

## Chapter Three

### *The Recognitions:*

### The Self Who Can Do More

Although Wyatt's quest is the center of attention in *The Recognitions*, he appears only in half of the novel's twenty-two chapters, and even in some of these makes only fleeting appearances. As Gaddis stated in one of his notes, "the body of the novel has not been squarely about [Wyatt], it has been about the others, and he only insofar as he was the spirit they lost."<sup>1</sup> Just as Camilla, the spirit Wyatt lost, keeps "cold vigilance, waiting" (61) for Wyatt to rectify his imperfections, he does so for others: "I wait," he tells Valentine, describing his role in their hypothetical novel (a metafictional version of *The Recognitions*). "Where is he? Listen, he's there all the time. None of them moves, but it reflects him, none of them . . . reacts, but to react with him, none of them hates but to hate with him, to hate him, and loving . . . none of them loves, but, loving . . ." (263). Here Wyatt founders, aware of the absence of love in his life, but for the others he epitomizes what Valentine calls "this other . . . more beautiful self who . . . can do more than they can" (253).

Each of the novel's major characters sees in Wyatt what he or she might have become: "the self-who-can-do-more," to quote again from Gaddis's notes, "the creative self if it had not been killed by the other, in Valentine's case, Reason; in Brown's case, material gain; in Otto's case, vanity and ambition; in Stanley's case, the Church; in Anselm's case, religion, &c. &c."<sup>2</sup> Like Rilke's angel, with whom Wyatt is several times associated, he represents for these characters "a being in whom the limitations and contradictions of present human nature have been transcended, a being in whom thought and action, insight and achievement, will and capability, the actual and the ideal, are one."<sup>3</sup> As we have seen, Wyatt is no angel and has difficulties of his own reaching the Rilkean ideal, but he does possess enough talent to remind others of their shortcomings. Otto, for example, is lost in envy and admiration: "I mean to know as much as you do, it must be . . .

I mean you can really do anything you want to by now, I mean, you don't feel all sort of hedged in by the parts you don't know about, like I do" (134). "It was like a part of me working, like a part of myself working there," Wyatt's former supervisor Benny reminisces. "And I couldn't do it. He could do it and I couldn't do it" (606). This sense of failure and inadequacy dogs most of the novel's other characters as well, driving them to madness, drugs and alcohol, inertia, suicide, or at the best to what Thoreau calls lives of quiet desperation.

These characters also provide a certain amount of dramatic comic relief from Wyatt's grimly serious quest for redemption and authenticity. With the same kind of "calamitous wit" he ascribes to Saul Bellows,<sup>4</sup> Gaddis may have intended a comedy of manners that deflates the lives and pretensions of the New York intellectuals, literati, artsy homosexuals, and assorted camp followers who make up his *dramatis personae*. But the ferocity of Gaddis's satire, the contempt he heaps upon nearly everyone in the novel, betrays the stern moralist who doesn't so much invite the reader to laugh at the human foibles of his characters as to recoil in horror and inquire of them, aghast with indignation, "But why do you do the things you do? Why do you live the life you live?" (923). This half of *The Recognitions* is less a comedy than a tragedy of manners.

Gaddis accomplishes much more than an exposé of Bohemian life; instead, he offers a dramatization of the sociological pressures that drive people to don masks, to exchange "the things worth being for the things worth having" (499), to confuse the genuine with the counterfeit, and to reject "revelation for fear of examining the motives which conspired to breed it" (613). Gaddis's own relentless inquiry into those motives makes well-rounded characters of what may first appear to be caricatures, mere butts of his satirical thrusts. "How little of us ever meets how little of another" Agnes Deigh complains in her suicide letter to Dr. Weisgall (758), and how little attention has been paid to this intriguing gallery of characters.

#### Otto

In Gaddis's "bop version" of *Faust*, Otto Pivner plays Wagner to Wyatt's magus in the early part of the novel, but thereafter acts more as a comic double, a funhouse mirror reflection of the "refugee artist" (661). Like the clown in a Shakespearean subplot, Otto functions as a ludicrous counterpart to Wyatt, aping his manner, stealing his best

lines, parodying Wyatt's quest as his does older models. Dozens of parallel situations link the two: Otto cuts his cheek (449) and asks his presumed father (515) the same question that Wyatt, also with torn cheek, asks his father (427); a bartender calls after Otto to remind him of his abandoned newspaper (475) just as a French waiter had called after Wyatt about his (77); Otto's hair starts burning (486) as Wyatt often dreams his does (87, 99, 586); Otto's final conversation with Esther (609–13, 620–22) echoes Wyatt's last conversation with her (585–92) so closely that Esther can prompt him; during those conversations both Wyatt (589) and Otto (620) remark that, looking around, there doesn't seem much worth doing anymore; Otto's last conscious act is to pound on a church door seeking sanctuary (729), just as Wyatt does before being turned away from his monastery (891); by the end of the novel each is called by a new name—Otto as Gordon, Wyatt as Stephen—and the final appearance of each is accompanied by the ringing of church bells (900, 950). These are only a few of the countless parallels, echoes, and parodies Gaddis scatters throughout the text, giving Otto's actions the same kind of vague familiarity that nags the readers of his plagiarized play—whose title, appropriately enough, he stole from Wyatt.

Otto's stumbling progress is not played entirely for laughs, however. His troubles with identity and authenticity not only are mundane variations on Wyatt's more metaphysical ones, but are closer to the plane most readers inhabit than the rarified one on which Wyatt operates. Similarly, his vanity may only be a more common version of the intense self-consciousness and introspection that characterizes Wyatt's thoughts, who can even be said to be guilty of theological vanity when he demands of his father, "*Am I the man for whom Christ died?*" (440). In his fumbling way, Otto even approaches the same "recognitions" Wyatt makes, often by way of the same metaphors from painting. In one of the most significant passages in the novel, Otto tells Esme

—a story I heard once, a friend of mine told me, somebody I used to know, a story about a forged painting. It was a forged Titian that somebody had painted over another old painting, when they scraped the forged Titian away they found some worthless old painting underneath it, the forger had used it because it was an old canvas. But then there was something under that worthless painting, and they scraped it off and underneath that they found a Titian, a real Titian that had been there all the time. It was as though when the forger was working, and he didn't know the original was underneath, I mean he

didn't know he knew it, but it knew, I mean something knew. I mean, do you see what I mean? That underneath that the original is there, that the real . . . thing is there, and on the surface you . . . if you can only . . . see what I mean? (450–51)

In a later conversation with Esther Otto employs the same metaphors from counterfeiting that have bedeviled Wyatt, using them in conjunction with the talismanic verb "to recognize": "And this, this mess, ransacking this mess looking for your own feelings and trying to rescue them but it's too late, you can't even recognize them when they come to the surface because they've been spent everywhere and, vulgarized and exploited and wasted and spent wherever we could, they keep demanding and you keep paying and you can't . . . and then all of a sudden somebody asks you to pay in gold and you can't. Yes, you can't, you haven't got it, and you can't" (621–22).

These are two of several instances where Otto's insights come close to matching Wyatt's, but each time Otto backs off "with the brave refusal of one rejecting revelation for fear of examining the motives which conspired to breed it" (613). The kind of wholesale revision of one's life that Wyatt/Stephen makes is too drastic a move for most of us, and yet even Otto may be ready to make such a change by the end of the novel: learning that Jesse has run off with his counterfeit money, Otto/Gordon reacts to the doctor's injunction "You'll have to start all over again" by tearing off his bandages and laughing, with "a soft wind from the south, and the bells ringing a morning Angelus" (950) to suggest he too is ready to begin a new life.

Before reaching this point, however, Otto traverses his own inferno. He is first seen in a Lexington Avenue bar gazing blankly at what will emerge as a symbolic triad: "staring at a dollar bill pinned on the wall, a sign which said, *If you drive your FATHER to drink drive him here*, and his own image in the mirror" (101). Worrying about money, his father, and his image are Otto's major concerns in the novel, and the ridiculous circumstances in which this symbolic triad is introduced sets the tone for most of his actions. Having recently arrived in New York City from Harvard, poor in money but rich in vanity and ambition, Otto enters the world of Wyatt and his wife with the first of many fabrications: overhearing a barfly yell at a man in a Santa Claus suit, "Hey Pollyotch, don't start singing your ladonnamobilay in here" (101), Otto revises this for Esther when telling her "he'd been at a party uptown, at some playwright's house, he left when it got too noisy and

some woman kept calling him Pagliacci" (105). Although Esther quickly sees through him as "a conceited pretentious boy" (106), she finds his attentions to her consoling as Wyatt withdraws further into himself.

She grows annoyed soon enough, however, with his obsession with money and makes the acute observation, "You seem to take not having it as a reflection on your manhood," to which Otto responds, "But money, I mean, damn it, a man does feel castrated in New York without money" (150–51). Later, Max taunts him, "You have a real complex about money don't you Otto, a real castration complex without it" (463), which Gaddis brings to a comic apotheosis when Otto goes to meet his father for the first time since childhood. Panicking at the loss of his wallet while trying to pick up a blonde in a bar, Otto "felt for his inside breast pocket, as though the wallet must have been there all the time, its absence illusory, caused by witchcraft; and he glanced quickly at the blonde, as those medieval inquisitors, fingering the pages of the *Malleus Maleficarum* may have glanced at the witches who seemed to deprive men of their virile members, when they found that 'such members are never actually taken away from the body, but are only hidden by a glamour from the senses of sight and touch'" (512). When his "father" gives him his "Christmas present"—actually forger Frank Sinisterra passing \$5,000 in counterfeit twenties to his presumed contact—Otto keeps "the packet clutched against his parts" (520) then rushes up to his hotel room to spread the money over his bed with the ardor of an impassioned lover, "counting the money, in various positions" (521). This money, of course, proves his downfall: learning of its counterfeit nature, he flees the country with it, gets wounded in earnest in a Central American revolution (after faking such a wound through most of the book), and finds the freedom of cathartic laughter only when he discovers the tainted money has been stolen from him.

Otto's search for a father is as hapless as his search for wealth, and in fact financial rather than filial motives lead him to arrange to meet the father he hasn't seen since childhood. No explanation is given for the long estrangement, and Otto shows some trepidation at the prospect of meeting Mr. Pivner. "It was a problem until now more easily left unsolved; and be damned to Oedipus and all the rest of them. For now, the father might be anyone the son chose" (303). Needless to say, he chooses badly. Sitting in a hotel lobby awaiting his father, trying to guess if Mr. Pivner is among those present, Otto chooses a gentle-

man he later catches in bed with the blonde Otto had hoped to pick up, a woman who will later sag encouragingly in Mr. Pivner's direction—all adding to the Oedipal tension surrounding Wyatt's relation to his father. With a Dickensian relish for coincidence and mistaken identity, Gaddis propels Frank Sinisterra into the lobby just as Mr. Pivner is being led away as a suspected junkie and both Otto and Sinisterra make the logical mistake, with hilarious results. (In Gaddis's small world, Sinisterra not only is responsible for the death of Camilla but is the real father of Chaby Sinisterra, Otto's seedy rival for Esme, who, unbeknownst to either of them, is hopelessly in love with Wyatt. A temporary father to Otto, Sinisterra will also become one to Wyatt later in the novel.) Sincere in his desire to be reunited with his son, Mr. Pivner returns to the hotel the following night, and finds himself in the lavatory standing next to a "figure his own height, near the same stature, [ . . . ] when the whole face turned on him, turned bloodshot eyes in a desolation of contempt" (566–67). Mr. Pivner's hopes flicker but quickly go out as no recognition takes place, and he soon finds a surrogate son in the affably fatuous Eddie Zefnic.

Like "Oedipus and all the rest of them," Otto is engaged in an archetypal quest, but as John Seelye points out, "the plotting of this incident recalls Restoration comedy" more than it does the spiritual quests of Oedipus, Hamlet, Ishmael, Stephen Dedalus, or, more to the point, Wyatt Gwyon. Otto's motives for finding his father have nothing to do with love, atonement, or spiritual kinship, and in fact extend little beyond the anticipation of a generous Christmas present (preferably in cash) and listening to his patrician (if not regal) father speak of "his intimacies with opera stars, artists, producers, over breast of guinea hen and wine" (518). Similarly, Otto's numerous encounters with mirrors are not numinous opportunities for the "intimacies of catoptric communion" (673) as they are for Wyatt and Esme, but vain attempts to prepare a face to meet the faces he hopes to meet: "He smiled at himself in the mirror. He raised an eyebrow. Better. He moistened his lips, and curled the upper one. Better still. The smile, which had shown his face obsequious, was gone. He must remember this arrangement: left eyebrow raised, eyelids slightly drawn, lips moistened, parted, down at corners. This was the expression for New York" (159–60).

As Otto progresses through the novel, wrapping himself tighter and tighter in the web of deceptions, betrayals, and self-fabrications he has spun around himself, his mirror image records the assaults on his in-

creasingly fragmented identity. Noting that Esme has finally put up a mirror in her apartment, he glances "into it to see his face shorn off at the jaw" (480). A few hours earlier, Otto had been seated in a bar staring "straight before him; but he did not see his face for the sign FRANKS AND KRAUT 20¢ was pasted on the mirror just above his collar" (474). The next time Otto stares into a bar mirror, it takes "him a good half-minute to realize that neither the stubbled chin, nor the flattened nose, nor the bunched ears, nor the yellow eyes he stared into, were his own" (486). While Wyatt struggles toward psychic integration, Otto disintegrates so rapidly that his lack of cohesion resembles Esme's schizophrenia by the middle of the novel as "he retire[s] from the image of himself which had stepped down from the mirror above the bar, to dwell apart and watch it move across the room toward the lobby, prepared to applaud this vacant being if things should go well, to abandon it tinted and penniless if things should conspire against it" (512). Like the preternatural portrait in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the mirror here as elsewhere in *The Recognitions* functions as an occult window on the soul and records with pitiless accuracy the shattering of Otto's identity. After his accident and transformation into "Gordon," the ideal self-who-can-do-more he had sought in so many mirrors, the loss of Otto's sense of self is finalized by the conspicuous absence of all mirrors in his new surroundings, with the exception of the perforated one on the ophthalmoscope Doctor Fell uses to peer into Otto's glazed, empty eyes.

### Esther and Esme

A romantic quadrangle links Wyatt and Otto with the novel's two principal female characters, Wyatt's wife Esther, and his model Esme, both of whom tolerate Otto only because of Wyatt's indifference. Both have additional lovers—Esther, Ellery; Esme, Chaby—making Otto even more superfluous, and many of the other male characters seem to have slept with Esther or Esme. But the promiscuity of Greenwich Village women is hardly Gaddis's chief concern. Esther and Esme represent the two traditional forms of female salvation open to the mythic hero, and their inadequacies as suitable anima figures dramatize Gaddis's critique of that very tradition. Though both women share initials and an avocation for writing, they are diametrically opposed: Esther is rational, big-boned, ambitious, and writes prose, while Esme is mystical, delicate, aimless, and writes poetry. Gaddis's prose sharpens the

contrast further: his introduction of Esther (78–80) is written in the well-balanced, logically ordered style of Henry James—an author Esther admires—while Esme's equivalent introduction is fractured into two sections (276–77, 298–302) presaging her incipient schizophrenia, and written with the illogic of an interior monologue, punctuated with solipsistic questions and fragments of poems, fictions, and esoteric trivia. They are united, however, in their unrequited love for Wyatt and, after losing him, in their despair.

Esther is the more aggressive of the two. An intelligent woman and a sympathetic character in many ways, Esther is too strongly committed to reason, analysis, intellectual matters, and social success to fulfill the emotional needs of her brooding husband. Complicating matters further, Esther deeply resents being a woman, "and having come to be severely intellectual, probing the past with masculine ruthlessness" (78), she expresses that resentment with a rapacious, castrating sexuality, "seeking, in its clear demand, to absorb the properties which had been withheld from her" (80). Too out of touch with her own femininity, she is hardly in a position to supply the feminine component Wyatt's psyche lacks, and with problems of his own, Wyatt is in no position to help her find herself. Consequently, their marriage is a study in frustration, their temperaments nicely set off by Esther's "thralldom to the perfection of Mozart, work of genius without an instant of hesitation or struggle, genius to which [Wyatt's] argument opposed the heroic struggle constantly rending the music of Beethoven, struggle never resolved and triumphed until the end" (81). Too similar to Aunt May in her schematic outlook on life, Esther loses Wyatt to someone more like his lost mother.

Gretchen to Wyatt's Faust, Esme has been sent to him by the novel's Mephistopheles, Reck tall Brown. A promiscuous manic-depressive schizophrenic addicted to heroin, she nevertheless models as the Virgin Mary in Wyatt's religious forgeries ("No needle marks on your Annunciation's arm, now," Brown reminds him [259]), but even outside his studio she is consistently described as resembling a painting (183, 193, 197, 306, 912). With so many keys to character to be found in mirrors and works of art in *The Recognitions*, it is worth noting the difference between the paintings with which Esther and Esme are associated. During his marriage, Wyatt works at restoring "a late eighteenth-century American painting in need of a good deal of work, the portrait of a woman with large bones in her face but an unprominent nose, a picture which looked very much like Esther" (88). Later, turning an

ultraviolet light on the restored painting, Wyatt sees another *Dorian Gray*-like revelation of his wife's soul: "in the woman's face, the portions he had restored shone dead black, a face touched with the irregular chiaroscuroic hand of lues and the plague, tissues ulcerated under the surface which reappeared in complaisant continence the instant he turned the violet light from it, and upon the form of Esther who had come, looking over his shoulder, and fallen stricken there on the floor without a word" (118). This remarkable passage, with its images from syphilis and disease, not only reveals Wyatt's sexual revulsion from his wife, but more importantly places the blame on Wyatt for Esther's subsequent decline, as though caused by the sympathetic magic of his voodooistic painting.

Esme, on the other hand, is associated with Wyatt's unfinished painting of Camilla, the other virgin of *The Recognitions*. If the spirit of Camilla was translated into the soul of the Barbary ape, Heracles, it finds its present reincarnation in Esme by way of numerous parallels and verbal echoes: Esme is said to have a child four years old (196), the age at which Wyatt realized he had lost his mother; Esme has "a vague look of yearning, but that without expectation" (273), an echo of "the unchanging, ungratified yearning in the face of Camilla on the living-room mantel" (33); before her suicide attempt, Esme dons Camilla's Byzantine earrings with the same bloody results (469-70) as Camilla experienced (14), and after the suicide attempt goes "over to a drawer, looking for something" (480) just as Camilla's ghost had returned after her death to her sewing room, "looking for something" (20); Esme too becomes "an apparition" with a face "delicately intimate in the sharp-boned hollow-eyed virginity of unnatural shadows" (745), restored to a spiritual state of virginity as was Wyatt's ghostly mother before her.

Although Esme is associated with a wide variety of other female figures of salvation in addition to the Virgin Mary and Faust's Gretchen—Dante's Beatrice, Saint Rose of Lima, the Flying Dutchman's Senta, Peer Gynt's Solveig, Lucius's Isis, Saint Francis's Clare, even the king's daughter in the Grimm Brothers' "The Frog King"—she is elsewhere associated with succubae and sirens, and when Wyatt deigns to think of her at all, it is unfortunately in her role as temptress. Rebelling from Brown in his role as the Troll King, Wyatt comes to view Esme more as Ibsen's Green-clad One than as the maternal Solveig and at that point flees from her offer of intimacy to return to his father and take up the priesthood.<sup>6</sup> Given the close association between Esme

and Camilla, unconscious fears of incest also seem to be at work in Wyatt's troubled mind. But after the destruction by fire of the *Stabat Mater* modelled on Camilla and Esme—Wyatt having found in Esme's face the lines necessary to complete the old portrait—he realizes the mistake he made in spurning the one woman capable of offering him selfless love. Returning to New York to expose his forgeries and to find Esme, he bungles the first and fails the second, then reluctantly abandons her a final time to travel to Spain and seek out his mother's tomb to do penance.

To some extent, Esme resembles another schizophrenic in American literature, Nicole in Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*. "Nicole, the goddess who failed," Leslie Fiedler has written of her in terms applicable to Esme, "is postulated in the novel as a schizophrenic, in an attempt to explain her double role as Fair Lady and Dark, her two faces, angelic and diabolic, the melting and the grinning mask."<sup>7</sup> Both faces are turned toward Stanley after Wyatt disappears; by day he tries to convert her to his Catholicism, but by night her "simulacra" assail him "immodest in dress and licentious in nakedness, many-limbed as some wild avatar of the Hindu cosmology [ . . . ] full-breasted and vaunting the belly, limbs indistinguishable until he was brought down between them and stifled in moist collapse" (828). Ever the victim of male projections, Esme slips deeper into madness and religious mania as the novel nears its conclusion, her unrequited love for Wyatt causing her to waste away, "so quickly as though she . . . she had no will to live," as Stanley mournfully confesses, reporting her Firkbankian death, a "staphylococcal infection [ . . . ] from kissing Saint-Peter-in-the-Boat" (953). One of the strangest yet memorable heroines in contemporary literature, Esme betrays the absurdities of the role of romantic redemptress forced upon so many female characters by males who prefer virgins and whores to any more complex woman in between.

### Reck tall Brown and Basil Valentine

Reck tall Brown enters *The Recognitions* by way of the same Satanic invocation Goethe's Faust uses to summon Mephistopheles—both spells based on the medieval *Key of Solomon*—and thereafter is usually seen wreathed in cigar smoke, basking in the infernal heat of his apartment, and surrounded by shadows. With greater relish for Grand Guignol than for subtlety, Gaddis arrays Brown in all the trappings of a twentieth-century devil, a Mammon of the modern world: "—A pub-

lisher? A collector? A dealer? Recktall Brown sounded only mildly interested. —People who don't know me, they say a lot of things about me. He laughed then, but the laughter did not leave his throat. —A lot of things. You'd think I was wicked as hell, even if what I do for them turns out good. I'm a business man" (141). Playing upon Wyatt's various frustrations and disappointments, Brown talks Wyatt into forging paintings for him, offering the motto "—Money gives significance to anything" (144) in place of Saint Irenaeus's motto at the beginning of *The Recognitions*, "God gives significance to anything" (as one might loosely translate "*Nihil cavum neque sine signo apud Deum*"). Just as the devil replaces God in Wyatt's world, Brown replaces Rev. Gwyon to a great extent, and thereafter calls him "my boy" and watches over him like a gruff but protective father.

As crass and vulgar as his raunchy name, Recktall Brown nonetheless harbors an ideal "self-who-can-do-more" that he betrayed in his pursuit of material gain. As with the others, that more beautiful self resides in works of art in his possession. One is a portrait of Brown when younger, before which he sometimes stands "with fond veneration" for "the youth he revered there" (228). But like the other uncanny paintings and mirrors in the novel, this too is symbolically accurate and unmasks his grasping greed by its disproportionately large hands until, "passing it hundreds of times in the years since, often catching up one hand in the other before him, his hands came to resemble these in the portrait" (228). "Hands like that, on these beautiful things?" Basil Valentine will gloat over Brown's corpse, going on to compare Brown to the Chancellor Rolin in Van Eyck's *Virgin and Child and Donor* (689). But just as Rolin "combined rigid piety with excesses of pride, of avarice and of lust" (in the words of one of Gaddis's sources),<sup>8</sup> Brown does display some appreciation for the beautiful objects he deals in—especially for a set of fifteenth-century Italian armor whose beauty proves his undoing. Early in the novel Brown admits, "It's my favorite thing here" (232), a preference he reiterates at his fatal Christmas Eve party (664). In that same early chapter, Valentine had engaged Wyatt in prescient banter, teasing him with "Brown tells me you have another self. Oh, don't be upset, it's not uncommon you know, not at all uncommon. Why, even Brown has one. That's why he drinks to excess occasionally, trying to slip up on it and grab it. Mark me, he's going to get too close one day, and it's going to turn around and break his neck for him" (253). Drinking to excess the night of the party, knowing Wyatt is no longer under his control and threatening to expose their forgeries, Brown makes a foolish attempt to climb

into his beloved armor, which does indeed "break his neck for him" as he falls and clatters down the stairs.

His death, like so many of the deaths in *The Recognitions*, is absurd but symbolically apt; watching him climb into the armor, a visiting member of England's Royal Academy is reminded of an essay he once wrote: "The devil, wearing false calves, do you recall? Mephistopheles, don't you know, in mffff that ponderous thing by Goethe. Good heavens yes, wearing false calves, don't you know, to cover his cloven feet and his mphhht calves, yes. Well my thesis, don't you see, was that these things weren't simply a disguise, to fool people and all that sort of thing, but that some sort of mfft . . . aesthetic need you might say, some sort of nostalgia for beauty, don't you see, he being a fallen angel and all that sort of thing, [ . . . ]" (676). Bending over the corpse of this fallen angel, "the heavy figure in perfect grace despite its distension hurled down among the roses" of the Aubusson carpet (681), Wyatt weeps for Brown as he does for no other character in the book, in quick succession associating him with the Grimm Brothers' king, *Tosca's* Cavaradossi, Graves's crucified wren, "old earth," *Peer Gynt's* Troll King, and finally, however, as a "luxury," the indulgent father who allowed Wyatt to play at Flemish painter for two years and protected him from the outside world.

Despite his corrupt dealings, Brown admired Wyatt and had his best interests at heart. "I want to watch out for you," he once said with gruff sincerity (365). Not so his partner Basil Valentine, who appears at first to be more sensitive to Wyatt's difficulties but who later exposes himself to be as predatory as Esther. Like Wyatt's wife, Valentine is aligned with reason and analysis, and is likewise envious of Wyatt's abilities. "He's jealous of you, my boy, can't you see that?" Brown warns him (364), but Wyatt is initially seduced by the companionship of one whose learning and aesthetic tastes match his own. Viewing Wyatt's forgery of a van der Goes *Death of the Virgin*, Valentine murmurs, "The simplicity . . . it's the way I would paint" (334). Disturbed later by the damage Wyatt inflicts upon the face in this painting, Valentine surreptitiously restores the face himself (with results Wyatt finds laughably vulgar), perhaps from the same "nostalgia for beauty" the British R.A. spoke of, perhaps from his vain desire to participate in Wyatt's artistry: "Because you're . . . part of me . . . damn you" (692). Wyatt stabs him at that point and leaves him for dead, sensing enough truth in Valentine's words to want to kill that part of him epitomized by the haughty aesthete.

Graced with taste, intelligence, and "the best education money can

buy" (364), Valentine uses these gifts to place as much distance as possible between himself and others, specifically "the stupid, thick-handed people, [ . . . ] whose idea of necessity is paying the gas bill, the masses who as their radios assure them, are under no obligation" (386). Valentine insists on obligations to church, state, culture, tradition. Consequently, he is involved (in addition to Brown's art scam) in shipping works of art "back to Europe" where they "belong" (688–89), working to restore the Hapsburg monarchy to Hungary, and acting in the clandestine interests of the Jesuits—activities that make up the novel's murky espionage subplot but that have in common an attempt to turn back the clock to an age of aristocratic privilege when the masses knew their place and kept their hands off art. Making his acquaintance late in the novel, Esme calls him the Cold Man and challenges him, "But why do you do the things you do? Why do you live the life you live?" (923). Valentine defends his reactionary politics with an appeal to the same kind of aesthetic elitism that led Pound and Eliot (among others) to favor authoritarian governments: "because any sanctuary of power . . . protects beautiful things. To keep people . . . to control people, to give them something . . . anything cheap that will satisfy them at the moment, to keep them away from beautiful things, to keep them where their hands can't touch beautiful things, their hands that . . . touch and defile and . . . and break beautiful things, hands that hate beautiful things, and fear beautiful things, and touch and defile and fear and break beautiful things" (924). To achieve this end, Valentine is willing to forsake all humane obligations, going so far as to arrange for the assassination of his childhood friend Martin. Invited to join Valentine in this sterile ivory tower, Wyatt stabs him and flees from New York, immersing himself for the next few months in the simple arts of the people.

In the novel's religious scheme, Valentine is associated not only with Catholicism but with Gnosticism, that early Christian heresy that held matter to be evil and urged nonparticipation in a fallen world. In his notes, Gaddis wrote: "Basil Valentine, who is the gnostic presumption [ . . . ] is finally stricken down with insomnia, for his very refusal to realize and grant the worth of matter, that is, of other people. The essence of his gnosticism is largely an implacable hatred for matter. It is that element of asceticism [*sic*] common in so many religious expressions turned, not upon the self, but upon humanity."<sup>9</sup> In a kind of parody of Agatha of the Cross—"the saint who didn't sleep for the last eight years of her life" (365)—Valentine survives Wyatt's attack

only to lapse into an insomnia for which his Hungarian doctors can find no "reason," and finally expires babbling Latin, which exposes the failure of his kind of Gnosticism: the penultimate word in his quotation "Aut castus sit aut pereat" (Be pure *or* perish) becomes "et pereat" (*and* perish) (949)—suggesting that any withdrawal to a pure realm of thought without the "impurity" of human relations will lead to sterility at best (note Valentine's homosexuality), and at worst to death.

### Stanley and Anselm

That same Latin motto can be said to govern the life of Stanley, who likewise perishes from a mistaken notion of purity, a mistake for which he is taunted throughout the novel by his friend Anselm. In the novel's religious dialectic, Stanley and Anselm represent the two extremes of institutional Catholicism and primitive Christianity, respectively, both making explicit in their arguments some of the tensions implicit in Wyatt's religious conflicts. Raised a Protestant but drawn in his extremity to the priesthood of Stanley's church, Wyatt will finally settle for Saint Augustine's simple injunction "Love, and do what you want to" (899). But Wyatt's movement from one to the other—with excursions into Calvinism, satanism, mystical alchemy, and paganism—owes much of its theological depth to the religious debates held by Stanley and Anselm in their various Greenwich Village haunts.

Neither ever meets Wyatt, yet both are linked to him by numerous metonymic gestures, relations, and attitudes: both Stanley and Anselm know and love Esme (in their respective ways); both are artists—Stanley a composer, Anselm a poet—and Stanley especially shares Wyatt's religious obsession with authentic art and his preference for working at night; Stanley's eyes burn green in moments of anger as Wyatt's do, and he apparently lives only a block north of Wyatt's Horatio Street studio; Anselm has Wyatt's distrust of rationality and comes into possession of Wyatt's father's razor, with unmanly results; and the three of them, as Max points out, are "all mothers' sons" (534) suffering from the psychological tensions between mothers and sons, between Mother Church and her wayward children.

Reminiscent of Dostoyevski's Prince Myshkin or Alyosha Karamazov, Stanley is the holy fool of *The Recognitions*, moving through its sordid scenes with unassailable purity and goodwill. But while Dostoyevski's saintly characters are blessed with some degree of serenity, Stanley has an air of gloom and uneasiness about him. "A candid look

of guilt hung about him" we are told at his first appearance (182), standing forlorn at a party attended by the three women who will assail that purity he so zealously guards: Agnes Deigh, a lapsed Catholic he hopes to bring back into the fold; Hannah, a dumpy Village artist hopelessly in love with him; and Esme, his spiritual sister in many ways, whom he wants to "save" but who inspires in him feelings closer to eros than agape. In addition, Stanley is haunted by the thought of his mother, moribund in a nearby hospital, and his unfinished organ mass, which he hopes to complete before her death, but which proves to be quite literally the death of him.

Stanley shares Wyatt's frustrations with creating sacred art in such profane times, and most of his aesthetic pronouncements could as easily come from Wyatt's lips (cf. 186 with 89, 616 with 113–14). But he also shares Wyatt's self-isolation and discomfort with human contact, a terror of intimacy that approaches cold-heartedness at times. Instinctively recoiling from the first of Agnes's many loving gestures, "the consecrated mind thrust the vagrant heart aside" (193), a stance he maintains throughout the novel, all the while insisting that love and unity can still be found in the Church. Disturbed by "the gulf between people and modern art" (632), Stanley composes music in the Renaissance style of the Gabriellis and loses himself in nostalgia for those ages past when art and religion went hand in hand to bind communities together—much as Wyatt imagines fifteenth-century Flanders. He quietly opposes the easy cynicism of Max, Otto, and the others until Anselm, for one, can stand it no longer. Flinging Matthew 10:35–36 in Stanley's face ("For I am come to set man at variance [ . . . ]"), Anselm hisses, "Yes, there's your gulf, the hand of your everlasting Christ!" (632), then goes on to attack Stanley's confidence in "spiritual love" with sputtering anger:

—And stop this damned . . . this God-damned sanctimonious attitude, he cried, twisting free, and they stood face to face. —Stanley, by Christ Stanley that's what it is, and you go around accusing people of refusing to humble themselves and submit to the love of Christ and you're the one, you're the one who refuses love, you're the one all the time who can't face it, who can't face loving, and being loved right here, right in this lousy world, this God-damned world where you are right now, right . . . right now. (635)

Finally taunting him with a pornographic photograph of Esme, he pinpoints Stanley's real fear, that of sexual intimacy, the repression that will return to haunt Stanley during his ocean voyage with Esme.

Anselm challenges the fastidious, rather austere Christianity of Eliot (whose works Stanley can quote) in the spirit of Yeats's Crazy Jane, who spurns her bishop's "heavenly mansions" because she knows better that "Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement."<sup>10</sup> Concealing Tolstoy's *Kingdom of God* within a girlie magazine, more blasphemous than pious, Anselm is an enemy not of the religious but of the religiose. He recognizes the New Testament for the radical document it is and is contemptuous of those who compromise or prettify its stringent call for humility and renunciation, a call he feels others should struggle with as intensely as he does. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" Saint Paul counsels (Phil. 2:12), not with the cheerful confidence so many Christians exude. After his friend Charles attempts suicide, only to be abandoned by his mother because he won't return to Grand Rapids and submit to Christian Science, Anselm turns on Hannah:

—It's the complacency I can't stand, Anselm burst out. —I can't stand it anywhere, but most of all I can't stand it in religion. Did you see Charles' mother? did you see her smile? that holier-than-thou Christian smile, [ . . . ] I don't blame Charles a God damn bit for flipping. God is Love! We'd all flip, taking that from your own mother and you're lying there with your wrists slashed open. But love on this earth? Christ! . . . pity? compassion? That's why I've got my balls in an uproar if you want to know, talking about some kind of love floating around Christ knows where, but what did she give him? When he wouldn't go back to Grand fucking Rapids and be treated by Christian Science? She gave him one of those eternally damned holier-than-thou smiles and left him here. She left him here without a cent, to let Bellevue kill him, or let him try it again himself. God is Love, for Christ sake! If Peter had smiled like a Christian Scientist Christ would have kicked his teeth down his throat. (531–32)

One moment quipping "I envy Christ, he had a disease named after him" (534), the next moment proving the existence of God with citations from Saints Augustine and Anselm (for whom he abandoned his given name Arthur) and tearing to shreds someone's beatnik version of the Paternoster (536), Anselm veers violently between fierce blasphemy and a grudging respect for Christ's teachings. As sensual as Stanley is chaste, however, Anselm cannot accommodate Christianity's opposition to sex: "With all the . . . rotten betrayals around us, and that, that . . . that one moment of trust, is sin?" (526). But the sexual encounters he boasts of are acts of victimization, not trust, and may be a reaction against the apparent homosexual attraction to both Charles

and Stanley that he throttles throughout the book. Unshaven, broke, his problems are compounded by frequent drunkenness and the rejection (by publisher Recktall Brown) of his religious poetry. He is the angriest character in this angry novel.

"Why do you fight it so hard?" (633) Stanley asks him, echoing Esther to Wyatt (118). Anselm shares with Wyatt and Stanley an incapacity for tenderness and, more important, a problematic relation to his mother. Anselm describes her as a religious fanatic who is more interested in dogs than in her troubled son—which accounts for his habit of crawling on all fours from time to time. It is after a hallucinatory encounter with his mother in a subway that Anselm castrates himself with the Reverend Gwyon's old razor, stolen while he was at Esther's party, in emulation of "Origen, that most extraordinary Father of the Church, whose third-century enthusiasm led him to castrate himself so that he might repeat the *hoc est corpus meum, Dominus*, without the distracting interference of the rearing shadow of the flesh" (103).

As "screwed up with religion" as Stanley is (182), Anselm follows in Thomas Merton's footsteps and retreats to a monastery out West to write his memoirs, much to Stanley's amazement.<sup>11</sup> Stanley doesn't fare as well; as unworldly as Esme, he too perishes in the highly symbolic conclusion. In the last two pages of the novel, Gaddis evokes in compressed form all of the major tensions in *The Recognitions*: appearance vs. reality (the church at Fenestrula is smaller than it looked at night); the ideal vs. the real ("there was nothing, absolutely nothing, the way it should be"); shadowy night vs. "the vast consciousness of the lighted sky"; American innocence vs. European worldliness (Stanley is dressed in red, white, and blue, playing an oversized organ donated by an American, and is unable to comprehend the Italian priest's warnings); the demands of art vs. the need for love; human loss vs. artistic gain; the Church as "a private chapel" vs. "a public convenience" (both the same building, Stanley realizes); and religion as a refuge vs. a tomb. Church bells ring in a new life for Wyatt (and possibly for Otto and Anselm), but they toll the impending death of the novel's most devout Catholic and most devoted artist, a martyr to both art and religion, "for the work required it" (956).

### Frank Sinisterra and Mr. Pivner

There are nearly as many fathers seeking sons in *The Recognitions* as sons fleeing mothers in search of spiritual fathers. No one in the novel

confuses his mother with anyone else's—"Amor matris, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life," as Stephen Dedalus suggests<sup>12</sup>—but a number of skewed father and son combinations link the older generation with the younger. Rev. Gwyon abandons his son first for the Son, then for the Sun; thus abandoned, Wyatt is taken up by father figures as diverse as Recktall Brown, Basil Valentine, Frank Sinisterra, the novelist Ludy, and the porter at the monastery where he ends up; Sinisterra, the natural but disappointed father of Chaby, is mistaken by Otto for his own father before becoming a father figure to Wyatt; Otto's father, Mr. Pivner, misses his own son but finds one in Eddie Zefnic; Stanley briefly enjoys a father figure in Father Martin; Arnie Munk fails at becoming a father so regularly that his wife steals a baby in desperation, while the homosexual Big Anna the Swede becomes a legal father "because the only way I can possibly get bold of little Giono is to adopt him" (825); and even our Father Who art in heaven emerges as little more than a useful fiction, anybody's or nobody's father.

Frank Sinisterra, another of Gaddis's great comic creations, is as devout a Catholic as Stanley and as devoted an artist as Wyatt; he plays key roles both in directing Wyatt's life and in clarifying his aesthetics. Introduced wearing the first of many disguises, Sinisterra poses as ship's surgeon on the *Purdue Victory* and puts an end to Camilla's life during an improvised appendectomy. Apprehended and sentenced to prison—which he resents "no more than Saint Augustine resented the withdrawal he had made from the world when living near Tagaste" (488)—Sinisterra does not reappear until nearly five hundred pages later, but thereafter plays an increasingly important role first in Otto's then in Wyatt's life.

Later masquerading as Mr. Yák, he runs into Wyatt at Camilla's tomb in Spain and takes him under his wing, first because he sees this as an opportunity to make restitution for his earlier misdeed, and second because he finds in Wyatt the son he never had in Chaby. Despite all his fatherly efforts, Sinisterra has not been able to prevent his real son from becoming a "bum":

—Whenever I was home to give him the benefit of my study and experience, I tried to teach him. I taught him how to spring a Yale lock with a strip of celluloid. I taught him how to open a lock with wet thread and a splinter. I taught him how to look like he has a deformed spine, or a deformed foot. Nobody taught me all that. I learned it myself. It was a lot of work, and he had me right there to teach him, right here, his own father. So what does he

learn? Nothing. He's never done a day's work in his life. You think a bum like that I'd claim him for my son? (493)

But he knows Wyatt is no "bum," as he often tells him, and he swells with paternal pride when he learns that Wyatt knows enough about Egyptian mummies to help him with his most ambitious counterfeit. Sinisterra re-christens Wyatt with the name Camilla intended for him, and by the time "Mr. Yák," "Stephan," and their "mummy" settle onto a train, they resemble "a weary and not quite respectable family" (812).

Sinisterra takes Rev. Gwyon's place by quite literally following in his footsteps: his approach to San Zwingli (776) contains numerous verbal echoes of Gwyon's earlier approach (16), and both share the "glittering eye" of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* (428, 794). Both watch the rain from the windows of their Madrid rooms and are chilled by the thought of leaving a window open or "something precious left out in the rain" (12, 821). Sinisterra has "a light in his eye seldom seen today but in asylums and occasional pulpits" (776), Rev. Gwyon's current and former location. But more importantly, Sinisterra provides Wyatt with the moral instruction his deranged father was incapable of giving: he sees Wyatt through his difficult symbolic death by water (a feverish delirium), and in their last conversation, as Wyatt/Stephan searches his face "as though waiting for some answer from him," Sinisterra counsels, "—What you'd want to do maybe, he commenced, —you might like to go to a monastery awhile, you don't have to turn into a monk, you are like a guest there" (816–17). Stephen follows his advice and there experiences the hillside epiphany that frees him into a new life.

Like Stanley, Sinisterra dies a martyr to his art and is likewise guilty of hoarding all his love for his work (817). A parody of a genuine artist, Sinisterra lavishes on his counterfeiting projects all his technique and expertise, and "like any sensitive artist caught in the toils of unsympathetic critics" smarts from unkind reviews (5–6). A comic voice in the novel's aesthetic debate, Sinisterra exemplifies the danger of overreliance on heartless virtuosity; while Wyatt is struck by the beauty of the *Dama de Elche* on a Spanish one-peseta note, Sinisterra dismisses it as "A cheap engraving job" (782). As Stanley insists, "It isn't for love of the thing itself that an artist works, but so that through it he's expressing love for something higher, because that's the only place art is really free, serving something higher than itself" (632). Sinisterra

works only for laundered cash, and his "art" is of course limited to slavish imitation with an intent to defraud, not to enlighten or to serve anything higher. Sinisterra studies and respects the "old masters" (519) as reverently as Stanley or Wyatt, but erroneously considers "a craftsman, an artist" to be interchangeable terms (785), blind to the motives that elevate a craftsman to an artist. His career provides a ludicrous but illuminating dimension to the novel's consideration of the artist's role in society and the aesthetics that distinguish artistry from mere craftsmanship.

Neither artist nor craftsman, Mr. Pivner is the most conventional character in *The Recognitions*, living a life of quiet desperation in the Age of Anxiety, practically a case study out of Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). Trusting "there would be time" (292), Pivner has all of Prufrock's doubts and misgivings but none of his romantic longings, and like Eliot's dreamer he shrinks from asserting himself in any but the meekest way. Although he makes only a half-dozen appearances in the novel—each one a quiet vignette expertly poised between pathos and bathos—Pivner performs two important functions: first, he exemplifies the numbing conventional life Gaddis's more unconventional characters are reacting against; and second, he provides a mundane counterpart to the more exotic search for meaning and authenticity conducted by the others.

As Rev. Gwyon has his books on myth and magic, Wyatt his alchemical tracts, Esme her Rilke, Stanley Eliot, Anselm Saint Anselm, Valentine Tertullian, and Sinisterra Bicknell's *Counterfeit Detector* for 1839, Mr. Pivner has Dale Carnegie. He studies *How to Win Friends and Influence People* with the same attention the others spend on their authors, although to his credit Pivner is more interested in winning friends than influencing people—especially the friendship of his estranged son Otto. Carnegie's call for "a new way of life" (498) is a profane version of the more sacred calls made by Christ, Dante, and Rilke to which the other characters are striving to respond. Although Pivner is largely unaware that he and Carnegie's millions of other readers vainly pursue "the Self which had ceased to exist the day they stopped seeking it alone" (286), he, too, has moments of recognition, glimpses of the "self-who-can-do-more." He is generally made nervous by such music as Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony, for example, "but sometimes he was struck with a bar of 'classical' music, a series of chords such as these which poured forth now, a sense of loneliness and confirmation together, a sense of something lost, and a sense of

recognition which he did not understand" (501). His fleeting impulses toward authenticity are conveyed with the same complex of alchemical/metallurgical/counterfeit imagery Gaddis uses throughout the novel: "the strain of perfect metal in his alloy cried out for perfection," but under a relentless barrage of meretricious advertising, flattering self-help books, and the glib assurances of science and reason, "that perfect particle was submerged, again satisfied with any counterfeit of itself which would represent its worth amongst others" (293). While others in the novel rage against the dying of the lights of civilization, Pivner goes gentle into that benighted modern world.

Pivner is arrested while listening with his surrogate son Eddie Zefnic to the famous aria from Handel's *Messiah* that begins, "He was despised, rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (743) and is later duly "crucified" with a frontal lobotomy (at Eddie's suggestion, who joins the novel's ranks of Oedipal headhunters) after being sent to prison as a counterfeiter—on the slimmest of evidence, it should be noted, however appropriate the metaphor. (We recall that one of the headlines Pivner had read earlier in the novel was "Lobotomy to Cure Man of Writing Dud Checks" [289].) The sense behind this outlandish turn of events is that Pivner is a victim of the same kind of anxiety neurosis that budding scientist Eddie Zefnic eagerly observes being inflicted experimentally upon "a whole bunch of kids (ha ha I mean little goats)," he writes, "which are hooked up so that when the light dims it gets a shock, so after a while then the minute the light dims the kid backs into the corner and gets tense but then we change the signals around on him then he gets the real anxiety neurosis" (933). The makers of postwar society have changed the signals around to the point where old values and certainties seem no longer appropriate, and new ones intent only on bringing "a good price in the market place" (502). Those like Pivner without the strength to maintain the old values or without the courage to light out for new territory may as well agree to a lobotomy and have done with it.

At the quiet center of the novel, Mr. Pivner is Gaddis's Willy Loman, and his failure is a similar tragedy for the common man. He struggles to maintain values that seem curiously unreal in the brave new world of "the Age of Publicity" (736), values at odds with those of the unctuous radio announcers he listens to so politely: "What was this anomaly in him, that still told him that the human voice is to be listened to? the printed word to be read? What was this expectant look, if it was not hope? this attentive weariness, if it was not faith? this

bewildered failure to damn, if it was not charity?" (502). Amidst the angst-ridden quests for philosophers' stones and the will of God by the wild-eyed characters in the novel, Mr. Pivner's failed quest for love and authenticity is blandly undramatic, and perhaps for that very reason all the more tragic.

### Baedeker's *Babel*

Among the other characters in this well-populated novel is a young writer named Willie working on a novel called "Baedeker's *Babel*," to be based on the Clementine *Recognitions*. Gaddis's own novel is a kind of Baedeker's guide to the Babel of modern civilization and to the varieties of babble its citizens speak. "The decay of overripe forms of civilization is as suggestive a spectacle as the growth of new ones," Huizinga writes of fifteenth-century Flanders,<sup>13</sup> and in that spirit Gaddis aligns mid-century America not only with Van Eyck's Flanders—"a world where everything was done for the same reasons everything's done now [. . .] for vanity and avarice and lust" (689–90)—but with "Caligula's Rome, with a new circus of vulgar bestialized suffering in the newspapers every morning" (386), and even with Ikhnaton's Egypt, as the British R. A. obligingly explains: "Too much gold, that was their difficulty, gold kicking around all over the place, and vulgarity everywhere, eh? Yes, that's what happens, that's when the decadence sets in, eh? Same damn thing running around today from the look of things, eh? Wasn't like this fifty years ago, eh? Good heavens no, people then who had money inherited it don't you know, knew how to spend it. Some sense of responsibility to their culture, eh?" (658).

This trans-cultural historical approach is similar to that used in *The Waste Land*. Like Eliot, Gaddis dramatizes "the world of fire" (726) kindled by those for whom vanity, avarice, and lust have obliterated any sense of responsibility to their culture, much less to their god. There is indeed what one critic called "an odor of spoilt culture" hanging over *The Recognitions*,<sup>14</sup> a stench given off by those for whom learning has deteriorated to fodder for cocktail party chat:

—Einstein . . . someone said.

—Epstein . . . said someone else.

—Gertrude . . .

—Of course you're familiar with Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty. Have you ever observed sand fleas? Well I'm working on a film which not

only substantiates it but illustrates perfectly the metaphor of the theoretic and the real situation. And after all, what else *is* there?

—Who *was* it that said, “a little lower than the angels”?

—That? it’s in that poem about “What is man, that thou art mindful of him.” That was Pope.

—Which one? (600)<sup>15</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that the novel’s most sympathetic characters—and the ones who offer Wyatt the best advice—are the mad, the uneducated, the disenfranchised: Janet, the Town Carpenter, Esther’s sister Rose (all of whom are deranged to some degree), Fuller, the peasant girl Pastora, and the old porter at the Real Monasterio. When Wyatt boasts he can lock out the world, it is Fuller who tells him, “Seem like such a measure serve no good purpose, sar. Then the mahn lose everything he suppose to keep, and keep everything he suppose to lose” (347). It is Janet who defines damnation more succinctly than any church father and who reminds Wyatt, “No love is lost” (442). And it is the porter who will not allow Wyatt to lock out the world any longer by staying in a monastery. “Go where you’re wanted,” he tells him (894), sending him back to Pastora. *The Recognitions* is not a repudiation of education or culture, of course, but an attack on its misuse by those who come and go speaking of “the solids in Uccello” and other matters with little or no understanding, counterfeiters of the intellect who drop names and botch quotations in their desperate attempts to win friends and influence people.

These characters have a weary apologist in Agnes Deigh, whose extraordinary 3500-word suicide note (757–63) delineates with nerve-shattered lyricism the complex difficulties and risks involved in allowing anyone a glimpse of the private self hiding behind that protective coloring of culture. “Before the flowers of friendship faded friendship faded,” she writes (quoting Gertrude Stein, in whose style the letter is couched), and so Agnes and her flock skip over friendship and its perils and simply exchange the “flowers” of friendship—that is, empty civilities that counterfeit sincere friendship, exchanged “in ritual denial of the ripe knowledge that we are drawing away from one another, that we share only one thing, share the fear of belonging to another, or to others, or to God” (103). Here Gaddis quotes from Eliot’s “East Coker,” but the world he dramatizes in his novel is the spiritually bankrupt one of *The Waste Land*, and like the poet before him Gaddis weighs an entire civilization in the balance and finds it wanting.