

Chapter Seven

In the American Grain

With *Carpenter's Gothic* it becomes clear that America has always been Gaddis's great subject. The theme of personal failure he identified for his lectures on American literature is subsumed in his own work by the larger theme of the failure of America itself. Throughout his work, as in much of Jack Kerouac's, there is a feeling of bitter disappointment at America's failure to fulfill its potential, to live up to the magnificent expectations held for the New World ever since Columbus declared it the Terrestrial Paradise predicted by Scripture. Instead, we find a country in the first novel so immersed in counterfeit it can no longer tell the difference between the genuine and the fake, except to prefer the latter; in the second, people talking themselves to death in a country running down from cultural entropy; and in the third, America at its last gasp, facing the yellow dead-end sign planted at the foot of the novel's first page. "It's too late to try to . . ." Liz murmurs at one point, only to be interrupted by Paul's more final "Too late" (216).

Carpenter's Gothic, like *The Great Gatsby* sixty years before it, suggests that it is too late to reverse the tide, to restore the promise of the American dream. In fact, as McCandless points out in a valedictory speech late in the novel, the dream has become a nightmare:

—Two hundred years building this great bastion of middle class values, fair play, pay your debts, fair pay for honest work, two hundred years that's about all it is, progress, improvement everywhere, what's worth doing is worth doing well and they ["the new generation"] find out that's the most dangerous thing of all, all our grand solutions turn into their nightmares. Nuclear energy to bring cheap power everywhere and all they hear is radiation threats and what in hell to do with the waste. Food for the millions and they're back eating organic sprouts and stone ground flour because everything else is poisonous additives, pesticides poisoning the earth, poisoning the rivers the oceans and the conquest of space turns into military satellites and high technology where the only metaphor we've given them is the neutron bomb and the only news is today's front page. . . . (230)

The only survivors in *Carpenter's Gothic*—Paul, Edie, and the smirking neighborhood kids—hint at an even bleaker future, dominated by moral jackals and hyenas. (Lawyers are reportedly the subject of Gaddis's next novel.)

Even though Gaddis's novels have contemporary settings, he avoids the historical amnesia McCandless complains of in his last line by anchoring each of his novels in specific aspects of the American past: in *The Recognitions*, the Calvinist tradition of New England, nineteenth-century Protestantism, twentieth-century expatriation, and even Columbus's voyage of discovery; in *J R*, late-nineteenth-century social and educational reform movements, robber barons and unregulated capitalism, and the Protestant work ethic of Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger; in *Carpenter's Gothic*, the anti-intellectual religious tradition that has bedeviled America every other generation since the Great Awakening in the 1700s and the legacy of the South's defeat in the Civil War, which created "this cradle of stupidity where they get patriotism and Jesus all mixed together because that's the religion of losers" (224). Although Gaddis avoids the kind of historical set pieces favored by Barth and Pynchon, he joins them in trying to correct that fault William Carlos Williams complained of to Valéry Larbaud in his documentary history *In the American Grain*: "It is an extraordinary phenomenon that Americans have lost the sense, being made up as we are, that what we are has its origin in what *the nation* in the past has been; that there is a source in AMERICA for everything we think or do."¹

Gaddis's work is also anchored in America's literary traditions. The criticism of puritan/fundamentalist religion in his first and third novels looks back obviously to Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and Melville's harsh critiques of Christianity, but also to Mark Twain (Christian Science as well as mainstream Christianity) and to such works as Harold Frederic's *Damnation of Theron Ware* and Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry*. Gaddis's use of apocalypse is firmly rooted in an American tradition that R. W. B. Lewis has traced back to Melville's *Confidence-Man*, which he considers

the recognizable and awe-inspiring ancestor of several subsequent works of fiction in America: Mark Twain's *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* and *The Mysterious Stranger*, for example; and more recently, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, William Gaddis' *The Recognitions*, John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Thomas Pynchon's [sic] V. Melville bequeathed to those works—in very differing proportions—

the vision of an apocalypse that is no less terrible for being enormously comic, the self-extinction of a world characterized by deceit and thronging with imposters and masqueraders[. . .].²

Gaddis's satire of the abuses of capitalism in *J R* joins a long tradition of American antibusiness novels running from William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* through Theodore Dreiser's Cowperwood trilogy, more Sinclair Lewis (*Babbitt* and *Dodsworth*), to contemporary novels by Vonnegut and Heller. In fact, John Brooks grumbles that Gaddis may have killed off the genre: "With 'J R' we have the American business novel, as to form, coming to the sort of dead end that the novel in general came to with James Joyce."³ I prefer to see *J R* as capping that genre and disproving Henry Nash Smith's complaint that "serious writers seem unable to take an interest in a system of values based on economic assumptions."⁴

Finally, Gaddis's allegiance to the comic tradition in American literature should not be overlooked, despite the gravity of his themes. As Lewis points out, even the Apocalypse can be enormously comic, and all of Gaddis's work is animated by a comic brio that adds a kind of desperate hilarity to his grim themes. From the Marx Brothers shenanigans in *J R* to more subtle examples of learned wit, Gaddis's novels, like Janus, wear the masks of comedy and tragedy simultaneously, a strategy that prevents them from becoming ponderous or depressing, and one that relies on the comic as much for its entertainment value as for its philosophical stance. Gaddis's favorite review of *J R*, for example, appeared not in any of the prestigious New York journals or literary quarterlies but in the "provincial" *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, whose reviewer admitted: "If Gaddis is a moralist, he is also a master of satire and humor. *J R* is a devastatingly funny book. Reading it, I laughed loudly and unashamedly in public places, and at home, more than once, I saw my small children gather in consternation as tears of laughter ran down my face."⁵ Critics may consider that inconsequential praise, but Gaddis's fellow writers would be green with envy.

In fact, writers rather than critics were the first to recognize Gaddis's enormous achievement, as witnessed by the surprisingly large number of contemporary novels in which Gaddis and/or his novels appear. His early association with the Beats led to his becoming the model for Harry Lees in Chandler Brossard's *Who Walk in Darkness* (1952) and for Harold Sand in Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* (1958). (In exchange,

Gaddis lifted a few lines from William Burroughs's *Junkie* for his own demi-Beat novel.⁶) David Markson, acquainted with the Beats but closer in spirit to his mentor Malcolm Lowry, refers to *The Recognitions* and parodies Gaddis's style of dialogue in his detective novel *Epitaph for a Tramp* (1959). He has continued to refer to him in other works: the opening line of *The Recognitions* is quoted (in a chapter of opening lines) in his delightful *Springer's Progress* (1977) and Gaddis flits through the memory of mad Kate a dozen times in Markson's last novel, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988). *The Recognitions* appears on the bookshelf of the protagonist of Richard Horn's innovative novel *Encyclopedia* (1969), and *J R* is named and amusingly imitated in John Sladek's science fiction novel *Roderick* (1980). More recently, Gaddis's friend Stanley Elkin included in his novel *The Magic Kingdom* (1985) an eight-year-old geriatric named Charles Mudd-Gaddis—a name that gave Gaddis some puzzled bemusement—and an editor named Virginia Wrappers ("the guardian of standards") in Charles Simmons's *jeu d'esprit* *The Belles Lettres Papers* (1987) includes Gaddis on her list of the twenty-five best writers in America.

Gaddis's stylistic influence on contemporary writers is more difficult to access. His general contribution to black humor and the revival of Menippean satire was noted in my first chapter, but his direct influence on particular writers is arguable. Some novels, like Sladek's *Roderick* and Markson's *Going Down* (1970), show unmistakable signs of influence, explicitly in Sladek's case, implicitly in Markson's brilliant novel.⁷ Other novelists have testified to Gaddis's influence on their own work: Joseph McElroy has acknowledged the role *The Recognitions* played in shaping his first novel, *A Smuggler's Bible* (1966),⁸ and Don DeLillo has praised Gaddis "for extending the possibilities of the novel by taking huge risks and making great demands on his readers."⁹ Harry Mathews told me he modeled the title of his first novel, *The Conversions* (1962), on that of Gaddis's first novel, though he didn't actually read *The Recognitions* until sometime in the 1970s. Robert Shea reportedly had *The Recognitions* in mind when he wrote the *Illuminatus!* trilogy with Robert Anton Wilson (1975), but the result more resembles Pynchon's paranoid fictions than Gaddis's. Some of Donald Barthelme's dialogue-stories resemble pages from *J R*, but the resemblance may be as misleading as that with Gilbert Sorrentino's dialogue-novel *Crystal Vision* (1981), which was inspired not by *J R* but by William Carlos Williams's *A Novelette*. Gaddis's novels have also earned the praise of

Stanley Elkin, William H. Gass, Paul West, and David Foster Wallace, but it would be safer to say these novelists, along with Barth and Coover, share affinities with Gaddis rather than show his influence.

The novelist most often linked with Gaddis by way of both influence and affinity is Thomas Pynchon. *V.* especially has struck a number of critics as reminiscent of *The Recognitions* in many ways: structurally, both consist of dual narrative lines that occasionally intersect; both indict masculine principles for a variety of modern ills and feature motherless sons attempting to restore the balance by aligning themselves with feminine principles; both alternate between Greenwich Village scenes and European locations; both are widely allusive, often to the same authors; both use comical names for some of their characters; and so on. Similarly, Gaddis's *J R* resembles *Gravity's Rainbow* in some ways: both often allude to Wagner and Weber; both hold Western economic policies chiefly responsible for the deteriorating quality of modern life; both indict American and European exploitation of Third World nations; and both make demands upon the reader unheard of since *Finnegans Wake*. With the publication of *Carpenter's Gothic*, the pattern seemed complete: several reviewers noted Gaddis now had a counterpart to Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*, another short work featuring a neglected housewife haunted by ambiguities.

But in an essay on this particular topic, I found that the similarities between their works looked more like a case of what Leni Pökler in *Gravity's Rainbow*, using electrical imagery, would describe as "Parallel, not series."¹⁰ The resemblances between *V.* and *The Recognitions* are of the duplicitous sort that led many reviewers to assume Gaddis's novel was an imitation of Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the thematic similarities between the later novels obscure the pronounced tonal differences and cultural allegiances that separate the two. As a recent Pynchon critic has written, Gaddis's work "lacks Pynchon's delight in the varied, zany, countercultural aspects of popular culture. It also lacks Pynchon's scientific and occult interests, his brilliant colloquial style (though Gaddis is a better and thoroughly damning mimic of spoken colloquial voices), and Pynchon's warmth."¹¹ What can be said, however, is that Pynchon is one of the very few rivals Gaddis has among contemporary novelists in the English-speaking world.

Gaddis's body of work may have a superficial resemblance to Pynchon's, but it displays an organic form all its own. Joseph McElroy likened it to the contracting universe: "the big bang" with the thousand-page first novel, "and the slow evolution out of that" with *J R*,

"then down to what is almost a paradigm, or a *pensée*," *Carpenter's Gothic*.¹² But I prefer to see the three novels as cultural soundings corresponding to the three ages of adulthood: youth and expansive idealism in *The Recognitions*; middle age and evasive idealism under siege in *J R*; and the beginning of laconic old age with idealism lost in *Carpenter's Gothic*. Even though each of Gaddis's novels teems with characters of all ages, these three ages determine the principal moral viewpoint in each and the darkening pessimistic outlook. In either case, Gaddis's work reveals an organic continuity elegant in its progression, relentless in its engagement with the major issues of the time, and unique in contemporary American literature.

Postscript: A Legal Fiction

In 1987 Gaddis published the first excerpt from his next novel, a short fiction in the form of a legal opinion entitled "Szyrk v. Village of Tatamount et al."¹³ A further argument for McElroy's thesis, this fiction represents the most compact presentation yet of Gaddis's characteristic themes and parodic techniques. It takes its premise from an incident in *J R*: the huge steel sculpture *Cyclone 7* that entraps a boy near the end of *J R* (671–72) has its counterpart in a small town in Virginia, where it entraps a dog this time. Its sculptor, a SoHo artist named Szyrk (pronounced "Zrk" as in "Srskić" [*J R* 557–58]), files for a temporary restraining order to prevent the local fire department from injuring his work in its attempt to free the dog. The fiction consists of Judge Crease's decision to grant the sculptor a preliminary injunction to supersede the temporary order.

All of Gaddis's characteristic themes and concerns are here: the artist at odds with the community, the validity of art, the media's role in shaping public opinion, the intellectual poverty of the South, chauvinistic patriotism, political chicanery, and of course the Byzantine workings of the law. The story is a tour de force in legal wit of the kind used by Rabelais, Swift, Sterne, and Melville, as well as by Gaddis himself. *J R*, it will be remembered, opens with the attorney Coen weaving a web of legal fictions around the Bast sisters with such findings as "in the case of a child conceived or born in wedlock, it must be shown that the husband of the mother could not possibly have been the father of the child" (11) reminiscent of Walter Shandy's finding "That the mother was not kin to her child" by a similar mazy path of legal quibbling. Writing in 1951 of the disappearance of this sort of

learned wit, D. W. Jefferson noted, "Fewer people need to go to law today, so we are all less legally minded; [. . .] The community has benefited from these reforms, but a theme for wit has been lost."¹⁴ Gaddis has recovered this theme for our litigious society by means of his unmatched gift for parody, rendering an opinion in a brilliant display of legal discourse complete with citations and spacious learning. (It is not surprising that, asked what field he would have entered had he not become a writer, Gaddis answered, "The law."¹⁵) The orotund periods and Olympian ironies of Judge Crease's language do not conceal a crusty outlook of the sort one expects from Gaddis's older protagonists. Crease takes a dim view of Szyrk's postmodernist work, for example—his references to Shakespeare, Donatello, and Eliot (among others) define his artistic sensibility—and he passes judgment on self-referential art, denigrating

the theory that in having become self-referential art is in itself theory without which it has no more substance than Sir Arthur Eddington's famous step "on a swarm of flies," here present in further exhibits by plaintiff drawn from prestigious art publications and highly esteemed critics in the lay press, where they make their livings, recommending his sculptural creation in terms of slope, tangent, acceleration, force, energy, and similar abstract extravagancies serving only a corresponding self-referential confrontation of language with language and thereby, in reducing language itself to theory, rendering it a mere plaything, which exhibits the court finds frivolous. (46–47)

But at the same time holding "the conviction that risk of ridicule, of attracting defamatory attentions from his colleagues and even raucous demonstrations by an outraged public have ever been and remain the foreseeable lot of the serious artist" (49–50), Crease gives the back of his hand to critics and complainants alike and finds in favor of the plaintiff with one of the most eloquent defenses of venturesome art in our time. In so doing, the learned judge also gives conclusive evidence, if more were needed, of the inquisitorial art of William Gaddis.

Notes and References

Chapter One

1. George Stade, review of *Ratner's Star* by Don DeLillo, *New York Times Book Review*, 20 June 1976, 7.
2. Frank D. McConnell, reader's report on Steven Moore's *A Reader's Guide to William Gaddis's "The Recognitions,"* 31 July 1980.
3. *Contemporary Authors*, ed. James M. Ethridge, Barbara Kopala, and Carolyn Riley, vol. 19/20 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1968), 135.
4. *The Recognitions* (1955; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1985), 240; hereafter cited in the text, abbreviated *R* when necessary. Because Gaddis uses ellipses extensively, my ellipses are bracketed; for consistency, I follow this practice in all cited material.
5. Interview with Miriam Berkley, 17 June 1985. A condensed version of this interview was published in *Publishers Weekly*, 12 July 1985, 56–57, but all of my quotations are from the unedited transcript, with a few corrections supplied by Gaddis.
6. John Aldridge, review of *J R*, *Saturday Review*, 4 October 1975, 27.
7. Frederick Karl, "American Fictions: The Mega-Novel," *Conjunctions* 7 (1985):248.
8. *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1986), 59, 64; hereafter cited in the text.
9. John Kuehl and Steven Moore, "An Interview with William Gaddis," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1982):4.
10. Malcolm Bradbury, *Writers in Conversation 13: William Gaddis* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986). Videocassette distributed by the Rowland Collection, Northbrook, Ill.
11. Further biographical details are available in the introduction to *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1984), and in Louis Auchincloss, "Recognizing Gaddis," *New York Times Magazine*, 15 November 1987, 36, 38, 41, 54, 58.
12. Cynthia Ozick, review of *Carpenter's Gothic*, *New York Times Book Review*, 7 July 1985, 1.
13. Tony Tanner, review of the Avon reprint of *The Recognitions*, *New York Times Book Review*, 14 July 1974, 28.
14. Frederick Karl, "Gaddis: A Tribune of the Fifties," in Kuehl and Moore, *In Recognition*, 176.
15. *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, ed. Robert Philips (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1984), 298.