an "anarchist."^[19] But even Anderson's peers were confused by his politics, with Odets once calling him "a damned reactionary, a fascist!"^[20] By that time, Anderson himself self-protectively embraced detachment from organized politics, claiming merely, "I vote Democratic or Republican as I please."^[21] To this day, scholars continue to struggle to locate Anderson's politics. As I detail below, some claim he was a socialist, others an anarchist, while others avoid the question altogether.

Russell DiNapoli offers the lengthiest consideration of Anderson's relationship to anarchism, linking the playwright's politics to William Godwin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and, most strongly, early-twentieth-century American anarchist Benjamin Tucker.^[22] In doing so, however, DiNapoli almost entirely distances Anderson from the major threads of American anarchism prevalent during his career. By the 1920s, Tucker's influence had waned significantly as he turned away from anarchism as a viable political solution. Rather, figures like Galleani, Emma Goldman, and Alexander Berkman held sway in American anarchist circles—they and their followers became the target of anti-radical sentiment because they were the most visible anarchists, and their punishments, in turn, increased their standing within radical circles. This "violent" anarchism, as DiNapoli calls it, achieved ascendancy,^[23] which is precisely why Sacco and Vanzetti presented such a threat: they were not philosophical anarchists; they advocated for the overthrow of US governance. DiNapoli concludes that anarchism appears in Anderson's plays more as a "personal philosophy" than an "ideology," and that "nowhere does the playwright uphold anarchism as it was defined" by prominent anarchists (past or present).^[24] In short, Anderson was interested in anarchism, but his politics never reified around it or any other single radical position. Ethan Mordden perhaps sums it up best: "Anderson's affiliation was anarchist, though he conceded that anarchy [was] out of reach and democracy was flawed but useful."^[25] In keeping with other scholars, Mordden suggests that Anderson was an anarchist who did not really accept the basic premises of anarchism!^[26] Ultimately, Anderson is an example of the persistent difficulty in writing about literary radicalism from this period: a dramatist linked to radical and progressive political causes, writing in an era of radical literary politics, but with views detached from the dominant threads of radicalism.

Anderson's plays and his politics embody a not uncommon generic radicalism: though never fully embracing any of the era's radical ideologies, he was often labeled as radical, and thus is emblematic of intellectuals and writers who drifted left during the period, many of whom were called radical, even when their politics resembled those of Franklin Delano Roosevelt more than Emma Goldman. Like many, the Sacco-Vanzetti affair attracted Anderson, but the motivation for his attraction remains ambiguous. Consequently, scholars who discuss Anderson's purported radicalism sometimes fall into a type of circular reasoning: they argue that he was drawn to the case because he was a Leftist; therefore, he was a Leftist because he was drawn to the case. His two plays about Sacco and Vanzetti, *Gods of the Lightning* and *Winterset*, do not define the complexity of his political journey, nor do they establish him

as a staunchly radical playwright. These plays do, however, provide insight into the floating, generic literary radicalism of the 1920s and 1930s. The plays deploy Sacco and Vanzetti as political symbols representative of anarchism, but the nature of these symbols is fragmented and detached from the men's own lived anarchism.

Anderson's First Anarchists: *Gods of the Lightning*

Gods of the Lightning, which Anderson co-wrote with Harold Hickerson, has been largely forgotten.^[27] The play was completed in the spring of 1928, only a few months after Sacco and Vanzetti were executed, staged later that year, and published in early 1929. The play immediately prompted a variety of negative responses to its perceived political transgressions and aesthetic shortcomings: "The Chief of the Licensing Division of the City of Boston, J. M. Case, ruled that [it] was practically 'anarchist and treasonable' and should not, therefore, be licensed for presentation in that city";^[28] it was dubbed "a failure" precisely because it was based on the Sacco-Vanzetti case and thus "missed a chance to [be] a decidedly finer play";^[29] and it has since been called "an indignantly one-sided and propagandistic account of social injustice that is practically devoid of literary interest."^[30] Nevertheless, it ran at the Little Theater in New York City for 29 performances in October 1928, and the Group Theatre revived it in 1934, signaling some acceptance from Leftist dramatic circles.

Anderson and Hickerson attempt to create a one-to-one corollary to Sacco and Vanzetti in *Gods of the Lightning*: "Vanzetti becomes Dante Capraro, the gentle and humane Anarchist" while "Sacco is greatly transformed into the native-born American James Macready, a militant International Woodsmen of the World leader."^[31] Jennifer Jones argues that Sacco and Vanzetti "are combined in the character of Capraro, a pacifist organizer,"^[32] but Macready clearly also reflects elements of their story and their politics, functioning as a rough amalgam of the two anarchists. While the play does privilege the "American man of action,"^[33] Vanzetti's labor organizing mirrors Macready's union work, and the similarities between the case and the play favor reading Capraro and Macready as representations of Sacco and Vanzetti, even if their reproduction is inexact and overlapping.

The plot similarly veils the Sacco-Vanzetti case in the thinnest veneer, reproducing the Left's widespread message about the men by depicting the arrest, trial, and execution of Capraro and Macready as a heinous injustice in which the mechanisms of law are distorted and misused to eliminate a radical threat. Certainly, the play attacks the legal system's failures, but it does not offer a cohesive "left wing message."^[34] Jones and others imagine Anderson set out to write a socialist play—they begin with the assumption that Anderson was a radical.^[35] They then analyze the play and find it is not particularly radical in comparison to its radical author. This reading, though, is symptomatic of Anderson's conflicted politics and his concomitant untidy representation of Sacco and Vanzetti. In addition, these critics' efforts to evaluate a play about two anarchists by comparing it to the author's purported socialism, inevitably pushes anarchism to the margins. *Gods of the Lightning* emerges in the historical moment that Sacco and Vanzetti are transformed from living victims to potent symbols: it marks a politically wavering playwright's articulation of anarchism to a similarly diffuse, and increasingly generic, vision of radicalism.

The unsettled role of anarchism in the play occurs initially through Capraro and Macready who each reject government for different reasons. Macready says "government's nothing so important. It's a police system, to protect the wealth of the wealthy."^[36] Though linked to the Industrial Workers of the World

(IWW), his critique of government is purely economic.^[37] Macready parrots Vanzetti's economic ideology without embracing his anti-government stance. Capraro's political views, on the other hand, are simple anti-state anarchism, as revealed by his testimony during the play's version of the trial:

Salter: Do you believe in capitalism?

Capraro: No.

Salter: You believe that all property should belong to the workers?

Capraro: Property should belong to those who create it.

Salter: You are a communist?

Capraro: I am an anarchist.

Salter: What do you mean by that?

Capraro: I mean, government is wrong. It creates trouble.

Salter: You would destroy all government?

Capraro: It will not be necessary. I would rather wait till it was so rotten it would rot away . . .

Salter: You are against this government of ours?

Capraro: Against all governments.^[38]

He denies being a communist, rejects government regardless of its implication in economic oppression, and, elsewhere, eschews all violence: "When you take violence into your hands, you lower yourself to the level of government, which is the origin of crime and evil."^[39] Both Macready and Capraro contain elements of Sacco's and Vanzetti's specific lives and political beliefs, yet they "represent the gamut of nonviolent anti-government philosophy and action,"^[40] a major deviation from the two Galleianists on which they are based. Perhaps reflecting his own conflicted politics, Anderson juxtaposes non-anarchist Leftism with strict anti-government anarchism (while excluding violence almost entirely), creating a field of indeterminacy.

Were the play fully dedicated to a propagandistic retelling of Sacco and Vanzetti's plight, it likely would end with their execution, or perhaps with a reiteration of the anarchist statements the men (primarily Vanzetti) made as their deaths approached. The play, however, does not end with an execution. Rather, it interprets the events for its audience, recasting the meaning of these purportedly unjust deaths. With the anarchists dead, the play's final lines are given to Rosalie, Macready's lover. She expresses the drama's closing sentiment. The remaining living characters wait in the restaurant while Capraro and Macready are executed. There Rosalie speaks the play's concluding words:

Don't whisper it! Don't whisper it! Didn't you hear me say not to whisper any more? That's what they'll want you to do—whisper it—keep quiet about it—say it never happened—it couldn't happen—two innocent men killed—keep it dark—keep it quiet— No! No! Shout it! They're killing them . . . Mac—Mac—my dear—they have murdered you—while we stood here trying to think of what to do they murdered you! Just a moment ago you had a minute left—and it was the only minute in the whole world—and now—now this day will never end for you—there will be no more days . . . Shout it! Shout it! Cry out! Run and cry! Only—it won't do any good—now.^[41]

All but the last line of Rosalie's monologue gesture toward martyrdom—a bold call to ensure Macready's death is not forgotten—but her final sentence turns to fatalism: the deaths have no meaning. “It won't do any good” to shout of this injustice. Rosalie's despondency has two ramifications. One is political: if *Gods of the Lightning* is a propaganda piece, a socialist (or anarchist) play (failed or otherwise), her fatalism contradicts the men's politics and denies Sacco and Vanzetti any legacy. Contrary to Marxian theory and the lived politics of these two anarchists, nothing can be done; all is hopeless, revolution is impossible. The other is personal: the drama is a tragedy playing out against the backdrop of a politicized trial, not a political tragedy. In this case, sharing the tragedy of their unjust deaths is meaningless, because they are still dead, and Rosalie's individual sorrow will not be assuaged by any political action.

As Michael Schwartz argues, the play evokes “the anger and the fatalism” many felt after Sacco and Vanzetti were executed.^[42] This “ultimate grimness,”^[43] however, speaks more about those left to process their deaths than about the two anarchists themselves. By doing so, Anderson recast the men's potential martyrdom as a reason for despair rather than action. And, he ignored Vanzetti's own words before his execution: “Never in our full life can we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man as how we do by an accident.”^[44] Despite his looming death, Vanzetti did not give into fatalism, and *Gods of the Lightning* need not either—Anderson's politics recast the meaning of these events.

Anderson chose to write about two anarchists, but he creates characters who espouse pacifistic anarchism and those who speak for radical labor. He links these two positions through their placement within a legal system that is subject to the play's critique, yet he concludes by questioning the meaning and the lasting significance of Sacco and Vanzetti's martyrdom. Anderson chose Sacco and Vanzetti as subject matter, but by exploring their politics through a pseudo-Leftist play that ends on a note either of political fatalism or apolitical loss, he sublimates anarchism. Though his ambiguous political agenda may be tied tenuously to Leftist ideologies, it is clearly not anarchist—it bears little resemblance to its real-life protagonists' radicalism.

Anderson's Anarchist Trial: *Winterset*

Unlike *Gods of the Lightning*, *Winterset*, written and published in 1955, was an immediate critical success, winning the Drama Critics Circle Award, and it continues to hold a secure position in the Western dramatic canon.^[45] This success, though, tends to detach all political content from the play.^[46] Anderson conceived of *Winterset* as “an experiment, an attempt to twist raw, modern reality to the shape and meaning of poetry.”^[47] In his introduction to the play, he discusses his yearning for a “great theatre in this country,” one that has “outgrow[n] the phase of journalistic social comment and reache[d] . . . into the upper air of poetic tragedy.”^[48] While outlining these ambitions, he fails to mention Sacco and Vanzetti. Setting out to write a tragic verse play and thus “establish a new [dramatic] convention,

Anderson imagine[d] himself to be participating in a purely literary endeavor with little political import.”[49] According to DiNapoli, Anderson saw the Sacco-Vanzetti subject matter as a sure way to receive publicity in the politically charged 1930s, “and he judged that if he handled the subject in a way that did not infuse the potentially explosive event with newfound political life, a financial success might be achieved.”[50] Steven Richman more generously suggests, “Anderson, long a champion of individual liberties [was] clearly offended” by Sacco and Vanzetti’s plight.[51]

Regardless of Anderson’s intent, the notion that *Winterset* is not a political play has retained remarkable traction: in the seventy-five years since it was written, scholars have focused on the play’s dramatic sources, conventions, and innovations, while frequently minimizing the historical event at its center.[52] It seems that when writing “propagandistic” plays, Anderson established a reputation for “Leftism” that was suspended temporarily when he wrote “pure literature.”[53] Put differently, when considered in the context of dramatic innovation, *Winterset* is granted a reprieve from the taint of radicalism, but given the overall context of Anderson’s work (including *Gods of the Lightning* and *Both Your Houses*), it is strange to ignore the obvious political overtones in the play.[54] In 1935, Anderson had not yet fully rejected radical politics and he still associated with and was produced by Left-leaning theatre groups. Despite its subsequent sterilization, *Winterset* no more directly addressed the Sacco-Vanzetti affair and radicalism than did *Gods of the Lightning*. [55]

In *Winterset*, Anderson again thinly veils his characters. Mio, the play’s protagonist, is the son of Bartolomeo Romagna, a radical fish peddler. Romagna is a conflated image of Sacco and Vanzetti, combining Vanzetti’s vocation (fishmonger) with Sacco’s fatherhood (Vanzetti had no children.). Notably, Romagna never appears in the play’s action: he haunts the text’s dialogue but is not a character; he establishes the link to Sacco and Vanzetti yet is a generic amalgam of both men’s anarchism. *Winterset* also includes Judge Gaunt, an obvious analog to Webster Thayer, the judge who presided over Sacco and Vanzetti’s trial, rejected several appeals and regularly defended the verdict, and, thus, was subject to particular ire from those who saw the entire ordeal as an injustice. In addition, Garth, Trock, and Shadow represent the real-life Morelli gang who may well have committed the crime for which Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted.[56] Set thirteen years after Romagna’s execution, the play depicts Mio’s search for the truth: he refuses to believe his father capable of murder and having sought the guilty parties for years, he eventually learns of and seeks out Garth, who witnessed Trock kill Romagna. This quest is paralleled by Trock’s efforts to kill anyone who might implicate him in the crime and by Judge Gaunt’s aimless, insane wanderings as he attempts to justify his court’s verdict. These three paths converge on the night of the play’s action, the same night on which Mio meets Miriamne and falls in love, providing a romantic plot which Anderson privileges over the Sacco-Vanzetti backdrop.

Radicalism appears early in the play. Trock has come to see Garth, worried that continued interest in the case will lead Garth to confess and implicate him. Garth asks:

who wants to go to trial again

except the radicals? . . .

Let the radicals go on howling

about getting a dirty deal. They always howl

and nobody gives a damn.[\[57\]](#)

Here, Garth gestures toward the continued interest in the Sacco-Vanzetti case but reduces this interest to the “radical” element; many may still take a voyeuristic interest in the case, but only the radicals are still interested in pursuing justice. Mio is aligned with this sustained “radical” interest because he too seeks the truth:

No other love,
time passing, nor the spaced light-years of suns
shall blur your voice, or tempt me from the path
that clears your name.[\[58\]](#)

He seeks the truth because he must:

Will you tell me how a man’s
to live, and face his life, if he can’t believe
that truth’s like a fire,
and will burn through and be seen
though it takes all the years there are?[\[59\]](#)

Mio does not believe the legal system’s findings, so he rejects them and seeks truth elsewhere; he wants to clear his father’s name, which is all that can be accomplished since Romagna is already dead. At the same time, the judge roams the streets, defending the legal system:

Judge Gaunt’s gone off his nut. He’s got
that damn trial on his mind, and been going round
proving to everybody he was right all the time
and the radicals were guilty—stopping people
in the street to prove it—and now he’s nuts entirely
and nobody knows where he is.[\[60\]](#)

The combination of Mio's quest for truth contrary to the one produced by the legal system and Gaunt's insane defense of the trial resemble *Gods of the Lightning*, suggests a substantive critique of the system that convicted Sacco and Vanzetti. Thirteen years after Romagna's death (and eight years after Sacco and Vanzetti's), however, Anderson suspends this critique, reducing it to context for the burgeoning romance between Mio and Miriamne (Garth's sister), who meet and immediately fall in love. At this point, *Winterset's* attack on the legal system fades as Anderson redirects the action:[\[61\]](#) the play shifts from a pursuit of truth to an establishment of truth secondary to the pursuit of love.

Suddenly, the Judge is no longer described as insane and he begins to sound cruel, yet reasonable in his defense of the verdict:

I know and have known
what bitterness can rise against a court
when it must say, putting aside all weakness,
that a man's to die. I can forgive you that,
for you are your father's son, and you think of him
as a son thinks of his father. Certain laws
seem cruel in their operation; it's necessary
that we be cruel to uphold them.[\[62\]](#)

As Mio, Garth, Trock, and Judge Gaunt interact, critique of the trial comes to the fore, with the tenement turning into a courtroom: Gaunt slips into his role as judge, calling for

Order, gentlemen, order! The witness will remember
that a certain decorum is essential in the court-room.[\[63\]](#)

The fictive Judge Thayer, Morelli gang, and Sacco-Vanzetti family all reenter the legal system, and in this surreal recreation of the courtroom, Mio finds the truth he seeks. Romagna's innocence and Gaunt's complicity in the legal injustice are revealed, yet Gaunt still defends the verdict:[\[64\]](#)

Suppose it known,
but there are things a judge must not believe
though they should head and fester underneath

and press in on his brain. Justice once rendered
in a clear burst of anger, righteously,
upon a very common laborer,
confessed an anarchist, the verdict found
and the precise machinery of law
invoked to know him guilty—think what furor
would rock the state if the court then flatly said;
all this was lies—must be reversed? It's better,
as any judge can tell you, in such cases,
holding the common good to be worth more
than small injustice, to let the record stand,
let one man die. For justice, in the main,
is governed by opinion. Communities
will have what they will have, and it's quite as well,
after all, to be rid of anarchists. Our rights
as citizens can be maintained as rights
only while we are held to be the peers
of those who live about us.[\[65\]](#)

The romantic plot requires the resolution of critique, so Anderson dramatically retries the case. In the seemingly obvious climax of Mio's life story, he confirms his father's innocence, learning that the legal system failed him by succeeding in its main goal, the maintenance of social order. As in *Gods of the Lightning*, Anderson takes aim at the legal system and finds it corrupt. Mio's beliefs are confirmed, and he can now spread word of Romagna's innocence:

Wherever men
still breathe and think, and know what's done to them

by the powers above, they'll know.[\[66\]](#)

Just like Rosalie in *Gods of the Lightning*, Mio calls for the truth to be spread—again dissemination momentarily appears to be the necessary step for redressing legal injustice. Yet Mio does no such thing. From the time he learns the “truth” until the end of the play, Mio’s love for Miramne triumphs over his pursuit for the truth, and the fatalism of *Gods of the Lightning* reemerges.

Winterset’s fatalism operates on two levels. First, after Mio learns the truth, the value of this truth—and its dissemination—are called into question. Miriamne’s and Garth’s father Edras questions the value of pursuing the issue:

What will be changed
if it comes to trial again? More blood poured out
to a mythical justice, but your father lying still
where he lies now.[\[67\]](#)

He then fundamentally denies the value of what Mio has learned: “there is no truth.”[\[68\]](#) This dismissal of the play’s revelation intersects with Miriamne’s desire that Mio not reveal Garth’s guilt. She asks Mio to keep their secret and he agrees:

I tried to say it
and it strangled my throat. I might have known
you’d win in the end.[\[69\]](#)

Second, Mio’s choice of Mariamne over his life-long goal of clearing his father’s name proves meaningless when both characters die at the play’s end. Mio abnegates the hope of “learn[ing] to live like a man . . . to live and forget to hate” and the “truth” for Mariamne, only to lose his life at Trock’s hand.[\[70\]](#)

In *Winterset*, Anderson attacks the American legal system much as he does in *Gods of the Lightning*, but once again closes on a dual note of personal tragedy and political hopelessness. Any radicalism is sublimated to other concerns. In the earlier play—with its gossamer radicalism mirroring Anderson’s shifting, indeterminate politics—anarchism becomes pacifist, irrelevant, and impotent. In the later one, Sacco and Vanzetti linger as the nearly invisible background for dramatic innovation and poetic tragedy. In both cases, Anderson deploys the anarchists as neutered symbols of injustice: anarchism is sublimated, which in itself is not surprising, nor profound, but in the context of other literature from this period, Anderson’s choices resonate more powerfully. Twice he structured a play around Sacco and Vanzetti; twice he tentatively attacked the legal system’s failures; and twice he minimized the significance of this

critique by ending with fatalism. The mere appearance of anarchists in Anderson's plays does not make him an anarchist. He may have found some aspects of anarchism appealing, but neither of these plays nor his statements about politics suggest that Anderson aligned with the more radical forms of the era's Left. Rather, he appears as another fellow traveler: someone who flirted with radical politics, yet ultimately sublimated them to his personal, political, and literary vision.

Ultimately, *Gods of the Lightning* and *Winterset* distill the transformation of Sacco and Vanzetti into potent, yet disarticulated symbols: they continued to signify well after their deaths, but their signification was fully separated from their politics. Their appearance in literature functioned as radical *bona fides*: touching on the Sacco-Vanzetti affair's injustice (even briefly) signified attachment to the broadly Leftist movement of the late 1920s and 1930s. Anderson's plays, though—like much of the literature that shaped the meaning of Sacco and Vanzetti's legacy—essentially strip anarchism of its power and specificity. Their image is no longer meaningfully anarchist; it simply marks a pseudo-radical shell that could be filled with literary and political content.

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[1]. Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty and Other Plays*, ed. Harold Clurman (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 40.

[2]. For a brief history of anti-radical sentiment and laws from this period (with particular focus on anarchists like Sacco and Vanzetti), see Dan Colson, "Erasing Anarchism: Sacco and Vanzetti and the Logic of Representation," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2014): 179-196.

[3]. For a detailed analysis of Sacco and Vanzetti's politics see Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991). Avrich convincingly argues the two men were Galleanists. Even amongst radicals, Galleani stood out as particularly extreme, so Sacco and Vanzetti were neither the naïfs some have claimed nor merely philosophical anarchists—they were aggressively opposed to all state governance and believed violence was justified to achieve an anarchist society.

[4]. Alfred S. Shivers, *The Life of Maxwell Anderson* (New York: Stein and Day, 1983), 26.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 39.

[6]. Anderson to John M. Gillette, 15 September 1912, in *Dramatist in America: Letters of Maxwell Anderson, 1912-1958*, ed. Laurence G. Avery (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 3.

[7]. Anderson to Upton Sinclair, June 1919, in *Dramatist in America*, 13.

[8]. Shivers, *The Life*, 111.

[9]. *Ibid.*, 61.

[10]. *Ibid.*, 63.

[11]. Anderson to Brooks Atkinson, 21 August 1939, *Dramatist in America*, 90-91.

[12]. Anderson to Donald Ogden Stewart, 11 March 1941, *Dramatist in America*, 110.

[13]. Shivers, *The Life*, 238.

[14]. *Ibid.*, 56, 1.

[15]. Shivers argues that “Anderson . . . believe[d] that under any conditions except wartime, government was the natural enemy of the average citizen” (*The Life*, 198). According to Shivers, “[t]he exigencies of total war had compelled him to reach a truce within his own democratic government” (*The Life*, 198). Note the rejection of pacifism linked to the anti-fascism: Anderson was willing to accept both government and war to fight fascism. Like many radicals and progressives from the era, he appears to have accepted the Popular Front logic that moderates, liberals, and radicals must all come together to fight the immediate enemy: the fascists.

[16]. Shivers, *The Life*, 7.

[17]. Shivers, *Maxwell Anderson* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), 137.

[18]. Shivers, *The Life*, 125.

[19] Russell DiNapoli, “Fragile Currency of the Last Anarchist: The Plays of Maxwell Anderson,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2002): 277, 282.

[20]. Hal Cantor, “Anderson and Odets and the Group Theater,” in *Maxwell Anderson and the New York Stage*, eds. Nancy J. Doran Hazelton and Kenneth Krauss (Monroe, NY: Library Research Assoc., 1991), 34.

[21]. Anderson to the editor, November 1944, *Dramatist in America*, 192.

[22]. Russell DiNapoli, *The Elusive Prominence of Maxwell Anderson in the American Theater* (Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2002), 56.

[23]. *Ibid.*, 53

[24]. *Ibid.*, 54.

[25]. Ethan Mordden, *Sing for Your Supper: The Broadway Musical in the 1930s* (New York: St. Marten's Press, 2005), 230.

[26]. Turning to Mordden, who does not write extensively about Anderson, captures the ubiquity of this seemingly contradictory view: the notion that Anderson was an anarchist—but one who did not really embrace anarchist views—saturates much scholarship on his plays.

[27]. Calling the play “minor,” Shivers’s biography of Anderson almost entirely ignores *Gods of the Lightning*, and—in a suggestion of how scholars have struggled to deal with the appearance of Sacco and Vanzetti in Anderson’s plays—notes merely that it was “based on an internationally famous legal trial” (Shivers, *The Life*, 112).

[28]. Shivers, *Maxwell Anderson*, 106.

[29]. Barrett H. Clark, *Maxwell Anderson: The Man and His Plays* (Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1976), 17-18.

[30]. Shivers, *Maxwell Anderson*, 106.

[31]. Ibid. The play also includes Celestino Medeiros, a convicted murder who confessed to the Braintree crime and claimed Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent. Medeiros’s execution was delayed while Governor Fuller and the Lowell Commission considered his confession alongside other evidence, but ultimately they did not believe his story and he was executed the same night as Sacco and Vanzetti. In the play, “Madeiros [*sic*] is changed into the bleak-minded and fatalistic restaurant owner Suvorin” (Shivers, *Maxwell Anderson*, 106).

[32]. Jennifer Jones, “A Fictitious Injustice: The Politics of Conversation in Maxwell Anderson’s *Gods of the Lightning*,” *American Drama* 4, no. 2 (1995): 83.

[33]. Ibid.

[34]. Ibid., 107.

[35]. Jones, for instance, reads the play as a “socialist drama” that merges “political protest with instinctive American worship of the individual” (89, 83). By claiming Capraro is a condensation of Sacco and Vanzetti and arguing that Capraro’s politics always come second to Macready’s, Jones attempts to demonstrate that the play “eviscerated the beliefs [Sacco and Vanzetti] died for” (94). She builds this argument, however, on the claim that “Sacco and Vanzetti were pacifists,” misreading their anti-war stance as the rejection of all violence (88). Ultimately, she accuses Anderson of focusing on an “American protagonist” at the expense of the “socioeconomic forces of race and class oppression that brought about the death of Sacco and Vanzetti” (93).

[36]. Anderson and Harold Hickerson, *Gods of the Lightning* (London: Longman’s, Green, and Co., 1928), 26.

[37]. Jones interprets Macready as an unabashed, liberal individualist who overwhelms Capraro’s

anarchism, but Macready is linked to the IWW: he speaks from a political position similar to the one Jones attributes to Anderson.

[38]. Anderson and Hickerson, *Gods of the Lightning*, 78.

[39]. *Ibid.*, 26.

[40]. Michael Schwarz, *Class Divisions on the Broadway Stage: The Staging and Taming of the I.W.W.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[41]. Anderson, *Gods of the Lightning*, 106.

[42]. Schwartz, ch. 5.

[43]. *Ibid.*

[44]. I quote here from John Dos Passos, *The Big Money* (Boston: Mariner, 2000), 372. Dos Passos regularized the spelling from a reporter's transcription that originally appeared in the *New York World* on 13 May 1927.

[45]. *Winterset* was first staged at the Martin Beck Theatre in 1935 and was a "smashing success at the box office" (Shivers, *The Life*, 149). Its original run lasted 179 performances. The play then toured nationally before returning to Broadway for 16 additional shows. It was turned into a film (directed by Alfred Santell and starring Burgess Meredith) in 1936. The play has not been revived frequently, though it was staged for short runs in Chicago in both 1991 and 2016.

[46]. The long-standing tradition of foregrounding Anderson's purported aesthetic triumphs may well explain the tendency to minimize his play's political import.

[47]. Anderson, "Acceptance Speech for the Drama Critics' Circle Award to *Winterset*," in *Dramatist in America*, 295.

[48]. Anderson, introduction to *Gods of the Lightning*, x, vi.

[49]. *Ibid.*, xi.

[50]. DiNapoli, "Maxwell Anderson's Misuse of Poetic Discourse in *Winterset*," in *Staging a Cultural Paradigm: The Political and the Personal in American Drama*, eds. Barbara Ozieblo and Miriam López-Rodríguez (Bruxelles: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2002), 101. DiNapoli contends that "[Anderson] knew the topic would entice audiences to see the play" (101). He claims that Anderson's attention to Sacco and Vanzetti "exploited the Sacco-Vanzetti issue for other than artistic reasons" (101).

[51]. Steven M. Richman, "*Winterset* and the Recrudescence of Ressentiment," *Nova Law Review* 18, no. 3 (1994): 1882.

[52]. The body of scholarship on *Winterset* is quite small given the play's critical reception in the 1930s.

What little research there is largely ignores the play's focus on anarchism in favor of other theatrical/dramatic concerns. The most common trope is to look at source materials and influences. As early as 1946, Samuel Klinger examined "Hebraic lore" in the play ("Hebraic Lore in *Winterset*," *American Literature* 18, no. 3 [1946]: 219-232). Explorations of other Biblical influences (Howard D. Pearce, "Job in Anderson's *Winterset*," *Modern Drama* 6 [1963]: 32-41), Shakespearean elements (Jacob H. Alder, "Shakespeare in *Winterset*," *Educational Theatre Journal* 6 [1954]: 241-248 and John B. Jones, "Shakespeare as Myth and the Structure of *Winterset*," *Educational Theatre Journal* 25 [1973]: 34-45), and classical references (Frances Abernethy, *Winterset: A Modern Revenge Tragedy*, *Modern Drama* 7 [1964]: 185-189 and J. T. McCullen, Jr., "Two Quests for Truth: King Oedipus and *Winterset*," *The Laurel Review* 5, no. 1 [1965]: 28-35), amongst other allusions and inspirations, followed over the next few decades. After about 1980 work on *Winterset* is virtually non-existent, excepting the scholars I engage with in this essay.

[53]. Shivers, *The Life*, 148

[54]. In part, *Winterset*'s reputation emerges from the contradictions of post-WWII literary scholarship. During the Cold War, anti-communist backlash, scholars were forced to reconcile the play's reputation as one of the best from the 1930s with its subject matter (Sacco and Vanzetti) and Anderson's dalliance with the Left. Anderson's rejection of communism makes the reconciliation possible, but scholars who wished to study *Winterset* were wise to ignore any political significance in the play that might appear radical. Thus, they focused on the fiction of apolitical formal characteristics. This scholarly juggling act may account for the seemingly disconnected reputations of Anderson (still viewed as a Left-leaning fellow-traveler) and *Winterset* (long considered a brilliant, yet apolitical play that just happens to be about two anarchists).

[55]. Shivers claims "the passage of years since *Gods of the Lightning* gave [Anderson] the aesthetic distanced he needed in handling the Sacco-Vanzetti case" (Shivers, *The Life*, 148). In other words, Shivers reads *Winterset* as an aesthetic object worthy of consideration almost in spite of its subject matter, unlike the earlier play which he virtually ignores.

[56]. In his confession, Medeiros implicated the Morelli gang, and many of Sacco and Vanzetti's other defenders insisted the Morelli gang committed the Braintree robbery as well. *Winterset* obviously taps into this accusation, as its fictionalized Morellis try to avoid the exposure of their crime.

[57]. Anderson, *Winterset* (Washington: Anderson House, 1935), 14.

[58]. *Ibid.*, 50.

[59]. *Ibid.*, 70.

[60]. *Ibid.*, 15.

[61]. Richman rightly argues "the play stands for the proposition that a developed legal system may be seriously flawed" (1869), but after establishing its flaws, the play shifts significantly.

[62]. *Winterset*, 73.

[63]. Ibid., 95.

[64]. Richman claims Gaunt's depiction is open to a "sympathetic interpretation" (1882), but such an interpretation would have been difficult to sustain at the time, as outrage lingered almost a decade after Sacco and Vanzetti were executed.

[65]. *Winterset*, 98-99.

[66]. Ibid., 99.

[67]. Ibid., 109.

[68]. Ibid., 117.

[69]. Ibid., 125.

[70]. Ibid.

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