

Chapter Four

J R: What America Is All About

"We live in a country that never grew up," Gaddis has Hannah complain in *The Recognitions* (748), and it is fitting that his second novel—a comic exposé of "what America is all about," as one of its refrains goes—should be named after an eleven-year-old boy who epitomizes a society where stock options "mature" more regularly than people do, and where trucks drive by emblazoned with the slogan "None of us grew but the business."¹ Just as everyone in the counterfeit world of *The Recognitions* moves in relation to Wyatt, everyone in the paper world of *J R* moves in relation to J R Vansant, a slovenly but clever boy who transforms a small "portforlio" of mail-order acquisitions and penny stocks into an unwieldy financial empire, bringing the economy to the brink of ruin simply by dedicating himself with a vengeance to "the traditional ideas and values that have made America what it is today" (652). "I mean like remember this here book that time where they wanted me to write about success and like free enterprise and all hey?" J R asks through a dangling telephone on the last page of the novel. In *J R* we have one of the most searching analyses of "success and like free enterprise" in American literature and one of the funniest and most scathing critiques of those traditional ideas and values.

Money Talks

The most radical feature of *J R* is its narrative mode: except for an occasional transitional passage in elliptical prose, the novel is composed entirely of dialogue—726 pages of voices without a single chapter break or sectional space. Novels written primarily in dialogue have been done before—for example, by Ronald Firbank (whom Gaddis has read) and Ivy Compton-Burnett (whom he hasn't)—but never to the extreme lengths Gaddis takes it. To make matters more difficult, his dialogue is not the literary dialogue of most novels, with completed

grammatical sentences helpfully larded with *she said*s and explanatory asides by the author on what the characters actually mean by what they say. Instead, *J R* reads like a transcript of real speech: ungrammatical, often truncated, with constant interruptions by other characters (and by telephones, televisions, and radios), with rarely an identifying (and never an interpretive) remark by the author.

"It is the thesis" of Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings*, an important source of ideas for *J R*, "that society can only be understood through a study of the messages and communication facilities which belong to it,"² a thesis that Gaddis puts to the test by casting the entire novel in dialogue—a narrative mode that puts readers to the test as well. Such a mode makes extraordinary demands upon a reader; it demands active involvement and concentration on the reader's part, not passivity. (This point seems unnecessary until one looks at Gaddis's reviews; "Relax your attention for a single paragraph," one reviewer complained, "and you've missed something crucial, and must reread"—as though a better novelist would make allowances for day-dreaming.³) Jack Gibbs, a major character, pinpoints this problem during a drunken conversation with Edward Bast, a young composer: "problem most God damned readers rather be at the movies. Pay attention here bring something to it take something away problem most God damned writing's written for readers perfectly happy who they are rather be at the movies, come in empty-handed go out the same God damned way what I told him Bast. Ask them to bring one God damned bit of effort want everything done for them they get up and go to the movies" (289–90). That "pay attention here" is directed to the reader as much as to Bast; while any text benefits more from an active reading than a passive one, *J R* leaves the reader no choice. The passive reader will not last a dozen pages.

The purpose is not to put readers off but to force them to participate in the fiction. Just as radio audiences must use their imaginations more than movie audiences do, Gaddis's readers must join him in creating this fictional world. Noting Gaddis's reliance on one-sided telephone conversations, Carl Malmgren has pointed out that "the telephone conversation becomes an important metaphor *in* and *for* the novel [. . .]": the text of *J R* presents readers with one-half of a phone conversation; they must supply the other half if their experience is to have meaning or coherence. Gaddis's point, of course, is that meaning and coherence are less properties of a text than they are products of activities performed upon it. *J R* takes a form which necessarily demands and fosters

these activities."⁴ In this way, the reader's search for meaning and coherence parallels that of the novel's characters—for meaning and coherence are less properties of life than products of activities performed upon it—and as the attentive reader grows more and more giddy trying to keep track of the complications of the plot, he or she comes to experience the same degree of exasperation that Bast, Gibbs, and the others feel.

Given the novel's great length, it may not be immediately apparent how lean and economical Gaddis's novel actually is: a more conventional rendering of the same material would easily run twice as long. In his perceptive review, novelist D. Keith Mano cited a trivial exchange between Stella and Gibbs:

- Do we need the radio?
—Looking for the God damned lighter. (349)

"Yet note that it describes the action," he points out, "while underlining his drunkenness, her arch prose. You'd need four narrative sentences to accomplish as much. Despite its length, *J R* is a condensation."⁵ This point is more apparent when comparing the opening pages of the novel that appeared as "J. R. or the Boy Inside" (*Dutton Review*, 1970) with pages 3–44 of the published book. They appear more or less identical, yet a textual collation reveals that of the six hundred or so changes Gaddis made, most were deletions, from superfluous punctuation to excess verbiage and most speaker identifications. The dialogue in the book version is usually more elliptical—making it harder to follow at times—but greater in verisimilitude and quicker in narrative pacing. Of course any comparison with a literal transcript of people speaking—see Andy Warhol's tape-recorded "novel" *a* (1968), for example—will reveal that Gaddis's characters speak with more variety, wit, and color than their real-life counterparts would. Gaddis's real achievement lies in his ability to simulate vernacular speech close enough to insure accuracy while avoiding its shortcomings.

Finally, the exclusive use of dialogue adds to the novel's dramatic vitality by closing the traditional gap between story-time and text-time, that is, between the amount of time an episode covers and the time it takes to read that episode. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes that "a hypothetical 'norm' of complete correspondence between the two is only rarely realized,"⁶ but most of *J R* maintains this correspondence. Never does Gaddis stop the narrative flow to indulge in a flash-

back or to examine a character's motives, or move things forward with such temporal leapfrogging as "A week later . . ." From Coen's opening query "Money . . . ?" to J R's final "Hey? You listening . . .?" every day in the narrative is tracked by a sleepless narrative eye that pauses only when the characters sleep. (The ideal reader would rest only at those rare junctures: e.g., 75, 155, 234, 316, 414, 491, 580, 669.) As a result, the text quickly builds an irresistible momentum that functions as a formal analogue to the rapid growth of J R's family of companies. By the time Bast cries out, "No now stop, just stop for a minute! This, this whole thing has to stop somewhere don't you understand that?" (298), there is a relentless inevitability driving both J R's enterprises and *J R* itself that makes stopping at that point commercially and aesthetically unthinkable.

A Story of Wall Street

Although its form and intricate convolutions are radical, *J R*'s story material is fairly traditional. It can be separated into five interwoven strands; given the wonderful complexity of the plot, these should be itemized:

1. An interfamilial dispute comes to a head with the death intestate of Thomas Bast, owner of the General Roll Company, and his survivors grapple with future ownership of the company (which may need to go public to finance the substantial death taxes). Half of Thomas's forty-five shares in the company will be inherited by his daughter Stella, and with her husband Norman Angel's twenty-three shares they hope to approach controlling interest in the company. But they face a challenge by the impending return of Thomas's brother James, a composer and conductor, whose share of stock, combined with the twenty-seven shares belonging to his maiden sisters Anne and Julia, will give him close to controlling interest. There are two wild cards: Edward Bast, the illegitimate son of James and Nellie (Thomas's second wife), who may be in a position to claim half of the shares Stella is expecting, thus tilting the balance toward James's ownership; and Jack Gibbs, Stella's former lover, once given five shares for helping the company out. Intent on gaining full control, scheming Stella sets out to prevent Edward from pressing his claim, to learn the location of Gibbs's shares, and perhaps even to wrest Norman's shares away from him. She is successful enough to emerge at the end of the novel with controlling interest in the company—her husband comatose in a hospital from an attempt at suicide.

2. The upper middle-class Bast family dispute out on Long Island has its upper-class counterpart in the Moncrieff family dispute in Manhattan. The former Amy Moncrieff has a bad marriage with Lucien Joubert, a Swiss fortune hunter attracted less by Amy's stunning beauty than by her father Monty Moncrieff's company Typhon International, ruthlessly run by Amy's great-uncle Governor John ("Black Jack") Cates. Typhon owns many of the other companies mentioned in the novel—Diamond Cable, Nobili Pharmaceuticals, Endo Appliance—and has many of its assets tied up in two foundations, one in Amy's name, the other in her son Francis's. A substantial number of shares in Diamond Cable belong to Boody Selk, the jet-setting teen-aged daughter of obnoxious Zona Selk—an old friend of the family—and just as controlling interest in General Roll falls to Stella, controlling interest in Typhon comes into the hands of Amy and Boody by the novel's end.

3. Amy Joubert, Edward Bast, and Jack Gibbs all teach at a junior high school on Long Island, whose principal, Mr. Whiteback (also president of a local bank: he'll give up one or the other "when I know which of them is going to survive" [340–41]), spends most of his time trying to mollify irate members of the board of education such as Major Hyde (an employee of Typhon's Endo Appliance), superintendent Vern Teakell, local politicians and contractors (all with Italian surnames), the right-wing Citizens Union on Neighborhood Teaching ("All women?" Gibbs asks [241]), and visitors from a foundation investigating the disastrous results of the school's adoption of the latest educational technologies.

4. Attending this appalling school is J R Vasant, whose best friend, the nameless son of Major Hyde, shares his interest in writing away for and trading junk mail flyers and career solicitations. "See them in there together getting their mail you suddenly know what the industrial military complex is all about," as Gibbs notes (497). J R's enthusiasm for tacky business opportunities is matched by the Hyde boy's mindless patriotism ("a martial miniature" [33] of his fatuous father), but J R's greater daring launches him on a career that parodies the Horatio Alger paradigm and demonstrates, as Richard Bulliet has written, "that 'the market' so beloved of economic theorists can be convincingly allegorized as an ethically innocent and none-too-bright sixth-grader."⁷ Using money from one small venture to finance a slightly larger one, borrowing against that for yet a larger one, J R quickly finds himself the unexpected father of the J R Family of Companies with his grubby fingers in nearly every aspect of the American economy, including the

Basts' General Roll and the Moncrieffs' various companies. (Convenient summaries of J R's acquisitions can be found on pp. 431, 529–30, and 656.) His paper empire collapses like a house of cards by the end of the novel, but he emerges unscathed and bursting with new ideas.

5. Trying their best to skirt the edges of all these business deals and family disputes are five artists engaged in desperate attempts to keep their heads clear enough to create art for an indifferent society. As Gibbs tries to find the motivation to revive his work in progress of sixteen years, *Agapē Agapē* ("a book about order and disorder more of a, sort of a social history of mechanization and the arts, the destructive element" [244]), his friend Thomas Eigen tries to finish a play about the Civil War amidst the distractions of his enervating public relations work for Typhon and his disintegrating marriage. From Gibbs and Eigen the reader learns of the struggles of another writer named Schramm, blocked in his attempts to write about his traumatic World War II experiences, and of a painter named Schepperman, whose work is warehoused in Zona Selk's country house to his immense frustration. A generation younger but facing many of the same obstacles is Edward Bast, recently graduated from a music conservatory, who reluctantly agrees to act as J R's "business representative" (as his card reads) in order to find enough time and money to finish an operatic suite based on Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" that enshrines his unrequited love for his cousin Stella, a work later modified to a cantata and finally abandoned in favor of a piece for unaccompanied cello, written in crayon.

Despite the absence of formal division markers, the novel falls roughly into thirds, with each third doubling the pace and complications of Gaddis's pentahedral plot. *J R* begins with a society on edge: the stock market is troubled; Thomas's death has renewed the Bast family conflict; Edward Bast, Gibbs, and Eigen are feeling the pressures of their respective jobs; every marriage is on the brink; Amy fears her estranged husband will abduct their son, while her father is more worried that the press will learn of the conflict in interests that jeopardizes his new government post; and tempers are flaring at J R's school over an impending teachers' strike and the possible loss of foundation funding. These and many other conflicts come to a boil a third of the way through the novel on the long Friday that occupies pages 234–86: Schramm commits suicide, Marion tells Gibbs she's leaving Eigen, Schepperman tries to prevent Zona Selk from removing his painting from Typhon's lobby, J R has his company off and running after bringing a minority suit against Diamond Cable for Moncrieff's

transgression of a company by-law (settling out of court for damages based on 100 times holdings), and Bast finds himself reluctantly stuck with a position as an executive officer in J R's company, with a commission to write two hours of "zebra music" for a wildlife film, and with a foulmouthed teenager named Rhoda for a roommate. Around page 500, the novel reaches a second plateau: Gibbs has the good fortune to win big at the horsetrack and to enjoy a brief affair with Amy—a calm before the storm—and J R is doing well enough to move his operations to the Waldorf with Typhon's former PR man Davidoff "on deck stamping out brush fires" for him. But Eigen has lost both his job and his family, Amy's worst fears soon come to pass when she learns that Lucien has abducted Francis to Geneva, and Norman Angel, faced with the loss of both wife and business, shoots himself with his childhood rifle. The storm breaks loose, and the final third of the novel races at breakneck speed as the J R Corporation spins wildly out of control (ruining a dozen other companies, thousands of careers, even a town or two), Bast succumbs to nervous exhaustion, Indians revolt, a civil war breaks out in Africa, and the stock market collapses.⁸

Asked by an interviewer in 1968 what his work in progress was about, Gaddis answered, "Well . . . ah, just tell them it's about money."⁹ Money is the first word in *J R* and it functions as the novel's thematic center of gravity, trapping art, education, commerce, politics, and marriage in its pull. But the novel is more specifically about the difference between "the things worth having" and "the things worth being," as Gaddis wrote in *The Recognitions* (499)—or in *J R*'s financial vocabulary, the difference between tangible and intangible assets. During their final conversation together, an exhausted Bast pleads with J R: "listen all I want you to do take your mind off these nickel deductions these net tangible assets for a minute and listen to a great piece of music, it's a cantata by Bach cantata number twenty-one by Johann Sebastian Bach damn it J R can't you understand what I'm trying to, to show you there's such a thing as as, as intangible assets?" (655). It is this commitment to such intangibles as art, manners, and ideals that sets Bast, Amy, and the artists (in their better moments) apart from the rest of the novel's characters. The contrast is not the trite one between hard-hearted businessmen and tender-hearted artistic types; rather, it is the difference between those who treat others and even themselves as marketable commodities, who measure the validity of any idea by what William James called its "cash-value" (*Pragmatism, passim*), as opposed to those who reiterate Aristotle's "reproach to be

always seeking after the useful does not become free and exalted souls" (571),¹⁰ those few people who would not only "rather hear a symphony than eat" (659) but who insist on the human use of human beings. While Bast and Amy intuit this position and try to share it with J R, it is the polymath Jack Gibbs who gives it historical breadth and intellectual fiber.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

When, in his drunken elation at winning the double, Gibbs facetiously invites Amy to join him in redeeming the Protestant ethic (477), he revives a concept Gaddis introduced in *The Recognitions*, probably by way of Max Weber's classic study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (English trans. 1930). Weber attributes Puritanism's success in capitalist Europe and especially in America to its work ethic, a kind of "worldly asceticism" that held one best serves God by laboring in a "calling," and that the most reliable sign of belonging to the Elect (those predestined for salvation) is financial success in that calling. Its grimmest form was taken by Wyatt's New England ancestors: "Anything pleasurable could be counted upon to be, if not categorically evil, then worse, a waste of time. Sentimental virtues had long been rooted out of their systems. They did not regard the poor as necessarily God's friends. Poor in spirit was quite another thing. Hard work was the expression of gratitude He wanted, and, as things are arranged, money might be expected to accrue as incidental testimonial" (R 13-14).

Although its religious nature has been lost sight of today by all but fundamentalists—who remain convinced that wealth is a sign of God's grace—the Protestant ethic continues to exert a baleful influence, of which Jack Gibbs is all too aware. "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling," Weber writes, "we are forced to do so."¹¹ But the difficulty of finding a calling, of finding something worth doing, is a problem that plagues many of Gaddis's characters. Wyatt raises this complaint in *The Recognitions* (143, 589)—as do Otto and Ed Feasley (620, 615)—but Gibbs locates the problem in a wider historical context: "the whole God damned problem's the decline from status to contract" (393; repeated on 509, 595), that is (to quote from Gibbs's probable source), "from an inherited state of affairs to one voluntarily contracted."¹² In a well-known essay on Tolstoy and Kafka, Philip Rahv sketches the implications of this shift:

Status is synonymous with the state of grace; and he who has a home has status. This home, this cosmic security, this sacred order of status, is not a mythical or psychological but an historical reality. It persisted as a way of life, despite innumerable modifications, until the bourgeois era, when the organization of human life on the basis of status was replaced by its organization on the basis of free contract. The new, revolutionary mode of production sundered the unity of the spiritual and the temporal, converting all things into commodities and all traditional social bonds into voluntarily contracted relations. In this process man was despirited and society atomized; and it is against the background of this vast transformation of the social order that the meaning of the death of Ilyich and K. becomes historically intelligible.¹³

It is against this same background that J R's more perspicacious characters struggle. How many people today can dignify their job as a "calling"? Robbed of the security and sanctification of traditional occupations, most people voluntarily contract themselves to do something hardly worth doing in the first place, much less doing well, leaving only company loyalty (as Hyde insists) in place of social and religious bonds. "No no listen look," Gibbs tells Amy, "first time in history so many opportunities to do so God damned many things not worth doing" (477).

Gaddis's artists face the difficulty not only of finding something worth doing, but succeeding at the task. In their darker moments, Gibbs, Eigen, and Bast wrestle with the same dilemma that drove Schramm to suicide: "It was whether what he was trying to do was worth doing even if he couldn't do it? Whether anything was worth writing even if he couldn't write it?" (621). In an economy still driven by the Protestant ethic, artists labor under the Puritan prejudice against artistic creation—an invalid calling that was considered frivolous at best, at worst sinful and sacrilegious.¹⁴ The attitude toward artists held by Governor Cates, for example, is reminiscent of that attributed by Hawthorne to his Puritan forefathers in the "Custom-House" preface to *The Scarlet Letter*: "A writer of story-books! What kind of business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!" Compare this to Davidoff's admission to Bast that he once started to write a novel: "maybe a little jealous of you boys with a knack for the arts luxury I can't afford never finished it, couldn't just sit on my butt and indulge myself like that" (540). Given a society where art is dismissed as a luxury, a knack, an indulgence, is there any wonder that Schramm is

driven to suicide and the others to paralyzing self-doubts? If "Blessed is he who has found his work," as Gibbs quips (116, quoting Carlyle), then damned are those who cannot work at the one thing they feel is worth doing—which gives the ubiquitous use of "God damned" by Gibbs and Eigen ominous theological overtones.

Cates, Davidoff, Hyde, and many others in the novel view artists as disruptive neurotics and are convinced that if society could rid itself of these elements it could get on with business (see Cates on 693). Gibbs documents the contributions technology has made towards this goal by helping to eliminate "the offensive human element" (174) from the arts. These range from such unsuccessful ventures as that by "nineteenth-century German anatomist Johannes Müller [who] took a human larynx fitted it up with strings and weights to replace the muscles tried to get a melody by blowing through it [. . .] Thought opera companies could buy dead singers' larynxes fix them up to sing arias save fees that way get the God damned artist out of the arts all at once, long as he's there destroy everything in their God damned path what the arts are all about" (288), to more successful inventions as the player piano ("play by itself get to shoot the pianist" [604]), and in our own age, as Hyde boasts, "Records of any symphony you want reproductions you can get them that are almost perfect, the greatest books ever written you can get them at the drugstore" (48). Cates insists that the book publishing industry is the worst run business in America, but allows, "cut out that ten percent royalty these scoundrels grab they might see a little daylight" (422).

Yet "these scoundrels" alone are capable of redeeming the Protestant ethic, of restoring the human element to a society where "value," "charity," and "good will" exist primarily in their tax law connotations (201, 212, 213), where investment brochures are called "literature," and where "the human machine" (30) is the most prevalent metaphor. Wearily assuring her lawyer that she knows preferred stock doesn't vote, an exasperated Amy goes on:

—Doesn't sing doesn't dance doesn't smoke or drink or run around with women, doesn't even . . .

—Pardon?

—Oh nothing Mister Beaton it's all so, just so absurd so, lifeless, I can't . . .

—Please I, Mrs Joubert I didn't mean to make an emotional issue of it, the . . .

—Well it is! It is an emotional issue it simply is! because there aren't any, there aren't any emotions it's all just reinvested dividends and tax avoidance that's what all of it is, avoidance the way it's always been it always will be there's no earthly reason it should change is there? that it ever could change? (212)

Weber could be used to extend Amy's reductive view to say that's the way it's always been after Puritanism saddled America with "a capitalistic way of life" that "turned with all its force against one thing: the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer,"¹⁵ and there's no reason it should change as long as artists remain excluded from America's closed system. Gaddis introduces the second law of thermodynamics early into his novel (21) to remind readers of "nature's statistical tendency to disorder, the tendency for entropy to increase in isolated systems."¹⁶ Recurrent infusions of energy are necessary to combat entropy and homogeneity, and art is the principal means of infusing energy and diversity into a culture's "system." To continue the mechanical metaphor, socially conscious art such as Gaddis's provides invaluable "feedback," which Wiener defines as "a method of controlling a system by reinserting into it the results of its past performance."¹⁷ Gibbs's historical survey *Agapē Agape* and Gaddis's own novel assess the results of America's past performance. "Boy what a mess" (81) is one child's succinct verdict.

Out of the Mouth of Babes

Although Gaddis's most informed social criticism is given to his adult characters, he follows an American tradition in giving his most trenchant criticism to children. If Hawthorne's Pearl is American literature's first underaged critic of Puritan hypocrisy and its socioeconomic ramifications, she leads a children's crusade that includes Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, several of James's girls and Anderson's boys, Salinger's precocious kids, and Pynchon's Spartacus Gang. Gaddis modifies and greatly extends the traditional literary use of a child as "the touchstone, the judge of our world—and a reproach to it in his unfallen freshness of insight, his unexpended vigor, his incorruptible naïveté," taking up the tail end of that tradition Leslie Fiedler has so brilliantly analyzed when the innocence of the child is revealed "as a kind of moral idiocy, a dangerous freedom from the restraints of culture and custom, a threat to order."¹⁸ Gibbs lectures his students that "Or-

der is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos" (20), and Gaddis's children are intent on exposing the holes in the various kinds of order adults have tried to impose on society.

Of the many advantages young characters offer, Gaddis is most interested in their blunt honesty, the honesty of a child free enough from "the restraints of culture and custom" to point out the emperor has no clothes. Here, for example, is J R on banking practices: "you know what they do there? Like they say they pay this lousy four and a half percent on savings what those cheap shits never tell you they pay it on your lowest balance the whole quarter so you put like this thousand dollars in for awhile then you take out like nine fifty so you get like a fourth of this lousy four and a half percent of like fifty dollars while they been out loaning this here thousand all the time" (169–70). Those sentiments may be held by Gaddis's adult characters—and by Gaddis himself—but the breezy freedom of J R's language reduces bankers to the level of loansharks and gives his criticism a force it would lack coming from an adult. Rhoda is equally blunt on the kind of business mail J R's "uptown headquarters" receives, especially the "literature" sent out by companies to their stockholders:

—This reduced fully diluted shares outstanding by sixteen percent which had the effect after imputed interest on like you call that literature man I mean I call it bullshit . . . Paper tore, —here's one will you chair this management symposium on healing the sick corporation I mean that must be some chair. [. . .] you could like go chair that thing on healing the sick corporation with your heart batting for the poor they'd really be asthonsied man like I never saw such sick companies, I mean that must be some fucking chair. (556–58)

This kind of comic reduction is also used to deflate the pretense of "corporate democracy" by which those same sick companies allegedly operate. Davidoff begins the following discussion, which leads to an argument over the validity of corporate democracy between J R and his classmate Linda:

—that's what people's capitalism is, isn't it everybody. As one of the company's owners you elect your directors in a democratic vote, and they hire men to run the company for you the best way possible. When you vote next spring . . .

—With one share we get like one vote?

—You certainly do, and what's more you're entitled to . . .

—And like if I owned two hundred ninety-three thousand shares then I'd get like two hundred ninety-three thousand votes?

—That's not fair! [Linda objects] Like we get this one lousy vote and he gets like two hun . . .

—What's so not fair! You buy this here one share so you've got like this lousy twenty-two fifty working for you where I've got like six thou, wait a second . . . the pencil came up to scratch, —nought times nought is . . .

—He couldn't could he?

—I could so boy I could even vote two hundred ninety-three thousand times for myself for a director if I wanted to couldn't I?

—I mean like that's democracy? It sounds like a bunch of . . . (92–93)

Linda is cut off before she can give it a name, but J R sees that corporate democracy is actually a plutocracy, and his bullying enthusiasm for it underscores the greed for power at its heart, not to mention its sterility ("nought times nought is . . ."). It is worth noting that Linda and Rhoda join Amy in her condemnation of business practices, to be joined by Liz in *Carpenter's Gothic*; Gaddis's women are usually more humane than his men.

Where Huck Finn spurns the corrupt civilization handed down to him, J R gleefully accepts it, wanting only to know how quickly he can get his share. By following the letter of the law in defiance of its spirit, he is able to engender a "family" of companies with the assistance and example of adults as bereft of humane values as he is. Such respected members of the business community as Cates, Moncrieff, and Crawley are shown to be the moral equivalents to an ambitious sixth-grader by way of dozens of demeaning parallels. J R and Cates share the same attitude toward lawyers ("trouble with you lawyers, all you do is tell me why I can't do something instead of how I can" [196; cf. 336, 467]), react to news of death with financial considerations foremost (J R on 299, 343, Cates on 691, 698, 709), and justify objectionable business deals on the grounds that if they don't do it first someone else will (659, 693); both even examine their snout after blowing their noses (109, 301). J R models his shabby family of companies after Cates's and thus, baffled at Bast's objections to his increasingly outrageous schemes, can legitimately claim he is following in the footsteps of a man Davidoff describes as "one of your country's outstanding Americans[, . . .] one of the men who opened the frontiers of America as we know it today" (91). J R's activities strike him not only as perfectly legal, but even patriotic, as he tells his shyster lawyer: "Look

I'm in a hurry but boy Nonny I mean don't you ever say I told you to do something illegal I mean what do you think I got you for! I mean if I want to do something illegal what do I want with a lawyer I mean holy shit where do you think we are over at Russia? where they don't let you do anything? These laws are these laws why should we want to do something illegal if some law lets us do it anyway" (470).

J R of course has his youth and the moral vacuum in which he lives to excuse his amoral behavior: "holy shit Bast I didn't invent it I mean this is what you do!" (466). The real targets of Gaddis's satire are the politicians, lawyers, businessmen, and educators who invented and sustain "it"—which J R's cynical school superintendent defines as "a system that's set up to promote the meanest possibilities in human nature and make them look good" (463). Even though Gaddis's children unwittingly provide a good deal of the humor in *J R*—Crawley's Mannlicher rifle comes out "manlicker" in the Hyde boy's ordnance-heavy school report (a sly dig at Crawley's hunting machismo?)—they emerge as the real victims of modern society. Several children are shot, killed, or abandoned in the novel; schoolgirls are seduced by their teachers; and technological "enervations" (649) rob them of any chance at getting an adequate education. In this "novel about futures" (a subtitle Gaddis discarded), their outlook for the future is bleakly symbolized near the end of the novel in a newspaper account of "the brave little fourth grader trapped in the soaring steel structure" on a wind-swept Cultural Plaza that does indeed offer "a unique metaphor of man's relation to the universe" (671–72). Weber had warned that the Protestant ethic could become "an iron cage,"¹⁹ but even he did not guess it would imprison children as well. The youngest victim is Eigen's four-year-old son David; asked by his mother if he loves her, he replies in the only terms he understands:

- Yes.
- How much?
- Some money . . . ? (267)

Filthy Lucre

- Money . . . ? in a voice that rustled.
- Paper, yes.
- And we'd never seen it. Paper money.
- We never saw paper money till we came east.

- It looked so strange the first time we saw it. Lifeless.
- You couldn't believe it was worth a thing. (3)

The novel's opening exchange reminds the reader that paper money—along with stocks, bonds, debentures, etc.—is lifeless, inert, having no more intrinsic value than the green leaves the little girl folds into her purse thirty pages later. But Gaddis invests money with a darker hue and important psychological implications by way of a pattern of imagery generated from Freud's symbolic equation of money with excrement. Freud and his followers have traced the route by which a child's anal-erotic satisfaction at producing feces is transferred and increasingly sublimated as he or she grows older: from such substances as mud, sand, tar, putty—all similar to excrement but odorless and socially acceptable—to stones and artificial products such as marbles and buttons, and finally to shiny coins.²⁰ At this stage, coins appear to the child more valuable than paper money because more reminiscent of feces, as Dan diCephalis learns to his distress when his daughter Nora tells him that her younger brother sold his father's money to some boys: "He didn't know, he thought the coins were better because the other's only paper" (314). By the time a child learns that, contrary to appearances, paper money is more valuable, the transference is complete and the anal-erotic basis of the interest in money is completely sublimated. However, such colloquial phrases as "filthy lucre" and "stinking rich" betray an unconscious memory of money's antecedents, and in *J R* Gaddis does not miss an opportunity to debase financial dealings by alluding to their excremental origins. He knew what he was about when he named the leading businessman-collector of *The Recognitions* Recktail Brown, but in *J R* he approaches Swift in the virulence of his use of scatological imagery to reduce commerce to "childish nonsense" (199).

Switching channels from Ann diCephalis's resource program on silk production to Amy's on corporate democracy, Hyde inadvertently introduces the excrement theme in his enthusiasm to give "these youngsters a sense of real values, my boy there . . .

—when the silkworm starts to spin it discharges a colorless . . . that happens in the large bowel before . . . billions of dollars, and the market value of shares in public corporations today has grown to. . . . (46)

This juxtaposition of excrement and money is the first in a series of increasingly blatant metaphoric associations: Hyde's boy dismisses the

contents of J R's portfolio as "crap," while J R himself prefers the expletive "holy shit," an oath taken up in moments of stress by Bast and Davidoff (446, 540); J R's first financial deal involves the removal of a pile of dirt in front of Hyde's house—later dignified as "landfill operations" (529), but reminiscent of a child's fondness for mud as a surrogate for excrement; J R picks up a number of tips for starting his business while eavesdropping in Typhon's executive washroom, and once again the Hyde boy can be relied upon to bring out the anal overtones: "go ask that old fart [Cates] that caught us in the toilet you'll find out you don't own shit" (129). Even jokes contribute to the symbolic equation of finance and anality; J R asks Bast, "Did you ever hear that one about if you need money just ask my father he's got piles?" (133), and one of J R's companies makes novelty toilet paper rolls with the message "On the hole business is very good" (581, 681; "The top man in the company he had cases sent out to all the division heads, sort of an encouraging word when you're in the middle of . . ." [682]). Numerous other examples could be piled up, ranging from casual obscenities to Crawley's suggestion that Bast use his aunts' old stock in Norma Mining for toilet paper (173) to J R's plans to have a water tower painted to resemble a roll of toilet paper.

Near the end of the novel, Gaddis brings his excremental vision of the American free enterprise system to an appropriately disgusting climax when, during Isadore Duncan's enema, the two terms in the symbolic equation money = excrement become one:

—No such thing as free enterprise in this country since the Haymarket riots [Duncan says], the minute something threatens this expanding capital formation . . .

—That's it lie still now [the nurse tells him], just try to keep it in as long as you can that's it . . .

—Threaten this expanding capital formation and they're at the head of the line whining for loan guarantees against the, the taxes on those tips she's sitting out there counting at night on her four dollar davenport to, to . . .

—That's it now just keep it in . . .

—to bail them out because she's the only one who knows failure's what it's really all, all I don't know how much longer I . . .

—Just a little longer you're doing fine . . .

—See the debt burden rising twice as fast as income the price of chemicals today see that in the paper? Price of chemicals in the human body it's worth three dollars and a half used to be ninety-eight cents when I, I can't, good time to sell out try to slow down inflation the whole security market's co, collapsing credit shrinkage forcing a, can't . . .

—Just a minute longer . . .

—forcing a, a mass, massive outflow of . . .

—Wait here's the pan! here's the pan! my. . . . (684–85)

Excrement is the body's waste, and by this point in the novel commerce should epitomize "what America is all about, waste disposal and all" (27; cf. 25, 179), a veritable wasteland where economic activity amounts to little more than "shitting around" (173) with paper trash.²¹

In this context, Mozart's remark "believing and shitting are two very different things"—quoted in Bast's lecture on Mozart (42) and often repeated by Gibbs—can be read as the bluntest of formulations on the difference between those committed to "intangible assets" and those obsessed with tangible ones. Davidoff names some basic texts of this latter group when he tells J R's biographer "go up to the library dig out some of the President's speeches whole Protestant work ethic head of General Motors on free enterprise whole utilitarian pragmatism angle what works, [J R] sees how things are not how they ought to be whole approach is what works" (530). But he betrays the anal character of the pragmatic approach when he describes his working relationship with his new boss as "he does the grunting and we do the work" (526). In marked contrast stand the believers who, like Gibbs, are "trying to believe something's worth doing long enough to get it done" (492) and are unpragmatic enough to prefer envisioning how things ought to be. The working relationship between members of this group is memorably conveyed in a quotation not from Mozart but from Beethoven: "the better among us bear one another in mind" (290).

If money = excrement, then J R's repeated exclamations of "holy shit" during his financial dealings underscore the extent to which money has become sacred to his sort, the inevitable result of a Puritan ethic that could compare "the relation of a sinner to his God with that of a customer and shopkeeper."²² Christ had warned them against trying to serve two masters—"Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24; cf. R 889)—so they ingeniously blended the two together, a figure for whom "holy shit" is a suitable invocation. (An allusion to another famous New Testament text against wealth [Matt. 19:24] is given an anal taint when Duncan tells Bast he's reaching for the bedpan, "Not the eye of a needle" [686].) During their last conversation, Bast rages at J R with all the anger of Christ driving the moneylenders from the temple: "And stop saying holy shit! it's all you, you want to hear holy you're going to hear it" (655) and proceeds to

play him an aria from Bach's twenty-first cantata. Art is holy in the etymological sense of being whole, characterized by perfection and transcendence. Bast and the other artists know that such perfection can only be attempted, never fully realized, but also know, as Johan Thielemans has remarked, that "artistic perfection represents the only possible escape from entropic processes."²³ For them, as for Eliot in "East Coker," "there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

To be sure, Gaddis's artists have their faults and in fact bring most of their misfortunes on themselves. This is not a novel about saintly artists versus corrupt businessmen. Gibbs displays appalling insensitivity at times, even when sober, and can never seem to remember to visit his daughter on their court-appointed days; Eigen is an insufferable egotist who turns every conversation his way, and like Gibbs is often quite sexist. From what we hear of Schramm's and Schepperman's off-stage actions, they sound self-destructive and more often drunk than not. Gaddis is as hard on his artists as Melville is on the title figure of "Bartleby the Scrivener"—another story of Wall Street—and like Melville illustrates the perils of "preferring not to" engage in conventional behavior. However, the artists are distinguished from the businessmen in their devotion to ideas loftier than profit margins and tax shelters. It is with them as with Richard Wagner, of whom Robert Donington has written: "With a genius—and not only with a genius—the very thing which goes most wrong with his outer life may often go most right with his inner life, in the sense that the deeper levels of his work show an appreciation of the very truths and realities which most elude him in his personal life-story."²⁴ Devoted to "the inner life," artists will naturally be incomprehensible to those committed to "the outer life." To plunder Eliot again, "Shrieking voices / Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering, / Always assail them" ("Burnt Norton"), yet by listening instead to the voice inside, Gaddis's artists can redeem their chaotic lives—and in works of genius, the chaotic lives that surround them—with something more memorable than a balanced stock portfolio.

The Soft Machine

Duncan's grim joke about selling out, as though his body were a share in Allied Chemical, recalls the self-alienating consciousness that Weber and Marx considered inevitable in a capitalist economy. Norman O. Brown summarizes their argument as follows:

The desire for money takes the place of all genuinely human needs. Thus the apparent accumulation of wealth is really the impoverishment of human nature, and its appropriate morality is the renunciation of human nature and desires—asceticism. The effect is to substitute an abstraction, *Homo economicus*, for the concrete totality of human nature, and thus to dehumanize human nature. In this dehumanized human nature man loses contact with his own body, more specifically with his senses, with sensuality and with the pleasure-principle. And this dehumanized human nature produces an inhuman consciousness, whose only currency is abstractions divorced from real life—the industrious, coolly rational, economic, prosaic mind. Capitalism has made us so stupid and one-sided that objects exist for us only if we can possess them or if they have utility.²⁵

Amy has already been quoted on the abstract, dehumanized element in commerce, which J R uses to his advantage as he flaunts the "know your broker" rule with characteristic anal imagery:

—like I mean this here bond and stock stuff you don't see anybody you don't know anybody only in the mail and the telephone because that's how they do it nobody has to see anybody you can be this here funny lookingest person that lives in a toilet someplace how do they know, I mean like all those guys at the Stock Exchange where they're selling all this stock to each other? They don't give a shit whose it is they're just selling it back and forth for some voice that told them on the phone why should they give a shit if you're a hundred and fifty all they. . . . (172)

The worst consequence of the "inhuman consciousness" Marx warns against is the tendency to treat people like machines, a tendency the educators in the novel display with frightening insensitivity and that J R displays in abundance with a naïveté that makes it all the more frightening.

The encroachment of mechanization in modern society is viewed with alarm throughout *J R*, especially by Gibbs. In his *Agapē Agapē* he derives the mechanization of man not only from such significant but predictable quarters as factories and assembly lines, but from Aristotle's fanciful discussion of robots and automated machinery, E. L. Thorndyke's work in animal intelligence (which, as Gibbs points out, laid the foundations for public school testing), F. W. Taylor's efficiency engineering, and B. F. Skinner's behaviorism.²⁶ The modern result is the tendency, as Hyde puts it, to

—key the human being to, how did you put it once Dan? Key the . . .

—The individual yes, key the technology to the individ . . .

—Dan knows what I'm talking about, key the individual to the technology. (224)

Hyde's inadvertent transposition of terms is the grounds for Gibbs's complaint "God damned things in the saddle and ride mankind" (400, quoting Emerson). The phrase "in the saddle" is used elsewhere in its sexual slang sense (155, 535), and Coach Vogel, for one, finds a sexual allure in machinery. Regaling Dan with his observations on a school-girl's walk, Vogel comments:

—Look at that rise and fall, just look at that! they came up on the corridor, —look at that reciprocating beam motion and you can see what got Newcomen started on the steam engine can't you. [. . .] Frightening thing how machinery can give you ideas like that about a simple schoolgirl. Start off with that steady reciprocating movement and the next thing you know you've got a bottom, round and droops a little but still good, nothing wrong with it at all. It's when you add that so-called parallel motion James Watt introduced that you've got ass, push pull, push pull, quite an improvement, always sorry I never got a look at Mrs. Watt. (318)

Encouraged by Whiteback to "eliminate the offensive human element" from sexual education, Vogel obliges with a hilarious mechanical model:

—Micro Farad yes that's, farad's an electrical unit, his resistance at a minimum and his field fully excited, laid Millie Amp on the ground potential, raised her frequency and lowered her capacitance, pulled out his high voltage probe and inserted it into her socket connecting them in parallel, and short circuited her shunt [. . .] bar magnet had lost all its field strength, Millie Amp tried self induction and damaged her solenoid [. . .] fully discharged, was unable to excite his generator, so they reversed polarity and blew each other's fuses. . . . (329–30)

These examples suggest that satire can defuse the threat of mechanization, to some extent, simply by ridiculing it. But satire is an adult response largely unavailable to the child, the real victim of technology in *J R*. Dan's daughter Nora likes to pretend her brother is a coin-operated machine (56) and *J R* sees no substantial difference between "wrecked up buildings and people" (300), and is in fact anxious to replace his employees with machinery simply because "they let you like pretend it's going to wear out two or three times as fast so you're

getting this big bunch of tax credits right off, they call it depreciated acceleration or something only the thing is you can't do it with people see" (296). He is lost in admiration for an automat clerk who "throws out twenty nickels without she doesn't even look at them? Like her fingers can count them like they're this here machine" (113) and at school sits through resource films that make extensive use of "the human machine" analogy (30). As a result, it is hardly surprising that he would confuse vivisection with autopsy (77, 129) or believe Eskimos are stuffed for museum exhibits (475). So divorced from real life are *J R* and his classmates that Gibbs tells Amy, "I could sit down over there shoot myself through the head they'd think I was dead and expect to see me in school tomorrow" (118).

The economist F. H. Knight has written: "Economic relations are *impersonal*. [. . .] It is the market, the exchange opportunity, which is functionally real, not the other human beings; these are not even means to action. The relation is neither one of cooperation nor one of mutual exploitation, but is completely non-moral, non-human."²⁷ For no one is the market more real than human beings than for Governor Cates, and his nonhuman relation with others is boldly literalized by his own increasing mechanization, in much the same manner as Victoria Wren's in Pynchon's *V*. In and out of the hospital throughout the novel to be fitted out with more prosthetic parts, Cates is finally accused by Zona Selks of "impersonating himself":

—he's nobody, he's a lot of old parts stuck together he doesn't even exist he started losing things eighty years ago he lost a thumbnail on the Albany nightboat and that idiot classmate of his Handler's been dismantling him ever since, started an appendectomy punctured the spleen took it out then came the gall bladder that made it look like appendicitis in the first place now look at him, he's listening through somebody else's inner ears those corneal transplants God knows whose eyes he's looking through, windup toy with a tin heart he'll end up with a dog's brain and some nigger's kidneys why can't I take him to court and have him declared nonexistent, null void nonexistent why can't I Beaton.

—Well it, it would be a novel case ma'am I doubt if there are precedents and the time it would take to adjudi. . . . (708)

Beaton's legalistic response makes him sound as inhuman as his employer, but four pages later he unexpectedly emerges as one of the few victors in *J R* against the dehumanized world it dramatizes. Portrayed

throughout the novel as a legalistically precise, rather prissy character ("man he sounds like this real fag," Rhoda reports [554]), the general counsel to Typhon International endures the often humiliating demands made by Cates, Davidoff, and Zona Selk with what may appear to be the spineless loyalty of a company yes man. But Beaton's ardent admiration for Amy—to which he haltingly confesses early in the novel (214)—leads him to plot a devious course of revenge against his tormentors and of triumph for the woman he so admires, a double plot that Gaddis brings to an exciting climax near the end of the novel. Beaton is entrusted by Cates to keep an eye on the date on which the fourth dividend must be declared to retain control of the two foundations in Amy and her son's names; control over both will revert to Amy if the dividend goes undeclared, and throughout the novel Cates reminds Beaton to notify him of the date. Beaton is also aware that one of the products of Nobili Pharmaceuticals contains an ingredient that can be fatal if taken in combination with such strong cheeses as Stilton (207–8); knowing both that the obnoxious Zona Selk is using that product (434) and that she enjoys Stilton cheese, Beaton invites her to Cates's hospital room on the day the fourth dividend must be declared, and even provides her with both drug (690) and cheese (695). All of this comes to a head on page 712, the last day of the novel: as Zona begins gasping for water after taking the drug and cheese, Beaton calmly informs a dumbstruck Cates that he has allowed the fourth dividend to pass, and that Amy's failure to sign over powers of attorney—another delaying tactic of his—means she is now in full control of the foundations and much of Typhon itself. While Cates and Zona suffer what appear to be fatal attacks, Beaton quickly leaves the hospital room for the nearest restroom and promptly throws up from the unbearable tension. There he meets Bast, who has also just thrown up; pale, shaken, and purged, the novel's two unlikely heroes share a moment of quiet solicitude before Bast leaves to make his final trip uptown.

The Human Use of Human Beings

Beaton's heroic (if criminal) course of action needs to be spelled out because it can easily go unnoticed in the blizzard of financial talk that surrounds him. (No reviewer or critic has mentioned it.) Bast's victory is of a different sort: fired from the J R Corporation because of his insistence on what amounts to the human use of human beings (639),

broken in health and spirit, he makes one final attempt at something worth doing by writing in his hospital bed a piece for unaccompanied cello "because all they'll give him is a crayon," his roommate Duncan explains, "he said he has to finish something before he dies" (675). But he loses all faith in his abilities after the poignant death of Duncan, who expires wishing only that he had been able to hear Beethoven's "Für Elise" as it was meant to be played, having heard only the mangled version his daughter struggled with before her premature death at the hands of incompetent doctors (687). Even this crass, garrulous wallpaper salesman yearns for the perfection and wholeness art can provide, and Bast offers to play the piece for him before he realizes Duncan is dead. (Another victim, apparently, of medical negligence; all three of Gaddis's novels are filled with loathing for the medical profession.)

In his fever, Bast had called Duncan his father (671), and there is a sense that with Duncan's death he is freed from the life-long pressure he felt from his father to excel at composing. At any rate, he stuffs his cello music into a wastebasket, in despair over "the damage I've caused because they all thought what I tried to do was worth doing and I haven't even done it . . .!" (715). But after his cousin Stella confronts him with "this fear you haven't inherited James' talent so you'll settle for money" (716), Bast realizes his failure has resulted not from insufficient talent but from the misguided use of music to win the love of his distant father and destructive cousin. Vowing "No, no I've failed enough at other people's things I've done enough other people's damage from now on I'm just going to do my own, from now on I'm going to fail at my own here those papers wait, give me those papers" (718), he retrieves his cello music from the wastebasket. Beginning where he should have started originally—with a modest cello piece rather than an opera—Bast purifies his art by abandoning hopes to win affection and approval (or fame or fortune) with it. Realizing he not only can write music but must write it ("genius does what it must talent does what it can, that the line?" Gibbs had teased him earlier, quoting Bulwer-Lytton [117]), Bast is last seen, like Wyatt and Thoreau before him, resolved to live deliberately: "God damn it will you just go do what you have to and . . ." Eigen tells him, to which Bast responds, "That's what I'm doing yes!" (725).

"In Gibbs' universe order is least probable, chaos most probable," Wiener writes in *The Human Use of Human Beings*, referring not to his namesake in *J R* but to American physicist Josiah Willard Gibbs. "But while the universe as a whole, if indeed there is a whole universe, tends

to run down, there are local enclaves whose direction seems opposed to that of the universe at large and in which there is a limited and temporary tendency of organization to increase."²⁸ Beaton and Bast create such enclaves in their efforts to bring order to the corporate and artistic worlds, respectively, and do so by engaging in what Wyatt in *The Recognitions* called "moral action," which he insists "is the only way we can know ourselves to be real, [. . .] the only way we can know others are real" (R 591). Such action ensures the human use, rather than the mechanical use, of human beings. True to Beethoven's dictum "the better among us bear one another in mind," Beaton acts to remove financial control from the morally corrupt and heartless Cates and Zona Selk to place it in Amy's hands. Bast acts morally when he rescues his music from the wastebasket (i.e., rescues art from the wasteland culture that surrounds it), realizing he owes it to himself, not to others, to pursue his music; only by being true to his art can he create art that will be true for others.

The other artists in *J R* are last seen moving in a similar direction. Like Wyatt finding in Esme the necessary lines to complete his portrait of Camilla, the painter Schepperman sees in an old man what he needs to finish a portrait begun long ago. When the old model finally breaks away, his slammed door "brought down half the ceiling," Eigen tells Bast, so now Schepperman is "down on his knees picking plaster out" of the wet paint (724–25). The roof may be falling in on art everywhere, but the artist persists, down on his knees if necessary. Eigen himself has taken up with Schramm's father's attractive young widow and seems intent on working up Schramm's notes into the book Schramm could never write. Eigen represents a more compromised version of the artist enduring, with some unsavory implications: he pretends the notes are actually his, and there's some truth in Rhoda's blunt accusation "you're like some fucking graverobber aren't you" (616)—but the direction he has taken promises to heal two broken marriages, free his writer's block, and, if he can finish the book, vindicate somewhat Schramm's suicide.

Gibbs's case is more vague. Promising Amy he will work on his book during her absence, he accomplishes very little in the 96th Street apartment (a microcosm of the chaotic world an artist must work in), justly complaining that writing a book today is like nursing an invalid back to health (603–5). Convinced like Bast that he is going to die (on the basis of an incomplete blood test), Gibbs too dies to his old life by killing off his alter-ego Grynspan and begins anew at the end of the

novel. Realizing his infatuation with Amy is as misplaced as Bast's for Stella, he tells Amy over the phone (in the disguised voice of an old black retainer) that Gibbs has disappeared. He is last reported reading to Schepperman from Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*. Whether Gibbs will return to *Agapē Agape* or go on to incorporate it into a new, larger work (like *J R?*) is unclear. But told by the doctor he'll live another fifty years, his ex-wife off his back, his romantic idyll with Amy behind him, he too is ready to begin again to live deliberately.

As with Wyatt, the new beginnings for these artists are tentative, not triumphant. As Wiener implies, art is only "a limited and temporary tendency for organization to increase" and will always have to struggle against a universe running down and against people speeding up the process by viewing everything "at the corporate level," as Hyde says. Gaddis's *J R* is a damning vision of what America looks like from the corporate level, and thus a powerful argument for the necessity of recovering the human level.