

Chapter One

A Vision of Order

The misjudgment of one generation is always a source of amazement to the next. It is hard to believe now that Melville was ignored by his generation of critics, that Samuel Butler was a literary pariah to his, and that Malcolm Cowley had to reintroduce Faulkner to his. William Gaddis's first novel, *The Recognitions*, was published in 1955, remained a few years later, and largely ignored for a generation. Only after the publication of his second novel, *J R*, in 1975 did critics begin to realize that *The Recognitions* pioneered (among other things) the black humor of the fifties and sixties and the Menippean satire of the seventies; only then was Gaddis recognized as "a presiding genius, as it turns out, of post-war American fiction."¹ Even though Gaddis's third novel, *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), consolidated his place in the front rank of contemporary novelists, Gaddis remains one of the least read of major American writers. New critical studies of contemporary American fiction still appear that make no mention of his work, and a survey of any college's literature staff would probably reveal that many professors have not even heard of Gaddis, much less read him. Yet one professor who has, Frank D. McConnell, goes so far to say "that *The Recognitions* is the indispensable novel of the last thirty years in America, and that contemporary fiction makes no real sense without the presence of this strange, perverse, confusing, and ultimately sane book."²

This discrepancy can be accounted for in several ways. *The Recognitions*, for example, was cursed with inadequate reviews and an indifferent publisher who kept it only intermittently in print. The sheer size of *The Recognitions* and *J R* has scared off many, and although these and *Carpenter's Gothic* are now available in Penguin paperbacks, their reputation for difficulty intimidates many more. Nor has Gaddis made much effort to promote his work; until recently (and even then, grudgingly), Gaddis gave no interviews, avoided the literary limelight, and kept even interested critics at arm's length by insisting that the work must speak for itself.

The Man Inside

"I have generally shied from parading personal details partly for their being just that,"³ he once explained, and perhaps partly for the same reason painter Wyatt Gwyon, the protagonist of *The Recognitions*, avoids showings of his work. Meeting him for the first time, the art critic Basil Valentine tells Wyatt:

—Seeing you now, you know, it's answered one of the questions I've had on my mind for some time. The first thing I saw, it was a small Dierick Bouts, I wondered then if you used a model when you worked.

—Well I . . .

—But now, it's quite obvious isn't it, Valentine went on, nodding at the picture between them. —Mirrors?

—Yes, yes of course, mirrors. He laughed, a constricted sound, and lit a cigarette.⁴

Gaddis too works from mirrors, drawing extensively on his own background for the characters and settings in his novels. Born in Manhattan in 1922, he was reared in Massapequa, Long Island, in the house that was the model for the Bast home in *J R*. Like the Basts, his mother's people were Quakers, though he himself was raised in a Calvinist tradition, as is Wyatt, who nonetheless "looks like a Kwa-ker" to one observer (585). Like Otto in *The Recognitions* and Jack Gibbs in *J R*, Gaddis grew up without his father, who divorced his mother when Gaddis was three. Haunting all three novels, in fact, is the spirit of a dead or absent father who leaves a ruinous state of affairs for his children to grapple with, a situation that can be extrapolated to include Gaddis's vision of a world abandoned by God (*deus absconditus*) and plunged into disorder.

His fifth through thirteenth years were spent at a boarding school in Berlin, Connecticut, which not only furnished Jack Gibbs with the bleak memories recalled in *J R* but also provided the unnamed setting for the New England chapters of *The Recognitions*. Returning to Long Island to attend Farmingdale High School, Gaddis contracted the illness that kept him out of World War II a few years later, much to his disappointment. Already enrolled at Harvard by that time, he stayed on and later edited the *Harvard Lampoon* until circumstances required him to leave in 1945 without a degree.

Moving to Horatio Street in Greenwich Village—the street on

which Wyatt lives while painting his forgeries—Gaddis worked as a fact checker at the *New Yorker* for little over a year, a job he later recalled as "terribly good training, a kind of post-graduate school for a writer, checking everything, whether they were stories or profiles or articles. I still feel this pressure of trying to make sure that I've got it right. A lot of the complications of high finance and so forth in *J R*—I tried very hard to get them all right. And it was very much that two years at the *New Yorker*."⁵ He quit the job to try his hand at commercial short stories, without success, then set off in 1947 for five years of wandering through Mexico and Central America, Europe (mostly Spain and France), and North Africa. He worked on his first novel during these travels, returning to America in 1952 to revise it through two isolated winters. From Long Island he occasionally came into the city to mingle in the Greenwich Village milieu so mercilessly re-created in the middle section of *The Recognitions*, and eventually became acquainted with most of the emerging writers of the time.

The Recognitions appeared in 1955 as the leading controversial literary title on Harcourt, Brace's spring list (or so they treated it), but the novel had little immediate success, as was the case with *Moby-Dick* a century earlier. A few readers recognized its significance and provided Gaddis with a cult following, but most reviewers were put off by this gargantuan novel by an unknown writer. Looking back in 1975, John Aldridge, an early champion, gave this explanation:

As is usually the case with abrasively original work, there had to be a certain passage of time before an audience could begin to be educated to accept *The Recognitions*. The problem was not simply that the novel was too long and intricate or its vision of experience too outrageous, but that even the sophisticated reading public of the mid-Fifties was not yet accustomed to the kind of fiction it represented. [. . .] The most authoritative mode in the serious fiction of the Fifties was primarily realistic, and the novel of fabulation and Black Humor—of which *The Recognitions* was later to be identified as a distinguished pioneering example—had not yet come into vogue. In fact, the writers who became the leaders of the Black Humor movement had either not been heard from in 1955 or remained undiscovered. [. . .] Their work over the past 20 years has created a context in which it is possible to recognize Gaddis's novel as having helped inaugurate a whole new movement in American fiction. Rereading it with the knowledge of all that this movement has taught us about modern experience and the opening of new possibilities for the novel, one can see that *The Recognitions* occupies a strikingly unique and primary place in contemporary literature.⁶

After it became apparent the novel was not going to supply him the kind of success he had envisioned, Gaddis began a series of jobs in industry that would later provide some raw material for his second novel. After working in publicity for a pharmaceutical firm, he wrote film scripts for the army and later speeches for corporate executives—as does Thomas Eigen in *J R*, who has likewise published an important but neglected novel. With the appearance in 1970 of “J.R. or the Boy Inside,” which would later become the opening pages of his second novel, Gaddis broke his fifteen-year literary silence, and in the fall of 1975 *J R* was published to much stronger reviews than his first novel had received. Yet even though it won the National Book Award for the best fiction of the year, there are grounds, unfortunately, for Frederick Karl’s complaint that *J R* remains “perhaps the great unread novel of the postwar era.”⁷

Through the seventies Gaddis continued free-lance writing and performed brief teaching stints, usually in creative writing. At Bard College he developed a course on the theme of failure in American literature, a central theme in his own fiction and the subject of his brilliant essay “The Rush for Second Place” (1981), the best of his few nonfiction pieces. Meanwhile, critical commentary began forming around his two novels: essays began appearing with some regularity in scholarly journals, dissertations proliferated, all culminating in the summer of 1982 with the first book on his work, a special Gaddis issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, and a MacArthur Foundation fellowship (the so-called genius award). In 1984, a second book on his work appeared, Gaddis was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and he finished his third novel.

Like its predecessors, *Carpenter’s Gothic* abounds in autobiographical elements. Not only does it take place in the same Victorian house Gaddis owns in Piermont, New York—where his papers are stored in the same garage-converted locked room that excites Liz’s curiosity—but the house’s absentee landlord, the geologist McCandless, offers yet another mirror image of Gaddis: “His face appeared drained, so did the hand he held out to her, drained of colour that might once have been a heavy tan[, . .] his still, sinewed hands and his . . . hard, irregular features bearing the memory of distant suns, the cool, grey calm of his eyes belying . . . belying?”⁸ Belying Gaddis, perhaps, for the second half of this quotation is Liz’s fictionalization of McCandless’s appearance, and she later takes the process one step further away from its original by completing her description from a book:

she seized the pencil to draw it heavily through his still, sinewed hands, hard irregular features, the cool disinterested calm of his eyes and a bare moment’s pause bearing down with the pencil on his hands, disjointed, rust spotted, his crumbled features dulled and worn as the bill collector he might have been mistaken for, the desolate loss in his eyes belying, belying . . . The towel went to the floor in a heap and she was up naked, legs planted wide broached by scissors wielded murderously on the [television] screen where she dug past it for the rag of a book its cover gone, the first twenty odd pages gone in fact, so that it opened full on the line she sought, coming down with the pencil on belying, a sense that he was still a part of all that he could have been. (95)

The obvious lesson here is that we are dealing with fiction, not life, and that despite the encouraging fact that McCandless shares Gaddis’s appearance, marital history, political outlook, speech habits, even his pets, he is no more to be strictly identified with his author than is Otto, Gibbs, or Eigen. “No,” Gaddis has warned, “characters all draw on some contradictory level of their author’s life,”⁹ and sometimes even change in the course of composition. In a television interview with Malcolm Bradbury, Gaddis illustrated this point with reference to Thomas Eigen: “I started him out as being, sort of getting my own back, as it were. He starts out being quite a good fellow who has had bad luck, but as it went on he became very unpleasant, and finally by the end of the novel, he was thoroughly unpleasant, thoroughly, because this is the way he developed in the novel. I gave up identifying with him, and started to hold him at arm’s length. But I saw this really was who the man was; he was not just a man who had had bad luck, but his embittered state had turned him into a really, not anybody you’d want to know.”¹⁰

This autobiographical impulse can likewise be found in the work of a number of Gaddis’s contemporaries, and his various self-portraits do have elements of Mailer’s egotism, Kerouac’s self-absorption, Roth’s defensiveness, and Barth’s playfulness. But the impulse probably owes more, in Gaddis’s case, to the sense in some lines of Robert Browning’s poetry that Gaddis once copied into a 1983 issue of *Conjunctions* that featured an interview with his friend William H. Gass: “This trade of mine—I don’t know, can’t be sure / But there was something in it, tricks and all! / Really, I want to light up my own mind.” Perhaps the rest, as Eliot says, is not our business. Gaddis continues to live in and around New York City, travels widely, and is at work on a fourth novel.¹¹

Influences

The nature and extent of Gaddis's reading has elicited an unusually large amount of speculation, especially by reviewers and critics eager to establish "influences" with which they can then damn or praise his work. Because of the allusions, quotations, and the encyclopedic range of knowledge displayed in the novels, especially in *The Recognitions*, Cynthia Ozick's front-page cry "Mr. Gaddis knows almost everything"¹² echoes critics who assume he has read everything. For example, Tony Tanner confidently states, "Clearly, Gaddis has read Joyce (what hasn't he read?),"¹³ but Joyce is the most glaring example of an author whom Gaddis has not read, much less imitated. Similarly, Frederick Karl praises Gaddis's "extensive reading in and knowledge of religious literature, church fathers and historians, Latin works, church theologians, all sufficiently assimilated so that they can be regurgitated for parodic purposes,"¹⁴ although nearly all of the religious references in *The Recognitions* can be traced to a half dozen rather mundane sources. Delmore Schwartz was closer to the mark when he wrote to Gaddis's friend and editor Catharine Carver, "he knows a lot more about sleeping pills than about the Church, despite the allusions."¹⁵ This is not to denigrate Gaddis's undeniable learning: he is obviously an extremely well-read man who researches his books thoroughly, and these uncritical claims for his extensive knowledge are testimony to his artistry. Like most writers, Gaddis wears his influences most plainly on his sleeve in his first novel; with *J R* he clearly became his own man and "influences" all but disappear into the vast machinery of his work. But the nagging question of influences has been answered in so many misleading ways that a brief survey of Gaddis's reading—compiled from his books, letters, lectures, and conversation—seems warranted.

Gaddis majored in English literature at Harvard and remembers the program as solid and traditional: "we read Chaucer, we read Dryden and so forth, Elizabethan drama, Restoration comedy, all the things that a good education in that area gives you. And very little current. I mean, it was before the days of writing workshops, and discussing current novels, and so forth. It was much more . . . I can't call it 'classic' education, because that was much more Greek and Latin, but it was more old fashioned, which I'm delighted, I'm very glad of. I always have been very happy about that."¹⁶

Among others, he studied under Albert Guerard, attended F. O. Matthiessen's lectures on Greek drama, and was tutored in Chaucer by

Theodore Spencer. Gaddis looked at Spencer's edition of Joyce's *Stephen Hero* (1944) but was not impressed, and he did not look at much more of Joyce's work. Yet of all the alleged influences on Gaddis's work, Joyce has been named most often. The first academic essay on *The Recognitions* was a detailed demonstration of the novel's debt to *Ulysses*, "established in such minute detail," Gaddis later joked, "I was doubtful of my own firm recollection of never having read *Ulysses*."¹⁷ To this day the influence of Joyce is routinely assumed by many critics, despite several published denials by Gaddis. With justifiable impatience, he gave this emphatic answer to Joyce scholar Grace Eckley in 1975:

I appreciate your interest in *The Recognitions* & have to tell you I've about reached the end of the line on questions about what I did or didn't read of Joyce's 30 years ago. All I read of *Ulysses* was Molly Bloom at the end which was being circulated for salacious rather than literary merits; No I did not read *Finnegans Wake* though I think a phrase about "psychoanalooing" one's self from it is in *The Recognitions*;¹⁸ Yes I read some of *Dubliners* but don't recall how many & remember only a story called "Counterparts"; Yes I read a play called *Exiles* which at the time I found highly unsuccessful; Yes I believe I read *Portrait of an Artist* but also think I may not have finished it; No I did not read commentary on Joyce's work & absorb details without reading the original. I also read, & believe with a good deal more absorption, Eliot, Dostoevski, Forster, Rolfe, Waugh, why bother to go on, anyone seeking Joyce finds Joyce even if both Joyce & the victim found the item in Shakespeare, read right past whole lines lifted bodily from Eliot &c, all of which will probably go on so long as Joyce remains an academic cottage industry.¹⁹

Eliot and Dostoyevski are the most significant names here; none of Gaddis's reviewers described *The Recognitions* as *The Waste Land* rewritten by Dostoyevski (with additional dialogue by Ronald Firbank), but that would be a more accurate description than the *Ulysses* parallel so many of them harped upon. Not only do Gaddis's novels contain dozens of "whole lines lifted bodily from Eliot," but *The Recognitions* can be read as an epic sermon using *The Waste Land* as its text. The novel employs the same techniques of reference, allusion, collage, multiple perspective, and contrasting voices; the same kinds of fire and water imagery drawn from religion and myth; and both call for the same kinds of artistic, moral, and religious sensibilities. *J R* is not as Eliotic as the first novel, yet it too contains several quotations from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Hysteria," *The Waste Land*, and *Sweeney Agonistes*, all done in different voices. *Four Quartets*, so important to

the religious aura of *The Recognitions* that Gaddis at an early stage planned to weave every one of its lines into his text, is conspicuous in its absence in the profane world of *J R* and nearly invisible in the despairing one of *Carpenter's Gothic*.

Among novelists, Dostoyevski's importance is paramount. "How are we to write / The Russian novel in America / As long as life goes so unterribly?" Robert Frost asked with uncharacteristic obtuseness in his poem "New Hampshire," written about the time Gaddis was born. Life proved terrible enough by the 1950s to produce in *The Recognitions* the most "Russian" novel in American literature. Gaddis's love for nineteenth-century Russian literature in general crops up in his novels, his letters, and in his few lectures, where references are made to the major works of Dostoyevski, Tolstoy (especially the plays), Gogol, Turgenyev, Gorky, Goncharov, and Chekhov. Gaddis shares with these authors not only their metaphysical concerns and often bizarre sense of humor, but their nationalistic impulses as well. William H. Gass reported a talk of Gaddis's in Lithuania where Gaddis insisted "he and the earlier Russian writers had the same target, and that he was attempting to save his version of an acceptable country as they were endeavoring to redeem theirs."²⁰ In each of his novels, moreover, Gaddis pursues what Edward Wasiolek has called "perhaps the most distinctive trait of Russian fiction, to trace out the extreme, but logically possible, reaches of a human characteristic."²¹

Among western European writers, briefly, relevant works include Sade's *Justine*, Goethe's *Faust*, Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*, Broch's *Sleepwalkers*, Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, Silone's *And He Hid Himself*, some Ibsen, and Dante. Kafka's *The Castle* is alluded to in *J R*, and Gaddis once admitted that when he first read Kafka in his early twenties he was so stunned by what Kafka could do that he "sat down and wrote some very bad Kafka, though I thought of it as good Kafka then."²² He also read Gide's *Counterfeiters* when young, but doubts it influenced his own novel about counterfeiters. He has never read Robbe-Grillet (though parallels have been noted), nor Proust's vast novel beyond its "overture," but read Montherlant's *Bachelors* and apparently *The Girls* tetralogy. He keeps up with many middle European authors and, among Third World authors, has spoken highly of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and, in *Carpenter's Gothic*, quotes V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*.

The range of relevant British writers is much greater, extending from Langland's *Piers Plowman* and the medieval passion play *Harrow-*

ing of Hell through most of Shakespeare (*As You Like It* is his favorite) and other Elizabethan dramatists, Donne, Restoration and Augustan satirists, to a number of twentieth-century writers. Forster and Waugh, mentioned in the letter to Eckley, are discernible in Gaddis's mordant social criticism and use of foreign locales; he seems to have read and relished the bulk of these novelists' work. Rolfe's name is as surprising as it is little known, but in the unique writings of the self-styled Baron Corvo can be found anticipations of the virulent satire, haughty elitism, and outlandish erudition so prevalent in *The Recognitions*. A more obvious influence is the work of Ronald Firbank, whose unexampled novels were enjoying a revival when Gaddis was at work on his first novel. From these witty, outrageous novels Gaddis may have learned how to use elliptical dialogue—especially for effects usually achieved only in traditional exposition—and perhaps how to have campy fun at Catholicism's expense. (Gaddis may have learned from other masters of the novel in dialogue—especially early Waugh and late Henry Green—but Firbank's example is the most apparent.) Other British writers alluded to in Gaddis's writings include Charlotte Brontë (whose *Jane Eyre* made it into *Carpenter's Gothic* as a last minute substitute for *Lost Horizon*, which James Hilton's estate would not allow Gaddis to use), Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, much Conrad, some Wilde and Kipling, Norman Douglas's *South Wind*, George Borrow's nonfiction, C. M. Doughty and T. E. Lawrence's classic books on Arabia, some Huxley and Maugham, much Robert Graves, and Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. Among the poets, Browning, Tennyson, and Yeats are the most often quoted after Eliot.

Gaddis only recently read the British novel that most resembles *The Recognitions*—Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, having earlier "found it coming both too close to home and too far from what I thought I was trying to do," he told David Markson.²³ But Lowry read Gaddis's novel at Markson's suggestion and, in a letter to Markson written shortly before his death, praised *The Recognitions* as "a veritable Katchenjunga, you know the mountain I mean anyhow, of a book, the ascent of some overhang of which can scarcely be made safely without the assistance, one feels, of both Tenzing and Aleister Crowley. [. . .] What I can say is that it is probably all you claim for it, a truly fabulous creation, a Super Byzantine Gazebo and secret missile of the soul and likewise extraordinarily funny: much funnier than Burton[']s *Anatomy of Melancholy*] though Burton is a good parallel."

Despite his background in British and continental literature, how-

ever, Gaddis is first and foremost an American writer working with traditional American themes. Two in particular stand out: the first is the theme of failure, a theme so prevalent that it can be overlooked, he writes, "only by overlooking the main body of American literature and the novelists who have been struggling with the bitter truths of conflict and failure in American life."²⁴ His reading list at Bard consisted of such works as Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Lewis's *Babbitt*, Frost's "Provide, Provide," Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, and more recent novels such as Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, Sue Kaufman's *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, and Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes*. (Among the nonfiction he used are James's *Pragmatism*, Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, and John Holt's *How Children Fail*.) The theme of failure is one of the two most important themes in *J R* (both spelled out in the novel's final paragraph by J R himself as "success and like free enterprise") and is a thematic common denominator for all of Gaddis's work.

The vehicle Gaddis uses to convey this theme aligns him with another American literary tradition, what D. H. Lawrence facetiously calls "the great American grouch,"²⁵ "Much of our fiction," Gaddis declared in a 1986 address, "going back well over a century, has been increasingly fueled by outrage or, at the least, by indignation. Curiously enough, this is often coupled with and even springs from the writer's perennially naive notion that through calling attention to inequalities and abuses, hypocrisies and patent frauds, self-deceiving attitudes and self-defeating policies, these will be promptly corrected by a grateful public; but the state is the public's fiction, and gratitude is not its most prominent attribute."²⁶ Satire intended to be as edifying as it is caustic is an American staple going back to the first big novel in our literature, Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*. Gaddis probably doesn't know this work, but he does know the work of a good many later moral satirists: Hawthorne (he's read *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*, but not *A Marble Faun*, as has been suggested), Melville (*Moby-Dick*, "Bartleby the Scrivener," and *Billy Budd*, but he never finished *The Confidence-Man*), some Emerson (mostly at second hand), Thoreau's *Walden*, Crane's *Maggie*, a good deal of Mark Twain (both fiction and nonfiction), Nathanael West, Cummings (especially *I × I*), and, among his contemporaries, Heller, early Burroughs, and later Elkin.

Other American writers, not necessarily Lawrence's grouches, that Gaddis has read include Djuna Barnes (her stories as well as *Nightwood*), Faulkner (only *The Sound and the Fury* and a few stories, he confesses), and like every writer of his generation, Hemingway. He seems to have little interest in the works of those contemporary novelists with whom he is most often associated: John Barth, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, John Hawkes, Joseph McElroy, Thomas Pynchon, Gilbert Sorrentino, and Alexander Theroux—all of whom apparently know his work. Instead, he seems to prefer more traditional works over the kind of novels he himself writes—perhaps because he considers his work more traditional than his critics do. He never finished either *Lolita* or *The Sot-Weed Factor* (both on stylistic grounds) but alludes to Capote's and Styron's first novels in his work, and he has recommended the work of such novelists as Joy Williams (specifically *State of Grace*) and James Salter. Saul Bellow's novels are apparently old favorites, and *More Die of Heartbreak* elicited from Gaddis his first book review since his *Lampoon* days. In general he seems more likely to pick up a novel like Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (which he found "very funny") than novels as challenging as his own, a common tendency among many novelists. But to conclude the question of influences, it is worth quoting Gaddis's response to the query whether he thought Pynchon's work might have been influenced by his own: "I haven't read Pynchon enough to have an opinion either of his work or whether it might have been 'influenced' (perilous word) by mine, though I've understood he feels not & who's to know if he'd ever read mine before V? Always a dangerous course."²⁷

Intentions

The question of intentions is as dangerous a course to pursue as that of influences, but Gaddis's intentions have likewise been too often misjudged to leave them unexamined. In one of his essays Edward Hoagland suggests "writers can be categorized by many criteria, one of which is whether they prefer subject matter that they rejoice in or subject matter they deplore and wish to savage with ironies." Gaddis clearly belongs in the second camp, to the tradition of vitriolic satire fueled by moral indignation that goes back through the American writers named earlier to the great Augustan satirists of the eighteenth century, back through Voltaire, Ben Jonson, and the bitterly satirical Shakespeare of *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens* (even *King Lear*),

back finally to such classical satirists as Juvenal and Persius. Yet charges of nihilism and pessimism have dogged Gaddis from his earliest novel by those who feel his work is not based "on any but a narrow and jaundiced view, a projection of private discontent."²⁸ Such narrow and jaundiced views have been aired by those apparently unaware that satire is primarily a constructive, rather than destructive, artistic strategy, one that has as its quixotic goal the rejuvenation of society, not its ruin. Pope, for example, felt the satirist had a moral obligation to expose the faults of his society so that the necessary corrections could be made, and the same idealistic motivation spurred the Russian novelists Gaddis admires. Gaddis belongs to the company of "salutary assassins," as Gilbert Sorrentino puts it,²⁹ and all three of his novels can be read, in one sense at least, as crusades: in *The Recognitions*, against fraudulence and fakery at all levels (artistic, religious, intellectual, moral, political, etc.); in *J R*, against the abuses of capitalism, new-fangled pedagogy, and the farcical notion of corporate "democracy"; and in *Carpenter's Gothic*, against fundamentalism, sensationalist journalism, and every form of stupidity.

Like all satirists, Gaddis relies on humor to achieve his goals, encouraging the reader to laugh away the pretensions of all those he holds up to ridicule. The comic element in Gaddis's work, however, has been consistently underrated. Instead, undue weight has been placed on Gaddis's alleged negativity, much to the novels' disadvantage. He once addressed this charge in an interview with an answer that deserves to be quoted in full; asked if he considered his novels "apocalyptic," Gaddis replied:

You mean looking to a bad end? I don't know. A couple of reviews said about *J R* that everything in it is so negative, so bad, the artist is devoured by the business community, but I didn't see it that way at all, I saw it in a much more positive light. In both books this community does very much represent reality, the life which is going on, what one has to deal with. This is the outer demand, while what the artist does is from the inner demand. So that collision of the outer and inner demand is what it's all about. Many people have no inner demand, like *J R*. He is eleven years old, he is undeveloped, he has got nothing inside. The only values he knows are the ones he sees around him, which are: get ahead, succeed, make money, and so on. At the end, even though he has been put out of business, destroyed, he is still ready to go again and is looking for some new way to do it. He hasn't learned anything.³⁰ Whereas Bast, the composer, who at the beginning has these fantasies of com-

posing a grand opera at twenty, then, colliding with reality, with the material-success-junk aspect of America, sees that he has to modify his demands. He spends 700 pages colliding with this world, and his ambitions go from a grand opera to a cantata, then he takes out the voices so he can write a suite, and finally there he is trying to write a solo piece for cello. But as he says at the end, "I've been making other people's mistakes, now I'm going to make my own mistakes." So he has in a way been purified, he has gone through the purgatory of material craziness, and now he says: "I've had it, now I'm going to do what I want to do!" That to me isn't a negative message at all. If you get that one positive thread it is all one can hope for, because the world isn't that friendly a place, really.

In *The Recognitions* you have a similar theme. When Wyatt starts out he is not a genius, but he is a very talented painter. But he has had a bad start with the critics and, disappointed, he turns to forgery, which is to say involvement with the material-money-junk world. But he comes out and at the end he is ready to start again. That is not negative at all. We live in a world of negative forces, but the message in both books is for me a very positive one. This eludes many readers who say that they've never read anything so depressing in their lives. Well, it's enough to look around: bad things are there, you know. People ask, why don't I write nice books about happy people. But what do you say about happy people?³¹

Only with *Carpenter's Gothic* do the charges of pessimism have some validity. A positive message is conspicuously absent here, even though (to quote again from Aldridge) Gaddis's "awareness of what is human and sensible is always present behind his depiction of how far we have fallen from humanity and sense."³² Asked shortly after the publication of this novel, "If your work could have a positive social/political effect, what would you want it to be?" Gaddis answered, "Obviously quite the opposite to what the work portrays."³³ But Gaddis's own outlook seems identical to that of McCandless, who reads his fate in a book he takes down from his shelf (Naipaul's *Mimic Men*): "A man, I suppose, fights only when he hopes, when he has a vision of order, when he feels strongly there is some connexion between the earth on which he walks and himself. But there was my vision of a disorder which it was beyond any one man to put right" (150). A vision of order apparently sustained Gaddis through his first two catalogs of disorder, but *Carpenter's Gothic* projects a vision of disorder as bleak as Pope's at the end of his *Dunciad*, one that seems to proceed, as the narrator of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" puts it, "from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill."

Together, Gaddis's three novels constitute one of the most searching

critiques of "what America is all about," as a character in *J R* would say. Gaddis, like Hawthorne and Melville before him, is the leading modern exemplar in American literature of what Leslie Fiedler would call a "tragic Humanist," a writer "whose duty is to say 'Nay!', to deny the easy affirmations by which most men live, and to expose the blackness of life most men try deliberately to ignore. For tragic Humanists, it is the function of art not to console or sustain, much less to entertain, but to *disturb* by telling a truth which is always unwelcome."³⁴ The sentiment is even more forcibly expressed by Gaddis's most recent protagonist/spokesman, the learned Judge Crease, who insists "the artist comes among us not as the bearer of *idées reçues* embracing art as decoration or of the comfort of churchly beliefs enshrined in greeting-card sentiments but rather in the aesthetic equivalent of one who comes on earth 'not to send peace, but a sword.'"³⁵