

---

The following essay by Jonathan Franzen appeared in *The New Yorker*. The following text has been transcribed from the 30 September 2002 issue.

---

## Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books

---

Jonathan Franzen

---

For a while last winter, after my third novel came out, I was getting a lot of angry mail from strangers. What upset them was not the novel — a comedy about a family in crisis — but some impolitic remarks I'd made in the press, and I knew that it was a mistake to send more than bland one-sentence notes in reply. But I couldn't help fighting back a little. Taking a page from an old literary hero of mine, William Gaddis, who had long deplored the reading public's confusion of the writer's work and the writer's private self, I suggested that the letter writers look at my fiction rather than listen to distorted news reports about its author.

A few months later, one of the original senders, a Mrs. M—, in Maryland, wrote back with proof that she'd done the reading. She began by listing thirty fancy words and phrases from my novel, words like "diurnality" and "antipodes," phrases like "electro-pointillist Santa Claus faces." She then posed the dreadful question: "Who is it that you are writing for? It surely could not be the average person who just enjoys a good read." And she offered this caricature of me and my presumed audience:

The elite of New York, the elite who are beautiful, thin, anorexic, neurotic, sophisticated, don't smoke, have abortions tri-yearly, are antiseptic, live in lofts or penthouses, this superior species of humanity who read *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*.

The subtext seemed to be that difficulty in fiction is the tool of socially privileged readers and writers who turn up their noses at the natural pleasure of a "good read" in favor of the invidious, artificial pleasure of feeling superior to other people. To Mrs. M—, I was "a pompous snob, and a real ass-hole."

One part of me, the part that takes after my father, who admired scholars for their intellect and their large vocabularies and was something of a scholar himself, wanted to call Mrs. M— a few names in reply. But another, equally strong part of me was stricken to learn that Mrs. M— felt excluded by my language. She sounded a little bit like my mother, a lifelong anti-elitist who used to get good rhetorical mileage out of the mythical "average person." My mother might have asked me if I really had to use words like "diurnality," or if I was just showing off.

In the face of hostility like Mrs. M—'s, I find myself paralyzed. It turns out that I subscribe to two wildly different models of how fiction relates to its audience. In one model, which was championed by Flaubert, the best novels are great works of art, the people who manage to write them deserve extraordinary credit, and if the average reader rejects the work it's because the average reader is a philistine; the value of any novel, even a mediocre one, exists independent of how many people are able to appreciate it. We can call this the Status model. It invites a discourse of genius and art-historical importance.

In the opposing model, a novel represents a compact between the writer and the reader, with the writer providing words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience. Writing thus entails a balancing of self-expression and communication within a group, whether the group consists of "Finnegans Wake" enthusiasts or fans of Barbara Cartland. Every writer is first a member of a community of readers, and the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness; and so a novel deserves a reader's attention only as long as the author sustains the reader's trust. This is the Contract model. The discourse here is one of pleasure and connection. My mother would have liked it.

To an adherent of Contract, the Status crowd looks like an arrogant connoisseurial elite. To a true believer in Status, on the other hand, Contract is a recipe for pandering, aesthetic compromise, and a babel of competing literary subcommunities. With certain novels, of course, the distinction doesn't matter so much. "Pride and Prejudice," "The House of Mirth": you call them art, I call them entertainment, we both turn the pages. But the two models diverge tellingly when readers find a book difficult.

According to the Contract model, difficulty is a sign of trouble. In the most grievous cases, it may convict an author of placing his selfish artistic imperatives or his personal vanity ahead of the audience's legitimate desire to be entertained — of being, in other words, an asshole. Taken to its free-market extreme, Contract stipulates that if a product is disagreeable to you the fault must be the product's. If you crack a tooth on a hard word in a novel, you sue the author. If your professor puts Dreiser on your reading list, you write a harsh student evaluation. If the local symphony plays too much twentieth-century music, you cancel your subscription. You're the consumer; you rule.

From a Status perspective, difficulty tends to signal excellence; it suggests that the novel's author has disdained cheap compromise and stayed true to an artistic vision. Easy fiction has little value, the argument goes. Pleasure that demands hard work, the slow

penetration of mystery, the outlasting of lesser readers, is the pleasure most worth having; and if, like Mrs. M—, you can't hack it, then to hell with you.

The Status position is undeniably flattering to the writer's sense of importance. In my bones, though, I'm a Contract kind of person. I grew up in a friendly, egalitarian suburb reading books for pleasure and ignoring any writer who didn't take my entertainment seriously enough. Even as an adult, I consider myself a slattern of a reader. I have started (in many cases, more than once) "Moby-Dick," "The Man Without Qualities," "Mason & Dixon," "Don Quixote," "Remembrance of Things Past," "Doctor Faustus," "Naked Lunch," "The Golden Bowl," and "The Golden Notebook" without coming anywhere near finishing them. Indeed, by a comfortable margin, the most difficult book I ever voluntarily read in its entirety was Gaddis's nine-hundred-and-fifty-six-page first novel, "The Recognitions."

Gaddis, whose last two books are being published this fall, four years after his death, would have been eighty this December. As much as any American writer of his generation, he frankly endorsed Status and disdained Contract. His methods were increasingly postmodern, but he had old-fashioned Romantic and high-modern notions of the artist as savior and the work of art as singular and sacred; the plight of both art and artist in a commercially mad America was at the center of his work. Which work is, itself, quintessentially difficult.

I read "The Recognitions" as a kind of penance, back in the early nineties. During the previous year, while my father, in a different time zone, was losing his mind, I'd written two treatments and four full drafts of an "original" screenplay. In lieu of actual dollar payments, I had the enthusiastic support of a Hollywood agent who, out of pity or negligence, never mentioned that my story bore a fatal resemblance to "Fun with Dick and Jane," which I hadn't seen. My story had double and triple crosses and characters who used prosthetic makeup to impersonate other characters. I lived in that state of rage which comes of doing sustained work that you know to be shoddy and dishonest. By September, when I finally abandoned the project, one wall of my study was scuffed and dented from the pencils, scripts, shoes, and phone books I'd been throwing at it. I borrowed money and left Philadelphia to sublet a dark, underfurnished Tribeca loft (yes, Mrs. M—, a loft), whose silence was disturbed only by the shadowy traffic of pigeons in the air shaft. I'd been hoping to write some fiction, but I was far too sick of audience-friendly narrative, of well-made plots and lovable characters. One evening, in a state of grim distraction, like somebody going out to score hard drugs, I walked up Sixth Avenue and bought "The Recognitions" in a beautiful, newly reissued Penguin edition.

Every morning for a week and a half, I went from the breakfast table to a beige ultrasuede sofa module, turned on a lamp, and read non-stop for six or eight hours. I had some professional curiosity about Gaddis, but a few hundred pages of "The Recognitions" would have satisfied it. I sat and read the extra seven hundred pages in something like a fugue state, as if planting my feet on a steep slope, climbing. I was reluctant to leave my ultrasuede perch for any reason. The only way I could justify sitting there and spending

borrowed money was to make a regular job, with regular hours, out of climbing the mountain.

There were quotations in Latin, Spanish, Hungarian, and six other languages to be rappelled across. Blizzards of obscure references swirled around sheer cliffs of erudition, precipitous discourses on alchemy and Flemish painting, Mithraism and early-Christian theology. The prose came in page-long paragraphs in which oxygen was at a premium, and the emotional temperature of the novel started cold and got colder. The hero, Wyatt Gwyon, was likable as a child ("a small disgruntled person"), but otherwise the author's satiric judgments and intellectual obsessions discouraged intimacy. It was a struggle to figure out what, or even who, the story was about; dialogue was punctuated with dashes and largely unattributed; Wyatt himself dwindled to a furtive, seldom-glimpsed pronoun ("he"); there came brutish party scenes, all-dialogue word storms that raged for scores of pages. The only portable nourishment that might have helped sustain me on my climb was a familiarity with Gaddis's influences, maybe a nice pemmican of T. S. Eliot and Robert Graves, which I hadn't thought to bring. I was alone and unprepared on a steep-sided, frigid, airless, poorly mapped mountain. Did I already mention that "The Recognitions" has nine hundred and fifty-six pages?

But I loved it. At the novel's hidden pinnacle, behind its clouds of subsidiary symbolism, beyond its blind canyons of Beat anti-narrative, is a story about the loss of personal integrity and the difficult work of regaining it. Wyatt, a talented painter and former seminarian in his early thirties, is living in New York, unhappily married, and scraping by as a hired draftsman. He has abandoned his painterly ambitions, possibly because a corrupt French critic panned his early work, but more likely because he is incredibly earnest and has never found an adequate reply to the condemnation of art which a puritanical great-aunt issued in his boyhood: "Our Lord is the only true creator, and only sinful people try to emulate Him." One day, in New York, an American capitalist and art collector named Recktall Brown proposes a Faustian bargain: Wyatt will forge the work of Flemish Old Masters, and Brown will sell them for huge sums. Wyatt agrees to the deal, but after some early success he proves lacking in the necessary spinelessness. He considers resuming his religious studies, but when he goes home to New England he discovers that his father, a Protestant minister, has taken up Mithraism and lost his mind. Wyatt thereupon embarks on a long pilgrimage of sorts, first in New York, where he tries to expose his own forgeries, and later in Europe. He is last seen leaving a Spanish monastery, on page 900, intending, "at last, to live deliberately." Having surmounted the American Protestant suspicion of art and survived the dangerous attractions of the American Protestant marketplace, he seems finally on his way to being a real painter.

At the time, on the mountainside, I wasn't conscious of clinging to the parallels between Wyatt's story and my own situation: our weirdly isolated lives in lower Manhattan, our failed attempts to sell out, our extremely earnest doubts about art, our craving for penance, our crazy fathers. I was just happy to have a good, hard book to read, and I was impressed with myself for managing it. Following Wyatt's pilgrimage became my own pilgrimage. The loft, for those ten days, in spite of the gurgling pigeons, was the quietest place I've ever been. It was profoundly, metaphysically quiet. By the time I reached the

last page of "The Recognitions," I felt readier to face the divorce, deaths, and dislocations that were waiting for me out in the sunlit world. I felt virtuous, as if I'd run three miles, eaten my kale, been to the dentist, filed my tax return, or gone to church.

One pretty good definition of college is that it's a place where people are made to read difficult books. Certainly, my own moments of peak collegiate learning occurred whenever I acquired new tools to unlock difficulty — when I was forced to figure out, all by myself, that Emily Dickinson sometimes meant the opposite of what her words said, or when my German professor asked us, with a mysterious grin, whether it was possible that Josef K. was *guilty*. To learn about irony, ambiguity, symbol, voice, and point of view, it made sense to read the most sophisticated texts.

Four years of sophistication had a cumulative effect. As a freshman, I thought it would be cool to make up stories for a living, to have that be my job, to see my name in print. By the time I was a senior, my ambition was to create literary Art. I took for granted that the greatest novels were tricky in their methods, resisted casual reading, and merited sustained study. I also assumed that the highest compliment this Art could be paid was to be taught in a university.

My parents didn't understand this. When I began to write my first book, after college, I could feel my father's skeptical eye on me, could hear him asking questions like "What are you contributing to society with your abilities?" In college, I'd admired Derrida and the Marxist and feminist critics, people whose job was to find fault with modern Systems. I thought that maybe now I, too, could become socially useful by writing fault-finding fiction. At the excellent public library in Somerville, Massachusetts, I identified a canon of intellectual, socially edgy white-male American fiction writers. The same names — Pynchon, DeLillo, Heller, Coover, Gaddis, Gass, Burroughs, Barth, Barthelme, Hannah, Hawkes, McElroy, and Elkin — kept showing up together in anthologies and in the respectful appraisals of contemporary critics. Though various in their styles, they all seemed to take as a given that something was new and strange and wrong about postwar America. They shared the postmodern suspicion of realism, summarized by the critic Jerome Klinkowitz: "If the world is absurd, if what passes for reality is distressingly unreal, why spend time representing it?"

To prove to myself, if not to my father, that I was engaged in a serious professional pursuit, I tried to join this guild. I was one of those skinny young men in scary glasses and thrift-store clothes whom you see on Boston or Brooklyn subways, young men who look like they possess massive amounts of data about small-label rock bands or avant-garde literature or video technology, the very size of these data-sets affording a kind of psychic protection. And Gaddis ought to have been my ideal. Gaddis, it was generally agreed, was the really smart, really angry, really forbidding Systems writer. "The Recognitions" was an ur-text of postwar fiction, both the granddaddy of difficulty and the first great cultural critique, which, even if Heller and Pynchon hadn't read it while composing "Catch-22" and "V.," managed to anticipate the spirit of both. Gaddis was the original intense, thrift-store-clad, monster-data-set young man whose ambition, if he let it show in public, would have singed his fellow subway riders' eyebrows.

My problem was that, with a few exceptions, notably Don DeLillo, I didn't particularly *like* the writers in my modern canon. I checked out their books (including "The Recognitions"), read a few pages, and returned them. I liked the *idea* of socially engaged fiction, I was at work on my own Systems novel of conspiracy and apocalypse, and I craved academic and hipster respect of the kind that Pynchon and Gaddis got and Saul Bellow and Ann Beattie didn't. But Bellow and Beattie, not to mention Dickens and Conrad and Bronte and Dostoyevsky and Christina Stead, were the writers I actually, unhiply enjoyed reading. If Coover's "The Public Burning" and Pynchon's "The Crying of Lot 49" moved me, it was mainly because I loved Coover's character Richard Nixon and Pynchon's Oedipa Maas. But postmodern fiction wasn't supposed to be about sympathetic characters. Characters, properly speaking, weren't even supposed to exist. Characters were feeble, suspect constructs, like the author himself, like the human soul. Nevertheless, to my shame, I seemed to need them.

It wasn't until the nineties, after I'd wasted a year on the screenplay, that I tried to rekindle my collegiate excitement about really hard books. I needed proof that I was a serious Artist, rather than the unwitting plagiarist of "Fun with Dick and Jane," and "The Recognitions" was perfect for the task. Reading the whole thing would also confer bragging rights. If somebody asked me if I'd read "The Sot-Weed Factor," I could shoot back, No, but have you read "The Recognitions"? And blow smoke from the muzzle of my gun.

In the event, nothing was as I'd expected. Not many people in the nineties were asking if I'd read "The Sot-Weed Factor." "The Recognitions," on the other hand — whether because of its virtues or because of the circumstances of my reading it — bowled me over. Its characters weren't sympathetic, but the wit and passion and seriousness of their creator were. I titled my third novel partly in homage to it.

A few years after I conquered "The Recognitions," I started Gaddis's second novel, "J R." I again bought the handsome Penguin paperback, and I devoted an hour or two each evening to reading it. The novel, a massive comedy of modern American venality and social entropy, was just as brilliant as "The Recognitions." Unfortunately, I no longer had the luxury or burden of entire days for reading. One night, I gave up in the middle of a four-page paragraph, and for the next few nights I was out late, and when I opened "J R" again I was lost. I set it aside, hoping to pick up the threads some other night. Two months later, I quietly reshelved it. The bookmark, a sassy Ticketmaster sleeve bearing an ad for "K-ROCK 92.3 FM (HOWARD STERN ALL MORNING / CLASSIC ROCK 'N' ROLL ALL DAY)," remained stuck on page 469, attesting to my defeat by "J R" or to "J R" 's defeat by my noisy life.

In Status terms, I'd simply failed as a reader. But I did have Contract on my side. I'd given the book weeks of evening reading, it still wasn't working for me, and now I was eager to read shorter, warmer books by James Purdy, Alice Munro, Penelope Fitzgerald, Halldor Laxness. Battling through "J R," I'd wanted to grab Gaddis by the lapels and shout, "Hello! I'm the reader you want! I love smart fiction, and I'm looking for a good

Systems novel. If you can't even show *me* a good time, who else do you think is going to read you?"

But this only made it worse that I had quit. Precisely because I was so well suited to read Gaddis, I felt as if I were personally betraying him by not finishing "J R." From a Congregationalist childhood I'd gone straight to a collegiate worship of Art, without noticing the transition and without ever quite buying either faith. One day a secretary called from the Congregational church to ask if I still wanted to be a member, and I said no, and that was that. But it's much harder to leave a small, embattled cult than a mainstream suburban church. Nothing in my Congregational experience had prepared me for the fanatical fervor, the guilt-provoking authority, of Mr. Difficult.

There's something medieval Christian about "The Recognitions." The novel is like a huge landscape painting of modern New York, peopled with hundreds of doomed but energetic little figures, executed on wood panels by Brueghel or Bosch, and looking incongruously ancient beneath layers of yellowed lacquer. Even the blue skies in the book (the phrase "Another blue day" recurs as a despair-inducing leitmotiv) glow like oil-paint skies in an art museum beyond whose walls, forgotten, is the age of H-bombs and Army-McCarthy hearings in which the novel was written. The names dropped are Hans Memling, not Harry Truman; Paracelsus, not Elvis.

And yet the book is absolutely of the early fifties. Peel away the erudition, and you have "The Catcher in the Rye": a grim winter sojourn in a seedy Manhattan, a quest for authenticity in a phony modern world. Improvising on the theme of art forgery, Gaddis fills his novel with every conceivable variety of fraud, counterfeiter, poseur, and liar. Unlike Holden Caulfield, though, the main characters of "The Recognitions" participate in the phyness themselves. The young literary poseur, Otto Pivner, is working on a play whose plot, he says, "still needs a little tightening up." The narrator glosses this lie in a tone that's fundamental to the novel, a tone at once unsparing and forgiving:

(By this Otto meant that a plot of some sort had yet to be supplied, to motivate the series of monologues in which Gordon, a figure who resembled Otto at his better moments, and whom Otto greatly admired, said things which Otto had overheard, or thought of too late to say.)

Wyatt Gwyon may be the romantic projection of the author's artistic aspirations ("How ambitious you are!" his wife, Esther, unhappily exclaims), but it's Otto who seems to embody Gaddis's own confusion, humiliations, and disappointments. Otto's biography overlaps with Gaddis's — both grew up fatherless, both spent time in Central America and returned to New York via banana boat with their arms, though uninjured, in picturesque slings — and I suspect that the book owes some of its mood of playful fabulation to Gaddis's implication in his own satire.

The one genuine artist in "The Recognitions" is a devoutly Catholic young composer named Stanley. Throughout the book, Stanley is working on a requiem for organ which he hopes to play in a fragile old church in northern Italy. In the very last pages, as the

novel circles back to Europe, Stanley travels to the church and, failing to understand the caretaker's warning against playing anything dissonant or too heavy on bass, begins to perform the requiem. The church collapses and kills him, and "The Recognitions" closes with some of its best-known lines: "most of his work was recovered too, and it is still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard, though seldom played."

The other well-known lines in "The Recognitions" are uttered by Wyatt after Esther voices surprise that a certain popular poet (Auden, perhaps) is homosexual. Rejecting her interest in "personal things about writers and painters" as a prurient distraction, Wyatt bursts out:

What is there left of him when he's done his work? What's any artist, but the dregs of his work? the human shambles that follows it around. What's left of the man when the work's done but a shambles of apology.

Gaddis portrays Esther as a "vagina dentata" eager to sleep with male artists and "absorb the properties which had been withheld from her." Wyatt retreats from her into coldness and abstraction, and Gaddis retreats from readers in much the same way — as if, for him, intercourse with the public were a pleasure that threatened to taint the purity of his motives. What mattered to Gaddis, who avowedly strove to write literature that would "last," was not the weak and fleshly artist but the afterlife. Although he had a family, many friends, and a busy social life in which he enjoyed literary gossip, he consistently denied his person to the public. Strict prohibitions like this are a way in which threatened religious minorities resist the seductions of the majority culture, and Gaddis in the fifties had Norman Mailer and Truman Capote as examples of writers who had been seduced. He chose, instead, to be a purist of his faith. In his fifty-year career, he gave exactly one substantial interview, to *The Paris Review*. He published one brief autobiographical essay. He gave no public readings.

Not that an excess of media attention was ever a big problem. "The Recognitions" was published by Harcourt, Brace in 1955, with a marketing strategy of "Everyone is talking about this controversial book!" It received fifty-five reviews, an impressive number by today's standards, and, as William Gass notes in his introduction to the Penguin edition, "Only fifty-three of these notices were stupid." *The New Yorker* gave the book a brief, smirking dismissal ("words, words, words"); Dawn Powell, in the *Post*, offered up an error-riddled sneer. Sales were about five thousand in hardcover, not bad for a challenging first novel by an unknown writer. But the only prize the book won was for its design, and it quickly disappeared from public sight.

"I almost think that if I'd gotten the Nobel Prize when *The Recognitions* was published I wouldn't have been terribly surprised," Gaddis told *The Paris Review* in 1986, adding that the book's reception had been "sobering" and "humbling." Maybe if the novel had met with greater acclaim Gaddis would have relaxed a little; maybe Wyatt's "what is it they want" tirade, like his other puritanisms, would have been revealed as a skinny-young-man attitude to be outgrown. I doubt it, though. The book is *about* the everyday world's indifference to the superior reality of art. Its last lines ("with high regard, though seldom



played") unmistakably prefigure its own reception. Nurturing the hope that your marginal novel will be celebrated by the mainstream — the Cassandra-like wish that people will thank you for telling them unwelcome truths — is a ritual way of insuring disappointment, of reaffirming your own world-denying status, of mortifying the flesh, of remaining, at heart, an angry young man. In the four decades following the publication of "The Recognitions," Gaddis's work grew angrier and angrier. It's a signature paradox of literary postmodernism: the writer whose least angry work was written first.

Some of Gaddis's rage appears to have been built-in. Born in 1922, he grew up with his mother in an old house in Massapequa, Long Island, and at a small Connecticut boarding school that he attended from the ages of five to thirteen. Five is young for boarding school, and five strikes me as a vital figure in Gaddis's biography. In "J R," an alter ego of Gaddis, an angry drinker named Jack Gibbs who was likewise sent to boarding school at the age of five, speaks of having "been in the way since the day I could walk," and he describes the loneliness of boarding school:

End of the day alone on that train, lights coming on in those little Connecticut towns stop and stare out at an empty street corner dry cheese sandwich charge you a dollar wouldn't even put butter on it, finally pull into that desolate station scared to get off scared to stay on . . . school car waiting there like . . . a God damned open hearse think anybody expect to grow up.

Gaddis as a young man was a rowdy, a drinker. Kept from the war by a kidney ailment, he studied English at Harvard and became president of the *Lampoon*, but in his senior year he was expelled without a degree after a run-in with the Cambridge police. He then bounced around Europe, Latin America, and New York during the seven somewhat shadowy years he was at work on "The Recognitions." In the year of its publication, he married an actress, Pat Black, with whom he soon had two children. Here the mood of his biography abruptly changes, the foreign locales giving way to fifties commerce and suburban life with kids. Like Melville a century before him, Gaddis went to work for a living in lower Manhattan. He did public-relations writing for I.B.M., Eastman Kodak, Pfizer, and the United States Army, among others. (An evaluator at I.B.M., recommending a "simpler style" for one of his projects, complained that "the whole of the text is perhaps too much an impenetrable mass.") For twenty years, even as the country's literary tastes were swinging from the realism dominant in the fifties to the zanier modes of "Portnoy's Complaint" and "Catch-22," Gaddis essentially dropped out of sight. He started and abandoned a "novel on business" and a play about the Civil War. He smoked a lot and drank a lot. His first marriage ended when he was living in Croton-on-Hudson, New York. Not until the end of the sixties did he scrape together enough grant money to return full time to the novel about business.

By the time the book was published, in 1975, the country's mood had caught up with him. "J R" received major and admiring review attention and won the National Book Award. The chunky paperback edition with its chunky title lettering was, like Patti Smith LPs and the "Moosewood Cookbook," a common sight in the secondhand stores and student-slum

apartments of my college years. The spine of "J R" was often suspiciously uncracked, however, or a strangely low used price was pencilled inside the cover, or the bookmark, which might be a sheet of rolling paper or a Talking Heads ticket stub, could be found on page 118, or 19, or 53, because Gaddis's fiction was, if anything, more difficult than ever. "J R" is a seven-hundred-and-twenty-six-page novel consisting almost entirely of overheard voices, with nary a quotation mark, no conventional narration of any kind, no "later that same evening," no "meanwhile in New York," not a single chapter break, not even a section break, but thousands of dashes and ellipses, another cast of dozens, and a laughably complicated plot based on Wagner's Ring and centered on a multimillion-dollar business empire owned and operated by an eleven-year-old Long Island schoolboy named J R Vansant.

J R is the grubby kid you have to laugh at because he's not old enough to hate, the preadolescent whose entire being is devoted to wanting stuff and to trading it for other, better stuff. First he does it with a classmate:

-Boy, what crap. That's all you've got is crap. What's this. -It's this club you can join if I recommend you. -What kind of club. -It's this club, see? You step inside and suddenly excitement surrounds you! You enter a world highlighted by the soft, flickering glow of open-hearth fireplaces . . . the attentive rustle of beautiful Bunnies-

Soon enough, he's trading with captains of industry. Early in the novel, J R's sixth-grade teacher takes the class to Wall Street to buy one share of Diamond Cable stock and "learn how our system works." While the class's new stock is losing ten per cent of its value in a few hours, and brokers and corporate officers are engaging in vile manipulations of markets and senators and foreign governments, and a corporate P.R. flak is laying on the smarm ("you and your other fellow Americans no longer play a passive part in our nation's great economy"), J R is studying the bylaws of Diamond Cable, asking dead-on questions like "What's a warrant?" and "What's that minus sign two and an eighth?" and ascertaining that the class's share of stock entitles it to file a shareholder's lawsuit. Within weeks, by threatening such a suit and accepting a cash settlement, J R, who conducts his business on a pay phone at the middle school, acquires his working capital. He buys a million and a half Navy-surplus wooden picnic forks, a bankrupt textile mill in upstate New York, and then an outward-spiralling galaxy of dubious concerns — a brewery, a printer, a publisher, a nursing home, a mortuary. Like his creator, J R is an obsessive. (Also like Gaddis, J R has no visible father. His mother is a busy nurse.) He pursues what his country teaches him is worth pursuing. He's devoid of charm, compassion, and scruples, but he doesn't know any better, and so you root for him against the novel's many corporate and legal sharks, who should know better but behave just as badly. "J R" anticipates Jonathan Lebed, the alleged teen-age market manipulator in New Jersey. It predicts the S. & L. crises and corporate raiders of the eighties ("Because like what good is this here pension fund doing just sitting there," J R wonders, "if we can like put it to work for them to get this here acquisition, you know?"), and it nicely demolishes President Bush's claim that Wall Street greed was an anomaly of the nineties.

The most sincere adult in the novel is, again, a young composer, a sweetheart named Edward Bast, whom J R dragoons into serving as the front man for his conglomerate. While Bast spends his days helping other characters (nobody, of course, helps him), the opera that he wants to compose is gradually scaled back to a cantata, to a piece for small orchestra, and, finally, to a piece for solo cello. The novel's maddening distractions recall the frustrations of Kafka's fiction; you can sense an author nightmarishly unable to find a quiet space to work. Bast tries to compose music in a Manhattan pied-a-terre that's a bitter cartoon of entropy; two broken faucets spew hot water day and night, the only clock runs backward, the rooms are piled high with boxes of unidentified crap, a never located radio dribbles nonsense, and bushels of junk mail keep arriving for J R, who has sent Bast a mechanized envelope opener that slices letters in half. In another part of town, Thomas Eigen, a P.R. writer for Diamond Cable who once wrote an "important" literary novel, comes home from the office too tired to work on his new opus. The apartment is a mess, his wife is angry, and his little boy insists that he play a board game:

-You got in the Heffalump's trap. Mama Papa got in the Heffalump trap. Mama? -She can't hear you David. Don't shout. -If I get red now I'll, yellow. I got yellow too look, I always win look, now look where I am and... -David you don't always win, nobody... -I won Mama four times today. Mama? -Stop shouting David... He held the bag down, -and I... got... -Black! You peeked. Papa you peeked! -Peeked?

"J R" is written for the active reader. You're well advised to carry a pencil with which to flag plot points and draw flow charts on the inside back cover. The novel is a welter of dozens of interconnecting scams, deals, seductions, extortions, and betrayals. Between scenes, when the dialogue yields briefly to run-on sentences whose effect is like a blurry handheld video or a speeded-up movie, the images that flash by are of denatured, commercialized landscapes — trees being felled, fields paved over, roads widened — that recall to the modern reader how aesthetically shocking postwar automotive America must have been, how dismaying and portentous the first strip malls, the first five-acre parking lots.

Indeed, one defense of Gaddis and his difficulty is that conventional fiction, driven by substantial characters and based on a soul-to-soul Contract between reader and writer, was simply inadequate to the social and technological crises that twentieth-century writers saw developing all around them. Both the moderns and the postmoderns resorted to a kind of literature of emergency. The moderns employed new, self-conscious methods to address the new reality and preserve the vanishing old one. The postmodern enterprise was even more radical: to resist absorption or cooptation by an all-absorbing, all-coopting System. Closure was the enemy, and the way to avoid it was to refuse to participate in the System. For Pynchon this meant flight and paranoia; for Burroughs it meant transgression. For Gaddis it meant being very angry — so angry that, at a certain point, he stopped making sense. Halfway through "J R," I bailed out. As one of his ex-followers, I wonder: Did I betray him, or did he betray me?

One frequent problem with the literature of emergency is that it doesn't age well. In the fifties and sixties, Gaddis and his cohort sounded alarms about the emergence of a world in which we've now been living for decades. Our suburban, gasoline-dependent, TV-watching American present looks a lot more like 1952 than 1952 looked like 1902. As the decades pass, the postmodern program, the notion of formal experimentation as an act of resistance, begins to seem seriously misconceived.

Fiction is the most fundamental human art. Fiction is storytelling, and our reality arguably consists of the stories we tell about ourselves. Fiction is also conservative and conventional, because the structure of its market is relatively democratic (novelists make a living one book at a time, bringing pleasure to large audiences), and because a novel asks for ten or twenty hours of solitary attentiveness from each member of its audience. You can walk past a painting fifty times before you begin to appreciate it. You can drift in and out of a Bartok sonata until its structures dawn on you, but a difficult novel just sits there on your shelf unread — unless you happen to be a student, in which case you're obliged to turn the pages of Woolf and Beckett. This may make you a better reader. But to wrest the novel away from its original owner, the bourgeois reader, requires strenuous effort from theoreticians. And once literature and its criticism become co-dependent the fallacies set in.

For example, the Fallacy of Capture, as in the frequent praise of "Finnegans Wake" for its "capturing" of human consciousness, or in the justification of "J R" 's longueurs by its "capture" of an elusive "postwar American reality"; as if a novel were primarily an ethnographic recording, as if the point of reading fiction were not to go fishing but to admire somebody else's catch. Or the Fallacy of the Symphonic, in which a book's motifs and voices are described as "washing over" the reader in orchestral fashion; as if, when you're reading "J R," its pages just turn themselves, words wafting up into your head like arpeggios. Or the Fallacy of Art Historicism, a pedagogical convenience borrowed from the moneyed world of visual art, where a work's value substantially depends on its novelty; as if fiction were as formally free as painting, as if what makes "The Great Gatsby" and "O Pioneers!" good novels were primarily their technical innovations. Or the epidemic Fallacy of the Stupid Reader, implicit in every modern "aesthetics of difficulty," wherein difficulty is a "strategy" to protect art from cooptation and the purpose of this art is to "upset" or "compel" or "challenge" or "subvert" or "scar" the unsuspecting reader; as if the writer's audience somehow consisted, again and again, of Charlie Browns running to kick Lucy's football; as if it were a virtue in a novelist to be the kind of boor who propagandizes at friendly social gatherings.

It's unfortunate for Gaddis that so many of his friends, scholars, and defenders participate in these fallacies. Joseph Tabbi, the editor of Gaddis's essays and a true believer in subversive difficulty, thinks that the Apocalypse — the death of the individual, the triumph of the System — is not merely imminent, it has already occurred without your even realizing it, so don't blame the orphic Gaddis for his inaccessibility. Tabbi's apologies are a nice example of five-alarm avant-gardism:

Gaddis's audience has been limited in part because readers trained on nineteenth-century realism miss in his work those signs and conventional symptoms by which characters may be recognized, too readily, as rounded and whole. Such conventional characters are agents within a bourgeois and industrial world that is now, in the United States, largely historical.

If you're having a good time with a novel, you're a dupe of the postindustrial System; if you still identify with characters, you need to retake Postmodernism 101. William Gass, in his introduction to "The Recognitions," names the childish thing that it's time to put behind us: "Too often we bring to literature the bias for 'realism' we were normally brought up with." Gass's defense of difficulty complements Tabbi's, but with greater sophistry and alliteration. "If the author works at his work," Gass writes, "the reader may also have to, whereas when a writer whiles away both time and words, the reader may relax and gently peruse." Gaddis's fiction could have used fewer friends like this and better enemies. Even Steven Moore, a Gaddis scholar whose criticism is a model of clarity and intelligent advocacy, lets his enthusiasm get the better of him. "J R," for Moore, is a "lean and economical" book, because its inferential, all-dialogue form forces readers to supply missing descriptions and information; the purpose of a novel being, I suppose, to capture and efficiently store data.

My small hope for literary criticism would be to hear less about orchestras and captivings and more about the erotic and culinary arts. Think of the novel as lover: Let's stay home tonight and have a great time. Just because you're touched where you want to be touched, it doesn't mean you're cheap; before a book can change you, you have to love it. Or the novelist as the cook who prepares, as a gift to the reader, this many-course meal. It's not all ice cream, but sauteed broccoli rabe has charms of its own.

Difficult fiction of the kind epitomized by Gaddis seems to me more closely associated with the lower end of the digestive tract. His detractors refer to his "logorrhea," but it's more accurate to characterize him as retentive-constipated to the point of being unreadable, sometimes even unintelligible. Edmund Wilson, in his Freudian phase, identified the playwright Ben Jonson as a classic anal-retentive writer, obsessed with excretion, money, lists, seedy underworlds, arcane words, obscure references. Wilson suggested that the best writers trust their talents, and he contrasted Jonson's cramped output with that of his friend and rival Shakespeare, whose "open and free nature" Jonson himself praised. "The Alchemist," Jonson's peculiar play about a London con man posing as a transmuter of gold, reads like Renaissance Gaddis. Both writers stuff far too many swindles into their plots, and for both of them money is the world's shit (Reck tall Brown!), at once fascinating and repellent.

If I'm sounding a little Freudian myself, it's because the first lines of page 523, the terminus of my second reading of "J R," look so much like impacted excreta:

across smalltite traces and has Nonny put in for a mineral depletion  
allowance tipped his hand to the FDA coming down hard on cobalt safety

levels now Milliken jumps in to protect home industry only thing they had besides sheep and Indians till he suddenly gets the idea his state is

Lean and economical? "J R" suffers from the madness it attempts to resist. The first ten pages and the last ten pages and every ten pages in between bring the "news" that American life is shallow, fraudulent, venal, and hostile to artists. But there never has been and never will be a reader who is unpersuaded of this "news" on page 10 but persuaded on page 726. The novel becomes as chilly, mechanistic, and exhausting as the System it describes. Its world is ruled by corporate white men who pursue their work with pleasureless zeal, casually sideline women and minorities, and invent difficult insider languages to discourage newcomers: how oddly like the book itself! (And how odd that Gaddis and his academic admirers reject Christian Puritanism only to demand that his readers renounce the sinful pleasures of realism and cultivate a selfless and pure love of Art!) Even the fascination of J R Vansant wanes by mid-novel. J R is an avatar of Bart Simpson, but Bart is incomparably better suited to our cultural environment than J R is. Even the best gags in "J R" wear you out before you're done with them. On "The Simpsons," the gags hit their target, the target feels pain, and next week there's a new episode.

The curious thing is that I suspect Gaddis himself would rather have watched "The Simpsons." I suspect that if anyone else had written his later novels, from "J R" onward, he would not have wanted to read them, and that if he had read them he would not have liked them. Gaddis developed a style that his disciples believe ought to have transformed the way Americans read fiction, but his own tastes were notably conservative. He had particular disdain for modern art. For the cover of his fourth novel, "A Frolic of His Own" (1994), he chose an abstract painting by his daughter, Sarah, without mentioning on the jacket that she'd painted it when she was five: "See, any child *can* paint like that." Steven Moore, no doubt with the best of intentions, has assembled an impressive list of what Gaddis did and didn't like to read. Basically, he didn't like art fiction. He had, Moore reports, "little interest" in the contemporaries with which he was associated, including Pynchon. "In general," Moore concludes, he seemed "more likely to pick up a novel like Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (which he found 'very funny') than novels as challenging as his own."

To serve the reader a fruitcake that you wouldn't eat yourself, to build the reader an uncomfortable house you wouldn't want to live in: this violates what seems to me the categorical imperative for any fiction writer. This is the ultimate breach of Contract.

If "J R" is dedicated to the proposition that America sucks, the message of his third novel, "Carpenter's Gothic" (1985), is that it really, really, really sucks. Gaddis himself conceded that the book was "an exercise in style," and its content is strictly paint-by-numbers. A telegenic Southern preacher turns out to be — a dangerous, venal hypocrite! A United States senator turns out to be — corrupt! The book is a husk. Unlike "The Recognitions," it was handsomely reviewed.

Gaddis's last real novel, "A Frolic of His Own," rambles on for nearly six hundred pages in illustration of how a system designed to create order (American law) can end up sponsoring disorder. The book is ideal for graduate study. It makes a banal but unexceptionable social point (we litigate too much in America), it's riddled with motifs, quotations, stories within stories, and countless allusions to Gaddis's own earlier works and other famous texts (better brush up on your Plato and Longfellow), and its only aesthetic weakness, really, is that much of it is repetitive, incoherent, and insanely boring. This novel, of course, got the warmest reviews of any of Gaddis's books, and was given one of those unofficial lifetime-achievement National Book Awards.

The best parts of "Frolic" are the legal opinions and the characterizations. Creating a character entirely through dialogue is like boxing with one arm behind your back, and I'm not persuaded by the Gaddistic argument that straining our imaginations makes a character any more real to us. (In fact, the work of reading Gaddis makes me wonder if our brains might even be hard-wired for conventional storytelling, structurally eager to form pictures from sentences as featureless as "She stood up.") Still, his inferentially drawn characters can be vivid. Oscar Crease is a fifty-something amateur playwright and part-time professor in whose disorderly person a comically large number of lawsuits intersect. He lives in the large old house of his childhood on Long Island, hopelessly surrounded by a lifetime's worth of miscellaneous papers: another cartoon of entropy. Functionally, Oscar is a baby. He spends much of the novel in a wheelchair, forever pawing at his girlfriend's blouse, trying to get his hands and mouth on her breasts, and sucking down wine day and night.

In "The Recognitions," a son grows up and vanishes. "Carpenter's Gothic," the book without children, is a book without hope. At the center of the other two novels is a very large child. In "Frolic," it's the selfish, unreasonable, self-pitying, incapable, insatiable Oscar, a pig in the role of king, a suffering artist who (ha ha!) happens to have little talent. Oscar claims your sympathy only to abuse it. His long play about the Civil War is obviously and unfunnily bad, but a hundred pages are devoted to reproducing the manuscript and another fifty to endless jawing about its relation to art, justice, and order. The novel is an example of the particular corrosiveness of literary postmodernism. Gaddis began his career with a Modernist epic about the forgery of masterpieces. He ended it with a pomo romp that superficially resembles a masterpiece but punishes the reader who tries to stay with it and follow its logic. When the reader finally says, Hey, wait a minute, this is a mess, not a masterpiece, the book instantly morphs into a performance-art prop: its fraudulence is the whole point! And the reader is out twenty hours of good-faith effort.

Regarding Gaddis's two posthumously published books, I feel the way I did when my father was in a nursing home. Unless you're a very good old friend, it's better not to see him suffering like this. The title of Gaddis's last novel, "Agape Agape," comes from a tonally arch and intellectually dubious essay that he once wrote about player pianos and mechanization in the arts. The book is mainly a free-form rant, however, *with the sentences, yes, run the sentences, run together, make it choppy, even easier than it looks but no what no, what matters is the art*. An unnamed novelist lies dying, his body a wreck

that has betrayed his spirit. He reproaches himself for his failures, denounces the populist "herd" for misunderstanding him, and worries that he's perceived as a mere "cartoon." But a cartoon is what "Agape Agape" is: one opaque, obsessive, citation-riddled, solipsistic paragraph deifying "the work" as "the only refuge" from one's painful humanity. The novel did manage to stab me with its final note, a note reminiscent of Gaddis's early dreams of a Nobel Prize —

That was Youth with its reckless exuberance when all things were possible pursued by Age where we are now, looking back at what we destroyed, what we tore away from that self who could do more, and its work that's become my enemy because that's what I can tell you about, that Youth who could do anything

— but I was moved for the very reasons that Gaddis denigrated throughout his career: because I was touched by the human shambles. I was thinking of the artist, not the art.

If you're still wondering if you missed something, some key to Gaddis that will unlock his difficulty, you can set your mind at rest by reading "The Rush for Second Place," a slender collection of his essays and occasional writings. Here you'll learn that Gaddis can't finish even a short nonfiction piece without breaking into a rant. You'll find essays consisting of strung-together quotes that you have to read carefully, twice, before you conclude that no argument (or, indeed, logic) is hidden in the string. You'll see that, sure enough, literary difficulty can operate as a smoke screen for an author who has nothing interesting, wise, or entertaining to say. You'll find not one reference to the pleasure of reading fiction. You'll learn, rather, that Gaddis believed that novels should improve the world — that good fiction is not about "the way things are" but about "the way things should be." You'll learn that the phrase "agape agape" refers to his belief that the world of Contract, the American world of dollars and machines, has ripped apart the charitable love (*agape*) to which early-Christian communities aspired.

Or something like that — it's a little unclear. I imagine Gaddis's disciples wagging their fingers at me, telling me I'm another Stupid Reader, explaining that the essays subvert my expectations of clarity, of pleasure, of edification; that I haven't got the joke yet. They have postmodern apologies for his difficulty, such as this one by Gregory Comnes:

The narrative enactment of this epistemology shows readers how hard work is a necessary precondition for having meaning in narrative by forcing readers to participate actively in the construction of narrative meaning, requiring them to bring information to the text to read what was never written.

They tell me, in other words, that I just need to *work a little bit harder*. To which I can only reply that there is no headache like the headache you get from working harder on deciphering a text than the author, by all appearances, has worked on assembling it; and that I'm beginning to get that headache.



And beginning, as well, to sound like Mrs. M—?

Like many other Contract-minded Americans, like the literary societies of a hundred years ago, like the book clubs of today, I understand that the Contract sometimes calls for work. I know the pleasures of a book aren't always easy. I expect to work; I *want* to work. It's also in my Protestant nature, however, to expect some reward for this work. And, although critics can give me pastoral guidance as I seek this reward, ultimately I think each individual is alone with his or her conscience. As a reader, I seek a direct personal relationship with art. The books I love, the books on which my faith in literature rests, are the ones with which I can have this kind of relationship. "The Recognitions," to my surprise, turned out to be a book like this.

After "The Recognitions," however, something happened to Gaddis. Some-thing went haywire. Whether it's true or not, I tell myself a story about a five-year-old boy who was "in the way," about a skinny young man who, like Hamlet inscribing his stepfather's villainy on his brain, assembled an encyclopedia of phyness unparalleled in literature. He confided his faith and hope to a nine-hundred-and-fifty-six-page-thick vault, and he gave the grownup world one chance to recognize him. When the world, inevitably, failed this test, he took his talent to the archetypically phony work of corporate P.R., as if to say, "You'll never catch me hoping again." The modern cry of pain became the postmodern bitter joke. The corporate P.R. work was vile, but at least he was conscious of its vileness. Indeed, the essence of postmodernism is an adolescent fear of getting taken in, an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony. The theory is compelling, but as a way of life it's a recipe for rage. The child grows enormous but never grows up.

I think there's a good story in this. To the extent that I believe it's the story of Gaddis himself, it softens my anger with him, dissolves it in sadness. A Gaddis like this is not remotely a cartoon, and a story like this would never fit into a "Simpsons" format. A story like this, where the difficulty is the difficulty of life itself, is what a novel is for.

---

[Back to Adilegian Index.](#)

---

Web design for Adilegian copyrighted 2006 [James Clinton Howell](#).

---



Cover image: Letter from William Gaddis, copyright to The William Gaddis Estate. Design and composition by Danielle Dutton. Printed on permanent/durable acid-free paper and bound in the United States of America. And whereas these themes—money, powerlessness, and the importance of art in bad circumstances—would turn up in later works by Gaddis—in, for example, *A Frolic of His Own*, which mainly concerns the legal apparatuses of American life—in no other work of Gaddis is the lancet as sharp as here. I, who (like you) loves to read because I love to read (and this is life enough for me), consumed *J R* as if life were happening nowhere else.