

Book Discussion: *The Recognitions*

Friday, November 13, 2009 — Brad Johnson

Reading: pp. 3-77

We can test this theory out as the weeks play out, but I think that the reader of *The Recognitions* knows pretty quickly if it is his or her type of book. You may not know if you'll finish it, but if you've made through the first two chapters, you know what you're in for. The characters and narratives will accumulate, but really everything will hinge on what is what is laid out in these first two chapters.

Gaddis is many things, but it would be difficult to say that he disguises his themes. If anything, he goes out of his way immediately to accost you with his themes in all their apparent simplicity. Just as *JR* begins with a rustling voice that asks, "Money . . . ?"; and *A Frolic Of His Own* begins similarly mid-conversation with a single-word query, "Justice?"; the opening line of *The Recognitions* gets down to business quickly, "Even Camilla had enjoyed masquerades, of the safe sort where the mask may be dropped at that critical moment it presumes itself as reality."

I first read *The Recognitions* in Scotland, during a self-imposed break from my doctoral studies. I'd just spent two years not simply studying Herman Melville—people make a career out of that sort of thing—but positively immersed in his enigmatic novel *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*. I had a sense that Gaddis' novel would speak the same language of con men and masks, but I wasn't expecting the parallel to be so immediately apparent. Maybe there is a structural necessity to a book about duplicity and authenticity coming right out and identifying itself as such—a kind of open, Epimenidean confession.

What distinguishes *The Recognitions* from Melville's final (i.e., non-posthumous) novel is the place of irony in their respective novels. This is to say that Gaddis is concerned with a non-naive telling of authenticity—"non-naive" in the sense that

it is not wholly removed from duplicity—in a non-ironic register. With Melville, in my reading anyway, you're just never quite sure where the Masquerade ends, and indeed, *that* is the point. Gaddis, however, would seem to insist that the mask does occasionally fall; but that (unlike the masquerades Rev. Gwyon's wife prefers) they do so when you least expect or desire—i.e., the revelation may come too early or too late, and that which is revealed should never be assumed to be better or worse, or even altogether different, than the disguise. This, I would argue, is not altogether distinct from irony, but it is certainly irony of a different sort.

Autobiographically, I resonate with the opening chapter's juxtaposition of the deeply religious (chapter one, set in New England) and the deeply secular (chapter two, set in France). Gaddis tells us up front that neither "side" has as tight a grip on authenticity or self-awareness as it thinks. The following passage from chapter one is especially striking:

When modern devices fail, it is our nature to reach back among the cures of our fathers. If those fail, there were fathers before them. We can reach back for centuries. Gwyon appreciated the extended hands of his people less and less as the months passed. The doctors refused him information of any direct nature, guarding the frail secrets of their failing magic as carefully as Zuni priests planting prayer sticks. And then were that hallowed tribal agreement among them never to admit one another's mistake, which they called Ethics.

On the other, the spiritual, hand, the congregation breathed out stale prayers for the boy's recovery. But in the end they always gave their God full leave to do as He wished, to remove the lad if such were His sacred whim, loading the fever stricken boy with the

guilt it had taken them generations to accumulate. They called this Humility. (p. 45)

This, alongside the blisteringly funny comments about France in chapter two—my favorite being the paragraph on page 75 that begins memorably, “Paris simmered stickily under the shadowed erection of the Eiffel Tower”—reminds us of a certain pretentiousness that accompanies not merely ambition, but more importantly one’s self-certainty about that ambition. (One wonders, in fact, whether the review of Wyatt’s exhibition on p. 74, which we will see again, is not telling us something more than Wyatt at this point wants to believe.)

These are my take-away thoughts about the first couple of chapters anyway. What about you? Any favorite lines so far? Gags? (My personal favorite is the name of the German art magazine Wyatt reads, *Die Fleischflaute?*—ha!) Fire away—we’re in this together.

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Friday, November 20, 2009 — Brad Johnson

Reading: pp. 78-153

– With his ability and your ambition, she said, taking Otto’s arm, and looking away too soon to see the expression she brought to his face, — I’d have quite a remarkable man. (136)

As I said last week, one of the things I most appreciate about Gaddis is his ability to crystallize beautifully his expansive vision of the world and of his characters into concise, deceptively simple lines. (In his train wreck of a play, Otto, too, can be found attempting this, but in a decidedly more ‘counterfeit’ manner.) In a biting, though elegant, way, Esther’s critique of both her new boy-toy and husband, tells us volumes about her, Otto, and Wyatt. She, unable to have what she wants, perhaps because her desire is really only that which she *expects* she ought to have; Otto, “young enough to find answers before he even managed to form the questions” (131); and Wyatt, whose artistic talent is akin to that of an

alchemist, "left far behind, to haggle in darkness over the beams which they had caught, and clung to with such suffocating desire." (132)

We will have time in future readings to reflect on Otto's ambition and its evolution throughout the novel, and certainly feel free to do so now, but the crucial character in this chapter is Wyatt. He manages, it seems, both to take center-stage and collapse from view. This dichotomy, of his being there but not being there, of being out of step in general, is hammered home again and again. Dave mentioned this in a comment last week concerning [Wyatt's obliviousness to time](#), and the idea seemed to recur throughout chapter three. Consider, for example, Wyatt's description of his dream of the heavy footsteps at the parsonage:

— But listen, what was terrible was that I know every step in that house, I know how many steps it takes to come down the stairs or to cross the living room, I can't tell you the number but I know, but these steps I heard in the darkness, they kept reaching places too soon. I know the sound, I know how the sounds change when you step from the front hall into the living room, or passing the dining room or off the last stair and . . . but these steps kept arriving too soon, not hesitating anywhere and not in a hurry, but if you take regular even steps, and there weren't enough of them. (86)

This, I think, is indicative of Wyatt in general. He is out of step in almost every conceivable way. In manner of dress and overall appearance he is thought older than he really is; in aesthetic sensibility, he is uncompromising, in a fundamentally compromised age; he insists that the work of art is a "perfect necessity," and is asked in response, absent of irony, "Where'd you read that?" (144) It is with this in mind that Wyatt's exasperation earlier in the chapter pulls into focus something crucial about his character:

You look up and there she is, people . . . the instant you look at them they begin to talk, automatically, they take it for granted you understand them, that you recognize them, that they have something to say to you, and you have to wait, you have to pretend to listen, pretend you don't know what's coming next while they go right on talking with no idea what they're talking about, they don't even know but they go right on, trying to explain who they are because they take it for granted you want to know, not that they have the damndest idea as far as that goes, they just want to know what kind of a receptacle you'll be for their confidences. *How do they know I'm the same person that . . .* Who are they, to presume such intimacy, to . . . go right on talking. *And they really believe that they're talking to me!* (107-08, italics mine)

We're back to the masquerade that Camilla loved so much, but certainly not the "safe sort." The crucial question, it would seem, is not that surrounding authenticity. Leave this to Otto and Esther, Wyatt decides. No, for Wyatt, the key is not to be pine for what one is not or is not yet. Unlike the enlightened souls whose gospel is that of progress and materialism, i.e., that of discovery-through-experimentation, Wyatt opts for the deal with the devil, "babbling phantasies" that fewer and fewer are willing to hear, "in which the genuine, the necessary, the original, must itself also be created. Indeed, as Wyatt comes to realize, if one is to become "the man for whom Christ died," to be redeemed, one must go "all in"—if there is redemption, it occurs not from the absolving of guilt, but rather *through* the guilt, and by way of the sin. (At this point, we should note, this is still a very big "if." Wyatt is clearly playing a very dangerous game, whose consequences are unclear. If in this chapter he is out of step, and describes himself as feeling empty, we can fully expect him next to lose himself entirely.) Hence, his removal to the Lower West Side, and the world of art forgery. What resonated with you in chapter three? Is Gaddis fair to Esther? or Otto, for that matter?

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Friday, December 4, 2009 — Brad Johnson

Reading: pp. 154-221

We're back to the masquerade. Well, that is, if we ever left—hard to tell when it all occurs in front of mirrors. Lots of mirrors in this week's reading, especially when it comes to Otto. I wonder, as an aside, whether anybody will confess to (ever) being like him. Surely, we all have known an Otto at one point or another. If so, doesn't it seem to reason that at least one of us has also to be somebody's Otto? You can keep it to yourself, though, if you wish. Otto surely would, or at least work it into his play. Who knows, maybe he'll eventually find what he's looking forward in all those mirrors—or, at the very least, the mask that somebody will pay attention to.

I'm curious what others have gotten out of the reading. Adam mentioned to me last night, for example, that the party scene had an effect on him at a similar event this week. Despite the rapid introduction of characters in that chapter, many of whom will become regular features throughout the remainder of the novel, I found myself most riveted by a couple of Otto's conversations outside the party.

Each reflected something about him in a far purer way than any mirror. First, there is the farewell conversation with the man with the kewpie doll tattooed on his forearm, that tells Otto the story of his life through old photographs:

On the pages he had compelled, snapshots were firmly stuck with artistic disregard for angles, size, and number of art corners. All were consistent in one thing, however: — This is me. This is me in a bar in Brooklyn with some Greek sailors, one of hem had a camera. I was workin in the Navy Yard. This is me in Panama in the Canal Zone before I came up here. This is me in Darien on a

hunting trip with some Indians. Here, this is me with some Sand Blast Indians . . .

– I have to go, I have to get that train. It leaves in about ten minutes.

– Here, look at this one. . . By now he had got glue over most of his chin, and art corners stuck to his wrists and arms, framing the kewpie doll. — This is me . . . he started as Otto went toward the door. (164-65)

Photographs are a kind of mirror, right? A mirror where change is subtler; or, more often than not, a sad reminder of changes you have no hand in undoing. In this way, there is, I suppose, something sad about the scene. Nevertheless, say what you will, the man does have memories, and even a hope that his grandchildren might take part in them.

What does Otto have? He has his mirrors, and thus can make any number of non-subtle cosmetic changes, but he doesn't (yet) betray a memory that in any significant way helps define him. He is a constant self-creation—but, in no way is he concerned with the creation of a self-definition or identity, only the creation of appearance (e.g., "Adeline directly sought the bathroom; Herschel lay against the doorjamb getting his breath; and Otto (thinking only of what it looked like to see Otto entering a room) entered.") Even worse, if we're going to make moral judgments about the poor guy, this is not the creation of *his* appearance, which would have a certain postmodern glee to it at least, but the appearance of what he thinks others wish to see. He craves not simply for attention, but that what others see in him coincides and affirms what he thought they wanted to see. He is a perverse, but ultimately starving, parasite. All that he is comes from what others, their expectations and evaluations, etc. (A failure, perhaps, because most of them have nothing to offer. They simply don't care.) All this, of course, makes

his relationship with Esme all the more intriguing, because she, at last, is the mirror whose reflection he does not recognize because it is closest to reality:

Otto felt strange, holding her thin wrist: that Esme could give all and lose nothing, for the taker would find she had given nothing; plundering her, the plunderer would turn to find himself empty, and she still silently offering. (199)

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Friday, December 11, 2009 — Brad Johnson

Reading: pp. 222-277

The thing that jumps out at me repeatedly in this chapter is the power of representative recognition. Notice the heavy emphasis placed on Reck tall Brown's portrait, with its over-sized hands:

It had been painted from a photograph (the sitter too busy to sit more than that instant of the camera's eye) in which his hands, found in the foreground by the indiscriminating lens, were marvelously enlarged. The portrait painter, directed to copy that photograph faithfully and neither talented, nor paid enough, to do otherwise, had with attentive care copied the hands as they were in the picture. And pausing, 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, filling out large and heavy, so apparently flaccid that they had been referred to once, and repeated by other voices in other rooms, as prehensile udders. (228)

It is as though, in other words, that Brown had fallen under the gaze of the painting and had himself become *its* representation. The painting's

consciousness of being looked at (p. 251) only partially explains this. More importantly, it stems from the ignorance of God's overwhelming attention. He says: "—Like everything today is conscious of being looked at, looked at by something else but not by God, and that's the only way anything can have its own form and its own character, and . . . and shape and smell, being looked at by God" (251). Brown's flattening into a caricature of reality ("He does not understand reality. . . Reckall Brown is reality. . . a very different thing" [244]) is only the most obvious in his lack of consciousness of God's attention. Don't we see a similar thing in Wyatt's anxiety regarding his depiction in Valentine's hypothetical novel (pp. 262-63), where he concludes, "Yes, I don't live, I . . . I am lived"? This leads, I would suggest, to Wyatt's wonderful explication of his own place as the hero in *The Recognitions*: "Listen, he's there all the time. None of them moves, but it reflects him, none of them . . . reacts, but to react with , none of them hates but to hate with him, to hate him, and loving . . . none of them loves, but loving . . ." (p. 263).

In all this, Esme seems the counterpart to Brown. Hers is a kind of emptiness of character, too. And yet, where Brown's is a devouring emptiness, Esme's is creative. She cannot help but represent the visions and desires of others—be they those of Otto in the previous chapter, or those of Wyatt here (i.e. of St. Catherine de Ricci and his mother). We might pause and consider that this is not merely the effect of hers being a Christ-like *kenosis* as it is reflective of her ignorance of what Wyatt regards as divine attention. She is just as absent of form and character as Reckall and the reality he embodies. The difference is her knowledge of this, and the dread this portends. Consider her reaction to yet another representation of her:

Her face, more and more forgotten as effort worked through her, took a sulking look: one of fear, remembering now a sculpture of her head and bust made once by a student who did not know that, when the plaster dried, it would shrink one-tenth the size he had

modeled it, so that he made the cord tight which supported the neck, and when it dried they found death's excellent likeness of her head pendant, swinging gently with the door they had opened upon it. (p. 277)

Esme may be more self-aware than Brown, but the effect of this knowledge supplements his greed with her fear—fear always being the underside of greed, the fear of loss. The lines she cribbs from Rilke would then seem to suggest that for her the divine attention carries as much the threat to one's self as its creation. Hence, it would seem, her preference for heroin, where she can be both neither here nor there.

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Friday, December 18, 2009 — Brad Johnson

Reading: pp. 281-342

First things first: The writing on pages 281-93 just blew me away. Even if you're not a part of the discussion group, you should do yourself a favor and read those pages alone. In fact, if I have time today I'm going to scan and upload them. Just some ridiculously good moments there.

An example:

Over and under the ground he hurried toward the place where he lived. No fragment of time nor space anywhere was wasted, every instant and every cubic centimeter crowded crushing outward upon the next with the concentrated activity of a continent spending itself upon a rock island, made a world to itself where no present existed. Each minute and each cubic inch was hurled against that which would follow, measured in terms of it, dictating a future as inevitable as the past, coined upon eight million counterfeits who moved with the plumb weight of lead coated with the frenzied hope of

quicksilver, protecting at every pass the cherished falsity of their milled edges against the threat of hardness in their neighbors as they were rung together, fallen from the Hand they feared but could no longer name, upon the pitiless table stretching all about them, tumbling there in all the desperate variety of which counterfeit is capable, from the perfect alloy recast under weight to the thudding heaviness of lead, and the thinly coated brittle terror of glass. (pp. 282-83)

Good God, that's breathtakingly good.

Coming back again and again in this chapter, it seems to me, is the ambivalent status of originality. We see this in the opening section, where Otto's father goes through the banalities of his later-afternoon/early-evening routine. He is enveloped by the city in such a way as to become absolutely anonymous, even (as we see later in the chapter) to his own son). The city itself has a certain cadence that drowns out any expression of individuality. Even the act of suicide is expected to follow a prearranged script—hence the disappointment of the onlookers when they realize the man on the ledge isn't going to follow through on the arrangement. Mr. Pivner's reflections on "progress," as reflected in the sciences, economics, and journalism, are especially appropriate here as well.

Originality, however, isn't merely some ideal state. It isn't an unequivocal Good to which one aspires. As we see in Esme and Stanley, and certainly in Wyatt (though I think he is a more difficult case, because at this stage he still wants to claim *his* originality, which is rather problematic), there is a certain price to be paid for originality. Arguably, the alienation felt by one who strives for originality is even more acute than that of Mr. Pivner, for whom originality is of the clichéd self-help variety, wherein "success" entails your individuality looking identical to those surrounding you. Originality entails a certain ambivalent fracturing of time and self, does it not? For "you" are always striving "now" to somehow move past

“the now” that constitutes “you”. It’s enough to reach for the needle (Esme) or bend one’s knee (Stanley), finding momentary solace in the repetition.

I will cut my reflections short here, in hopes that they are vague enough to elicit conversation. And, to be honest, because my boss is hovering close behind me, wondering why my Excel spreadsheet looks curiously like a blog post.

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Friday, January 8, 2010 — Brad Johnson

Pages: 343-445

Well, it’s finally happened. Long in the making, of course, but now we can officially say that Wyatt, who, as we’ve noticed, long ago lost his name, has now basically lost his mind. And, we should note, a very poor drunk. He is one of those people for whom one drink of brandy means the entire bottle. And, well, one need only visit your local downtown library to see what becomes of mentally unstable drunks. I.e., they become either the homeless men surfing for porn on the free internet connection, or they become the librarian who logs them into the network. We should, I think, along with the Use-Me Ladies, pray for poor Wyatt. What did everybody think of the following passage?

Above, another blue day, (upstairs) the room papered with green-capped pink-faced dogs, and the button drawer, only apparitions move to perfection, there! Pray the Lord to keep you from lying, there, O spectral stabat mater may I go out and play the violin outside to the town wearing its sinside inside and not a soul in sight. Church bells inspissated the air, dropping it in sharp fragments. He sat down in his place at table, excused by the falling weights of the bells, and motionless when they had done. There, old vicary, congratulate my refuge, the saneside outside sheltering the insane inside: to present the static sane side outside to another outside saneside, to be esteemed for that outsane side while all the while the insaneside attacks your outsane side as though we

weren't both playing the same game, and gone down Summer Street (singing unchristian songs) the inane sinside, pocketing a cool million wearing the shoutside outside and the doubtside inside, the vileside inside and the violinside outside skipping dancing and foretelling things too come all ye faithful, of thine own give we back to thee. (p. 399)

I quote it in full for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I just really love it—so much so that I once quoted it in a paper I read, only so that I might have an occasion to read it out loud to an audience. Secondly, I find that it houses two recurring ideas I just want to mention in passing: perfection & motion. The latter, in particular, seems to play a crucial role throughout this week's reading. Pardon the crude analysis, but just see [here](#) and [here](#)—by my count, we have at least twenty instances of the words “movement” & “motion” in one hundred pages alone. Is that enough to qualify as a very relevant idea, or is it just a rhetorical tic to which Gaddis succumbed? The paragraph just before the one quoted above would seem to suggest the former, and in the process re-introduces us to the idea of perfection, which of course doesn't require a Google books search, because I dare say this obsession is on every page (in spirit if not in letter):

—The devil finds work for idle hands, here, without music, where reverberations of the human voice weary in recall with generations of fruitless exhaustion, denied the very possibility of music. A sharp unfriendly sound from the kitchen confirmed the silence and the vigilant conspiracy of inanimate things, watching for any break in the pattern. A movement broke it, his hand reaching forth to put his glass at his place at the table; and he stood in suspense sustaining the trust thrust upon his frame by the static details of dark woodwork, maintaining the inert vigil which belied music: music as ideal motion, a conceit in itself manifestly sinful, as the Serpent, gliding in the Garden, moved with unqualified motion, as the sound

of a lute, struck here now, would move upon undulant planes never before explored, to be cornered and quickly killed by the ruthless angles of the room, proving that those planes had never existed, affirming, in sharp consentaneous silence, the illusion of motion, the sin of possibility, the devil-inspired absurdity of indetermination.
(p. 398)

Now, remember, Wyatt is pretty intensely drunk and increasingly insane at this point, so we do need to be careful about trusting his every word here. He is, as we (and, it seems, Jane & Gwyon) learn in II.3, neither Christ nor Mithraen priest. But, in spite of the Town Carpenter's own mis-identification, Wyatt is a kind of hero. As such, his words, even when slurred and batty, are significant.

For his part, Wyatt is at least aware of the problems that adhere to his romantic gropings for the "sharp consentaneous silence" that is truth. This is, he realizes, a dangerous game, but one does not so much quit playing as pretend (knowingly or not) one's quit playing. E.g., the extinguishing of one's affection for Novalis, only to replace him with the "rational mind" of Friedrich von Hardenberg, the 'true' flesh-and-blood name behind the pseudonym, Novalis (pp.379-80). This was, by the way, the brilliant thing about the early German Romantics especially. They may be assailed for their naivety and/or the danger they pose to others (see Valentine's comparison of Wyatt to his boyhood friend Martin on page 383: "The ones who wake up late. You suddenly realize what is happening around you, the desperate attempts on all sides to reconcile the ideal with reality, you call it corruption and think it new. Some of us have always known it, the others never know. You and Martin are the ones who cause the trouble, waking suddenly, to be surprised. Stupidity is never surprised, neither is intelligence. They are complementary, and the whole conduct of human affairs depends on their co-operation. But the Martins appear, and cause mistrust . . ."), but the Romantics were all too aware of their problematic obsessions—they were, after all, the creators of a decidedly modern conception of irony that creatively resisted its

Greek connotation as simple deception. (I will elaborate on this point at a later time, perhaps in a mid-week / non-reading post, because it is very important to how I understand the greater vision of *The Recognitions*.)

Everything, like Arnobius' moon, is always in motion (p. 429). It is, then, not simply a matter of stopping motion. The sun sets, only to rise again—the gods may die, but they never go away completely. If this is so, if illusion and sin is borne of motion, the inability to stop, then Wyatt's 'sermon' on pp. 384-85 starts to ring a little true, and is in fact a bit better than it at first sounds: "Go out among them and tell them that their nostalgia for places they have never been is sex, the sweating Am-ha-aretz, and when they hear music, tell them it is their mother, tell Nicodemus, tell him there is no other way to be born again, and again and again and again of a thousand other mothers of others-to-be, tell him, my yetzer hara, tell them, tell them my evil heart, that they are hopeless, tell them what damnation is, and that they are damned, that what they have been forging all this time never existed."

* * *

Sunday, January 17, 2010 — Brad Johnson

Pages: 446-541

So, let's talk about Esme. She really took center stage in this week's reading, I felt. Chapter II.4 begins with her withering evisceration of Otto, in which she concludes, "You had me all filled in before you met me, Otto. There was no room for me at all" (p. 449). Now, for me, this raises an important question: *what would it mean really to know Esme?*

In her letter to Wyatt later in the chapter, in which she laments that she exists only as a painting to him, she insists that there is in fact a part of her, a remainder, that the paintings for which she models cannot depict (or, she continues, devour).

Painting, a sign whose reality is actually, I, never to be abandoned, a painting *is* myself, ever attentive to me, mimicking what I never changed, modified, or compromised, Whether I, myself, am object or image, they at once, are both, real or fancied, they are both, concrete or abstract, they are both, exactly and in proportion to this disproportionate I, being knowingly or unknowingly neither one nor the other, yet to be capable of creating it, welded as one, perhaps not even welded but actually from the beginning one, am also both and what I must, without changing, modifying, or compromising, be. (p. 472)

Her response to this we learn is “absolute death,” which she pursues in the form of her unsuccessful suicide attempt.

Is it just me, or does her letter stands in relief to Max’s comments as Otto scrapes dog shit from his shoe:

Otto stood there, his arm shivering in the sling, the wind blowing his hair up from behind. –Yes, he said, raising his eyebrows, – sometimes it’s difficult . . . he curled his lip slightly against its tendency to tremble, –it’s difficult to shed our human nature. Then he turned away quickly and stepped back to the curb, where he stood with his back to them, scraping the edge of his his shoe. He heard Max laugh, and call to him, “A little always sticks . . . (p. 466)

As Esme realizes, and as Otto consistently embodies throughout the novel (hence, all the mirrors* and the drama with his “papers of identity” [p. 486]), to be human—and thus human nature in general—is to be depicted. Short of “absolute death,” there’s no getting around it. As with Esme’s failed suicide, “a little always sticks.” Arguably, even if one is successful, your absence is not felt as such, for would not depiction devour death as much as life?

As a result, Esme's collapse into the third-person seems highly appropriate. Note that while Wyatt is still struggling with matters of identity and such, Esme has given in. She is nothing but the depiction of others now. Thus, she can refer to herself as 'she', not 'I', where in contrast Wyatt adopts a variety of pseudonyms (e.g., the Reverend from last chapter, John Hus, a host of artists, etc.), inconsistently resists mis-identification, and for most of the novel is only referred to by others pronominally. (I cannot remember a moment in which he does, anyway. Correct me if I'm wrong.)

This brings us to another question, which II.5 has much to say, but of which I will for now be silent and see if you have something to offer instead: that exactly of who gets to be counterfeit and who gets to be counterfeit artist? We're all a bit of both, sure, but surely some reap the respective scorn and benefit more than others. (If you are at all sympathetic to poor old Mr. Sinisterra, I highly recommend you look into the performance art of J.S.G. Boggs and his legendary 'Boggs Bills'. If you're unfamiliar, Lawrence Weschler's [*Boggs: A Comedy of Value*](#) will help—see esp. chapter one.)

* Oh, how I loved the short passage at the end of II.4, where Otto is sitting at a bar and staring straight ahead of him, whereupon "it took 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" (p. 486).

* * *

Friday, February 12, 2010 — Poseur Prophet
[*Pages 542-646*](#)

In my opinion, this chapter is the climax of the novel. It marks a significant turning point in terms of the plot development—things will not be the same from this point on and, for many, there is not much else that can happen apart from what

does happen. Benny foreshadows this more than once: first with his mention of an idea regarding “stark human drama” and a fellow doing something from a church steeple (573), then when Mr. Fettle mentions Tolstoy’s play to him, and again when Benny states that “[t]his only happens once... You make one show, and when it’s finished you throw it out” (607). So, here, at Esther’s Christmas party, we have everybody gathered together one last time, and the madness, at least as it relates to the living, reaches something of a climax in more than one *petite mort*. This is the show and, in the remaining three hundred pages of the novel, Gaddis will do the throwing out.

The thing that I enjoyed most about this chapter was the way in which Gaddis captures the utter insignificance of words and moments we try to invest with meaning. Here we see desperation, the pretension and, above all, the futility and impotence of it all. So, Esther surveys the room:

Tenants whom she had not met stood like fixed dwellers in her life, never to be dispossessed: they had been borne to her as they were in their permanent blue suits and brown suits and black dresses and eyeglasses, permanently standing and turning, talking to and about one another, nourished and propagated by their own sounds and the maneuvering of cigarettes, leaving the act of life outmoded, a necessity of the past, a compulsion of ignorance (572).

Or again:

No longer the garden, but, as Benny said, cut flowers posing dead, without past or future, in as great a variety of jealous identities assembled as the tenants of an expensive florist’s window, lacking the careless grandeur of indigenous plants, arranged instead in that slightly frantic symmetry which dazed passers-by call artistic, and

move on, never hazarding the senses to violation by wire and the treachery of paper petals (610).

Now, it would be easy to brush this all aside as a criticism of a certain culture that was (and is) blossoming in New York, but I think this should be avoided. The reason this chapter resonated so deeply with me is that it appears to function as a devastating unmasking of most (if not all) of the ways in which we try to come together with others in order to engage in something (or anything) meaningful. In my own life, I have had the opportunity to move in many different social circles – from drinking French wine with ivy-league professors, to drinking cheap beer with transgendered low-track sex workers, to drinking coffee with militant anarchists, and so on – but, at the end of the day, all of these interactions, all the talk and pseudo-action, can be described in exactly the same way as Esther’s party. This, I suppose, is also why it is more bearable to read about these gatherings, instead of continuing to attend them. As one party-goer states: “I really prefer books. No matter how bad a book is, it’s unique, but people are all *so ordinary*” (571). Because, at the end of the day, isn’t this effort to invest words and moments with meaning, and all the time we put into the masquerade, just a part of the (losing?) struggle we fight in order to reassure ourselves that *we* possess meaning, that we matter, that we are significant—that we are anything but ordinary?

In light of this, I believe that Benny—who used to be real but “isn’t real any more” (579)—is the shining star of the party. His moment in the spotlight is my favourite sustained passage in the novel. Of course, Benny isn’t the only person who isn’t real anymore, as Esther says to Wyatt: “I watched you turn into no one right here in front of me” and Wyatt, not denying this, seeks expiation because a moral action is “the only way we can know ourselves to be real... the only way to know others are real” (590-91). Yet sighting this (now surreal?) Wyatt seems to create a transformation in Benny—as though Benny becomes real for a moment and is able to recognize what is going on. Gaddis suggests this when he describes Benny shortly before Benny’s exchange with the critic: “Benny’s face was fleshy.

Moreover, though it was not puffy, it seemed to be flesh recently acquired” (600; compare this to the description of the carefully fortified face of the critic on the subsequent page). What follow from this is a fantastic rant about life, labour, and all the ways in which we try to separate who we are (i.e. somebody significant) from what we do in order to make money and survive (i.e. insignificant or shameful things). I would love to quote it in full, but it spans about six glorious pages. Still, he comes pretty close to summing it all up when he asks earlier of Wyatt: “Is he doing what he wanted to do now? Or like me, is he doing what he can do, what he has to do...” (596). Esther also comes close to summing things up, first in her words to Wyatt:

There are things like joy in this world, there are, there are wonderful things, and there is goodness and kindness, and you shrug your shoulders. And I used to think that was fun, that you understood things so well when you did that, but finally that’s all you can do, isn’t it. Isn’t it (590).

And again in her words to Otto:

Because you’ve done the same thing, you’ve spent all your time too, you’ve put all your energy up against things that weren’t there, but you put them there yourself just to have something to fight... So you wouldn’t have to fight the real things... And now you say you’re tired? At your age, because you’ve been trying to make negative things do the work of positive ones... (621).

Anselm also comes close to this when he concludes that art, religion and philosophy all function as “refuges from being alive” (633). Of course, the point I wish to emphasize is that all of this stands out to me because it seems to so accurately reflect the ways in which people actually are living their lives. This is why I have focused upon this particular part of the chapter, and why I haven’t brought up a good many other moments of interest (which I trust others will

raise). Goddamn, if this chapter doesn't sum up most everybody I've ever encountered... including myself, of course. So, I will give the last quotation to Benny:

What's tragedy to you is an anecdote to everybody else. We're comic. We're all comics. We live in a comic time. And the worse it gets the more comic we are... We're comic because there isn't anything else that... that has to... anything else that has to be (640).

So what do we do? We shrug our shoulders, fight our artificial fights, strike a pose, find what shelters we can, and laugh at everything but the tragedy of the loss of the real lives we think we may have had the potential to possess.

* * *

Saturday, February 20, 2010 — Brad Johnson

Another week, another party. Do people actually have Christmas parties on Christmas Eve? I wish I knew such people. The only thing I ever manage to do the day before Christmas is catch a movie. It always seems as though friends have other plans, typically with family. Ah, but we should know better than that bit of sentimentality, whether it be borne of "disciplined nostalgia" (p. 672) or intemperate familial bondage, having an enduring role in *The Recognitions*. Indeed, it seems that in this week's reading, amidst the operatic backdrop of Wyatt's formal severing of ties with his counterfeit operation there is a more subtle dissolution of family. By the end of part II, Wyatt is completely alone. He is already estranged from his father, but this estrangement is solidified by Rev. Gwyon's institutionalization and death. His surrogate family, Brown & Valentine, is (respectively) dead and mortally wounded. And Esme, Wyatt's *Stabat Mater*, is both physically and mentally missing.

As ever, Otto seems to serve as a kind of parallel to Wyatt. Like Wyatt, Otto has already rejected Esther and lost Esme (if he ever had her). In this week's

reading, though, the familial decay continues. Not only does Otto discover that his “father” gave him counterfeit money, thus destroying at least one aspect of the illusion constructed in their bizarre meeting, but his real father, Mr. Pivner, adopts a new “son,” apparently giving up on ever actually meeting Otto. Fittingly, Otto is left to roam alone the frozen hell that is New York City. This sets up one of my favorite sentences in the novel: “He stood numb, surrounded by ice, among the frozen giants of buildings, as though to dare a step would send him head over heels in a night with neither hope of morning to come nor heaven’s betrayal of its triumphal presence, in the stars.” (p. 699)

On a perhaps more mundane level of analysis, I was delighted once again by Gaddis’ eye & ear for the banality at the heart of formal sociality. He is arguably being corrosively cynical, but I think saying such misses the mark. Gaddis is having a good deal of fun at his party-goers expense, to be sure, but one must at least consider the pragmatic merits of Valentine’s ambivalent appeal to ugliness?

Do you think they knew the difference between what was bizarre and what was beautiful? that their vulgar ostentation didn’t stifle beauty everywhere, everywhere? the way its doing today? Yes, damn it, listen to me now, and swear by all that’s ugly! Do you think any painter did anything but hire himself out? These fine altarpieces, do you think they glorified anyone but the vulgar men who commissioned them? Do you think a van Eyck didn’t curse having to whore away his genius, to waste his talents on all sorts of vulgar celebrations, at the mercy of people he hated? (p. 690)

This is second-order cynicism, we might say. Cynicism about cynicism: ugly acquiescence to ugliness. This will not have the final say: for now, suffice it to say, on the one hand, we would be naive to not see its internal appeal, and blind not to see its debilitating effects. (One need only look at Senate Democrats and most A-list liberal bloggers to see what I mean here.)

The numerous party scenes throughout *The Recognitions* give us a hint at the debilitating effects of this kind of “vulgarity.” Most notably, perhaps, is the complete decay of communication. Not merely in misunderstanding, as on some level this implies an attempt to understand—e.g., one of my favorite passages from chapter eight, “The bearded young art critic was speaking in French, managing it with such urbanity, indeed, that his little friend . . . told him later, with demure awe, that he had not been able to understand a word of it; no marvel of ignominy, really, for the harassed Lyonnais who was listening could not understand a word of it either . . .”—but, as we see exemplified by Valentine throughout the party, in making more of an attempt not even to listen, or, as exemplified by nearly everybody else, listening only for conversational cues to say something long ago prescribed by social form or expectation. (This is bordering on, if not altogether jumping straight into, wankery, but the latter seems akin to signing your name to the books of other, like Mr. Feddle.)

Again, as vulgar as this is, we probably err to say it is absolutely negative or evil. A coin’s not counterfeit if everybody knowingly accepts it, as currency and as counterfeit, right? A forgery is only as good as the source to which it makes its appeal. “Thank God there was the gold to forge.” (p. 689)

* * *

Monday, March 15, 2010 — Brad Johnson

Pages 723-823

He had escaped, where, he did not know, he did not think, he had not thought since Christmas Eve, and when thought or memory intruded he forced it off with calculations drawn to one purpose: to keep moving, with money no object to spend his way through it, to keep moving and live it through, without looking back. (pp. 728-29)

This passage is talking about Otto, who has found himself living out his lie about being caught in the middle of a Central American revolution, but it just as well

anticipates Wyatt's strangely comedic drama in Spain with Sinisterra/"Mr. Yak". Like Otto, Wyatt's object, upon attacking Valentine and losing Esme, is simply to keep moving. Away from his crime(s), foremost; away from being used, in the service of criminals even greater than he; etc. That he ends up in league with yet another criminal, another counterfeiter no less, is of course the kind of circumstances we at this point in the novel have come to expect. That he is in Spain, Wyatt has learned from his father, is fitting, for "Spain is a land to flee across" (p. 769)

This long chapter detailing the weirdly co-dependent relationship between Wyatt/Stephan and Sinisterra/Yak turned out, in this second reading of the book, to be one of my favorites. (Not least because I did not remember it at all from the first reading.) At this point of the discussion, reiterating the plot is kind of pointless. Suffice it to say, as in the other parts of the story involving Sinisterra, the comedy is suffused with darkness—recall the scene in the first chapter when he accidentally kills Wyatt's mom, while impersonating a doctor; or his encounter Otto, who mistakes him for his father—and really highlight Gaddis' way with humor.

An interesting element in this chapter especially is, while there is so much movement going on, be it by foot, by train, or by carriage—indeed, so much activity in general, much of it involving corpses, prostitutes, cognac, and the ever-present sounds of [La Tani](#)—very little moves forward as such. Indeed, for all his desire to get away from his past, Wyatt finds himself (or so he thinks) chased by it. Gaddis flags this absence of movement for us in a beautiful passage where, I think, he also seems once again to be describing his book:

The image of Stephan Asche did not move. Nothing moved there, but the smoke rising gently behind the disorder of newspapers, the untended trail of a fire smoldering in a pile of debris where nothing retains its original shape, or purpose, among broken parts and

rusted remains of useful objects, unidentifiable now,
indistinguishable from other fragments of the past, shapes and
sharp angles of curious design and unique intention, wasting
without flame under the litter of news no longer news, pages of
words torn by the wind, sodden with rain, words retaining
separation, strung to the tear, without purpose, but words, and
nothing moves but the smoke, rising from two bright embers. (p.
796)

When you do not move, it seems, you are consumed. (Perhaps like the reader of *The Recognitions*—it is no coincidence, maybe, that it's been a couple of weeks since my last write-up.) Note that throughout the first three chapters of Part III, most of the characters are moving. There's Otto & Wyatt, of course, but also the ancillary characters, like Stanley, Max & Hannah. Those who are not are, at best, like Ellery, left in pitiful states of self-pity; or, at worst, like Agnes, Maude & Benny, physically abusive (toward self and/or others.)

If you are not moving, you are no longer working, as Wyatt says, to “prove one's own existence. . . . Why, there's no ruse at all that people will disdain, to prove their own existence . . .” (p. 800). I know I keep returning to this theme throughout my readings, but I do so only because I think Gaddis is so repeatedly explicit in saying that it's when the ruses stop, when you've given up on either fleeing from one ruse to another, or at least having the courtesy of seeing one through to its consequences, that you've no other outlet but destruction of some sort. Not a happy vision of life either way, I suppose, but nobody ever mistook *The Recognitions* for *How to Win Friends & Influence People*.

* * *

Friday, April 30, 2010 — Brad Johnson

Pages pp. 824-956

Given that Gaddis seemingly could not bring himself to finish writing the *The Recognitions*, punctuating it in the end with a fifty-page epilogue that culminates with Stanley's dream-church crashing down on him while he finally plays his epic Mass on their ancient pipe organ. It is an easy parallel to identify, that between Stanley and Gaddis, alike overwhelmed by their interminable works of art. Indeed, for Adam, this parallel might be one of the only ways, and even then, probably not adequately enough, to justify the tedious amount of time Gaddis pours into telling Stanley's story. Surely, or at least I should hope, there is more to him than a token jab at religious piety; not least because of his place amongst the men in Esme's life, each of whom she comes to despise, albeit one [Wyatt] in that deep sort of way that only speaks of a certain kind of love. A masculine Triumvirate that leads to her "marriage" to Christ, as a nun. (Incidentally ... Gaddis is pretty vicious to his female characters, isn't he?)

In my previous post, I noted the significance of movement. As we saw there, it seems as though if you do not move, you are consumed. It matters little to where you are moving; only that it is away from where your past and your present. This emphasis on movement continues into this final section of the book. Consider Stanley aboard his steamer headed to Italy:

[T]he whole severe enclosure of angles driven by vibrations, in motion with no direction, it was more than as though they had never left it, as though they could never leave it, and had never been anywhere else. Stanley looked at his wrist watch, as though knowing what time it was might confirm something" (p. 839).

I love this passage for what it says about the relationship of time & movement. The measurement of time on a watch & the vibrations of a moving vessel here

betray a foreboding sense that we cannot escape the consummation that awaits us. That, indeed, in a sense it is as though we never left it, and are just biding our time, seeking momentary consolations in outward signs of change (of scenery, of season, of ports of entry & departure, etc.).

It is, then, no doubt fitting that Stanley's adventure, and we should add our own reading (and writing about) *The Recognitions*, concludes with the lines: "The walls quivered, still he did not hesitate. Everything moved, and even falling, soared in atonement" (p. 956). This may well be as close to a happy ending as we're going to get out of Gaddis. The culmination that awaits us, which we never entirely left, needn't be a source merely of madness. (Although, given the examples of Wyatt, Otto & Stanley), it may very well require a step through madness in order to get there.) To submit to the end that one has never quite left may not necessarily lead to a classical "happy ending"—see Gaddis' paean to suicide in the Epilogue, complete with the brilliant line, "Any city that calls itself modern anticipates all her children's needs, even to erecting something high for them to jump from" (p. 946)—as it does an "atonement" of one's actions, be they noble or criminal, those of a sinner or saint, that set us (along with our respective endings) in motion to start with. This atonement is a departure from the more traditional idea that "the slate is wiped clean," where the bad is rendered good, the wrong made right, etc. Quite the opposite, in fact: "If you're going to make loaded dice, you have to make them perfect first. You can't just load ordinary dice, they have to be perfectly true, to start with" (p. 871). Here, our falseness, our pride, indeed, our sinfulness, is made true, "atoned," *in and as its very sinfulness*. Hence Stanley's resolve in the face of this new vibration, and his disregard of time (i.e., his lack of hesitation).

It can perhaps be said that Stanley (maybe even Otto, though he seems a much more oblique, difficult case to resolve) is a graphic depiction of the atonement

that Wyatt dramatically and climactically articulates in his final appearance. Let me quote it in full, for effect:

Look back, if once you're started in living, you're born into sin, then? And how do you atone? By locking yourself up in remorse for what you might have done? Or by living it through. By locking yourself up in remorse with what you know you have done? Or by going back and living it through. By locking yourself up with your work, until it becomes a gessoed surface, all prepared, clean and smooth as ivory? Or by living it through. If it was sin from the start, and possible all the time, to know it's possible and avoid it? Or by living it through. I used to wonder how Christ could really have been tempted, if He was sinless, and rejected the first, and the second, and the third temptation, how was He tempted? . . . how did He know what it was, with it there from the start, and possible all the time, to go on knowing it's possible and pretend to avoid it? Or . . . or to have lived it through, and live it through, and deliberately go on living it through.

This atonement is a recognizing of what one has done. It is not, however, a reversal or undoing of what has been done. One can avoid the effects of one's sin no more than one can their cause (i.e., for Wyatt, original sin). Like movement, one cannot help but keep doing it unto the very end. Indeed, also like movement, it is precisely the desire for authenticity, the stasis of a life lived without sin, that one is consumed by a madness that knows no end. Sin is atoned, then, one is made, in effect, sinless, not through the cessation or avoidance of sin, but by owning up to what one has done, what one is, and deliberately living out its consequences. It is, as it were, actively *knowing* one's end. Which is to say, it is recognizing the "end" that one has never quite left, the inevitability and accumulation of effects, be they those of our own creation or those created for us through the actions of others—though in reality, finally, they

are only ours individually. Instead of resisting and/or overcoming this end/sin, i.e., “pretend[ing] to avoid it,” atonement resides in recognizing one’s role in actively creating what was, paradoxically (?), always there; and in this recognition, borne of one’s falseness, one’s sin, one is no longer a slave to one’s end, but rather, *through* one’s falseness and sin, a participant in creating/counterfeiting what this end, good or bad, salvation or damnation, might yet become.