

Chapter Six

Carpenter's Gothic; or, The Ambiguities

In the years following the publication of *J R*, Gaddis occasionally taught at Bard College, an experience he described as follows:

My friend William Burroughs used to say that he didn't teach creative writing, he taught creative reading. That was my idea in the Bard courses I taught, especially "The Theme of Failure in American Literature," where we read everything from Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* to William James' *Pragmatism* to *Diary of a Mad Housewife*. What I was trying to do was raise questions for which there are no distinct answers. The problems remain with us because there are no absolutes.¹

Carpenter's Gothic is likewise a course in creative reading, a novel that raises questions for which there are no distinct answers, and one that counters absolutes with ambiguities. "There's a very fine line between the truth and what really happens" is a dictum that echoes throughout the novel,² but while half the characters proclaim the truth and the other half expose what really happens, an ambiguity that neither half wishes to acknowledge prevents the reader from attaining an absolute certainty about many of the novel's events and returns him or her to the air of uncertainty that is the chief climate of our ambiguous times.

This much can be deduced: *Carpenter's Gothic* concerns the last month in the life of Elizabeth Booth, "a stunning redhaired former debutante from the exclusive Grosse Pointe area in Michigan" and "the daughter of late mineral tycoon F R Vorakers" (255). Former head of Vorakers Consolidated Reserve (VCR) in southeast Africa, her father committed suicide eight or nine years before the novel opens when his bribery practices were in danger of being exposed. At his funeral, Paul Booth, a Vietnam veteran and proud Southerner (actually an orphan of uncertain heritage) who "carried the bag" for the bribes, seduced Liz (as he calls her) and took her as his second wife. He quickly ran through

much of her money in a number of ill-considered schemes to get rich; the rest of her money is tied up in a trust administered by "Adolph," much to Paul's frustration. Four years before the novel's present Liz survived an airplane crash, and four years later Paul is still pursuing a bogus suit for the loss of his wife's "marital services." Financial difficulties have led the couple to quit New York City for a rented house up the Hudson River—a ninety-year-old house in "Carpenter Gothic" style—whence Paul hopes to make it big as a media consultant. As the novel begins, his most promising client is the Reverend Elton Ude, an evangelical preacher from the rural South who with Paul's help parlays an accidental drowning during a baptism into a providential call for a multimedia crusade against the forces of evil, a.k.a. the powers of darkness (namely communism, teachers of evolution, the "Jew liberal press," and secular humanists everywhere). Using the house simply as a place "to eat and sleep and fuck and answer the telephone" (244), Paul spends most of his time elsewhere. Liz's younger brother Billy pays an occasional disruptive visit, but she spends most of her time fighting off boredom and coping with an unending series of phone calls, many concerning the whereabouts of the house's absentee landlord. Enter mysterious stranger.

A man apparently in his late fifties, McCandless began as a geologist and in fact did the original exploration of the African ore field that is now up for grabs between VCR and the Reverend Ude, who has a mission and radio station there. Disgusted at the increasing CIA involvement with the various movements toward independence in Africa beginning in the 1950s, McCandless drifted for years: he married and fathered a son named Jack (who once attended school with Billy), supported himself by teaching and writing articles for encyclopedias and science magazines, and even wrote a novel about his African experiences with the CIA. The first marriage ending in divorce, McCandless married a younger woman named Irene, but she left him two years before the novel opens. He is presently being hounded by both the IRS and the CIA, the latter in the uncouth person of Lester, a former colleague of his African days who is convinced McCandless retains vital information regarding the ore field under dispute.

McCandless arrives one misty morning to reclaim some papers stored in a locked room. Coming to life at his appearance, Liz transforms McCandless into a wearily romantic "older man" with a mysterious past, and on his second appearance a week later takes him into her bed during one of Paul's many absences. McCandless leaves the next after-

noon in the company of Liz's brother Billy, whose conversations with McCandless (there and later that night in New York City) solidify his earlier resolve to go to work for his father's company in Africa. Shortly after their departure, Paul arrives home in tatters (the victim of an attempted mugging) with all his media plans in tatters as well. Paul is \$10,000 richer—keeping for himself a bribe Ude intended for Senator Teakell and the FCC—and has paid a black youth \$100 to assassinate the minister. That night paid arsonists mistake another house for McCandless's and burn it to the ground.

A week later McCandless returns to find the house ransacked and Liz griefstricken at the news of her brother's death aboard an airplane shot down off the coast of Africa, a strike targetted for Senator Teakell who was ostensibly on a fact-finding mission "defending the mineral resources of the free world" but actually watching out for his own financial investments there. McCandless is preparing to leave the country—he has accepted Lester's offer of \$16,000 for his papers—but fails to persuade Liz to go with him. After he leaves Liz receives a brief visit from McCandless's first wife, both mistaking each other for the second wife Irene. Alone in the house after she leaves, Liz suffers a heart attack, symptoms of which were displayed throughout the novel, though dismissed by her doctors as high blood pressure. Because the house is still in disarray after the break-in that morning, the press mistakenly reports her death as the result of attempting to interrupt a robbery in progress. Paul believes this story, and though distraught at her death, he loses no time making sure both her and Billy's money will come to him, and he is last seen on the way to their funeral using the same seductive line on her best friend Edie that he used on Liz many years before.

As is the case with any summary of a Gaddis novel, this one not only fails to do justice to the novel's complex tapestry of events but also subverts the manner in which these events are conveyed. Opening *Carpenter's Gothic* is like opening the lid of a jigsaw puzzle: all the pieces seem to be there, but it is up to the reader to fit those pieces together. Paul's refrain "fit the pieces together you see how all the God damn pieces fit together" (205) doubles as Gaddis's instructions to the reader. The author doesn't make it easy: the initials VCR are used throughout the book but not spelled out until thirty-three pages before the end; a letter from Thailand arrives on page 48 but its contents not revealed until two pages from the end; names occur in conversations that are not explained until pages later, if ever. Ambiguity is introduced in the very first line of the novel ("The bird, a pigeon was it? or a dove"),

and though this particular ambiguity is cleared up at the end of the first chapter ("It was a dove"), the novel is rife with other ambiguities that are never resolved. Even after multiple readings, several events remain ambiguous, sometimes because too little information is given, sometimes because there are two conflicting accounts and no way to confirm either. As Paul complains later, "pieces fit together problem's just too God damn many pieces" (212).

Such narrative strategies are designed not to baffle or frustrate the reader but to dramatize the novel's central philosophic conflict, that between revealed truth versus acquired knowledge. Nothing is "revealed" by a godlike omniscient narrator in this novel; the reader learns "what really happens" only through study, attention, and the application of intelligence. The reader learns that McCandless has married twice, for example, by noting that Mrs. McCandless is old enough to have a twenty-five-year old son (251), but Irene young enough to still use Tampax (150; cf. the handwriting on p. 31) and to have her youthful photograph praised by Lester (132). If several events remain ambiguous after such study, the reader must live with those ambiguities rather than insist on absolute certainty, much as the intellectually mature individual abandons the absolutes of revealed religion for the ambiguities of actual life. In this novel Gaddis plays not God but the philosopher who announced the death of God: "Objections, non-sequiturs, cheerful distrust, joyous mockery—all are signs of health," Nietzsche insists. "Everything absolute belongs in the realm of pathology."

To his credit, Jesus never spoke of absolutes, but his followers in *Carpenter's Gothic* do. The Reverend Ude insists that Christ "buildd this great edifice of refuge for the weak, for the weary, for the seekers after his absolute truth in their days of adversity and persecution" (80). The same zealous certainty inspires the efforts of "a charming Texas couple who keep an eye out for schoolbooks that undermine patriotism, free enterprise, religion, parental authority, nothing official of course [McCandless explains to Billy], just your good American vigilante spirit hunting down, where is it, books that erode absolute values by asking questions to which they offer no firm answers" (184).³ The catalog of conservative values here is important: *Carpenter's Gothic* is not simply a satire on fundamentalism but a critique of the ways such absolutist thinking can lead to imperialism, xenophobia, rapacious capitalism, and the kind of paranoid cold war ideology enshrined in a *New York Post* headline at the novel's (and perhaps the world's) end: "PREZ: TIME TO DRAW LINE AGAINST EVIL EMPIRE" (259).

But none of this is new, as McCandless reminds both Billy and Lester in his harangues against Christianity. Just as Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* prefaces his tale of European imperialism in Africa with a reminder of Roman excursions into ancient Britain, McCandless several times sketches bloody moments in the history of Christianity (128, 142, 190–91, 236, 243) and locates this militant impulse in the Bible itself: the god of the Old Testament "is a man of war" (243; Ex. 15:3) and the son of god in the New Testament warns his followers "I come not to send peace but a sword" (142; Matt. 10:34). The fundamentalist fervor that McCandless lashes out against is not a topical subject that will date Gaddis's novel, but rather the latest and potentially the most lethal manifestation of a religion that has caused more bloodshed than harmony in its two-thousand-year history. The carpenter of "the profit Isaiah" (80) and the carpenter's son of the gospels together have created a Gothic nightmare of blood, guilt, persecution, righteousness, and intolerance—one meaning of Gaddis's ambiguous title.

"A patchwork of conceits, borrowings, deceptions"

A more important meaning of the title comes late in the book. At an awkward moment in his last conversation with Liz, McCandless welcomes the opportunity to discuss a neutral subject—the house's "Carpenter Gothic" architecture:

—Oh the house yes, the house. It was built that way yes, it was built to be seen from the outside it was, that was the style, he came on, abruptly rescued from uncertainty, raised to the surface —yes, they had style books, these country architects and the carpenters it was all derivative wasn't it, those grand Victorian mansions with their rooms and rooms and towering heights and cupolas and the marvelous intricate ironwork. That whole inspiration of medieval Gothic but these poor fellows didn't have it, the stonework and the wrought iron. All they had were the simple dependable old materials, and the wood and their hammers and saws and their own clumsy ingenuity bringing those grandiose visions the masters had left behind down to a human scale with their own little inventions, [. . .] a patchwork of conceits, borrowings, deceptions, the inside's a hodgepodge of good intentions like one last ridiculous effort at something worth doing even on this small a scale [. . .]. (227–28)

If one discounts the self-deprecating tone—Gaddis is no "country architect" with only "clumsy ingenuity"—this can easily double as a description of *Carpenter's Gothic* itself. Gaddis found his "simple de-

pendable old materials" in what he described to one interviewer as the "staples" of traditional fiction and set himself a task: "That is, the staples of the marriage, which is on the rocks, the obligatory adultery, the locked room, the mysterious stranger, the older man and the younger woman, to try to take these and make them work."⁴ In addition to these staples of plot, he depends on the staples of certain generic conventions. Gaddis's "patchwork of conceits, borrowings, deceptions" brings under one roof a number of genres: the Gothic novel, the apocalypse, the romance (in all senses), and the metafictional meditation, along with elements of Greek tragedy, Dickensian social satire, the colonial novel, the political thriller, documentary realism, the contemporary Vietnam veteran's story, and what Roy R. Male calls "cloistral" fiction. Each is a room jammed into Gaddis's Gothic construction, a little invention (only in comparison to his first two novels) of great ingenuity.

As McCandless says, Carpenter Gothic houses were meant to be seen from the outside and hence were designed with an emphasis on outward symmetry, even if it resulted in such deceptions as "twinned windows so close up there they must open from one room but in fact looked out from the near ends of two neither of them really furnished, an empty bookcase and sagging daybed in one and in the other a gutted chaise longue voluted in French pretension trailing gold velvet in the dust undisturbed on the floor since she'd stood there, maybe three or four times since she'd lived in the house" (226–27). (Note how perfectly this captures Paul and Liz's relationship: united under one roof, they are nonetheless divided by a wall of differences, his intellectual bankruptcy and lust caught by the empty bookcase and sagging daybed, her monied background and pretense to culture exposed by the chaise longue, "neither of them really furnished" with culture, taste, or education.) The novel conforms to strict Aristotelian unities: the action occurs in a single setting over a short period of time; which internal references date October–November 1983.⁵ A near-perfect symmetry balances the novel's seven chapters: the first takes place at sunset, the last at sunrise; the second and sixth begin with Liz climbing the hill from the river; the end of the third is linked to the beginning of the fifth with verbal repetitions (cf. 94–95 with 151); the central chapter, the fourth, takes place on Halloween and features the long conversation between McCandless and Lester that provides most of the historical background to the present-day events in the rest of the novel—the central heating of Gaddis's Gothic, as it were.

The Gothic novel is of course the most obvious genre Gaddis ex-

plots in *Carpenter's Gothic*, adapting as many of its stage properties as is feasible: the isolated "mansion," the locked room, the endangered "maiden," the mysterious stranger, even the witching time of year that allows for references to Halloween ghosts and a haunted house (148). The "unwavering leer" of the Masai warrior on a magazine cover follows Paul around as spookily as the moving eyes of an old portrait, and Liz has a dream premonition of death during the unholy hours between All Saints' Eve and the Day of the Dead. A parody of older Gothic novels, *Carpenter's Gothic* also incorporates long quotations from *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë's parody of even older Gothic novels.

The Gothic mode is not a new departure for Gaddis. Those chapters of *The Recognitions* set in New England creak with Gothic machinery: the heretical priest poring over curious volumes of forgotten lore, the deranged servant, supernatural statues, apparitions, the gloomy atmosphere that hangs over the desolate landscape, and the same attraction/repulsion felt by earlier Gothicists for Italianate Catholicism. Nor is the Gothic mode a new departure for American literature; Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* goes to great length to demonstrate that Gothic is the most characteristic form of classic American fiction. At the fleeting disappearance of James's and Wharton's ghosts, the genre took two directions in modern American literature: the Southern Gothic of Faulkner, O'Connor, and early Capote; and the supermarket Gothic that Alexander Theroux has wittily described (in his great Gothic romance *Darconville's Cat*) as "the genre of course of Hoodoo, Hackwork, and Hyperesthesia, the popular dust-jacket for which always showed a crumbling old mansion-by-moonlight and a frightened beauty in gossamer standing before it, tresses down, never knowing which way to turn."⁶ The New England Gothic tradition of Hawthorne and Melville has had few followers among serious contemporary novelists aside from Djuna Barnes, early Hawkes, some Pynchon, and the occasional anomaly (like Kerouac's *Dr. Sax* or Brautigan's *Hawkline Monster*).

Why would Gaddis revive this outmoded genre in the technological eighties? Partly for the challenge of reclaiming an exhausted genre (as Barth and Sorrentino like to do in general, and as Joyce Carol Oates has done with the Gothic in particular), but largely because the "symbols and meanings" of Gothic, Fiedler points out, "depend on an awareness of the spiritual isolation of the individual in a society where all communal systems of value have collapsed or have been turned into meaningless clichés."⁷ Liz's physical and McCandless's intellectual iso-

lation underscore the extent to which both have lost that connection between themselves and the world that McCandless reads of in V. S. Naipaul's novel (150, quoted at the end of chapter 1). With all of Jane Eyre's restlessness but none of her independence, Liz is the persecuted maiden in a Gothic melodrama: "when you feel like a nail everything looks like a hammer," she confesses to McCandless (223), reversing one of his cracks about fundamentalists. Psychologically immured in her Carpenter Gothic tower, Liz's choice between Paul and McCandless amounts to "being the prisoner of someone else's hopes [. . . or] being the prisoner of someone else's despair" (244). Liz finally perishes in that prison, subverting the happy ending of most Gothic fiction.

McCandless has much in common with the Gothic hero-villain, a mixture of Faust, Don Juan, and the Wandering Jew—all coming to stand, Fiedler argues, "for the lonely individual (the writer himself!) challenging the mores of bourgeois society, making patent to all men the ill-kept secret that the codes by which they live are archaic survivals without point or power."⁸ McCandless feels Christianity is just such an archaic survival, but his attempts to expose its ill-kept secrets of militarism, misogyny, and superstition have met with failure: called upon to testify at a "creationist" trial in Smackover—similar to one held in Arkansas in December 1981—he learned that fundamentalists are not simply ignorant (lacking knowledge) but stupid (hostile to knowledge), heirs to the anti-intellectual tradition in America that Richard Hofstadter has written about. An intellectual hero of sorts, McCandless is also the villain of the piece, however. He hopes to put his house in order (226), like Eliot's speaker at the end of *The Waste Land*, but he succeeds only in spreading disorder and chaos. Not only is he indirectly responsible for Billy's death, but he is as responsible as anyone for the nuclear showdown that looms over the novel's final pages. Possessing the facts about the ore field, he withholds this information, partly because he won't be believed (239), partly because of the Gothic villain's willingness to see his corrupt civilization go up in flames. During her longest and most powerful speech, Liz hurls exactly this accusation at him:

—And it's why you've done nothing . . . She put down the glass, —to see them all go up like that smoke in the furnace all the stupid, ignorant, blown up in the clouds and there's nobody there, there's no rapture no anything just to see them wiped away for good it's really you, isn't it. That you're the one who wants Apocalypse, Armageddon all the sun going out and the sea turned

to blood you can't wait no, you're the one who can't wait! The brimstone and fire and your Rift like the day it really happened because they, because you despise their, not their stupidity no, their hopes because you haven't any, because you haven't any left. (243-44)

The references to apocalypse and Armageddon here toward the end of the novel indicate the Gothic overlaps with another genre, the apocalypse. While the Gothic developed out of Jacobean drama, apocalypse originates in religious writings and mythography, bearing witness to the strange fact that cosmic catastrophe has been a fear and a hope of almost every society—a fear of extinction no matter how richly deserved, and a hope for purgation and another chance to start anew. The literary apocalypse is used by a writer to render judgment on society, a heretical desire to destroy that which God created. God said let there be light; the apocalyptic writer, like Melville at the end of *The Confidence-Man*, puts out the light.

Unlike other modern literatures, American literature has a strong, almost obsessive tradition in apocalypics. The first “best-seller” in our literature was Michael Wigglesworth’s long poem *The Day of Doom* (1662), and since then most of our major novelists have dealt in the apocalyptic: Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, Faulkner, West, O’Connor, and among contemporary novelists, Ellison, Barth, Baldwin, Burroughs, Pynchon, Vonnegut, Coover, Elkin, and DeLillo. It is tempting to divide these into the two traditional camps of apocalypists—the hopeful and the despairing—but many of these writers display both tempers: *Moby-Dick* is hopeful (Ishmael survives the catastrophe), but *The Confidence-Man* is despairing (nothing follows this masquerade).

Like Melville, Gaddis has written both forms: with Stanley composing a *dies irae* (322) and Willie speaking of “the doctrine of last things” (478), *The Recognitions* is certainly an apocalypse, but because Wyatt survives the cultural collapse that destroys the rest of the novel’s characters, it can be called a hopeful one—hence Gaddis’s disavowal of apocalyptic intentions in the interview quoted near the end of chapter 1. In *Carpenter’s Gothic*, however, both forms of apocalypse are set against each other: Ude and his followers are obviously banking on a hopeful apocalypse when they will be able to enjoy a “space age picnic in the clouds” while the rest of us are frantically consulting our Survival Handbook (135), and consequently they interpret all signs of cultural breakdown in terms of those foretold in the Book of Revelation.

McCandless interprets those same signs in the despairing apocalyptic temper of the Melville of *The Confidence-Man* or the Twain of *The Mysterious Stranger*. And yet, McCandless is himself a mysterious stranger with a nihilistic vision as despairing as Twain’s devil’s. A Christian reading of *Carpenter’s Gothic* would expose McCandless as the antichrist of the novel, spreading despair and disorder everywhere he goes. (The Christian reader might even find correspondences between the novel’s seven chapters and the seven seals in Revelation.) While signs and the interpretive context we place them in are themes in the novel, these particular ones are among the “deceptions” of the Carpenter Gothic style, however, and should not be seriously entertained.

Both McCandless and Ude can be held partially responsible for the literal apocalypse that begins at the end of the novel—“10 K ‘DEMO’ BOMB OFF AFRICA COAST War News, Pics Page 2” (259)—but McCandless’s sin is only one of omission; Ude’s is the more fatal one of commission. Like Tod Hackett in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (with which *Carpenter’s Gothic* has tonal similarities), Gaddis presents fundamentalists’ “fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power, and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization.”⁹ Although fundamentalists themselves may seem incapable of doing much more than breaking schoolbus windows and bombing abortion clinics, they are associated throughout the novel with right-wing politicians whose paranoid style of politics (as Hofstadter named it) can indeed help fundamentalists satisfy their apocalyptic yearnings. Fundamentalism or paranoid politics is not unique to America; as McCandless tells Billy:

—The greatest source of anger is fear, the greatest source of hatred is anger and the greatest source of all of it is this mindless revealed religion anywhere you look, Sikhs killing Hindus, Hindus killing Moslems, Druse killing Marionites, Jews killing Arabs, Arabs killing Christians and Christians killing each other maybe that’s the one hope we’ve got. You take the self hatred generated by original sin turn it around on your neighbors and maybe you’ve got enough sects slaughtering each other from Londonderry to Chandigarh to wipe out the whole damned thing, [. . .]. (185-86)

What the world and the novel need now to counteract this hatred and the polemical tone is love, or at least a romantic subplot. But the possibilities for love in both spheres are limited.

Gaddis’s working title for *Carpenter’s Gothic* was “That Time of Year:

A Romance," and like the "Gothic" in the published title, "romance" here means many things. As a genre, it has much in common with the Gothic; in fact, the latter is largely the romance pushed to extremes. The romance does, however, place greater emphasis on the picturesque, the idyllic, and the more conventional forms of love. (Love in the Gothic tends toward lust or perversion.) Gothic and romance "claim a certain latitude" from such constraints of realistic fiction as verisimilitude and plausibility, as Hawthorne argues in his famous preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*—another novel centering on a Gothic house and a debilitating family heritage—and Gaddis has always claimed this latitude.

Carpenter's Gothic displays the romance's indifference to strict realism: as in *J R*, events move impossibly fast; its countless coincidences strain belief; and there is an overwhelming emphasis on the negative that would be out of place in a more realistic novel. When Paul opens a newspaper "without knocking over the bottle" (203), the narrator draws our attention to this rare event, because elsewhere, no one can reach for anything without upsetting whatever glass is closest at hand; no one can cook anything without burning it; no one can turn on the radio without hearing a distressing item of news; checks are delayed while bills arrive swiftly; cars and trucks are always breaking down, buses caught in traffic jams; clocks, newspapers, even dictionary definitions are unreliable; the novel is tyrannized by Murphy's Law, where anything that can go wrong does so, and usually at the worst possible moment. Hawthorne insists that the romancer "may so manage his atmospheric medium as to bring out or mellow the light and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture," and Gaddis has pursued the latter option with such a vengeance that *Carpenter's Gothic* joins Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and Sorrentino's *The Sky Changes* as one of the darkest novels in contemporary American literature. Even its humor is black.

Only the brief affair between McCandless and Liz admits any light into the novel. Here Gaddis turns from the Hawthornian romance to sport with the Harlequin romance, using every cliché in the style book: the bored debutante—housewife, the older man with an exotic background, the obligatory adultery, the revivification of said debutante after one night in the older man's arms, prompting her to sigh with a straight face, "It's an amazing thing to be alive, isn't it . . ." (151). There is even the offer to take her away to faraway lands and the dutiful decision to stand by her man for reasons she cannot quite articulate;

echoing Stella in Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Liz can only say, "It's just, I don't know. Something happens . . ." (89).

Gaddis redeems these clichés by subjecting them to much more rigorous artistic control than is common, carefully integrating them with the patterns of imagery and literary allusion at work throughout the novel. Each genre Gaddis adapts has a reference point in a classic text: the Gothic in *Jane Eyre*, the apocalypse in the Book of Revelation (the most frequently cited biblical text), and the romance in the Shakespearean sonnet that provided Gaddis's earlier title:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

When Liz echoes the sonnet's concluding couplet by telling McCandless at the end of the novel, "I think I loved you when I knew I'd never see you again" (245), she unconsciously completes a series of references to the sonnet that begins on the novel's first page. In fact, much in the novel is encapsulated in the sonnet: the autumnal and predominantly nocturnal settings, the recurring references to empty boughs and yellow leaves outside and the fire grate inside—cold until McCandless arrives to rekindle it—and of course the relationship between the older man and his younger lover. Similarly, the poem generates much of the novel's imagery. On those rare occasions when Gaddis's characters stop talking, the text gives way to luxurious descriptions of the dying landscape, passages as colorful as the vegetation they describe, and imitative in their gnarled syntax of the intertwined vines, branches, and fallen leaves.

The equation of autumn with late middle age in the poem's first

quatrain is spelled out with scientific precision by McCandless (who had quoted a few words from the sonnet on p. 167):

—all those glorious colours the leaves turn when the chlorophyll breaks down in the fall, when the proteins that are tied to the chlorophyll molecules break down into their amino acids that go down into the stems and the roots. That may be what happens to people when they get old too, these proteins breaking down faster than they can be replaced and then, yes well and then of course, since proteins are the essential elements in all living cells the whole system begins to disinteg. . . . (228–29)

A page later, McCandless picks up the sunset image in the second quatrain of the poem:

—Finally realize you can't leave things better than you found them the best you can do is try not to leave them any worse but they [the young] won't forgive you, get toward the end of the day like the sun going down in Key West if you've ever seen that? They're all down there for the sunset, watching it drop like a bucket of blood and clapping and cheering the instant it disappears, cheer you out the door and damned glad to see the last of you.

But the sun she looked up for was already gone, not a trace in the lustreless sky and the unfinished day gone with it, leaving only a chill that trembled the length of her. (230–31)

In this brilliant orchestration of images, Gaddis combines the literal setting of this conversation and the metaphors from sonnet seventy-three with an echo from Revelation, which Liz will pick up later in the same conversation (“Apocalypse, Armageddon all the sun going out and the sea turned to blood” [244; cf. 185]—all leading to a symbolic alignment of organic decay (leaves, light, people) with cultural decay, and suggesting that fundamentalism is a malign but not unnatural cancer in the body politic, accelerating an otherwise inevitable process. As Cynthia Ozick was the first to point out, “It isn't ‘theme’ Mr. Gaddis deals in (his themes are plain) so much as a theory of organism and disease. In ‘Carpenter’s Gothic’ the world is a poisonous organism, humankind dying of itself.”¹⁰ McCandless “doesn’t much like getting old,” his first wife will later say (250), nor does he much like watching the disintegration of civilization, but apart from raging against the dying of the light, there’s little he can do to halt either.

As Shakespeare’s sonnet is a seduction poem of sorts, the words “death” and “expire” probably carry their secondary Elizabethan mean-

ing of orgasm. If so, the trope has its counterpart in *Carpenter's Gothic*, where a description of Liz after lovemaking (163) is used again to describe her position at death (253). Her death, of course, upsets the parallel with the sonnet—as it does with the Gothic—but it does fulfill the expectations of the dove imagery likewise present from the novel's first page. Watching the neighborhood boys bat a dead dove back and forth, “a kind of battered shuttlecock moulting in a flurry at each blow” (1), Liz turns away, catching breath for the first time. Throughout the novel Liz is closely associated with doves and is clearly a kind of battered shuttlecock herself—literally in her relationship with Paul (9, 22), figuratively with Billy and McCandless. Once again braving the dangers of cliché, Gaddis invests Liz with all the symbolic qualities of a dove (peace, innocence, gentleness) and even has her bleat like a dove (163–64). The symbolism is self-explanatory, but again Gaddis manages to make the cliché work: when this “sweet bird” emits “a choked bleat” as she dies, even a reader hardened by the savage ironies of modern literature must feel that peace and innocence have indeed fled from this world for good. The dove of the Holy Ghost is treated no better by the novel's militant Christians, and at the symbolic age of thirty-three Liz even has aspects of Him the fundamentalists profess to worship.

Most of the other genres that have rooms in Gaddis's house of fiction can be treated more briefly. In its use of a single stage setting and small cast, its reliance on messengers (by letter and phone), and its adherence to Aristotelian unities, *Carpenter's Gothic* has the formal design of Greek drama, a subject McCandless once taught (252). Like an adaptation by O'Neill or Eliot, Gaddis's novel includes a dark heritage of paternal guilt, features continual offstage atrocities, and even has its Furies in the neighborhood kids always smirking through Liz's windows. Reviewer Frederick Busch instead found several parallels to Dickens's *Bleak House*, and rightly so.¹¹ Gaddis's social crusader instincts encourage the parallel, as does his use of Dickensian names for his unsavory manipulators (Sneddiger, Grimes, Stumpp, Cruikshank, Grissom, Lopots). In particular, Gaddis shares Dickens's faith in the novel as an instrument for social improvement and his ability to make family disputes representative of larger social disputes. Gaddis goes so far as to correct von Clausewitz on this point: “it's not that war is politics carried on by other means it's the family carried on by other means” (241). The African episodes reported at secondhand are reminiscent of those novels featuring Anglo-Americans abroad that run

from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and several books by Forster and Waugh through contemporary novels by Graham Greene, Anthony Burgess, and Paul Theroux—not to mention the multinational political thrillers of more commercial novelists. *Carpenter's Gothic* is also a textbook example of "cloistral" fiction, a genre centering on a mysterious stranger's visit to a closed community and the moral havoc that results, epitomized by such stories as Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and Mark Twain's "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg."¹²

Of more interest is Gaddis's contribution to the growing body of Vietnam War fiction. Paul's Vietnam experiences are referred to only sporadically in the novel, but by piecing together the clues his tour of duty can be reconstructed—though only after separating the "official" truth from what really happened. He somehow managed to win a commission as a second lieutenant, much to the contempt of his adopted father, who reportedly told him "that he was God damn lucky he was going in as an officer because he wasn't good enough to be an enlisted man" (91). A platoon leader in the 25th Infantry, Lightning Division, he quickly alienated himself from his men by insisting on "All this military bullshit with these spades from Cleveland and Detroit in his broken down platoon out there kicking their ass to show them what the southern white officer class is all about" (193). After turning in his crew chief, a black nineteen-year-old named Chigger, for using heroin, Chigger "fragged" him; that is, he rolled a grenade under Paul's bed in the Bachelor Officer Quarters. He was pulled out by Chick, his radiotelephone operator, and the Army covered up the incident by blaming an enemy infiltrator—the story Paul later uses. Paul is discharged at the same grade he entered, an indication of his incompetence, for as McCandless points out elsewhere, officers welcome a war for "the chance to move up a few grades, peace time army they'll sit there for twenty years without making colonel but combat brings that first star so close they can taste it" (238). Paul leaves behind a native mistress, pregnant with his child: "it was a boy" he learns at the end of the novel (260).

Paul parlayed his bogus reputation as "this big wounded hero" into a job with Vorakers Consolidated Reserve, but years later, as the novel opens, he is still plagued by terrible memories of Vietnam: the machinegun fire (8), nearly crashing in a helicopter (83–84), and the aftermath of the fragging incident: "you know how long I laid there? How many weeks I laid there blown right up the gut watching that bottle of plasma run down tubes stuck in me anyplace they could get

one in? Couldn't move my legs I didn't know if I had any, God damn medic breaks the needle right off in my arm taped down so it can't move can't reach down, dare reach down and see if my balls are blown off, my balls Liz! I was twenty two!" (45). When a black nineteen-year-old mugger attacks Paul late in the novel, he sees in the mugger's eyes the same hatred he saw in Chigger's and kills him, for "They never taught us how to fight, they only taught us how to kill" (241).

The difficulty Vietnam veterans have had readjusting to society has already become a literary staple, and Gaddis's vets (Chick and Pearly Gates as well) have as difficult a time as any. But Gaddis once again subverts the cliché by portraying Paul as responsible for his own troubles. Not only did he bring the fragging upon himself, but in a sense he joins the enemy—not the Viet Cong, but Vorakers, Adolph, Grimes, and the other power brokers: "God damn it Billy listen! *These are the same sons of bitches that sent me to Vietnam!*" (242). Yet so strong is his lust for prestige and money that Paul willingly sacrifices his sense of moral outrage to join the very power structure that nearly killed him, thereby sacrificing any sympathy his Vietnam ordeal might otherwise have earned him.

The generic text Gaddis uses here as a reference point, though unacknowledged, is Michael Herr's brilliant *Dispatches* (1977), an impressionistic account of the two years (1967–68) Herr covered the Vietnam war for *Esquire*, and an aesthetic exercise in rescuing "clean" information from official disinformation and the vagaries of memory. Gaddis borrows one anecdote from Herr's book ("never happen sir" [214])¹³ and perhaps found a number of his other Vietnamese details there: Tu Do street, Drucker's bag of ears, the raunchy language Paul uses on the phone with Chick, and some of the war jargon (sapper, ville, "the old man," greased, BOQ). More importantly, *Dispatches*, like Gaddis's novel, investigates the gap between the "truth" and what really happens, specifically, the Pentagon's pathological allegiance to an official truth that had no basis in reality. The references to Vietnam in *Carpenter's Gothic* act as a grim reminder that his theme is no abstract problem in epistemology but one that in this case left 130,000 American casualties dead, maimed, and missing.¹⁴

Finally, it should be noted that another writer Gaddis borrows from in *Carpenter's Gothic* is the author of *The Recognitions* and *J.R.* Richard Poirier once described Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, as "more accessible only because very much shorter than the first [V.],

and like some particularly dazzling section left over from it."¹⁵ At first glance, the shorter and more accessible *Carpenter's Gothic* might similarly look like a particularly dazzling section left over from *J R*; in fact, one reviewer went so far as to say "its main plot comes from pages 96–103 of *J R*; substitute Liz Vorakers Booth for Amy Cates Joubert, change the African locale from Gandia to somewhere near South Africa, and there it is. Even the names Ude and Teakell come from *J R*."¹⁶ There are important tonal differences between Gaddis's three novels, of course, but it is possible to hear other echoes from the earlier two: Liz may have actually read *The Recognitions*, for she refers to the passage where Arnie Munk got so drunk he folded up his clothes and put them into the refrigerator (13; *R* 175) and to Rev. Gwyon's remark about "the unswerving punctuality of chance" (223; *R* 9), which also appears on Jack Gibbs's page of quotations (*J R* 486). For his third novel Gaddis returned to some of his source books for the first: to the 14th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for the Battle of Crécy (147), the *Pilgrim Hymnal* for two militaristic hymns (142), Cruden's *Concordance* for biblical citations, and Eliot's *Four Quartets* for at least one line ("to recover what had been lost and found and lost again and again" [155], from "East Coker"). Even McCandless's novel has its echoes from *The Recognitions*, especially in his protagonist Frank Kinkead's decision "to live deliberately" (139), the same Thoreauvian vow Stephen makes (*R* 900). From *J R* he borrowed Pythian Mining in addition to the other names enumerated above and hints broadly at a connection between *J R* and Paul Booth when Adolph dismisses the latter as knowing "as much about finance as some snot nosed sixth grader" (209).

Much of this is little more than the kind of cross-referencing one finds in the novels of Faulkner, Barth, or Sorrentino. *Carpenter's Gothic's* relationship to its huge predecessors seems to be hinted at in McCandless's description of his own novel: "it's just an afterthought why are you so damned put out by it," he asks Lester. "This novel's just a footnote, a postscript" (139). That "this" can refer to both novels, and the fact this particular line occurs in a real novel about an imaginary novel by an imaginary character who resembles a real author calls attention to the ambiguous status of fiction, blurring that fine line between truth and what really happens by offering fine lines that seem all the more true because they never happened. The ontology of all fictions—literary, religious, patriotic, and personal—emerges as one of Gaddis's principal preoccupations in *Carpenter's Gothic* and makes this novel not merely a footnote, a postscript to his megafictions, but a virtuosic exercise in metafiction.

That's All She Wrote

The nature and production of fictions is a recurring topic in the dialogues that make up the bulk of *Carpenter's Gothic*, ranging from Paul's rather primitive notion of literary fiction (112) to McCandless's more sophisticated attacks on such "fictions" as religion, occult beliefs, and ethnocentrism. Gaddis's use of fiction to explore the status of fiction is characteristic of metafiction, that genre that calls attention to itself as fiction and flaunts the artificiality of art.¹⁷ Though more realistic than such exemplary metafiction as O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* or Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, *Carpenter's Gothic* takes full advantage of the resources of this genre to clarify the distinction between (and preferability of) ambiguity over absolutism and to warn against the dangers of mistaking fiction for fact.

The *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (8th ed.) that Gaddis lambastes for inaccuracy each time Liz consults it (94, 248) gives three definitions of "fiction," each amply illustrated in *Carpenter's Gothic*. In fact, so many variations are played on this theme that it might be useful to resort to the sophomoric strategy of arguing directly from this dictionary's definitions, especially since Gaddis may have looked at them.

First Definition

1 a: something invented by the imagination or feigned; *specif*: an invented story <distinguish fact from~> b: fictitious literature (as novels or short stories) <a writer of~>.

Gaddis has always shown writers writing: in *The Recognitions*, Otto's struggles to concoct his play and Esme's to write poetry are dramatized, as is Jack Gibbs's work on *Agapē Agape* in *J R*. *Carpenter's Gothic* features two writers of fiction, both of whose works, however, blur the dictionary's distinction between fact and fiction. McCandless's novel is the object of Lester's extended scorn, partly because it follows the facts of the author's African experiences so closely that it doesn't merit the name fiction. The only aspects "invented" by McCandless seem to be slanderous aspersions (129), romantic self-aggrandizement (136–37), and pompous rhetoric (*passim*). Similarly, Liz's work in progress begins as autobiographical wishful thinking (63–64), but after McCandless's appearance begins to resemble a diary, reaching the point where her "fictional" account of an event is indistinguishable from the narrator's (cf. 163 and 257).

To modify Webster's definition, this is fact feigning as fiction, but perhaps a necessary sacrifice of "what really happens" to the "truth," that is, to something closer to how the authors experienced an event than a strict recital of the facts would allow. This is why Liz objects to the fanciful notion of setting up a mirror on Alpha Centauri in order to see through a telescope "what really happened" earlier in her life: "But you'd just see the outside though, wouldn't you" (153). Uninterested in aesthetic distance, Liz feels a writer's subjective sense of an experience is more important than the objective facts of the experience, a point she tries to impress upon McCandless, who prefers technical writing: "I'm talking about you, about what you know that nobody else knows because that's what writing's all about isn't it? I'm not a writer Mrs Booth I mean lots of people can write about all that, about grasshoppers and evolution and fossils I mean the things that only you know that's what I mean" (168). McCandless counters with "Maybe those are the things that you want to get away from," a position similar to Eliot's.¹⁸ He made a better objection to Liz's point when he said earlier that too many writers "think if something happened to them that it's interesting because it happened to them" (158-59).

The aesthetic debate here concerning subjectivity vs. objectivity and the legitimacy of autobiography in fiction began in *The Recognitions*, where Hannah complained of Max's painting, "he has to learn that it isn't just having the experience that counts, it's knowing how to handle the experience" (R 184). In his third novel Gaddis enlivens the debate by showing how the autobiographical writer can confuse the invention of fiction with the invention of self, using fiction as an actor uses makeup to create a new persona, even a new life. For Liz, writing fiction offers "some hope of order restored, even that of a past itself in tatters, revised, amended, fabricated in fact from its very outset to reorder its unlikelihoods, what it all might have been" (247). Writing gives Liz access to what Billy calls her "real secret self" (193), the self Wyatt struggles to find in his quest for individuation, and the self Liz lost sight of "twenty, twenty five years away when it was all still, when things were still like you thought they were going to be" (154). Bibbs to her brother, Liz to her husband, Mrs. Booth to McCandless, "the redhead" to Lester, she resists this fragmentation of her identity by these men to insist "my name my name is Elizabeth" (166), the stutted hesitation underscoring the difficulty she is having recovering the name of her true self from the men in her life.¹⁹ Appropriately, her writing is conducted in secret; hidden in her drawer, her manuscript is a metonymy for her self, itself hidden so far from her husband that

he is numbed when he comes across the manuscript after her death, written "in a hand he knew spelling little more than bread, onions, milk, chicken?" (257). Her failure to write parallels her failure to live, both captured in the flip title Gaddis briefly entertained for the novel: "That's All She Wrote."

Although McCandless completed and published his novel, it was published under a pseudonym; that, along with Lester's verdict ("rotten"), suggests his novel lacks the honesty and integrity he strives for in personal conduct. In an impressive apologia, he explains that one's life is a kind of fiction, to be crafted as carefully as a work of art:

—All that mattered was that I'd come through because I'd sworn to remember what really happened, that I'd never look back and let it become something romantic simply because I was young and a fool but I'd done it. I'd done it and I'd come out alive, and that's the way it's been ever since and maybe that's the hardest thing, harder than being sucked up in the clouds and meeting the Lord on judgment day or coming back with the Great Imam because *this fiction's all your own*, because you've spent your entire life at it who you are, and who you were when everything was possible, when you said that everything was still the way it was going to be no matter how badly we twist it around first chance we get and then make up a past to account for it. . . . (169; my italics)

If McCandless's fiction is indeed rotten, it is because he failed to construct it with the same fierce integrity that he constructed the "fiction" of his self. Like Hemingway's Frederic Henry, McCandless welcomes "facts proof against fine phrases that didn't mean anything" (228), but from Lester's quotations it sounds as though he preferred fine phrases when writing fiction. A better model would be Hemingway's reclusive contemporary Robinson Jeffers, parts of whose poem "Wise Men in Their Bad Hours" McCandless quotes on occasion (127, 161). Jeffers managed to put the same fierce integrity into his life as in his work, a synthesis McCandless apparently aims for but falls short of. If Liz's manuscript is a metonymy for her life, McCandless's study serves as his—a dusty, cobwebbed, smoke-filled room of books and papers that he continually tries to clean up, but where he manages only to create greater confusion and disorder. Alone, apparently friendless, estranged from his son and former wives, he sells out to the CIA for \$16,000 and is last seen heading for the tropics, where the only way you know where you are is the disease you get (246). Again, failure in art means failure in life.

Second Definition

2: an assumption of a possibility as a fact irrespective of the question of its truth<a legal~>.

McCandless would argue that religions and metaphysical systems are possibilities (at best) assumed as facts by their followers, whose adherence to these fictions parodies an artist's quest for permanence in art:

—no no no, his voice as calming as the hand along her back, it was all just part of the eternal nonsense, where all the nonsense comes from about resurrection, transmigration, paradise, karma the whole damned lot. —It's all just fear he said, —you think of three quarters of the people in this country actually believing Jesus is alive in heaven? and two thirds of them that he's their ticket to eternal life? [. . .] just this panic at the idea of not existing so that joining that same Mormon wife and family in another life and you all come back together on judgment day, coming back with the Great Imam, coming back as the Dalai Lama choosing his parents in some Tibetan dung heap, coming back as anything —a dog, a mosquito, better than not coming back at all, the same panic wherever you look, any lunatic fiction to get through the night and the more farfetched the better, any evasion of the one thing in life that's absolutely inevitable [. . .] desperate fictions like the immortal soul and all these damned babies rushing around demanding to get born, or born again [. . .]. (157)

McCandless twice uses "fiction" here in the sense of Webster's second definition, as he does elsewhere: "talk about their deep religious convictions and that's what they are, they're convicts locked up in some shabby fiction doing life without parole and they want everybody else in prison with them" (186). The crucial difference is that literary and legal fictions are recognized as fictions; religious fictions are not. Fundamentalists, he implies, are like poor readers who first mistake a work of fiction for fact, then impose their literal-minded misreadings on others—at gunpoint if necessary. Not only are fundamentalists "doing more to degrade it taking every damned word in it literally than any militant atheist could ever hope to," he fumes, but they don't even recognize the contradictions in the Bible any attentive reader would note (134, 136). The status of fiction and the validity of interpretation thus become more than academic matters for literary theorists; if the fundamentalist misreadings of sacred fictions prevail, aided by politicians misreading their constitutions, Armageddon will put an end to all fictions.

All the world's a text, Gaddis implies, and all the men and women

merely readers. In *Carpenter's Gothic* leaves from a tree become leaves from a book within half a sentence (197), and bed sheets still damp from Liz and McCandless's lovemaking become in the next paragraph sheets of paper that will become damp with ink to describe the event (198). Gaddis's characters are forced to read the world around them despite the general illegibility of that "text": the clock is untrustworthy, the newspapers unreliable, the dictionary inaccurate, even words misleading: Liz and Madame Socrate founder on the French homonyms *salle* and *sale* (26; cf. the confusion over *sale* and *salé* in *The Recognitions*, 943), the two meanings of "morgue" confuse her (225), and half-listening to the radio's account of "a thrilling rescue operation by the Coast Guard" (116) Liz is puzzled the next day about a "thrilling rescue by postcard" (158). Even single letters cause confusion, leading Paul to think Billy doesn't even know how to spell Buddha (85). Ambiguity haunts the simplest words.

Gaddis's most brilliant dramatization of the vagaries of interpretation recalls the doubloon Melville's Ahab nails to the mainmast of the *Pequod*. Anxious to give a distracted Liz "the big picture" of the various religious and political complications in which he is enmeshed, Paul draws a diagram showing these various groups and the interactions between them. The first to interpret this diagram, after Paul, is the narrator, who offers humorous asides on the shapes that grow beneath Paul's hand (the administration is represented by "something vaguely phallic"), cruel social innuendo ("all his blacks down here . . . a smudge unconnected to anything"), and ending with the fanciful observation that Paul's flow-chart arrows "darkened the page like the skies that day over Crécy" (100–1, 107). When McCandless comes across this drawing, he only sees the scribbblings of a child (118), as does Lester when he first sees it (124). But looking at it again (147), Lester realizes it does indeed resemble the battle of Cressy (as he pronounces it), though he needs to adjust the figures in the drawing somewhat, much like a critic pounding the square peg of a thesis into the round hole of a text. In addition to foreshadowing the militaristic results of the Teakell–Ude–Grimes cartel—Armageddon promises to be the last use of firepower as the battle of Crécy was the first—and exposing the childishness of it all, this example highlights the dangers of interpretation that surround all the characters, none of whom commands a vantage point from which "the big picture" can be seen, but each of whom believes he or she holds the right interpretation of the text. A fable for critics.

Gaddis's own text has already generated the same kind of contradic-

tory readings; with at least seven types of ambiguity in it, this is not surprising, though a few of the readings are. The novel struck most reviewers as savagely pessimistic, but one felt Gaddis "makes his optimism plain enough on the surface. The book ends with no period, indicating continuation. It hints at reincarnation, if only as a fly."²⁰ No comment. More than one reviewer accused McCandless of being mad. There are a few teasing innuendos to that effect, but his "madness" is more likely one more of the deceptions inherent in *Carpenter Gothic*, one made by linking Mrs. McCandless's remark that her former husband spent time in a hospital (250) with Lester's taunting question "you used to say I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy where'd you get that, that's somebody else too isn't it because you've got one" (140). But the clever line is only a gag from a Tom Waits song of the mid-seventies, and Lester's accusation is strictly metaphoric; he goes on to say "the figures on lung cancer right in front of you like the facts staring those primates square in the face out there choking on Genesis and you say it's just a statistical parallel and light another." Gaddis realizes (if McCandless doesn't) that the choice between the truth and what really happens is not as easy to make as McCandless pretends it is, but rather owes more to the instinct to cling to what he later castigates as "any lunatic fiction to get through the night and the more farfetched the better, any evasion of the one thing in life that's absolutely inevitable" (157). Faced with the inevitability of death, McCandless panics as easily as any fundamentalist, but that is hardly a sign of madness; the reader should not be misled by talk of lobotomies and lunacy into thinking McCandless was in that hospital for anything worse than malaria (152). Yet another critic has suggested that Paul and Edie team up to murder Liz!²¹ Although there is some question who is telephoning as she expires—both Paul and McCandless know the ringing code (246)—there can be no question Liz is alone, hitting her head on the kitchen table as she goes down. Yet see how I resist the ambiguity, insisting on certainty; it's a hard habit to break.

Third Definition

3: the action of feigning or of creating with the imagination

This activity thus emerges as both constructive and destructive in *Carpenter's Gothic*, an action that can be used for self-realization or misused for self-delusion. At one extreme is the "paranoid sentimental fiction"

of the American South (224) or the "serviceable fiction" of the African Masai that justifies their stealing cattle from other tribes because of "their ancient belief that all the cattle in the world belong to them" (121). At the other extreme are such fictions as *Heart of Darkness*—which McCandless declares "an excellent thing," even though Liz ascribes it to Faulkner and confuses it with Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* (158)—and Jeffers's "Wise Men in Their Bad Hours." Gaddis's characters largely misuse fiction and are more often seen feigning than creating anything worthwhile. But Gaddis himself faced and overcame the same problems in writing this novel, one that exemplifies the proper use of fiction and achieves the ideal set in the concluding lines of the Jeffers poem, the lines McCandless never quotes, perhaps because his creator has reserved them for himself:

Ah, grasshoppers,
Death's a fierce meadowlark: but to die having made
Something more equal to the centuries
Than muscle and bone, is mostly to shed weakness.
The mountains are dead stone, the people
Admire or hate their stature, their insolent quietness,
The mountains are not softened nor troubled
And a few dead men's thoughts have the same temper.

McCandless's *Carpenter Gothic* has stood ninety years, he boasts; Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic* should stand at least as long.