

ANALYSIS

The Recognitions (1955)



William Gaddis

(1922-)

“Gaddis, William (1922-), born in New York City, after four years at Harvard and much foreign travel published *The Recognitions* (1955), a long, elaborate, experimental, satirical novel with settings as diverse as the author’s travels, treating a Yankee artist whose original talent is overwhelmed by his career as a copyist of old masters. His second novel, *JR* (1975, National Book Award), again a rich parodic treatment of hypocrisy and corruption, centers on an ambitious young man’s success in business.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 272

“William Gaddis is regarded as one of the most brilliant and difficult American writers of the twentieth century. In fact, the *San Francisco Review of Books* called his first book, *The Recognitions*, ‘a novel of stunning power...unmatched by an American writer in this century—perhaps in any century.’ *JR* and *Carpenter’s Gothic* received equally high praise. Yet Gaddis is not a well-known author, for his works are extraordinarily complex in design, language, and vision....

The Recognitions, nearly one thousand pages in length, is, as one reviewer wrote, a satire on the entire modern world, dealing ‘with such arcane matters as art forgery, counterfeiting, false religious rhetoric, ambidextrous sexuality, the fraudulence of political life, and the masquerades of intellectual and artistic society.’ Written in the Joycean manner, the novel treats everything from the origins and varieties of religious belief to every period in human history. It is dense in style as well as content and has little traditional plot. There are fifty characters, with at least a dozen minor figures; these people’s lives, their pasts and presents or their anticipated conversations, cross and parallel one another’s. The story takes place in Paris, Italy, Spain, New York, and New England; it covers a thirty-year period.

There is a central figure, Wyatt Gwyon, who rejects his father’s calling as clergyman and instead becomes an artist. Wyatt’s efforts at understanding art in relation to life and true art in relation to counterfeit art involve discoveries regarding the shams and counterfeits of modern life. At the end of his

pilgrimage, at a Spanish monastery, he experiences an epiphany, an experience of the truth behind all things. Art and the preoccupations of the ordinary life, it would appear, are human structures created to save human beings from ultimate chaos. It is during this great spiritual and creative experience that Wyatt gains a 'recognition' of the unity of all living and nonliving things and extends himself beyond the temporal and artistic to a sense of the intermingling of life and death."

Lois Gordon
Cyclopedia of World Authors II
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 567

"In *The Recognitions* (1955), perhaps *the* novel of the fifties, William Gaddis makes counterfeiting his motif: for his characters, their activities, their emotional lives, and ultimately, for the entire surrounding culture. But counterfeiting, as we shall see, is not necessarily a purely negative form of expression; not always artificial or a form of plagiarism. In some of its manifestations, it can lead to recognitions, especially in an era when 'real things' are beyond attainment or themselves falsifications. Recognitions are related to Wordsworth's 'spots in time,' Joyce's epiphanies, religious revelations (the protagonist, Wyatt Gwyon, was once a seminarian), Proust's 'privileged moments.' They are moments of personal truth or consciousness. When a person achieves a recognition, he has attained some connection between the universe and himself. Not to achieve a recognition is to remain unrealized or part of dead matter, unrecognized and unrecognized—as, later, those impersonal creatures in Gaddis's *JR*, mutants attached only to 'dummy corporations.'

Halfway through this immense novel—half a million words—a character named Otto says what serves as a motif for the novel and for the period after the war when it was written. It serves also, as a theme for *JR*. Otto is a failed playwright, a young man striving for truth within a context of plagiarism or counterfeiting. He is unable to achieve recognition and searches reflections of himself for the 'real person,' which would be an act of recognition. If he could attain that reality, then he would be able to write a valid play, instead of one full of borrowed feelings and language.... How traditionally American—Emersonian, in fact!—and yet how applicable it is to the decade in which it appeared. Layers of untruth piled on; beneath it, somewhere, the real, while all the time we demand the forgery.

It is the opposite of the slice-of-life fiction that characterized the 1950s: Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness*, Bellow's *Augie March*, or Malamud's *The Assistant* and *A New Life*.... Gaddis draws on extensive reading in and knowledge of religious literature, church fathers and historians, Latin works, theologians, all sufficiently assimilated so that they can be regurgitated for parodic purposes. The point throughout is that every belief once sincerely held is now a subject of mockery, unless one has achieved a recognition.

Wyatt Gwyon, heir to a New England past, realizes that recognition, of reality, actuality, truth itself, involves a commitment of self little short of obsessive. He is a man misplaced in his time, in a phase antithetical to his own nature. He is surrounded by people who live at the level of forgery, who must relate every feeling to advertisements, publicity, exaggeration of self, narcissism, and who, as a consequence, have removed themselves from 'recognitions.' Like Stephen Daedalus—the parallels are numerous and clearly pointed—he is moving on different levels of intensity and observation. And like Stephen, he will prove his difference from the mob by bringing forth with great personal suffering an art that distinguishes him from those who worship false idols. With this art, Wyatt will define his sense of 'recognitions.' He is the most appropriate deliverer of the vision, for, like Stephen, he is as much divinity student as creator. Wyatt has forsaken his religious studies in order to pursue new shapes and forms, the churchly past giving way to the artistic present.

Yet Gaddis is pursuing a course different from Joyce's, although not less significant. Wyatt's own work, as a definition of himself, lacks meaning until he finds he can express himself only through a relationship with the past and, in particular, with the Flemish masters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: Memling, the Van Eyck brothers, Roger Van der Weyden, Hugo van der Goes, Thierry Bouts, Patinir; and including the Venetian painter Titian. The Flemish masters, besides their religious themes, impressed Wyatt with their obsessive dedication to detail, their absolute devotion to fidelity of line and color. Each curve and shaping involved the sense of a world and universe; nothing was left to chance or

coincidence. And their devotion seemed complete—no doubt, no removal of self, no narcissism. Instead of losing the subject in themselves, as in the narcissistic work of present-day creative artists, they lost themselves in their subject. If the 1950s were double-talk and double-think, labels that defaulted on thought, the Flemish masters were anchors in reality, in ‘recognitions.’

So Wyatt, who must transform the religious passions of his father into forms in which he can believe, removes himself to the Flemish past. He finds his creature urge focused and shaped through his connection to a distinctive, identifiable art. Here, Gaddis expresses the originality of his motif, not only through technical experimentation with forms but through insight into how art can reflect the real, whereas contemporary discourse only falsifies it. Wyatt is not a conventional forger of great art. He paints pictures that his masters could have painted, Flemish ‘originals.’ By bringing together the styles, colors, and shapes of a particular master, he creates canvases that might have been done—pictures, often, that the masters were thought to have painted, but that have failed to turn up. He reconstitutes art history by ‘discovering’ the work they did (but which has disappeared) and making them live in new shapes. As Valentine, a typically commercially-oriented art critic, says, ‘his work is so good it has almost been taken for forgery.’

Wyatt’s forgeries...enter a market in which the authentic article is really no different from the forgery. The dealer and purchaser connive with the seller and art critic, since all have everything to gain from putting across a forgery and little to lose from the discovery of one. The complicity of market, purchaser, seller, and art critic closes Gaddis’s trap around Wyatt. We are now about one-fifth through the novel, and the terms are set. Like a fish struggling in a net, Wyatt must find a way through or be pulled in. As readers, we are in the position of complicity, like the figures in Plato who seek reality in appearances. If we assent to forgery frequently enough, we lose the definition of what is real, what is forged....

Wyatt is a fateful, Christ-like thirty-three, and we never lose sight of the religious dimension. With *his* forgeries, or ‘miracles,’ Wyatt will deliver us from the defilement of art, and the defilement of life beyond it. The epigraph to the section (VII) compares Jesus Christ, who took upon Himself human nature in order to redeem mankind, to the artist, who must redeem us from those who defile creation.... At stake, finally, is not solely art, but the quality of life, even when that life is itself based on counterfeiting. As in the religious parables, when the sinner achieves salvation, the less real here is more real, especially when those who market both do not care which is which....

Reproduction, Wyatt indicates, is marketplace prostitution, in which the artist’s vision is diluted by way of intervening methods. His fanaticism brings from Valentine the rejoinder that ‘Every piece you do is calumny on the artist you forge’.... Wyatt’s defense of what he does is a defense of ‘recognitions’ themselves; a defense of his journey into the past for a reality that is singular and intense, undiluted by the mechanical detection tools of the modern critic... Wyatt has repositioned himself: ‘I’m a master painter in the Guild, in Flanders, do you see?...because I’ve taken the Guild oath, not for the critics, the experts...to use pure materials, to work in the sight of God’....

Wyatt is more than a crazy fool, for his is more than a vision of what could be. He makes the vision happen, and his fidelity to the masters is so great he becomes a master, whereas his contemporaries remain forgers of taste, panderers to the market. A modern-day visionary, a Christ of aesthetics, he insists that the purity of his materials—the gold he uses, his pigments, his exquisite colors—suggests the nature of his art. Valentine says that while Wyatt paints, ‘It’s your own work,’ but what happens, he asks, when he attaches the signature? Wyatt admits he loses everything when that occurs; he is, at that moment alone, a forger....

Wyatt must live with this knowledge, that the moment he signs the painting and makes it valuable, at that moment he destroys the foundation of his art. The Faustian quality of his conflict is clear, and he follows it through by destroying everything, burning it, turning it into ashes, and then himself assuming the name Stephen Ashe. He is the first Christian martyr born out of the ashes of his own work. The paradoxes and ironies are those of the very nature of the American experience, the Fall implicit in the beauties and purities of the Garden.

Themes of forgery and counterfeiting underlie every aspect of the novel, including Gaddis’s method of novel-making. For a book of such great length, the author needed more than a conventional narrative; and

the characteristic American picaresque, although appropriate to *Augie March* or *A New Life* would have become untenable for a thousand pages—unless the entire book was parodic, as Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor*. Gaddis devised two, really three, kinds of scene development. The first involves the introduction of a character, unknown to the reader and, apparently, unconnected to the narrative, who then links up with someone we know from before.... A second method that Gaddis employs, possibly as a carry-over from Joyce and Faulkner, is to describe an entire episode without indicating the name or names of the characters; so that the reader must derive from the context who is involved....

The final part (III) of the novel, one-quarter of its length, incorporates both methods: unnamed characters and characters who seem to have little connection to what came before. In addition, scenes are themselves so placed that they appear unassociated with people we have met. We have, then, actually three unknowns, so that reading becomes a kind of testing.... Because we may try our several alternative possibilities before we hit upon the 'right one,' we reconstruct many kinds of sequences. And in places, even the most careful reader cannot be certain of each character, event, scene.

Some of this Gaddis gained from Joyce, or from Eliot's modulations in 'The Waste Land,' but he differs from Joyce—I have in mind chiefly *Ulysses*—in some essential ways. The narrative line of *Ulysses* is frequently secondary to what occurs along the way; discourse and digression are at least as important as anything that happens. Part of the modernity of *Ulysses* was just this seeming indifference to narrative thrust. But *The Recognitions* has a strong narrative drive; it is not a secondary item, nor can it be ignored while we pursue method. A good deal does happen, including all kinds of forgery and counterfeiting, some conspiratorial work (Basic Valentine is a secret agent of sorts), even murder, and the exile of the main character, himself a murderer. What Gaddis has done is to locate his narrative under layers of disguise and deception, by doing so finding the equivalent in plot line of counterfeiting; like that Titian itself, which lies under layers of paint, Gaddis's narrative awaits someone willing to peel away coats which falsify and corrupt.

Are the difficulties presented to us as first-time readers of the novel worth the attention we must pay? Could not a more conventional method have worked as well? Since, except for Hawkes, so little of contemporary American fiction up to the mid-1950s was experimental, we are not conditioned to these labors, and part of the reading experience is to question the obstacles placed in our way. Yet the theme of the book is forgery, the motif recognitions. Gaddis's aim is clearly to defamiliarize the familiar so as to force us to experience it freshly. Thus, every kind of scene—some as familiar as cocktail party scenarios—gains fresh tonal varieties from the method of presentation. In this respect, Gaddis forces upon us that type of careful reading demanded by the early moderns, in both fiction and poetry....

While Wyatt strives to achieve a perfect 'Jesus figure,' Sinisterra [sinister land] aims at a perfect Jackson portrait on the twenty-dollar bill. As we follow Sinisterra's intense career, we focus on the 'real Jackson' much more attentively than we would without the counterfeit President; forgery energizes what the real deadens. By way of Sinisterra, Gaddis enters American history and finds forgery as establishing its own culture, including bank issues of money made on fictitious banks, banks that backed fictitious or worthless notes. That world based on forgery fills Sinisterra with extreme pride... Sinisterra's ideology parallels that of the other characters: Otto, the failed playwright, who plagiarizes; Esme, Wyatt's model, whose poems move in and out of plagiarism; the art dealers and critics, as well as buyers and sellers... His counterfeiting extends even to his parental role, for Sinisterra plays the false father to Otto and then later, as Mr. Yak, a Rumanian, takes a paternal role with Wyatt....

About halfway through, Gaddis increasingly comes to favor a modified stream of consciousness narrative without authorial intrusion. While avoiding the breakup of language the true method calls for, Gaddis nevertheless slips narrative into individual consciousness, to the extent that consciousness is nearly all. There is no intervening narrator until near the end, when he provides some exposition of events. By the third chapter of Part III, with identification of characters left entirely to the reader—characters are merely voices—the end has circled around to the beginning. At the start of the novel, Reverend Gwyon and his wife made their ill-fated voyage to Spain and met Sinisterra as the bogus ship's doctor; now Wyatt, having burned his paintings and rejected his forgeries, had fled to Spain, a murderer. There, he meets

Sinisterra, now Mr. Yak, whose aim is to prepare and sell a corpse done up as an ancient Egyptian mummy. The section is aptly titled 'The Last Turn of the Screw.'

Like Stephen and Bloom in *Ulysses*, the two meet oddly. By this time, Wyatt is ready to become Stephen, the name originally destined for him; and Sinisterra adds Asche on Stephen's false papers. As Stephen Asche, Wyatt attempts rebirth, the forger and murderer who once sought recognitions in counterfeit paintings. Obsessed with failure, pursued by demons, compulsively seeking some form of truth, Wyatt-Stephen has returned to Spain to seek his mother's grave, unaware, of course, that the man offering him aid is the man who butchered her. Further, because of a mixup with his father's ashes, Stephen does not know that the loaves he eats contained mixed in with the flour those very ashes, an act of true communion. Not only is he eating the wafer, he is consuming the actual body, indeed recognition of the real.

All these efforts at the real and actual on Wyatt-Stephen's part, however, occur under a mantle of deception, disguise, and forgery. Yak circles around like the Great Mother because he needs Wyatt's skill in preparing the mummy, which he hopes will be his consummate swindle. Sinisterra thinks he can win over Stephen by insisting he, too, is a craftsman and an artist; he insists he has fallen because 'they' were jealous of his work. Wyatt is now so strung out it is questionable if he even hears Sinisterra. Having put all his energies into creating great Flemish 'originals,' an effort to transcend his contemporaries' inconsequence and technical deficiencies, he drifts: a battered Orpheus, or perhaps an avatar of 1950s 'Beats.'

The structural tension in the novel lies in that play between great energy and great passivity; between a surface growth and development and the sense of nihilistic weariness, enervation, exhaustion, what could in fact be considered twin aspects of the American fifties.... We note the great stress on traveling, Wyatt's frenzied movement from New England to New York, then to Europe, accompanied by the frenzied movements of the other characters. Even those who go nowhere move to and fro like Michelangelo, consuming space at cocktail parties....

Gaddis's novel is archetypal. We can see how Pynchon, with his idea of the yo-yoing effect, is indebted to him: that expenditure of circular energy. We can, in turn, perceive how Gaddis sought in Hawthorne and Poe those intense inner energies which war with passivity; for this tension connects to larger American themes... American affirmation is 'against,' a value system erected on negativism and nihilism. The reason is that American attitudes are predicated on the Edenic myth and the Fall, and Gaddis plays diminution for faith gained and lost, like a yo-yo.... The working out is extremely complex and requires the close reasoning of intricate scenes and dense structuring, not a flat statement of direction....

There began that need to seek more radical forms, so as to keep pace with or mirror the phantasmagoria called up by science and technology—what we find in Gaddis and Barth now, Pynchon and Barthelme later, Hawkes earlier.... Gaddis moves into the more doomed part of the American tradition, parts we associate with Melville's Ahab, Hawthorne's fated figures, Poe's nightmarish characters and scenes. Ellison foresaw enervation, but also the potentiality of growth. Gaddis identifies with the doom that lies beneath enervation. The images in the final sections of *The Recognitions* are of an incoherent Wyatt, a pilgrimage of doomed figures to Rome, a lunatic Otto, and Sinisterra with his counterfeit Egyptian mummy. Widely dispersed geographically, they are all circumscribed by the final scene of the novel. Stanley, an imitational composer, enters a church in Fenestrula, sees a gigantic organ, and indicates to a priest who understands no English that he intends to play it. When Stanley pulls out two particular stops, the priest puts them back, with the warning, in an Italian which Stanley cannot comprehend, that the church is so old the bass vibrations could be dangerous.

Like the poor reader with no Italian, Stanley understands nothing of the warning, and rolls out the deepest possible sound of the bass pipes. 'Everything moved, and even falling, soared in atonement. He was the only person caught in the collapse, and afterward most of his work was recovered too, and it is still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard, though seldom played.' The apocalypse has arrived, with an explanation in Italian; and this experience of Stanley, personally doomed, while his counterfeit work soars in atonement, is a perfect expression of Henry Adams's virgin and dynamo: the machine crushes, the

Virgin saves. Gaddis's vision, both hilarious and doom-filled, goes much farther than Ellison's toward a reading of the 1950s, even the entire postwar era.

Since serious critics of the American novel—except for Tony Tanner—have ignored Gaddis's work, we have been spared their howls of outrage at his 'nihilism' or his lack of 'historical relevance.' Yet whatever our individual response, we must view Gaddis's sense of the fifties as a guideline, and measure other novelistic experiences against it... Implicit in the literature of the 1950s is a foreshadowing of nearly every aspect of social and political behavior of the 1960s; in literary terms, the two decades are seamless, Gaddis leading into Pynchon, Heller, Roth, and McElroy, Ellison and Burroughs into Barth, Oates, Barthelme, and others."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 176, 179-86

Michael Hollister (2015)

Gaddis's novel *The Recognitions* (1955) baffled and angered most of its initial reviewers, but it has slowly, steadily attracted a growing number of appreciative readers willing to work through its more than 900 demanding pages. Its length and encyclopedic complexity caused some critics mistakenly to hail it as the American *Ulysses*, but Gaddis disclaimed much knowledge of James Joyce.

â€¦publication of his controversial novel *The Recognitions* (1955). This book, rich in language and imagery, began as a parody of *Faust* but developed into a multileveled examination of spiritual bankruptcy that alternately was considered a brilliant masterpiece and incomprehensibly excessive. It became an underground classic, but, discouraged by the harshâ€¦

â€¦*The Recognitions* is the 1955 debut novel of US author William Gaddis. The novel was initially poorly received by critics. After Gaddis won a National Book Award in 1975 for his second novel, *J R*, his first work gradually received new and belated recognition as a masterpiece of American literature. In 2005, *Time* included *The Recognitions* in its list of "100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005".