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Gaddis Recognized

Carol Iannone

To millions it may have seemed the promised land, but to certain of its native sons, post-World War II America had gained the whole world only to lose its soul. Such, at any rate, was the view that impelled the evolution of "metafiction" in the postwar years—a fiction whose form and content were meant to mirror, in an ironic way, the extravaganza of hype, fraud, and mounting materialism that the United States, its critics said, had finally been revealed to be. The writers of "metafiction" now include such near-venerable men of letters as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and, perhaps less well known, William Gaddis, who in hindsight can be seen as a pioneer of the form.

Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955),* a thousand-page "meta-novel" about forgery, religion, art, and the quest for meaning in the contemporary wasteland, brought the principles of late literary modernism to bear upon the American novel. Lacking an authoritative narrative voice and the usual signs of fictional organization, full of complex mythological, literary, religious, historical, and occult allusions, *The Recognitions* uses and parodies many sources, among them T.S. Eliot (especially "The Waste Land"), Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Goethe's *Faust*, and a 3rd-century Christian work, *Recognitions of Clement*.

The Recognitions was widely reviewed—and widely damned. In what a Gaddis supporter has since called "one of American criticism's weakest hours," all but a few of *The Recognitions'* first reviews—there were fifty-five of them—

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ranged from cool dismissal to sputtering outrage that focused especially on the novel's bulk and complicated technique. But the book gradually began to gain a reputation as an underground classic, prompting paperback editions in 1962, 1970, and 1974. Favorable revaluations by John W. Aldridge, Tony Tanner, and David Madden appeared, and Anthony West predicted that *The Recognitions* would "one day take a place in classic American literature." Academic critics, who soon enough rallied to the Gaddis banner, have indeed maintained that *The Recognitions* is an American masterpiece on a par with *Moby-Dick*.

A year after the first reissue of *The Recognitions*, in 1963, Gaddis was awarded a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and garnered high praise from the patriarch of the literary mainstream, Malcolm Cowley. Gaddis soon accumulated other prestigious awards, and as the 60's progressed he began to enjoy as well the peculiar literary fame of the neglected writer; a 1968 *Book World* feature cited him as one of "ten neglected American writers who deserve to be better known."

And the times they were a-changin'. By 1975, the year of Gaddis's second novel, *JR*,† a corrosive diatribe against capitalist corruption told in 700 pages of near-hysterical running dialogue, Gaddis's voice fell on eagerly receptive ears. *JR* was awarded the coveted National Book Award—in part, as has been suggested even by Gaddis's admirers, because a lot of critics felt obligated to undo past damages. In 1982, in a crowning touch of reparation, Gaddis was chosen as a recipient of a five-year "genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation.

Gaddis's most recent novel, *Car-*

penter's Gothic,** another and even more corrosive diatribe against capitalist and sundry other corruptions, again told in near-hysterical running dialogue, but this time only 262 pages of it, has been greeted with enormous enthusiasm and respect. Although he is still no candidate for best-sellerdom, Gaddis is nevertheless light years from the days when he was forced to labor for his livelihood in the very thick of the asphalt jungle he so richly despises. He has, in fact, become something of a cult figure among the young, and his most loyal academic followers have worked energetically to establish his reputation as an American master.

GADDIS was born in Manhattan in 1922 and reared in New York City and on Long Island in the "fairly Calvinist tradition" of the Congregationalists. He was educated at boarding school, public school, and then Harvard, where he edited the humor magazine, the *Lampoon*. Gaddis was disqualified for service in World War II on account of a kidney disorder; he felt, he later reported, "resentful at having missed the experience that all my generation had." Returning to Harvard after a convalescence, he found it emptied by the war. After a drinking incident got his name into the local papers, he was asked by the dean to leave without a degree, despite his being in his fourth year.

After leaving Harvard, Gaddis worked for two years as a fact-checker for the *New Yorker*, but a sense of alienation soon propelled him to a life perhaps more typical of young people a couple of generations later than his own. For five years he traveled and occasionally worked in Central America, Europe (particularly Spain and France), and North Africa, interspersing his trips abroad with time in Greenwich Village. Indeed, many Village bohemian types are

* Penguin (paper), 956 pp., \$12.95.

† Penguin (paper), 726 pp., \$12.95.

** Viking, 262 pp., \$16.95.

immortalized in *The Recognitions*, and Gaddis himself appears in Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* as a "kid called Harold Sand," "a young novelist looking like Leslie Howard." Following his travels, Gaddis held a variety of jobs—making army films, corporate speechwriting, and doing public relations for a drug firm. Somewhere in these years he also married, had two children, and was subsequently divorced or separated.

Not a promising career from a certain point of view, and it is perhaps no surprise that some years later, as Distinguished Visiting Professor at Bard, Gaddis undertook to teach a course on Failure in American Literature. In one of his handful of essays, he rebukes the United States as "a society where failure can arise in simply not being a 'success,'" and which "holds its most ignominious defeats in store for . . . 'losers'—who fail at something that was not worth doing in the first place." Gaddis's work is based on such a vision of the abrasive emptiness of the American dream.

The Recognitions has a multitude of intersecting plot lines. The main one concerns Wyatt Gwyon, son of a minister. Left motherless at the age of four, Wyatt comes into the care of his dour, punitive, Calvinist Aunt May. During his adolescence, he falls deathly ill. After traditional medicine has tortured him to no avail, he is cured in a primitive ritual performed by his father, who has turned to the study of ancient magic following his disaffection with Christianity.

Wyatt declines to study for the ministry and some years later, after the failure of his own sterile marriage, he begins to forge works of art in the style of the masters of the Flemish Guild. Others cash in on his forgeries, but Wyatt is an innocent. He actually thinks of himself as a "master painter in the Guild, in Flanders," using "pure materials" and working "in the sight of God." The novel suggests that copying, in the sense of reverential "recognition" of the vision of the masters, is more genuinely creative than the spurious originality sponsored by sentimental romantic values.

Nevertheless, Wyatt sickens of

the dishonesty involved in forgery. Declining into mental breakdown, he begins a search for his true self. After a failed attempt at a reconciliation with his father, he departs for Europe, where he becomes entangled in yet another conspiracy, this time a counterfeiting ring. Wyatt, who has now changed his name to Stephen, eventually comes to spend time at the monastery to which his father had retreated years before.

At the monastery, Stephen eats bread containing his father's ashes, which have been mistaken for oatmeal. Here too he resumes his art work, but now it seems he "restores" paintings by scraping off their paint. Eventually, Stephen seems to leave the monastery, having arrived at a sort of salvation by means of "recognitions" such as these:

Look back, if once you're started in living, you're born into sin, then? And how do you atone? By locking yourself up in remorse for what you might have done? Or by living it through. By locking yourself up in remorse with what you know you have done? Or by going back and living it through. [...] If it was sin from the start, and possible all the time, to know it's possible and avoid it? Or by living it through [...] to go on knowing it's possible and pretend to avoid it? Or . . . or to have lived it through, and live it through, and deliberately go on living it through. [Ellipses not bracketed are Gaddis's]

AS EVEN this briefest of extracts suggests, the texture of *The Recognitions* is fabulistic, parodistic, and self-parodistic, layering fiction upon fiction. The book builds upon linguistic games and literary devices and allusions to a variety of languages. Even the annotated *Reader's Guide to William Gaddis's "The Recognitions"* admits that it is often hard to get hold of what is actually happening or to judge if some event is meant to be real or hallucinatory. Bizarre comic events continually intrude into an already surrealistic narrative, mingling the ridiculous and the serious, the ordinary and the mythic. Characters have names like Rectall Brown, Agnes Deigh, and Frank Sinisterra. Several large sec-

tions of the book are devoted to recording at great length and in intricate detail—and to no effective purpose—the rapid, superficial, deceitful conversation at artistic gatherings among various hangers-on in the "creative" world.

There is heavy emphasis in *The Recognitions* on sterility—in the general sense that characters can bring nothing original to pass, and in the particular sense that couples cannot or will not conceive, or even carry out plans to adopt, a child. Another emphasis is on sexual confusion. *The Recognitions* features several homosexuals, an apparent hermaphrodite, and one character who is taken to be a homosexual, apparently without reason. And of course, forgery, plagiarism, fakery, impersonation, counterfeiting, and many other kinds of dishonesty abound, all metaphors for Gaddis's chief point—that the world is a fraud.

As Gaddis sees it, religion, art, medicine, all the supposedly salvific structures of modern life are false and empty rituals—counterfeits of ancient ones—that have been superimposed upon a reality too fragmentary and remote for recovery except perhaps through momentary "recognitions," when "all of a sudden everything [is] freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see" (as Wyatt puts it). Yet unfortunately *The Recognitions* is itself but another symptom of the disease it seeks to diagnose. Nothing in the novel is alive; everything is self-conscious, sterile, entirely an affair of the head. The characters have neither texture nor vitality, but are instead just limply executed mouthpieces for points of view which remain contradictory and unresolved.

Gaddis is a writer who goes about saying a writer must not go about saying what he means but leave that task to the critics. Reading *The Recognitions* one begins to suspect that this is because he does not know what he means. Even the concept of "recognition" is fuzzy; sometimes compared to Joyce's "epiphany," it lacks Joyce's luminous conviction of the concreteness of reality. Disintegration, dissolution, decline, fragmentation are not just the themes but

the overriding experiences of this book and Gaddis lacks the aesthetic (or moral) energy to counter them.

EVEN Gaddis's admirers seem unable to agree on the most basic aspects of the meaning of *The Recognitions*. A volume of criticism, *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, proffers antithetical interpretations, with one critic observing rather tenderly that *The Recognitions* suggests that "nothing is empty or without significance that is spiritually derived from one's deepest and purest humanity," another almost gleefully remarking that the novel is "a black book indeed." And the interpretation that finds Gaddis declaring that "Art is the ultimate expiation" contrasts markedly with the one that finds the novelist insisting that "Truth must finally be sought beyond art's boundaries."

This ambivalence, it has been suggested, is actually part of Gaddis's technique: each reader must come to his own "recognition" and not expect the artist to do it for him. Thus, as a novel which may in the end be no more and no less valuable than the varying and often contradictory interpretations it inspires, *The Recognitions* can be seen as an anticipation of the deconstructionist movement—a work of art that undercuts the efficacy of the artistic act. But then, people tend to come to their own recognitions anyway, so why would they need Gaddis? Some of us had naively hoped that art might aim for something more comprehensive than this.

The fact that Gaddis engages issues of great seriousness and importance—faith, salvation, the function of art—only makes the more exasperating his refusal to see his work through to resolution, his yielding instead to an impulse of aimless accumulation. As he himself remarks in a recent interview: "Once one gets a theme in one's mind it becomes obsessive. If it happens to be forgery, then everywhere you look all you see is forgery, falsification—of religious values, of art—plagiarism, stealing." Of course, if everything is a forgery, then there is little point in working to make distinctions of

any kind and nothing then can be worth much effort. As Wyatt remarks, never have there been so many things not worth doing. To this principle, Gaddis's work bears eloquent testimony.

Given Gaddis's abrogation of his own role as an artist, which precisely involves the making of necessary distinctions, *The Recognitions* becomes itself a bit of a fraud, one of those elaborate manipulations of reality—like the tricks performed by the magicians of Pharaoh's court—which impress mightily at first but collapse finally of their own emptiness. Some critics have placed *The Recognitions* within the modernist tradition, or on the cusp that hinges modernism with post-modernism; others have suggested that it stands in a line of savage and uniquely American comedies that include certain works of Mark Twain and Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*. But once divested of its show of erudition, its literary parodies, its complex array of ultimately pointless mythological allusions, *The Recognitions* is actually closer to the type of 1950's melodrama exemplified by Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (approvingly cited by Gaddis in his essay on failure in American life) and such sub-middlebrow efforts as *Marty* and *Requiem for a Heavyweight*: vaguely adolescent tales about sensitive souls adrift in a harsh modern world saturated with fraud, commercialism, cruelty, and vulgarity. Stripped of its surface complexity, *The Recognitions* is reminiscent of nothing so much as an especially ambitious episode of the old TV series, *Playhouse 90*, though without the resolution demanded of the popular form and consequently without even its modest yield of satisfaction.

GADDIS's two subsequent novels do not employ the elaborate structure of mythological and literary allusion characteristic of *The Recognitions*. They are, to be sure, difficult books to read, but more because of their quotient of counterculture faddism than because they are experiments in the avant-garde. For whatever reason, with the passing of the 50's, Gaddis seems to have found his voice. Now his protest is

not muffled but open and focused, his nihilism untroubled by lukewarm gestures in the direction of "salvation."

If fraud is the leitmotif of *The Recognitions*, in *JR* it is entropy, i.e., the tendency of systems toward disorder and inertness. As a character remarks in *JR*, "Order is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos."

The entropic decline in *JR* is seen by Gaddis as the result of the subordination of all values in capitalist America to greed and profit. Language must of course reflect such a decline, and in *JR*, the language—almost entirely dialogue—is frantic, fast-paced, fragmentary, full of jargon, cliché, evasion, hesitation, deceit, apology, interruption, irrelevancy, manipulation. Characters seem to possess no identities that have not been corrupted or devastated by the "system." (Perhaps for that reason their names are seldom given; they often have to be identified through their speech habits, as in the favorite epithet of the main character, the eleven-year-old JR, "hot shit.") Settings switch during the brief, blink-and-you'll-miss-them narrative sections, and the whole book proceeds at breakneck speed.

JR is a sixth-grade entrepreneur who parlays his social-studies lessons in free enterprise into a corporate empire. His conglomerate comes to be known as the JR Family of Companies, an irony since the actual families portrayed in the book, including his own, are all fragmented or deteriorating in one way or another. The JR Corporation markets all kinds of improbable and fairly useless goods like wooden picnic forks, pork bellies, and green aspirin, and runs a series of deficient services, like an interlocking chain of nursing homes and funeral parlors. JR operates out of phone booths, chiefly the one in his school, using a handkerchief over the mouthpiece to disguise his boyish voice.

Very little, "educationwise," goes on in school. The principal, Mr. Whiteback, is also a banker, who strives for such goals as "the full utilization potential of in-school television." One of the school's teachers tells his class.

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"You're not here to learn anything, but to be taught so you can pass these tests." *JR* enlists the help of two of the school's teachers, a writer and a composer, in operating his companies out of a catastrophically disordered apartment. A large cast of supporting characters—bankers, brokers, politicians, public-relations men, businessmen, writers, artists, and a number of wives and girlfriends—are either driven ragged by or are perpetrators of the chaos caused by ringing telephones, blaring radios, intrusive advertising, bureaucratic scheming, snoopy reporters, and assorted other disorders deriving from the junky, kitschy culture they inhabit.

Corporate values have destroyed everything, Gaddis thunders in *JR*: family, education, morality, love, all social structures, relationships between men and women, sex, and even art. Nor can there be any doubt that the corruption is not an aberration but intrinsic to the system. "[W]here do you think you are, over at Russia," asks *JR*, "where they don't let you do anything? These laws are these laws why should we want to do something illegal if some law lets us do it anyway . . .?"

Gaddis does evince a certain skill in *JR* at capturing the speech patterns of different contemporary types, and at building an intricate, ingenious plot. But the book's monomania, with its Cyclopean vision of the horrors of capitalism as the cause of every evil, pretty thoroughly discredits this achievement. *JR* displays the same helplessness as *The Recognitions* in the face of its material.

THIS kind of one-note thinking also characterizes Gaddis's latest novel, *Carpenter's Gothic*, although it is shorter and takes place in a single setting. Paul Booth, a harried Vietnam veteran who promotes himself as a "media consultant," and his wife Liz, a long-suf-

fering heiress and would-be romantic novelist whose money is tied up in trust, rent a house on the Hudson River. The house is "carpenter's gothic," imitation gothic from the outside, the inside rooms poorly planned and crammed-in every which way—apparently another of Gaddis's fuzzily intentioned frauds. Paul's associates include a slick fundamentalist evangelist, the Reverend Ude, inspired to harvest souls in Africa, and a mining corporation interested in the same part of Africa for different but equally suspect reasons. The owner of the house, McCandless, is a failed novelist and a geologist, who, having surveyed the mining site, knows something about the intricate geopolitical schemes it is inspiring. A Gaddis stand-in, McCandless drops in periodically to rage against the multifarious stupidities of the modern world.

Stupidity is, in fact, Gaddis's major theme here. "*Carpenter's Gothic* . . . is about getting it wrong and stupidity," the author vouchsafed in one of his rare explications of himself. "It's about stupidity and ignorance, stupidity and greed. . . . Stupidity is, as someone says in the book, a hard habit to break." It is also about the Third World—Africa in the novel but, according to Gaddis, Central America as well. "Stupidity and sentimental values are guiding us in Central America right now." "Can't we stop wandering off in other people's wars and pushing people around?" he wonders. "The Nicaragua picture—it is beyond belief what we are doing, and stupid, stupid."

In *Carpenter's Gothic*, Gaddis means to show us the consequences of stupidity. His wrath is unleashed on all kinds of "true believers," not only fundamentalists and creationists but anti-Communists and diehard capitalists who persist in holding blindly to their creeds and in inflicting them on others. ("Revealed truth is the one

weapon stupidity's got against intelligence," quoth McCandless.) The true believers, aided by blandly corrupt government lackeys, and prodded by what Gaddis calls the "unswerving punctuality of chance," move toward a denouement in which several characters die violently, a nuclear device is exploded by the U.S. off the African coast while the President rages in headlines against the Evil Empire, and everything apparently returns to business as usual in this black Disney-land.

IN A way that even *The Recognitions* and *JR* do not, *Carpenter's Gothic* shows that Gaddis is not so much an artist as an anti-artist, working with cartoon characters and disembodied ideas. Instead of shaping, he flattens; instead of synthesizing, he fragments; instead of ordering, he disorders; instead of sifting the chaff from the wheat, he collects the chaff and blows it in our faces.

Gaddis enthusiasts have of course insisted that the form of his work is appropriate to its content. And, at different points in his novels, Gaddis himself shows his awareness of the kind of criticism he inspires by denouncing the simple-minded mentality that demands ready-made solutions from art. But what is this if not a by-now hackneyed justification for an impotent imagination? In undercutting the creative act, Gaddis does more to break down the human spirit than any system he opposes. It is true that our current funhouse state of literary criticism in one way or another encourages novels like *JR* and *Carpenter's Gothic*—tons of bloodless verbiage and sweaty convivances to make incomparable banality sound like truth. But in this corruption, from which he (unlike the various struggling artists of his fiction) has handsomely profited, William Gaddis himself has had a prominent hand.