Encyclopedic Representations: William Gaddis's The Recognitions

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters

Many thanks:

Paul Schwaber, the College of Letters, Edward Mendelson, Mia and Mark & Max (for giving me *The Recognitions*).

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"A whole Odyssey within its boundaries, a whole Odyssey without Ulysses. Listen . . ." *The Recognitions*

I. Introducing *The Recognitions*

The Recognitions is a difficult novel. The Recognitions was not an immediate success. The Recognitions remains an underground classic. But above all, The Recognitions is written in a striking and complex prose, a brilliant encyclopedic novel that reflects a totality of life in mid-20th century America. In 1955, William Gaddis published The Recognitions. Gaddis had worked as a fact-checker at The New Yorker in his early adulthood but spent the years leading up to 1955 primarily working on his novel. Harcourt Brace took the risk and published his tome, with no commercial success. To this day, the novel is not sold in many major bookstores, and it rarely, if ever, makes it on to college courses' required reading; it does, however, have a small, dedicated readership. The question persists for so many fans and lovers of the novel: why has The Recognitions not achieved more public critical acclaim?

At 956 pages, the novel is difficult to summarize, and in a way, that proves a ridiculous task. However, due to the fact that *The Recognitions* is not a commonly read work, the following is a short plot and character description in order that the reader will be able to identify and understand the evidence and quotations used in this essay. Gaddis admits that *The Recognitions* is loosely based on the Clementine *Recognitions*, "a rambling third-century theological tract of unknown authorship, dealing with Clement's life and search for salvation." Gaddis saw this work as the origin of the Faust legend, a fact relayed by him both in interviews and in *The Recognitions*. The novel begins with Reverend Gwyon and his wife Camilla as they travel to Spain. Camilla contracts appendicitis, and when she is operated on by a

¹ Peter William Koenig, "Recognizing Gaddis' 'Recognitions," *Contemporary Literature*, 16.1 (Winter, 1975): 64.

charlatan doctor, she dies aboard the ship. Reverend Gwyon returns to the United States without his wife's body. The story then follows his son, Wyatt Gwyon, through his childhood, and from his failed religious studies in early adulthood to his artistic studies in Paris, and finally to his adult life in New York City with his new wife Esther. Wyatt is a draftsman, although he also restores old paintings. Esther is an aspiring writer who gets frustrated by Wyatt's aloofness and tends to be promiscuous. Although this narrative is introduced as the central plot, and at the moment the reader believes it is so, Gaddis fragments the plot into multiple other equally important plots. Wyatt meets Recktall Brown, an art dealer and Wyatt's "Mephistopheles," and the two pair up with Basil Valentine to form a business scheme in which Wyatt will create "old paintings" in the style of the Dutch masters. Wyatt becomes obsessed with "recreating" these forged old masterpieces and becomes a recluse. Meanwhile, the story follows a young playwright Otto, whose youth shows through in his writing and social interactions. Immersed in the art world of New York City, Otto meets Stanley, a devout composer, Agnes Deigh, a literary agent, Esme, an aspiring poet and Wyatt's model or muse, among countless others. Characters come and go, stories begin and sometimes end; often there is no closure in this chaotic web of tales.

Although there are numerous characters and countless plotlines, the novel focuses on the creation of art. Each character has his own medium and method; Wyatt paints flawless forgeries, Otto writes a verbose play, Esme blends words into poetry, and Stanley composes a religious piece of music. Minor characters are involved in film, advertising, television, and publishing. These new artistic media are contrasted with the old; television and film attempt to appropriate literature, while publishing

exploits the literary merits of talented writers. Gaddis portrays the modern world and the artists' attempts to come to terms with emerging artistic disciplines. Artists are also faced with artistic traditions, and thus Gaddis's characters search for authentic means of production in light of the past and present. Themes of forgery, imitation, repetition, and recreation stand as the centerpieces of the text. There is no central plot in *The Recognitions*, but Gaddis drives the text with the question: how is it possible to create authentic art?

The Recognitions was unlike any other contemporary novel of the fifties.

Although numerous critics have compared it to Joyce's *Ulysses*, Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, and to nearly every tome about questionable artists, Gaddis's novel was remarkable for its time. William Gass comments that "The Recognitions was a thunderclap. It was a dull decade, the fifties, but here was a real sound." Klaus Benesch remarks that *The Recognitions* was the "first American novel to deal at length with the quandaries of assessing originality in a cultural environment predicated on an abundance of copies, representations, and simulacra." Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of critics in 1955 and the decade that followed either disliked the novel or proved indifferent to it. It was not well received and took decades to obtain a significant *underground* following. Why this was the case will be worth investigating.

In *Fire the Bastards!* Jack Green gathers all the available reviews of *The Recognitions* within ten years of its publication. Green published his essay, "Fire the

² William H. Gass, "A Temple of Texts: Fifty Literary Pillars," (St. Louis: International Writers Center, 1991), 43.

³ Klaus Benesch, "In the Diaspora of Words: Gaddis, Kierkegaard, and the Art of Recognition(s)," *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, ed. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007) 30-31.

Bastards!" in three parts in his own journal, *newspaper*.⁴ Green was fascinated by *The Recognitions*; when he read all fifty-five reviews of the novel, it became exceedingly clear to him that many of the critics did not in fact read the entire book, and if they did, there is significant proof that they did not fully digest it. His essay argues two main points: first, that the critics did not do a proper job reviewing *The Recognitions*, regardless of what they actually thought of the book; and second, that the process of reviewing new literature no longer functioned properly. In order to illustrate these points, let us turn to several of Green's examples. I will mention that he opts not to use capitalization and he rarely uses punctuation, perhaps as a means to fight the conventional form critics use when writing reviews. On page one, he offers a "constructive suggestion: fire the bastards!" Green commands:

FIRE edward wagenknecht of the chicago tribune for his confession, or rather boast:

There are 956 pages in this book, and I must confess that I did not stay until the last had been turned.

What is "The Recognitions" about? Really, I have no idea.

It is not pleasant to be defeated by a book.⁶

The critics did not hide the fact that they did not finish the novel. Green is outraged by this fact because he believes that reading the novel is what the critics get paid for. Why does one bother to publish a review in the newspaper, if the critic is going to tell you he did not finish the book (and therefore you probably won't either?)? Green shows that many of the reviews merely rearranged the dust jacket summary in order to write their reviews.⁷ Other critics subscribed to what Green calls "the notetaking

⁴ Jack Green, Fire the Bastards! (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1992) vii.

⁵ Green 1.

⁶ Green 5.

⁷ Green 76.

trick,"8 where instead of reading the entire book, they skimmed pages and picked up various notes about the text, only to later link them together in a false manner. The critics are paid to be authorities for the public; they are to serve as representatives for the readers of America and therefore to accurately guide readers through the literary world to significant texts. Green argues, through quoting the early reviews, that the critics were hugely unfair to *The Recognitions*. He believes that "if they gave a good goddamn theyd spend a little extra on the real job of reviewing—to see that great books are bought *now* & not, like *the recognitions* will, years & years after publication."9

Green's strident analysis is useful because it presents two clear problems: first, that *The Recognitions* was not treated fairly by the critics solely by the methods employed (rather than what was actually written, regardless of its positive or negative review); second, that the art of criticism in the fifties had become flawed. Although the latter point provides a cause for the former, I believe there is a characteristic inherent in the encyclopedic nature of *The Recognitions* that turned both the critics and the public away from the text. Take, for example, the case of Gaddis's second novel, JR.¹⁰ After the commercial failure of *The Recognitions*, it took Gaddis twenty years to publish again. However, this time Gaddis's work did receive positive attention and praise. JR won the National Book Award in 1976, despite the fact that it was nearly as long as *The Recognitions* (726 pages rather than 956) and arguably *more difficult* to read. During those twenty years, Gaddis worked in business, which he admits influenced the plot of JR. Again, to summarize where summary is nearly

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⁸ Green 11.

Green 10.

¹⁰ William Gaddis, JR (New York: Penguin, 1975).

ridiculous: JR follows a young boy who becomes involved in the world of big business through telephone calls and letters. It is a satire of the money hungry world, portrayed through the eyes of an innocent, though ambitious, eleven-year-old. The text is written without indication of who is speaking and therefore the reader is challenged to learn to identify the characters through their voices rather than by traditional signs. If JR could win such praise despite the fact that it shared most of *The Recognitions'* immediate difficulties, such as size and density, then those factors cannot be the obstacles that deterred the public from *The Recognitions*. Let me now point to a passage from the end of *The Recognitions* that I believe is one of Gaddis's hints that the critic or the reader should not (but will) get hung up on the sheer size of the text. A man notices a large book that another man has on his table. The dialogue reads:

-You reading that? [...]

-No. I'm just reviewing it, said the taller one, hunching back in his green wool shirt. A lousy twenty-five bucks. It'll take me the whole evening tonight. You didn't buy it, did you? Christ, at that price? Who the hell do they think's going to pay that much just for a novel. Christ, I could have given it to you, all I need is the jacket blurb to write the review.

It was in fact quite a thick book. A pattern of bold elegance, the lettering on the dust wrapper stood forth in stark configurations of red and black to intimate the origin of design. (For some crotchety reason there was no picture of the author looking pensive sucking a pipe, sans gêne with a cigarette, sangfroid with no necktie plastered across the back).

-Reading it? Christ no, what do you think I am? I just been having trouble sleeping, so my analyst told me to get a book and count the letters, so I just went in and asked them for the thickest book in the place and they sold me this damned thing. (*The Recognitions* 936-937)

Let this passage serve as my introduction to *The Recognitions*. The tone is playful, yet extremely satirical. Gaddis foresaw the critical response to *The Recognitions*, "the thickest book in the place," and includes a critique of the critics ("all I need is the

jacket blurb to write the review"), the readers ("Reading it? Christ no"), and authors ("looking pensive sucking a pipe") within the text itself. He ridicules these two men who remain on the surface of literature. Therefore, we will not take literature lightly, and instead I will attempt to provide a rigorous account of *The Recognitions*. In this essay, I will explore the structure of encyclopedic narratives and how *The Recognitions* fits into this category. Then I will do a close reading of the text, to show how the novel describes different methods for the production of art. Finally, I trust it will become clear how the structure of *The Recognitions* as an encyclopedic novel alienated readers, while at the same time it remains the key to unlocking Gaddis's message about authentic creation.

II. The Structure of Encyclopedic Narratives

Literature is a force that can stand on its own. It is possible to read simply within the margins of a work of literature in order to interpret it. As far back as Aristotle, however, philosophers and critics have tried to define and classify its essential elements. In the past, this categorizing work dictated the boundaries for writers and helped to determine which works were exceptional. Through the ages, these imposed structures were tested and extended, and the philosophy of literature became more supplemental than authoritative. Although it is a common practice for critics and academics to categorize literature according to specific genres or forms, it is not always clear what these labels add to a reader's understanding of a text. For many traditional works, I would argue that knowledge of their genres adds little or nothing for the reader. There are two specific things categorizing can do. First, if the reader is aware of a work's genre before she starts reading, she will project the criteria of the genre onto the text; for example, if the reader knows the text is a mystery, she may foresee a crime, a detective, an investigation, and a solution. Certain writers use the reader's expectation of genre to skew the plot. If the reader expects certain criteria of that genre, the author can then satisfy them or build something different. This alteration can produce exciting results, which break from expectations and force the reader to examine what a genre's function is for a text. Second, there is something to gain from learning about the text's genre after an initial reading. The reader uses genre to impose a structure upon a work, which can then organize and guide the reader toward an interpretation. I am not suggesting that the reader should do this first; I find that it is better to do a "blind" initial reading of a text. Great literature is always ripe for multiple readings, and I believe the first reading should focus on text itself, whereas second or third readings can gain insight from knowledge of genre or other literary criticism. This imposed, yet flexible, structure may bring out meanings that were not apparent in the initial reading. In this chapter, I will examine the recently proposed genre of "encyclopedic narrative" in order to lay a foundation for a discussion of *The Recognitions*.

In "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon" (1976), Edward Mendelson defines a literary form that he calls encyclopedic narrative. 11 Critics and academics now use this term without defining what they mean by it; Mendelson, however, gives criteria for what the structure typically involves. It is important to keep in mind that these are retrospective criteria and that Mendelson does not mean a novel without one is therefore necessarily excluded. Above all, the encyclopedic novel should directly reflect the society in the era in which it is produced. The era is not defined by a specific number of years, but many encyclopedic texts are written within ten or twenty years of when they are set to take pace. For example, *Ulysses* is set in 1904, but Joyce wrote it between the years of 1916-1922; The Recognitions takes place in the years after 1945 and was published in 1955. This distance is removed enough from the original time period so that the author may reflect upon it, while at the same time it is close enough that he will not lose sight of the era. Encyclopedic narratives categorize and explore various disciplines such as art, science, history, and religious thought. These texts seem self-aware and devote space to discussing the process of reading and writing. Mendelson argues that even though

¹¹ Edward Mendelson, "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon," *MLA* 91 (1976) 1267-1275.

other works might have similar characteristics, there are only seven pure examples of the encyclopedic form: Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the latest addition, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Mendelson does not go into extensive detail about how each book perfectly fits but rather picks scattered examples to support his argument. He devotes a significant portion of the essay to illustrating that *Gravity's Rainbow* now belongs in the category, although it is unclear why he chooses Pynchon's work over one of Gaddis's. He does not mention Gaddis in the essay. Perhaps Mendelson was not familiar with *The Recognitions* at the time he wrote the essay.

The first condition he sets out is that encyclopedic works reflect a totality of understanding of their cultures and time periods. Encyclopedic narratives thus have a specific relationship with the objective world outside the margins of the text. He explains: "Encyclopedic narratives occupy a special historical position in their cultures, a fulcrum, often, between periods that later readers consider national prehistory and national history." The author records a collective consciousness at a moment when the society is in a process of change. Whereas *Ulysses* illustrates a pivotal moment for Modernism, *Gravity's Rainbow* is often said to be one of the first postmodern novels. Encyclopedic narratives focus on what the society is concerned with, but also the manner in which societies communicate with each other.

Mendelson continues that an encyclopedic author is "one whose work attends to the whole social and linguistic range of his nation, who makes use of all the literary styles

¹² Mendelson 1267.

¹³ Mendelson 1267.

and conventions known to his countrymen, whose dialect often becomes established as the national language." The author uses the language and discourse of the society in order to speak directly to that group of people. Finally, the encyclopedic novel imitates the everyday life that surrounds it at that particular moment; in this way, it speaks directly to its contemporary readers. There are chapters on sexual relationships, religious practices, and *Ulysses* even dares to show the reader a moment of base everydayness: defecating. It thus presents the public and the private modes of existence with equal weight. As a whole, encyclopedic novels attempt to catalogue the content and form of a particular society.

Encyclopedic narratives provide information about a range of disciplines. Mendelson argues that each of these seven works attempts an account of the technology or science of the times, the art outside the realm of fiction, and "name vast numbers of jobs and professions, all the varieties of work and labor." The list of topics discussed does not end here, though, and the works do not mention just one or two things in each field. In *Ulysses*, Joyce gives a full account of Irish politics around the turn of the century but also finds space to present a wide range of religious and philosophical ideas as well. Encyclopedic novels do not have a central interest in any one particular field or area of life, but in turn, that does not compromise their extensive representation of the many fields it does concern itself with. These novels are like small cities of knowledge, with many parts working together to form the totality of an era.

Mendelson 1267-1268.
 Mendelson 1270-1271.

Encyclopedic narratives utilize numerous literary forms and languages in order to catalogue the history of narratives and of language. Mendelson suggests that each encyclopedic novel tries to incorporate "the conventions of heroic epic, quest romance, symbolist poem, Bildungsroman, psychomachia, bourgeois novel, lyric interlude, drama, eclogue and catalogue,"16 among others. Don Quixote tries to turn his story into a chivalric romance even though *Don Quixote* as a novel reflects the form of a framed tale. In *Ulysses*, characters recite poems and sing songs, or the entire form shifts from prose to theatrical dialogue. These shifts do not require smooth transitions; rather, like an encyclopedia itself, the experiments with literary form are placed next to each other, side-by-side, without so much as a clue from the author as to why this shift has taken place. Encyclopedic narratives are a forum for gaining knowledge about the history of literary forms, as well as finding them beautifully executed within a "real" text of literature. This criterion is problematic, though, for the encyclopedic narrative as a genre. No other genre subsumes so many others within it; encyclopedic narratives are collections of genres, and therefore one could argue it is not a pure genre. Although there is not a definite format for the encyclopedic narrative in the way there is for a mystery story or epic poem, encyclopedic texts share similar characteristics which Mendelson brings together in his essay. In addition to the inclusion of multiple genres, Mendelson considers these narratives to be "polyglot books that provide a history of language." Encyclopedic authors jump from one language to another as quickly as they do between disciplines or literary forms. Even though the encyclopedic narrative aims to reflect a specific

¹⁶ Mendelson 1270.

¹⁷ Mendelson 1273.

culture, it must make reference to the sub-cultures or norms that exist within it; one of the ways it accomplishes this is by the use of foreign language. The authors make no attempt to translate these phrases into the work's primary language. A reader who is unfamiliar with this other language will be thrown into the environment that the novel reflects; the reader has the same lack of information as the characters. A reader is consumed by the text. Without translations, encyclopedic authors make it difficult for their readers, but that is perhaps the point. They want readers to actively participate with the text and engage in thought. In order to understand the work, the reader must search passages for content clues, or it requires that the reader seek out the translation. In both cases, the author has taught the reader that he cannot accept what is on the page without constantly questioning the text.

Similarly, the encyclopedic narrative gives space to itself. It recognizes and reflects its own size, structure, and function as indeed encyclopedic. There are several examples of this consciousness: the author can be present in the action, a character may refer to the author, or finally the book can refer to its specific nature in some way. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante serves as both author and main character. In order to be able to recognize themselves, "Encyclopedic narratives usually enter their cultures from a position of exile or illegality." Both Stephen's and Bloom's perspective is an alienated one. Even though they clearly participate in Dublin society, they describe the world beautifully from their (self-imposed?) positions as outsiders. Mendelson explains that these novels "provide an image of their own scale by including giants or gigantism." This point is not quite explained, even though at first glance it seems to

¹⁸ Mendelson 1274.

¹⁹ Mendelson 1271.

ring true. Encyclopedic narratives do have moments of excess, which could be translated as gigantism. *Moby Dick* has a literal and metaphorical "giant" whale; Ulysses has a chapter that refers to the Cyclops. However, I do not believe there is a metaphorical image in all novels that represents the giant. Overall, the significance of the encyclopedic text's awareness of itself is twofold; on the one hand, it forces the reader to understand the novel's connection to the reality in which it is created. It is difficult to discuss the *Divine Comedy* or *Ulysses* without a discussion of their time periods or the author's place in that history. On the other hand, this consciousness forces the reader to reflect on the process of reading and writing in general. When one reads a novel, one often gets lost in the plot or the fictional world it presents. However, the encyclopedic form is a constant reminder that there is an author and a reader, and thus the reader oscillates between being consumed by the text and stepping away from the text to see its existence as a text.

There are several other characteristics that are commonly attributed to the encyclopedic form, although it is unclear if these can really be considered *criteria* for classifying a novel as one. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye notes that an encyclopedic narrative must include "an ambivalent female archetype [...] sometimes benevolent, sometime sinister, but usually presiding over and confirming the cyclical movement." This female figure is a shared theme between essayists of the encyclopedic novel; In "Going Belly Up: Entries, Entrees, and the All-Consuming Encyclopedic Text" (1996), Richard Hardack describes how this absent, though

²⁰ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) 322.

mysterious and even mystical female figure is a necessity for the encyclopedic man.²¹ He argues that encyclopedic texts, like *Ulysses*, are inherently male both in subject matter and in form. Hardack emphasizes the role of the female as the distant and yet highly significant "other" for the male characters of these narratives. He argues that men are the heroes of encyclopedic texts, but that they must constantly define themselves by absence of female characters.²² We will revisit this specific criterion in a brief discussion of *Ulysses*. For now, the significance remains strictly to illustrate how many different characteristics are associated with the genre. Even though these distinctions are true, or even only interesting, their lack of unity may well cause unease. How can a genre have characteristics that are so apparently fragmented?

To this day, Mendelson's article remains a reference point for academic discussion of the encyclopedic novel. As we have seen, there are several other studies that mention the encyclopedic narrative, but overall it remains a genre whose boundaries are suggested rather than defined or synthesized. In the following chapters I will argue that allowing for the form of encyclopedic narrative proves useful for interpreting *The Recognitions*, as well as *Ulysses* and in Mendelson's opinion, *Gravity's Rainbow*. Nonetheless, one must keep in mind that this genre has been formulated in the 20th century. It was not a defined concept before that time, and before the 18th century the idea of encyclopedic knowledge did not exist with that label. This term is imposed upon texts like the *Divine Comedy* and *Don Quixote* retrospectively; their authors did not know texts that belonged to this specific tradition when they wrote them. Instead, they responded to literature as a whole. 20th-

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²² Hardack 136.

²¹ Richard Hardack, "Going Belly Up: Entries, Entrees, and the All-Consuming Encyclopedic Text," *Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 7.2-3 (1996): 131-151.

century authors like Gaddis or Pynchon were likely aware of this distinction *before* they wrote, and therefore were responding to what was then outlined as an encyclopedic tradition (and it shows in *The Recognitions*, for Gaddis frequently quotes the *Divine Comedy*). I mention this not because I believe this imposition is a problem for *The Recognitions* (and my interpretation), but rather to point out that it might in fact be misleading to interpret pre-20th century texts on the basis of a 20th-century literary distinction.

Although Mendelson describes the encyclopedic narrative as its own genre, it shares similarities with the form of Menippean satire. Numerous works of literature that have been characterized as encyclopedic are at some point also referred to as Menippean satires. Don Quixote, for example, is commonly associated with both of these literary forms. What distinguishes these two forms as separate genres? Whereas Mendelson argues that the encyclopedic narrative is first recognizable in the *Divine* Comedy, Menippean satire originates in antiquity. The idea of the encyclopedic narrative is retrospective, while the concept of Menippean satire existed before and after great works in its style. Frye explains, "the Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes [...] [it is] naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent."²³ For example, in *The Consolation of* Philosophy, a work often characterized as a Menippean satire, Boethius uses himself as a character through which philosophical ideas are brought forth. Boethius, as a character in the work, has a dialogue with Philosophy, and he questions her about the existence of God and fortune. 24 Through this dialogue, certain ideas are expounded

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²³ Frye 309.

²⁴ Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (London: Penguin, 1999).

and conclusions may be drawn; however, none of those ideas necessarily reflect
Boethius the man. In this focus on mental attitudes, the Menippean satire "presents us
with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern."²⁵ This focused
content is usually manifested through a dialogue, and the structure shifts between
prose, poetry, or other literary forms. In this way, the Menippean satire may share an
aesthetic form similar to the encyclopedic narrative; when focused on content,
however, one can see that the Menippean satire has a distinct focus whereas the
encyclopedic novel ranges widely.

Now we may ask: what exactly can the concept "encyclopedic narrative" do for one's understanding of a text? Before we get to the discussion of *The Recognitions*, it will therefore be useful to examine Joyce's *Ulysses* as an encyclopedic novel. I mean to use *Ulysses* not to contrast the content of the two works, but rather to compare what the knowledge of each work's classification as an encyclopedic novel does for one's interpretation of the text. According to Mendelson, and most critics will agree, *Ulysses* is an encyclopedic text. It describes and categorizes the entirety of life in Dublin through the retelling of a single day in 1904. In different chapters, Joyce illustrates numerous literary forms, ranging from the inner monologue, free indirect discourse, sentimental tale, parody, song, parable, a play, and returns to inner monologue. Furthermore, no aspect of daily life is taboo; daily chores and bodily functions are exposed. As Leopold Bloom suggests to the reader, while thinking of something else, "instead of talking about nothing. Then I will tell you all."²⁶ The only way to actually say "something," or to describe value through

²⁵ Frye 310

²⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1990) 372.

language, is to "tell you all." If the narrator does not indicate where value lies, the reader becomes a participant in the narrative as the creator of meaning. The reader is given all the facts of the reflected life as they happen, as one is given in everyday life; from there, she goes about building systems of meaning and value. With this responsibility, I propose, one can use the criteria of the encyclopedic novel to interpret *Ulysses*. This is not to say that this interpretation will necessarily be the "right" or the only interpretation but rather one that may inspire new ideas and thoughts about the novel and the possibility for literature itself.

Hardack emphasizes the role of the female as the distant yet highly significant "other" for the male characters of these narratives. He explains, "The narrative will customarily focus on two inextricably-linked male companions or related figures [...] who define themselves without the company of women, save when they are invoked as still distant and monstrously reproductive creatures." Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom are these two "inextricably-linked" figures who only unite near the very end of the novel, and even then only briefly. The women who consume their thoughts are exactly as Hardack describes; they are relatively absent from the denouement of the story, and they represent the possibility for physical reproduction. Women have the power of sexual reproduction, whereas men can only attempt to imitate it with repetition or material reproduction. Hardack refers to men's production as their ability to "endlessly reproduce only the same thing; a grid of analogies replaces the reproduction of difference." Stephen is consumed by thoughts of his mother's death. He uses the art of writing as his attempt to reproduce. Bloom is

²⁷ Hardack 136.

²⁸ Hardack 136-137.

concerned with Molly, the mother of his daughter and dead son, Rudy. Bloom sees Rudy's death as a failure to reproduce on his part; he is fascinated by birth, and yet he cannot himself reproduce. He uses his job in advertising as a mode of reproduction, although like Stephen, this is a mere attempt. The task that women possess as creators, rather than merely replicators, is what makes women both actually and metaphorically "distant and monstrous" for men of encyclopedic narratives. The male characters are at the same time afraid and in awe of women for a power they will never possess.

Hardack argues further that not only is the distant female one of many criteria required for encyclopedic narrative, but that the genre is itself inherently masculine. The form of the text itself is male because it is unable to point to an origin. The size and scope of this genre forces the reader to get lost in the text; often one cannot tell where one has come from, or where one must go next. The encyclopedic narrative is an ambiguous space that has lost its origin. In addition to the inability of the male characters to give birth or create an origin, Hardack explains, "encyclopedic birth' always longs for an origin it cannot possess, an origin it attributes to a female nature it has dispossessed."²⁹ In *Ulysses*, the narrative describes a single day in Dublin. One could argue that it has a beginning at eight o'clock when Stephen starts his day; however, this day is just like any other and is a continuation of time from all days, months, and years prior. It is a snapshot, and within that snapshot it is difficult to try to find a true origin of the stories of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus. Finally, Hardack argues, "Always a kind of second delivery, an imitation or repetition, the encyclopedic anatomy is an enormous male body that substitutes for the body of

²⁹ Hardack 147

nature. It also creates without physical copulation, but not in the pure manner of original nature: instead, it creates through the manipulation of forms of reproduction."³⁰ The form itself must find ways to reproduce since it is inherently male. It does this by experimenting with different types of writing, using detailed accounts of facts and fictions, and by constantly referring back to the fact that it is itself a novel. Hardack classifies encyclopedic novels in this way, and although *Ulysses* fits this category, it will be important to look at the moments when Joyce breaks away from this arguably male form.

Although Joyce devotes most of the book to his two male figures, he concludes the book with an inner monologue by Molly Bloom. Until then, women did not get a significant say in the encyclopedic narrative; Hardack would argue that this is because the genre is itself highly masculine. Therefore, it will be important to explore Joyce's (unconscious?) choice to push the boundaries of the literature. Molly's soliloquy is an acute and brilliant rendering of a female psyche, but its significance goes far beyond that for the genre of encyclopedic narratives. The narrative could have ended with Bloom kissing Molly's buttocks and falling asleep. However, Joyce wants to give a woman a voice or "epic attention" for the first time. Thereby, he extends the genre. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante uses Beatrice as his distant and magical female figure toward whom he is constantly striving. When Dante meets Beatrice in Purgatory, she is defined only by her position in his narrative rather than having her own thoughts and opinions. She disappears as Dante reaches the height of Paradise, before one can truly hear her "voice." In all encyclopedic

³⁰ Hardack 148.

³¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C.H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

narratives prior to *Ulysses*, women are shaped by males and the significance of their place in the texts is based on male action. By concluding with Molly's perspective on the male figures of the novel, among other things, Joyce breaks the norm. Molly is no longer distant and mysterious; the reader seems to overhear her thoughts, which is even more intimate than hearing them spoken. Molly is fully present in the narrative and her voice is not muddled or confused by the words of others, specifically of men. Another significant counterpoint to Hardack's classification is that Molly's presence does provide the novel with a character who is capable of true reproduction. She thinks about how she is still young and could still give birth even after her loss of Rudy. Therefore, it is significant that the novel ends with her. It gives hope that reproduction will be possible in the future, both for the encyclopedic narrative and also as a possibility for Bloom and Molly. Joyce's brilliant rendering of Molly's inner consciousness ushers in a new era of possibility.

If one follows my argument, one will understand that the genre label helps *Ulysses* transcend the tradition of encyclopedic narrative and open the door for new possibilities. Hardack's fascinating claims about encyclopedic narratives thus seem slightly exaggerated, but naming and characterizing the encyclopedic text can help us to explore new interpretations. After this discussion of the encyclopedic text, we arrive at *The Recognitions*.

III. The Recognitions as Encyclopedic Narrative

As we have seen, encyclopedic narratives have specific characteristics that distinguish them from other genres of literature. We have also discussed the significance of classifying genres. Therefore, it is time we investigate *The* Recognitions. This novel is gigantic in scope, as well as in content. I will argue that The Recognitions is an encyclopedic narrative through a broad reading of the text, and I will show that it is conscious of that characterization. I will also offer a close reading of certain passages, themes, and prominent characters. Most of the scholarly essays about *The Recognitions* assume that their readers have in fact read the novel. However, for this essay I will assume that my reader has not, and therefore I will provide considerable background and contextual information. I chose to include long passages of the text, so the reader may become familiar with Gaddis's writing style, in addition to the peculiarities of the numerous characters. In this chapter, I will introduce certain aspects of the plot and text itself, and in the next chapter I will synthesize and interpret this information in order to understand why I believe it is enlightening to classify and read the novel as encyclopedic.

The criteria from Mendelson and Hardack's essays will serve as foundations for my investigation. As Mendelson describes, encyclopedic texts must reflect a totality of understanding of their culture and time period. *The Recognitions* is set primarily in New York City during the mid-20th century. Its form reflects the city. As Wyatt's grandfather, the Town Carpenter, explains,

Do you know what happens to people in cities? I'll tell you what happens to people in cities. They lose the seasons, that's what happens. They lose the extremes, the winter and summer. They lose the means, the spring and the fall.

They lose the beginning and end of the day, and nothing grows but their bank accounts. Life in the city is just all middle, nothing is born and nothing dies. Things appear, and things are killed, but nothing begins and nothing ends [...] you don't get heroes out of the cities. (*The Recognitions* 418)

Although the Town Carpenter describes actual cities, this metaphor extends to the structure of the encyclopedic narrative, which portray a continuation of reality, rather than framing a story to represent a specific slice of life. Encyclopedic means entirety; encyclopedic knowledge does not favor certain parts of life over others. In this system, it is the reader, rather the writer or compiler of these facts, who creates value. Gaddis's job is to present the reader with the entirety of life as he conceives of it, rather than to directly tell the reader what to think about these parts. The reader inhabits this city, is entwined in its large web of facts and fictions. One can only distinguish the seasons by a Christmas party or by the sweat on one's brow. This chaos is reality, and one must live *The Recognitions* in order to read it. From New York City, the story diverges to a banana plantation in Central America, a rural town in the American south, and on several trips to Europe. These diversions are scattered and random; they are important, though, because they illustrate how no modern city stays within itself, and no encyclopedic novel stays within the boundaries of its text. The novel employs a significant amount of dialogue, which reflects typical middle class, mid-century citizens of New York. The dialect is not elevated, and characters often trail off mid-sentence or have trouble enunciating their thoughts. Gaddis frequently uses ellipses, which mimics the uncertainty of language that one finds in everyday conversation. To perpetuate this realism, Gaddis spells words phonetically, or when he wants to emphasize certain syllables, he will italicize or add additional letters inside the word itself. In one example, Stanley walks down the street and

A man approached unsteadily rubbing a rough cheekbone with a rough hand. The lucidity of the blue day rising over him seemed to prompt him to clarify the immediate issue of that turbid pool which, if questioned later on, he would call his memory, but found now resident in his cheekbone, where the blood was already dry. –He was Boyman, the man muttered, –then I must be Go . . . ro . . . gro . . . go . . .

Crang . . . crang What was it? With [Stanley's] last breath of consciousness he realized he had left his glasses on the table beside her uptown bed. *Crang crang crang* came the drums over the hill and into sight. They were playing *Onward Christian Soldiers*. (*The Recognitions* 342)

The narration is dense in contrast to the simple exclamations and thoughts of the characters. The man whom Stanley encounters on the street hesitates or stutters, and from that pause the narration jumps to Stanley's musical inner monologue. There is repetition and uncertainty; both techniques reflect a "beat" dialect, which is important to note since he was Jack Kerouac's contemporary. In fact, Kerouac modeled *The* Subterraneans character Harold Sand after Gaddis. 32 The language is free flowing, jazz-hip, and characters admittedly make up words in lengthy and chaotic speeches. Gaddis portrays conservative characters who follow the tradition of language and conversation, but he also wants to show the vulgar and the explicit. Anselm, the novel's most outrageous and outspoken character, pushes the boundaries of what should be said in a novel. In one example, he exclaims, "Fuck a duck and screw a pigeon, that's the way you'll get religion. Then he spat in his face. –That's for your side-show conversion" (*The Recognitions* 635). Gaddis wants to extend everyday dialogue to his text, and therefore no phrase is too absurd. Thus he demonstrates the time and place in which he is writing through the dialect of that era.

Although *The Recognitions* focuses on the discipline of art and its manifestations, it also explores religion, science, philosophy, and American popular

³² "Gaddis in Fiction," *The Gaddis Annotations*, ed. Steven Moore, http://www.williamgaddis.org/infiction/index.shtml.

culture. On the first page, Gaddis introduces religious conflict through the death of Reverend Gwyon's wife. When Gwyon and his wife Camilla are en route to Spain, Camilla contracts appendicitis and she is improperly treated by the fraudulent doctor Frank Sinisterra.³³ When Camilla dies, Gwyon buries her in Spain rather than bringing her body home. Thus the religious conflict, for Aunt May, "a barren steadfast woman, Calvinistically faithful to the man who had been Reverend Gwyon before him," believes Camilla's body should not have been "buried over there with a lot of dead Catholics," and instead "for deposit in the clean Protestant soil of New England" (*The Recognitions* 3). This point does not seem important on the first page, but as one reads on, it becomes apparent that conflicting religions prove an important theme. In addition, it establishes Europe, from the very first page, as the "other." This emphasizes a likely prevalent feeling in post World War II America. Throughout the novel, Gaddis touches on other religions, such as Mithraism. It is more important that he includes other religions than what exactly he says about them. Like religion, Gaddis explores the world of popular professions of the time. Wyatt becomes a symbol of the struggling artist, Otto is a pseudo-intellectual playwright trying to find a publisher, and Stanley is a pious composer. These represent larger categories of archetypal professions, but Gaddis also weaves in several jobs that are characteristic of that era. For example, every party in the novel has a conversation in which characters compare analysts and treatment results; various minor characters are involved in the television industry or the up-and-coming advertising industry. The

³³ Frank Sinisterra is a recurring character who represents the counterfeiter/artist. In the beginning, he poses as a doctor aboard the ship, causing Camilla's death. Later, Sinisterra is found counterfeiting money and accidentally posing as Otto's father. All of Sinisterra's forged personas result in disasters, giving him a "sinister" quality.

novel employs well-known philosophers and their beliefs, whether it is the duality between Plato and Aristotle, Berkeley's thoughts on matter, brief mentions of Averroës, or Anselm's quoting of St. Anselm.³⁴ Gaddis uses these well-known philosophers to give personality to his characters, rather than to actually *do* a philosophical analysis. All of this looks like a laundry list of information, and, really, it is; facts, disciplines, and opinions are apparently haphazardly layered upon each other. There is no structure to these facts. Gaddis wants to show what these citizens were concerned with in their everyday lives. Even though the facts are fleeting and seemingly interchangeable, they are important because they help Gaddis reflect the consciousness of the era.

Mendelson argues that encyclopedic narratives respond to and utilize different literary forms and languages within their boundaries. *The Recognitions* begins as a typical *Bildungsroman*. The reader learns about Reverend Gwyon and his wife Camilla. Once Camilla dies and Gwyon buries her in Spain, he returns home to the American south where he lives with Aunt May and his son, Wyatt Gwyon. At this point, the novel veers off to focus on the childhood and upbringing of Wyatt. As a young boy, Wyatt is fascinated by the world. He becomes intrigued with his father's religious interests as well as in a tabletop painting by Bosch of "The Seven Deadly Sins" in his father's study. In subsequent episodes, Wyatt goes to Paris, where he tries his hand at original paintings, though with no critical success; finally, he ends up in New York City, where he navigates the American art scene. He strikes a deal with

³⁴ Anselm is a character in *The Recognitions*; as Steven Moore says, "Anselm is an enemy not of the religious but of the religiose. [He] veers violently between fierce blasphemy and a grudging respect for Christ's teachings" (Moore, *William Gaddis*, 55). Anselm frequently quotes St. Anselm which results in utterly comical dialogues.

businessman and art dealer Recktall Brown, in which he will create forgeries of 15th century Dutch paintings for Brown.³⁵ One critic joked that these first few chapters seem to mirror Joyce and give the reader a "Portrait of the Artist as a Forger." 36 Wyatt's curiosity certainly parallels Stephen Dedalus's acquisition of knowledge, and as with Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, a reader attempts to use this information about Wyatt's early childhood to explain his eccentric adult life. The reader can psychoanalyze Wyatt, and thus she can participate in the text. Gaddis includes these early details of Wyatt's life to experiment with genre but also to critique a linear narrative. Although the beginning strongly resembles a Bildungsroman, it quickly leads into other narratives and other literary forms. Wyatt's childhood may seem like an origin, but Gaddis is not willing to give the reader a satisfying end. Reality is not book-ended in such a way but instead is presented as scattered fragments. Perhaps the only full narrative anyone knows is that of one's self, and Gaddis is not writing about himself. He portrays the fragmented narratives he finds in life. Experiments with literary form reinforce the encyclopedic novel's attempt to reflect totality, not unity; Gaddis wants to explore countless forms without claiming or explaining how these forms interact with each other. In that way, too, the novel is like an encyclopedia.

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³⁵ Gaddis loves attributing names to his characters that accurately reflect their personalities. Recktall Brown makes dirty deals that revolve around art and money. Although he prides himself as a businessman, his business is all but honorable. Brown wants to take advantage of the public and soil the art world with forgeries, rather than promote new artists and original work.

³⁶ When I was initially reading *The Recognitions*, I thought of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a parallel to Wyatt's upbringing. Stephen and Wyatt are both artists, but Wyatt's art is of a different nature. He becomes a forger, and thus I thought of this phrase "Portrait of the Artist as a Forger" as a comparison. During my research of *The Recognitions*, I came across a scholar who also used this phrase. Unfortunately, I am unable to give him credit because I cannot find the source where I may have read it.

In addition to the *Bildungsroman*, the novel includes nearly all the forms Mendelson discusses. It is a heroic epic when Wyatt is immersed in creation, working tirelessly to paint masterpieces. He throws off all pleasures, material comforts, and human contact in order to focus on the task at hand. It becomes a bourgeois novel when the text seamlessly transforms into Otto's play. At one moment the narrator is describing Otto's inner consciousness, and then suddenly the reader is thrown into Otto's highly dramatic, written dialogue between two lovers. It has moments of comedy, drama, and tragedy, all posed alongside each other without formal transitions. Gaddis ventures into obscure genres like the eclogue (Wyatt's trip home) and the epistolary novel. He employs letters to provide the reader with information that is supposedly shared between only two characters. Rather than describe the contents of the letter, or a character's reaction to the letter, Gaddis provides the reader with the letter itself, fully printed in its "original" form. In these moments, Gaddis becomes the editor of an epistolary novel. Take, for example, the first letter in the novel, one that Esme writes to Wyatt. She writes it in a moment of madness and strange love for Wyatt and his work; it is haphazard yet meaningful. Until this point, Esme is not given a voice in the text, but here the form of a letter allows her to express her inner thoughts. Although much of the letter is nonsense, there are certain phrases that come close to something meaningful. She writes, "To recognize, not to establish but to intervene. A remarkable illusion?" (The Recognitions 472). This phrase is significant because through writing she is able to expound a philosophy of painting. She describes the way Wyatt creates art, as an act of intervention rather than creation. The letter provides insight into Wyatt's view of authentic art and how Esme

responds to that. At other times, Gaddis playfully uses poetry and song, to experiment with genre and to play with the language of the text. Ultimately, *The Recognitions* should be considered an amalgamation of all genres, thus further confirming its status as encyclopedic narrative.

The Recognitions constantly refers to other novels, even as it discusses the nature of being a novel itself. In regard to other novels, every chapter of *The* Recognitions has an epigraph derived from works of literature. Gaddis includes a quote from the work of the same name, the Clementine *Recognitions*. When the reader encounters this similarity, she is forced to reflect on the title of the book she has in her hands. If she is aware of the Clementine *Recognitions*, she might wonder why Gaddis copies the title of another book. He wants to evoke the theme of forgery before the reader even opens the book. The epigraphs are taken from Goethe's *Faust*, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and the Bible, among countless others. The title page epigraph, from T.S. Eliot's "Marina," reads "the awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships" (*The Recognitions*, Title Page). Gaddis does not cite Eliot, as if to say: this novel requires your participation as a reader. From this quote, the reader gathers that the tale will be optimistic; there are signs of hope that skew the reader's expectations. This image is immediately shattered when Camilla dies on the first page. Gaddis constantly uses epigraphs to build expectations and to evoke active reader participation. Similarly, chapter one, "The First Turn of the Screw," begins with a dialogue from Faust II,

Mephistopheles: Was gibt es denn? [What is going on?] Wagner: Es wird ein Mensch gemacht. [A man is being made]³⁷

³⁷ "A Reader's Guide to William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*," *The Gaddis Annotations*, ed. Steven Moore, <www.williamgaddis.org/recognitions/I1anno1.shtml>.

The significance of this quote placed at the front of the novel is threefold. Before the text of the novel begins, the reader is confronted by the tradition of great writing. The reader is constantly reminded of this tradition by the epigraphs. The particular quote from Faust II, however, also foreshadows Wyatt's coming-of-age tale, in which we see him reach adulthood. Finally, by using a quote from *Faust*, Gaddis immediately sets up one of the strongest underlying themes of the novel, the Faust legend. Gaddis successfully reworks old stories and quotes and places them in a modern context. Therefore, he cannot (and does not) come right out and devalue or ridicule other modern attempts to appropriate traditions. Instead, he puts ideas in the mouths of his characters, and allows the reader to interpret their authenticity. A minor character says in passing "We're shooting Faust now, a sort of bop version, we've changed him to this refugee artist, and Mephistopheles is . . ." (*The Recognitions* 661). The Faust legend informs the interactions of Wyatt and Recktall Brown. Gaddis also skews tradition through a modern lens, in this case through film, which produces absurd and hilarious effects. Imagine, for a moment, a bop version of *Faust*! In Hardack's essay, he explains, "Like Cervantes or Joyce, encyclopedic writers not only try to incorporate previous authors into their texts—even authors they themselves have fabricated—but all subsequent critics or authors, providing instructions, traps, and predictions for those who have the audacity to come after them."38 Gaddis attempts to do just that. On one hand, he tries to respond to everything that came before him either by quoting it directly, or by placing the words in the mouths of his characters (often in their original language). On the other hand, he wants to say *everything*. He

³⁸ Hardack 138.

does not let tradition cripple his own creative process; instead, he uses what came before in order to respond to tradition, reject it, or ignore it. Gaddis looks to the past and anticipates the future. After I prove that this is Gaddis's goal, we will return to this notion of "everything" in the next chapter in order to demonstrate its significance for understanding my idea of Gaddis's intentions for *The Recognitions*.

The Recognitions is highly concerned with the process of writing and the fact that it is a product of that process. Many of the characters are writers, and they enjoy discussing new books, old books, and their own books. Characters expose their philosophies about writing, or what they understand to be an "authentic" work of literature. Early in the novel, Wyatt discusses writing a novel with Basil Valentine. The dialogue reads:

-Like. . . as though I were reading a novel, yes. And then, reading it, but the hero fails to appear, fails to be working out some plan of comedy or, disaster? All the materials are there, yes. The sounds, the images, telephones and telephone numbers? The ships and subways, the. . . the. . .

-The half-known people, Valentine interrupted easily, who miss the subways and lose each other's telephone numbers? Cavorting about dressed in the

absurd costumes of the author's chaotic imagination, talking about each

other. . . (*The Recognitions* 263)

The two discuss encyclopedic narrative inside the text itself. They describe the content and structure of *The Recognitions*, one that includes "the sounds, the images, telephones and telephone numbers." No fact is too insignificant to print. As Wyatt explains to Valentine, *The Recognitions* has no hero and the narrative does not ascend toward the fulfillment of the plot. Instead, it describes life. The reader is presented with objects and interactions and then left to interpret them for himself. *The Recognitions* is aware of its gigantism. Hardack explains "the encyclopedic text must thus swallow its own consumer [...] it must always have existed, as in Cervantes and

Rabelais, so that reviews of the book, and the effect of the book, and even readers of the book, can already be incorporated into the text."³⁹ Hardack means this directly and indirectly. The encyclopedic text should discuss the process of reading and writing, but it must also be aware of its own nature as encyclopedic. Gaddis uses passages like the above to incorporate the reader into a discussion of the text. Wyatt describes his own novel, in the very language that a reader of *The Recognitions* might describe it. In a passage that I quoted in the introduction, an unnamed character jokes, "You didn't buy it, did you? Christ, at that price? Who the hell do they think's going to pay that much just for a novel" (*The Recognitions* 936). Gaddis had an eerie foreknowledge of the critical response to his novel, and he includes that knowledge within the text as Hardack describes.

In order to reflect the specific culture and era in which the book was written, Gaddis writes primarily in English with countless diversions in Latin, French, Spanish, and Italian. Although foreign languages are present when the characters visit other countries, they are most often used when characters are demonstrating knowledge of famous works of literature or famous quotations. Gaddis will often employ foreign phrases at key moments in the dialogue, when it is crucial to get their meaning in order to understand the scene as a whole. When Stanley is given permission to play his composition at Fenestrula, his life goal, the priest tells him "Prego, fare attenzione, non usi troppo i bassi, le note basse. La chiesa è così vecchia che le vibrazion, capisce, portrebbero essere pericolose" (*The Recognitions* 956). Stanley does not understand, and the reader likely does not either. Moments later, as Stanley pulls organ stops and plays his work, the church collapses around him. This is

³⁹ Hardack 137

a key moment in which it is crucial that Stanley understand that the priest has begged: "Please, pay attention, don't use too much bass, and low notes. The church is so old that the vibrations, you see, could be very dangerous." The reader is puzzled by this occurrence because, like Stanley, she does not understand the translation. Without research or reference to the annotated guide to *The Recognitions*, the reader is left in the dark, much like a character inside the text who does not speak that language. Furthermore, it requires that the readers of *The Recognitions* be willing to go further than the text and not settle with only what is on the page. Even for the multilingual and well-read reader, it is necessary to look up certain references in a book of this size and scope. Although this makes for difficult literature, it reflects the realistic fact that language and communication are uncertain and imperfect, while at the same time it forces the reader to actively participate in his or her understanding of the text.

Art and Authenticity

We now move to a close reading of the text in order to take a step closer to understanding the significance of the encyclopedic narrative. Even though there is no central plot, the novel explores the question: how is it possible to create art authentically? This question drives the characters to create in various media and motivates interactions in their everyday lives. The next question, though, is what is Gaddis's definition of authenticity in this context? I do not think Gaddis offers his opinion; instead, the text offers different renditions of artistic authenticity, portrayed through each character. He does not say: *here*, dear reader, is my definition of authenticity and *here* are the means by which to achieve it. He wants the reader to

⁴⁰ "A Reader's Guide to William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*," *The Gaddis Annotations*, ed. Steven Moore, <www.williamgaddis.org/recognitions/36anno2.shtml>.

arrive at meaning, not digest what is prescribed by the text. He never tells the reader what to think, but he does pose obviously absurd situations such as one view that something has authentic value "as long as it's 'authorized'" by society (*The Recognitions* 464). Although there are numerous characters to discuss, I have chosen five in order to illustrate how Gaddis uses these characters as representatives of possibilities for artistic authenticity.

The reader is first introduced to the art of Wyatt Gwyon. One sees the early creative process of Wyatt as a young boy; he is curious, concerned with language, and suffocated in his Protestant home. He begins to draw, but when Aunt May discovers his work, she scolds him. He is so full of shame he buries his drawings in the backyard. Although Wyatt is set to follow in his father's footsteps as a minister, he does not succeed in his religious studies. Instead, he goes to Paris to study painting but ultimately fails to find a style that is popular with the critics. Crémer, an art critic in Paris, offers to make a deal with him; Crémer proposes that he will review Wyatt's paintings favorably in exchange for ten percent of the profit Wyatt makes in sales. Wyatt refuses and gets a negative review. Frustrated with his original works and the Paris art scene, Wyatt returns to American where he works as a draftsman (a job he later abandons) and restores old paintings for private clients. Recktall Brown, an art dealer and businessman, confronts Wyatt with yet another business proposition. Brown will fund Wyatt to produce forgeries of 15th century Dutch painters. These paintings will not be copies of paintings known to exist; rather, they will utilize elements and techniques of other paintings to create "new" old paintings. Once they are complete, Brown will anonymously place them in old barns or with random

antique dealers. Brown proposes that he will then "find" these works as undiscovered masterpieces, and the paintings will be sold at auction as originals. If Wyatt can create flawless forgeries, they will both benefit. Brown will make a significant profit, and Wyatt will have his art and livelihood underwritten. Unlike the deal with Crémer, Wyatt accepts Brown's offer. And so, Wyatt's main quest in the novel begins. He spends all his time researching methods to age paintings, the subjects of Flemish art, and the techniques of the old masters. He becomes obsessed with this task; he retreats from society, no longer frequents parties, and he takes a second apartment without his new wife Esther so that he may live and work alone.

Throughout the novel, Wyatt reveals glimpses of his sense of authentic creation. When he first meets Brown, he tells him "a work of art redeems time" (*The Recognitions* 144). A successful painting will be able to resurrect the era in which it was produced; it will fulfill the past in the present. Wyatt continues, "Damn it, when you paint you don't just paint, you don't just put lines down where you want to, you have to know, you have to know that every line you put down couldn't go any other place, couldn't be any different" (*The Recognitions* 144). Wyatt does not value originality. The freedom associated with modern art does not appeal to him. Any individual can haphazardly splatter paint on a canvas and call it art. Wyatt seeks a more rigorous method and finds it in the technique and subject matter of old masters. Wyatt takes this philosophy from his art teacher Herr Koppel, who told him that "to be original was to admit that you could not do a thing the right way, so you could only do it your own way" (*The Recognitions* 89). This sentiment is what directs Wyatt to forgeries. However, he makes it clear that forgeries are usually a matter of

"pulling the fragments of ten paintings together and making one, or taking a . . . a

Dürer and reversing the composition so that the man looks to the right instead of the left" (*The Recognitions* 250). Wyatt does not want to copy old paintings, nor does he want to appropriate pieces for a new whole. Instead, Wyatt wants to create 15th century Dutch masterpieces in the 20th century. He wants to produce authentic work by creating something *of that era*. He does not want to imitate masterpieces, nor does he want to leave any trace of the 20th century in the painting. Wyatt does not obsess over his paintings for money or to convince the public that they are originals. He strives for perfection because he believes that art as extension of the past is the most authentic art.

From Wyatt, we move to Otto, an absurd counterpoint to Wyatt. The two are briefly friends, but whereas Otto idolizes Wyatt, Wyatt hardly pays attention to Otto. Otto models himself in Wyatt's genius image but falls exceptionally short. He is playwright who relies solely on imitation within the boundaries of social construction. Otto is concerned with two things: his play and his appearance in the eyes of others. The play, entitled "The Vanity of Time," features two main characters, Gordon and Priscilla, who exchange lofty ideals without ever doing or enacting anything. As far as the reader can tell, the play is made up entirely of dialogue and set in a single location. Even though Otto is passionate about his writing, he looks for inspiration in the wrong places. He has two methods of writing: he either steals others' ideas and mindlessly fits them into his work, or he thinks of one original idea and obsesses over it to the point of exhaustion. In a dialogue between Otto and Esther, she says: "[Wyatt] said I shouldn't try to make explicit things that should be implicit" (*The Recognitions*

121). When Esther walks away, Otto immediately scribbles this phrase down on a shard of paper, attributing the quote to one of the characters in his play. He even tells a friend who passes by he has just thought up a brilliant new line for his play. Otto is willing to appropriate other character's clever phrases and attribute them as his own. To illustrate the latter method, Otto sees Herschel at a party and says to Hannah, "'I'd say he was a latent heterosexual,' [Otto] immediately regretted wasting such an inspired line on Hannah, and resolved to repeat it to someone who would repeat it as [Otto's] own. He even tried to think quickly of a spot for it in his play (The Recognitions 180-181). Indeed, he fixates on this phrase and uses it at any appropriate (or often inappropriate) moment. Repeating the phrase over and over, he becomes utterly comical. He does not possess the ability to be original, and even when he comes close, he ruins the chance by imitating his own ideas. Furthermore, when he is accused of imitation, he grows extremely angry. Max accuses Otto of lifting parts of The Sound and the Fury, and he replies, "I've never even read it, I've never read The Sound and the Fury damn it, so how the hell..." (The Recognitions 463). The reader never finds out whether Otto is telling the truth, but ultimately it does not matter. What does matter is that Otto's creative consciousness absorbs the things he reads and hears without processing them as belonging to another author or individual. His art relies on the imitation and appropriation of these collected phrases, whether or not he is aware of it. This is not a form of repetition, since he seems unaware of his sources. Rather, it is mimicking, because he wants to write like other great authors, and in the attempt for greatness uses too much of "the greats" in his work. Otto feels successful when he sees his work resembling other famous works or when it glorifies

scenes from his own life. For example, he reads an excerpt of his play to a minor character named Jesse:

"Gordon: Any rational person fears romance, my dear Priscilla.

"Priscilla: And so you will not marry me, because I love you.

"Gordon: Romantic love, my dear, romantic love. The most difficult challenge to the ideal is its transformation into reality, and few ideals survive. Marriage demands of romantic love that it become a reality, and when an idea becomes a reality it ceases to be an idea. Someone has certainly commented on the seedy couple Dante and Beatrice would have made after twenty years of badly cooked meals. As for the *Divine Comedy*, it's safe to say that the *Purgatorio* would have been written, though perhaps a rather less poetic version. But Heaven and Hell rejuvenated, I think not, my dear. There is a bit of verse somewhere on this topic concerning Petrarch and his Laura, but I cannot recall it. But even Virginia, you may remember, preferred drowning before the eyes of her lover to marrying him. Paul at least had the pleasure of seeing her drown nude, but she knew what she was doing. A wise girl, Virginia.

"Priscilla: But then, what you're saying is..."

-What the hell is he saying?

-Well, Gordon is saying that love, I mean romantic love...

-That's all they do, talk?

-Well, it's a play, I mean...

-When does he slip it to her? (*The Recognitions* 156)

Otto's characters do not have a realistic conversation; instead, Gordon lists the names of famous literary figures without dwelling on their significance for Otto's play. Otto wants to prove his intellectualism simply by using the names of other intellectuals. He believes that is the tradition of literature and wants to imitate that. But what great authors write this superficially? Ultimately, Otto's aims are not inauthentic, but his result is laughable. With layer upon layer of imitation, the reader cannot help but laugh at how meaningless this amalgamation appears. Again, we find that Gaddis does not directly disagree with Otto's methods, but he certainly portrays certain aspects of Otto's art as absurd.

For Recktall Brown and Basil Valentine, art means business. They are not concerned with creating art, but rather want to create business deals within the art

world which will result in profit. They possess a skill but not an art. Brown funds Wyatt's forgeries, and he believes that to convince the public that these works are authentic thus renders them authentic. Valentine is brought in to help with this process, although it is not clear what specific role he plays beyond accomplice and mentor. Valentine befriends Wyatt behind Brown's back and constantly tries to convince Wyatt to do personal forgeries for his own collection. For Brown and Valentine, authentic art is related to the business side of the art world and the audience's reception of a work. Authentic art is pure repetition—repetition so flawless that it becomes original. When Brown negotiates with Wyatt, he explains, "Most forgeries last only a few generations, because they're so carefully done in the taste of the period" (*The Recognitions* 230). The best forgeries, therefore, are the ones that can perfectly reproduce the original without transferring any of the era in which it is produced into the painting. This is the same sentiment that Wyatt has about forgeries; but whereas Wyatt wants this kind of forgery because it reflects the highest form of art, Brown and Valentine want unrecognized forgeries in order to convince the public of their worth. It is a game of deception and profit. Although Brown and Valentine are delightfully devious characters, their scheme highlights problems with the art world in New York City during the mid-20th century. Valentine admits, "Originality is a device that untalented people use to impress other untalented people, and protect themselves from talented people [...] most original people are forced to devote all their time to plagiarizing" (*The Recognitions* 252). This attitude devalues originality and furthermore illustrates how truly talented artists must resign themselves to forgery. To be authentic one must avoid the untalented individuals who are original

for originality's sake, not for art's sake, and instead hide one's true talent in a single form of art. Is this a problem of modern art itself, or are the art dealers and critics to blame? Brown and Valentine perpetuate the value of old art, rather than glorifying the newest and most original art. Gaddis does not portray Brown and Valentine as heroes; if Wyatt is Gaddis's Faust, then Brown is his Mephistopheles. Brown and Valentine's methods are deceptive and not productive. Their view of authenticity, as opposed to Wyatt's, is wrapped up with monetary gain and nothing else.

In complete contrast to the previously discussed methods of creation, Esme produces art with total disregard of what has come before her. Esme is the archetype of a "beat" literature woman. She is defined by her position amongst men; she is Wyatt's model and Otto's lover (for a moment). She is promiscuous, overdoses on drugs, and seems fleetingly beautiful. Esme is most often described in the presence of others, but in her solitary moments she is portrayed as an artist. The narrator explains, "[Esme] had never read for the reasons that most people give themselves for reading. Facts mattered little, ideas propounded, exploited, shattered, even less, and narrative nothing. Only occasional groupings of words held her" (*The Recognitions* 298-299). Esme wants to break from linguistic and literary traditions, without understanding or exploring those traditions first. She wants to redefine meaning and recreate value according to her own criteria. The narrator adds:

The sole way, it seemed to her often enough when she was working at writing a poem, to use words with meaning, would be to choose words for themselves, and invest them with her own meaning: not her own, perhaps, but meaning which was implicit in their shape, too frequently nothing to do with dictionary definition. The words which the tradition of her art offered her were by now in chaos, coerced through the contexts of a million inanities, the printed page everywhere opiate, row upon row of compelling idiocies disposed to induce stupor, coma, necrotic convulsion. (*The Recognitions* 299)

Esme's art is made by pure originality. She has no method other than intuition. Esme believes her art is authentic because she aims for an origin. She creates from a place without tradition, rather than knowing and then rejecting that tradition. For her, "work and thought in casual and stumbling sequence did not exist, but only transcription; where the poem she knew but could not write existed, ready-formed, awaiting recovery in that moment when the writing down of it was impossible: because she was the poem" (*The Recognitions* 299-300). Esme's art has a primitive and intuitive quality to it; she wants to reach a pre-linguistic era and thus create anew. Her art is an extension of her inner consciousness and therefore has little "real world" structure. In a way, this disregard for the past could be considered authentic because of its pure originality. However, Gaddis does not portray Esme as the one who has truly discovered the secret to artistic production. In fact, he constantly makes fun of Esme, and her position in the novel is not a favorable one. Her disregard for tradition renders her clueless or ignorant rather than enlightened. Esme is not a savior or a sage, but rather a desperate young woman who sleeps around. She is thin and frail; she never takes a stand and can hardly be taken seriously. Although Esme's means of artistic production have an air of authenticity, Gaddis portrays Esme as inauthentic. This recreation from origin is not what Gaddis wants to advocate as authentic production.

Stanley's character provides a spiritual element to the art of creation. Stanley is introduced far along into the novel, and yet the book ends with his epiphanic moment. Whereas Stanley's friends are materialistic and crude, Stanley is concerned with the "good". He is shy and timid, but a lover of certain things very strongly. His art is musical composition and throughout the novel he is constantly writing one piece

that he believes will be truly authentic and close to God. He admires the composers who

had touched the origins of design with recognition. And how? With music written for the Church. Not written with obsessions of copyright foremost; not written to be played by men in worn dinner jackets, sung by girls in sequins, involved in wage disputes and radio rights . . . (*The Recognitions* 322)

Stanley's notion of authentic art is that it must be made for a worthy end, and for him that end is the church. He does not want his art to be caught up in material things, but rather wants it to communicate something spiritual. He explains that "the devil is the father of false art" and that "art is the work of love" (*The Recognitions* 464-465). Authentic or true art is made with God's inspiration. This authenticity does not equal originality. Instead, Stanley explains,

Everybody has that feeling when they look at a work of art and it's right, that sudden familiarity, a sort of . . . recognition, as though they were creating it themselves, as though it were being created through them while they look at it or listen to it and, it shouldn't be sinful to want to have created beauty? (*The Recognitions* 535)

The work of art already exists and to create is to recognize what was already there. Great artists, in Stanley's eyes, do not create anew, but rather are inspired by God and thus art is "created through them." For Stanley, this authenticity is derived from timelessness. Art requires that the artist reach back to what is already present ("origins of design") and be a vehicle for its actualization. This closely resembles an ancient model of creation. In the *Meno*, Plato describes the act of recollection. Socrates explains, "As the soul is immortal [...] there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before."

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⁴¹ Plato, "Meno," trans. G. M. A. Grube, *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: from Thales to Aristotle*, eds. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000) 81c.

If souls are immortal, then they never lose their knowledge or wisdom. Every individual is possessed with great knowledge in his soul, and it is a matter of recollecting this knowledge. For Socrates, to recollect is to look inward to the soul for knowledge; one must search tirelessly and courageously. It requires constant questioning to recognize the information already in the soul. Stanley believes that art is embedded in one's soul by God. Therefore he is introspective, and he is dedicated to his composition. He aims to find authentic art within himself and thus create for and by God. By associating Stanley with ancient values, Gaddis praises Stanley's effort but ultimately he is buried in the resulting collapse of his own work. His creative method leaves him in a pile of a disintegrated church, thus illustrating that this artistic approach does not result in purity or salvation.⁴²

We return to the main problem that Gaddis poses: how can one produce art authentically? After a close reading of five prominent characters, however, we still do not know what Gaddis thinks. Unlike other encyclopedic texts, *The Recognitions* lacks a hero. As a result, no character emerges as the one who has discovered authentic methods. There are glimpses of genuine art in each character's method, but each one falls short. I believe this lack of direction is what caused many readers to put down the novel, and for those who did continue, is what disappointed them. We have investigated each character's position, and we could conclude that because no one character emerges as "right" or as the hero of the novel that Gaddis had no clear opinion on the matter. To stop there, though, would be a mistake. It is at this moment

⁴² As we saw earlier, Stanley is instructed not to use the bass notes on the organ at the Fenestrula. He does not understand the priest's Italian commands, and when he plays the bass notes the church collapses around him. Stanley dies in the accident, and he is thus buried by his own composition.

that I would like to shift back to the distinction of *The Recognitions* as encyclopedic narrative, and finally to elucidate why this distinction can bring the reader closer to Gaddis's intention for the book.

IV. Solutions for Authentic Art

As we have seen, the form of the encyclopedic narrative is playful and chaotic. Even though it has certain identifiable characteristics, even these collapse on themselves. *The Recognitions* ushers in a new era for the encyclopedic novel, one that lacks a hero. The novel follows several characters in-depth; however, no character provides a dominant voice. No character offers *the* solution for authentic art. Each character is presented in moments of both satire and admiration. One cannot find a solution to the problem Gaddis suggests through his prose. So where, then, can one find it? Gaddis highlights this problem, as Basil Valentine explains,

And that is why people read novels, to identify projections of their own unconscious. The hero has to be fearfully real, to convince them of their own reality, which they rather doubt. A novel without a hero would be distracting in the extreme. They have to know what you think, or good heavens, how can they know that you're going through some wild conflict, which is after all the duty a hero. (*The Recognitions* 247)

Gaddis knows exactly what he is doing with *The Recognitions*; he is conscious of his writing and the process in which he writes. He demonstrates this awareness through his characters. No artistic character strides triumphantly ahead of the others. Instead, characters come and go without distinct entrances or exits from the text. In this passage, Gaddis recognizes that a reader needs a hero, and yet he does not give her one. He is correct that "a novel without a hero would be distracting in the extreme," and this manifested itself in the critics' reviews of *The Recognitions*. I believe that the undefined dominant voice, combined with the chaotic nature of the encyclopedic narrative, provoked the negative reviews from the critics. Jack Green jokes, "the recognitions has an antiending, eg the main character walks away on p900 & is not seen again. The last page, where an artist is killed by the completion of his work,

sounds one of the main (nonchristian) themes of the book—but so does every other page." These two examples highlight problems that *The Recognitions* faces without a hero. Wyatt is set up as a hero, but after page 118 he is never again mentioned by his first name. Gaddis allows the reader to become invested in characters, and then promptly removes them from the text. I can understand why a hero-less text frustrates readers and critics; without a central figure, there is no single force driving the text. For the critics, the question of authenticity is a central question that plagues their work. Rather than write literature, critics produce works as extensions and responses to other literature. I am not saying this is in any way inferior than the original works of literature, but I wish to illustrate how one could argue that critical works are once removed from literary works. Critics likely recognized the central theme of authentic creation in *The Recognitions*; however, they were disappointed when they could not find a dominant voice that might answer their own questions about authentic art.

I believe that the problem of authentic art plagued Gaddis as well. I see two examples of this point: first, the referential nature of the novel demonstrates that Gaddis was struggling with the great texts that preceded him; second, he describes that an author may have "some wild conflict" to communicate through his novel. Authentic writing is just as important to Gaddis as authentic painting is to Wyatt. Faced with the fact that Gaddis provides no dominant voice, it is possible to stop there and say that he fails to answer the central question raised by the novel. However, I believe the number of references in *The Recognitions* illustrates how this problem directly affected his work and therefore might be evidence to examine the novel more carefully for a solution. Take, for example, the influence of Joyce on Gaddis. *The*

⁴³ Green 16.

Recognitions is constantly compared to *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and, in a way, rightfully so. Critics point out several nods to Joyce. Gaddis employs Joycean phrases like "psychoanaloser" (*The Recognitions* 183). He experiments with genre and explores Modernism through these fragmented structures. The beginning of *The Recognitions* parallels the *Bildungsroman* structure of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In *Carnival of Repetition*, a book that analyzes *The Recognitions* through a postmodern lens, John Johnston points out:

At the conclusion of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus sets out to 'forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race.' What appears to interest Gaddis is the ambiguity of the verb 'to forge,' and the paradox by which a forgery can yield 'recognitions' of reality.⁴⁴

Johnston argues that the notion of forgery runs through both works; he is ambiguous, though, about the relationship between the two authors. There are similarities, but they are not significant. For example, after page 118, Wyatt Gwyon is no longer mentioned by name; later in the novel, Wyatt is "renamed" Stephan, a fact scholars love to dwell on. In every interview Gaddis gave, interviewers brought up the Joyce comparison. Gaddis loved to remind them that he *had not* in fact read more than forty pages of *Ulysses*. In a frustrated letter to one scholar, Gaddis wrote:

I appreciate your interest in *The Recognitions* & have to tell you I've about reached the end of the line on questions about what I did or didn't read of Joyce's 30 years ago. All I read of *Ulysses* was Molly Bloom at the end which was being circulated for salacious rather than literary merits; No I did not read *Finnegans Wake* though I think a phrase about "psychoanaloosing' one's self from it is in *The Recognitions*; Yes I read some of *Dubliners* but don't recall how many & remember only a story called "Counterparts"; Yes I believe I read *Portrait of an Artist* but also think I may not have finished it; No I did

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⁴⁴ John Johnston, *Carnival of Repetition: Gaddis's* The Recognitions *and Postmodern Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) 9.

not read commentary on Joyce's work & absorb details without reading the original.⁴⁵

Gaddis acknowledges that there are parallels between his work and Joyce's oeuvre, but he does not want his reader to get caught up with this comparison; instead, one should accept the voice of Gaddis (the text itself) and the voice of Joyce in the reader (imposed on the novel) as separate entities. This comparison is similar to the one Max makes about Otto's play and *The Sound and the Fury*. In most interviews, Gaddis does not get angry like Otto, but rather he becomes increasingly worn out by the comparison to Joyce. In this letter, though, Gaddis is visibly frustrated. Like Otto, Gaddis is accused of being inauthentic and he is a victim of an overly critical discussion of the origins of his work. The fact that Gaddis responds in different ways to past texts illustrates that he too was likely searching for the best method.

In order to demonstrate the second point, I would like to return to the last sentence of the passage quoted above. Valentine explains, "They have to know what you think, or good heavens, how can they know that you're going through some wild conflict, which is after all the duty a hero" (*The Recognitions* 247). Through Valentine, Gaddis explains that the reader needs a hero to understand the author's "wild conflict," which is for Gaddis, in my opinion, the question of how to produce art authentically. Conflict is a catalyst for producing art; a novel can be a means by which the author works out that conflict. I see *The Recognitions* as the medium through which Gaddis attempts to work out his conflict. He shares the quest for authentic art with his characters. What conclusion does he reach? What wisdom does he offer on that issue, with no hero to illuminate it? Gaddis sets up a strange

⁴⁵ Steven Moore, *William Gaddis* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) 7.

contradiction: an author has a conflict, which he communicates through the hero. Gaddis does not have a hero, but that does not necessarily resolve the conflict. Therefore, this contradiction invites the reader to investigate other possible places where Gaddis may have asserted his notion of authentic art. I propose that the encyclopedic form is the structure for authentic creation.

Before we explore this claim, it is necessary to discuss the significance of authentic art. First, what does it mean to be authentic? What is my definition of authenticity? This issue concerns much of early to mid-20th century philosophy. especially philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas. I am not drawing on any particular philosophy when I define authenticity; nonetheless, I mention these two because they are certainly present in my mind when I think of authentic art. I propose that authentic art is a creation that is meaningful to one's self and to one's community. Art cannot be created solely for one's self or by one's intuition, with complete disregard for an audience; it would be meaningless without reference to some external thing and therefore no one beside the artist would be able to understand or appreciate it. However, it cannot be created exclusively with society in mind either because art requires some extension of the artist in the work; the artist must include strands of his personal vision in his art. Therefore, I think the artist must look around and know his society. He must become familiar with it, and when she understands the common voice, she must then find a way to make her own. She must take a position in the world around her as artist and create from that space. Therefore, authenticity is not a fixed idea. By definition, it simply means the genuineness of something, which is vague and conditional. One could argue that I am going about

looking for authenticity in Gaddis's work in the wrong way; how can I have a set definition in mind before I start looking for his? I would respond that although that is true, my definition is descriptive rather than prescriptive. It is a set definition but it remains broad enough to let Gaddis's opinions come forth and expand. I impose this definition upon Gaddis's work in order to investigate whether he has an actual method for making authentic art. On the other hand, without some preconceived idea of authenticity, I may have been content with a superficial reading of *The Recognitions* and I would not have been inspired to do any critical work at all.

Second, why is authenticity necessarily a "problem"? When one picks up a paintbrush or pen, one is ultimately faced with the tradition of art before him. In The Anxiety of Influence (1973), Harold Bloom discusses an anxiety evoked in poets when faced with the history of poetry. 46 He argues that poets are inspired by reading famous and brilliant poetry; therefore, when new poets begin to write, the great poets are always present in the act of writing. He states, "Poetic history, in this book's argument, is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves."⁴⁷ New writing evokes, but misrepresents, the poetic tradition, so that history is an inescapable weight. Poetic influence concerns poets because they too want to create something great, and thus anxiety builds. The anxiety does not only stem from the need for originality, though, for as Bloom explains, "poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better. The profundities of poetic influence cannot be reduced to

 $^{^{46}}$ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). 47 Bloom 5.

source-study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images."48 Originality is not the only factor which renders a poem successful; Bloom argues that poetic influence does not hinder originality, since being original is not necessarily the most important factor in writing. Again, we find this sentiment about originality, much like the thoughts on art communicated by Wyatt, Brown, and Valentine. Although Bloom's work focuses on poetry, he is concerned with a similar problem of authentic art. Bloom, however, offers several methods by which poets, or artists, may cope with the voices of the past. He calls these the "Six Revisionary Ratios." They are: Clinamen, "poetic misreading or misprision proper," Tessera, "completion and antithesis," Kenosis, "movement towards discontinuity with the precursor," Daemonization, "movement towards a personalized counter-sublime, in reaction to the precursor's sublime," Askesis, "movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state solitude," and Apophrades, "the return of the dead."⁴⁹ Once Bloom lays out these categories, he devotes chapters to each one with an accompanying analysis of the poets who responded with each method. In this work, Bloom does not offer one method as the best way to respond to the past; instead, I believe his goal was to investigate the poets and their respective works in order to create new interpretations of their poems through these categories. Bloom's conclusion is puzzling; he leaves the reader with an epilogue entitled "Reflections upon the Path." The text shifts from a critical essay to a metaphorical story. It begins and ends by saying, "Riding three days and nights he came upon the place, but decided it could not be come upon."50 In between, a man wonders what it might mean to "come upon a place." Like the poets,

⁴⁸ Bloom 7. ⁴⁹ Bloom 14-16.

⁵⁰ Bloom 157.

this man considers different approaches for the task at hand. This allegory is confusing and vague; although Bloom treats this as conclusive, I do not see what it amounts to. In my opinion, Bloom does not offer a cure for the notion of anxiety that he introduces. He understands it as a necessary aspect in the process of art.

I would like to extend Bloom's reading of poetry to all disciplines of art. In the 20th century, the anxiety of influence was more prominent than ever. In the first twenty years, one saw photomontage emerge in the art world as a new medium; in 1962, Andy Warhol creates the "Campbell's Soup Can" series by imitation and repetition of a mass-produced product. Artists find new ways to respond to the tradition of art and the culture in which they live. Like other 20th century art, *The* Recognitions explores different ways that artists cope with influence. Each of Gaddis' characters reflects these methods of how to deal with that influence. Whereas Wyatt represents a "return of the dead," Otto reflects "misreading or misprision proper." I am not arguing that Gaddis directly used Bloom's criteria as a basis for The Recognitions in any way. Bloom's work was published in 1973, eighteen years after the publication of *The Recognitions*. Instead, I mean to point out how Bloom's notion of anxiety is noticeable in *The Recognitions* and how both authors provide different methods of dealing with the anxiety. Bloom does not directly give one method that is "correct," and without a hero, neither does Gaddis.

Let us return to the claim I made earlier, that the encyclopedic form is the structure for authentic creation. I repeat the central question of the book: how can one produce art authentically? I argue that Gaddis's answer is: by *saying everything*. He communicates "everything" by the literary form of the encyclopedic text. The

encyclopedic form uses multiple voices, multiple attempts at art, and does not favor any of them. When Gaddis explains each character's art, there is always a glimpse of something good or true in it, even though he proceeds to poke fun at it. The fact that Gaddis incorporates all kinds of methods and does not favor any one is his message. Authentic art is not authoritative; it is based on the subject through the space he occupies in the world. Instead of stating that Stanley's art is the most authentic, or that Wyatt's art is the truest, Gaddis gives all artistic voices a space on the canvas of his text. Gaddis would recognize Bloom's ratios, but he would add that to actually overcome the anxiety it would be necessary to use all those methods, without favoring one or the other. The encyclopedic text provides the possibility for these multiple voices to layer upon each other, each one unique and important within the whole. The nonlinear aspect of encyclopedic knowledge makes it so each method is valuable in itself. The encyclopedic form explains the content. Through this form, Gaddis is able to respond to the literary tradition, while at the same time asserting himself as author/producer of a new great American novel. The Recognitions is obviously a response to the past because it uses epigraphs, quotes, and ideas from famous works of literature; however, it also makes a solid stride into the future. The Recognitions is the first encyclopedic text that completely lacks a hero. As I mentioned in the introduction, Benesch points out, *The Recognitions*

is perhaps the first American novel to deal at length with the quandaries of assessing originality in a cultural environment predicated on an abundance of copies, representations, and simulacra [...] *The Recognitions* reflects, in its own peculiar ways, the shift from modern (uniqueness, originality, authenticity) to postmodern modes of representations (seriality, iteration, repetition).⁵¹

⁵¹ Benesch 30-32

The Recognitions is a product of its era, and therefore it reflects the new developments of its society. Gaddis includes strains of the modern and postmodern because he writes at the time in which the shift began to take place across disciplines. Gaddis imitates the past, but he also breaks from it. He quotes direct passages from other works, yet he writes phrases never before strung together. Rather than use one method, Gaddis uses them all.

When one says everything, anxiety fades away. A writer no longer worries about which method is the most authentic because he employs each method as necessary. Different methods are appropriate at different times; therefore no one method stands above the rest. Here, it is the reader who makes meaning and value. This idea is postmodern, in that there is no authoritative voice inside a text. For Gaddis, art cannot be made outside of history. *The Recognitions* suggests that regardless of the method, every new act of creation responds to the past, whether it accepts or rejects it. The tradition of art provides a foundation on which new art is conceived; perhaps there is no art that does not repeat, no authenticity that does not forge. Forgery is not simply copying paintings, but rather it is a constant response to the tradition of art. All new works have at their base a past work. It is authentic to accept this notion and to create art without originality as a focus.

Ultimately, though, *The Recognitions* provides possibility. Gaddis did not tell the reader to arrive at this conclusion. In fact, my interpretation of *The Recognitions* is constructed solely on my understanding of meaning in the novel. And yet the encyclopedic form opened doors. The nonlinear structure allows for multiple interpretations without an authoritative voice denying new, creative ideas. Because

the encyclopedic text is made up of facts rather than opinions of the author, it provides a space for all these voices to exist next to each other in equal positions. In "Encyclopedic Discourse" (1992), Hilary A. Clark expounds on the possibilities of the encyclopedic text.⁵² She writes, "An encyclopedic play of language as desire gives rise to a new optimism, a sense of new possibilities for recreating, not merely reflecting, the world."53 Thus the encyclopedic narrative creates new possibilities both for potential literature and for society. The Recognitions paves the way toward postmodern literature, but it also provides a prescriptive method for authentic creation. In my reading of *The Recognitions*, the form of encyclopedic narrative is the key to understanding the novel's conclusion, even though it was initially the obstacle that alienated its audience.

Hilary A. Clark, "Encyclopedic Discourse," SubStance 67 (1992) 95-110.
 Clark 96.

V. Beyond the Text, the Next Fifty Years

After the initial negative critical response to *The Recognitions*, one might assume the book was forgotten. In the fifty years since its publication in 1955, however, it has become more popular. It remains an underground classic, and yet within the last ten years several books have been published on Gaddis, with two or three devoted to *The Recognitions*. Gaddis published four books after *The Recognitions*, and a collection of his essays was published in 2002 after his death in 1998. Although I have already presented my interpretation of the text, I would like to go beyond the text to several external sources in order to make some concluding remarks.

First, I want to briefly touch on two recent critical works that respond to *The Recognitions* in order to illustrate the current sentiment about the work. Although there are now quite a few works on Gaddis, there are two critical works that stand out above the rest: *Carnival of Repetition* by John Johnston and *Paper Empire*, a volume of essays on Gaddis and "the World System." My goal is to reflect shared themes in these works, rather than to discuss their arguments and conclusions in detail. In *Carnival of Repetition*, Johnston uses *The Recognitions* to explore the emergence of postmodern themes in literature. He discusses the act of recognition as a repetition or simulacra. *Paper Empire* includes Klaus Benesch's essay on Gaddis, Kierkegaard, and the concept of repetition. Benesch explains his position:

The Recognitions, I argue, sets out to redefine the very act of 'repetition' itself. By introducing a form of repetition that signals not so much an act of iteration but the laying bare of a spiritual core that is extant yet not fully actuated in the original, the novel reflects and, at the same time, defuses the tensions between the modern notion of authenticity (and/as originality) and a postmodern

environment steeped in modes of simulation and means of producing simulacra ⁵⁴

Benesch argues that *The Recognitions* illustrates the progression from Kierkegaard's notion of repetition, to the modern notion of authenticity, and ends with postmodern conclusions (the novel as simulacra). Scholars have begun to recognize *The Recognitions* as a turning point in literature. Although these discussions are brief, I mean to illustrate how contemporary scholars highlight the postmodern aspect that Gaddis picked up on, a fact that critics could not appreciate in the fifties and sixties because they were not yet far enough removed. Initially, numerous critics compared *The Recognitions* to *Ulysses*; they looked back and only saw the similarities to past works, rather than the differences that make *The Recognitions* unique. Since the first wave of criticism, scholars have shifted the emphasis to the future and thus Gaddis is associated with Pynchon, DeLillo, and Barth. Gaddis is now praised as a forerunner who preceded the postmodern wave of literature.

Although *The Recognitions* most closely resembles *J R*, Gaddis's award-winning work from 1975, *Carpenter's Gothic* is an interesting counterpoint to *The Recognitions*. So Gaddis published *Carpenter's Gothic* in 1985; it is compact (262 pages) and makes no unnecessary diversions. Whereas *The Recognitions* aims to say everything, *Carpenter's Gothic* says very little. The plot unfolds slowly and mysteriously. Elizabeth Booth rents a house in upstate New York from the elusive Mr. McCandless. Elizabeth busies herself with duties inside the house, while her verbally abusive and pseudo-entrepreneurial husband Paul works in New York City. The narrative never leaves the house, but the reader catches glimpses of unexplained

⁵⁴ Benesch 32.

⁵⁵ William Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

occurrences in the outside world. There are references to a man named Reverend Ude, to a car accident Elizabeth was in several years earlier, and to Mr. McCandless's bible cartoons. However, the text only refers to these things rather than explains them. The reader is befuddled with such a lack of information. *Carpenter's Gothic* is tight and skillfully written, but overall it lacks the depth of *The Recognitions*. In an interview, Gaddis discusses his intentions for *Carpenter's Gothic*:

I cannot really work unless I set a problem for myself to solve. In *Carpenter's Gothic* the problems were largely of style and technique and form. I wanted to write a shorter book, one which observes the unities of time and place to the point that everything, even though it expands into the world, takes place in one house [...] it became really largely an exercise in style and technique.⁵⁶

Whereas *The Recognitions* extends into every aspect of life, *Carpenter's Gothic* remains within the walls of a single house. The plot unfolds through a linear narrative, and yet it is stifled by an attempt to stay within boundaries. *The Recognitions* was, in my opinion, a momentous novel because it was encyclopedic. Gaddis's style is bound with a keen sense of describing the totality of the world. *Carpenter's Gothic* does not *say* any thing, nor does it *do* any thing. It repeats the same names, facts, and plot points without any significance. *Carpenter's Gothic* is intriguing and the dialogue is well written, but it is in no way as noteworthy as *The Recognitions*.

I see the characterization of *The Recognitions* as an encyclopedic narrative as obvious and necessary. It intrigued me, though, why in 1976 Mendelson did not mention Gaddis in his foundational essay on encyclopedic texts, "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon." I corresponded with Mendelson on this point, asking him two questions. First, had he read *The Recognitions* at the time his essay

 $^{^{56}}$ Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, "The Art of Fiction CI—William Gaddis," The Paris Review 105 (Winter 1987), 54-89.

was written and if so, why did he choose not to include it either instead of or at least alongside Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (the centerpiece for his essay)?; second, if he had read *The Recognitions* since then, does he think that Gaddis's work would fall in line with the other important encyclopedic texts that he mentions in his article? His response:

It's been a long time since I wrote that article, but, if I remember correctly, it never occurred to me to write about "The Recognitions" because (1) it didn't have the cultural authority that I thought "Gravity's Rainbow" would have and (2) because it seemed to me (perhaps wrongly) an essentially satiric and negative book, unlike all the truly encyclopedic books, which all have a vision of the way in which a world - even an unjust one - is held together in some ultimately cohesive way.

Of course, my inclinations don't really mean anything here, but in reality there is no such thing as a category of "encyclopedic narrative" - all it is (or all it was intended to be) was a convenient way of thinking about a batch of books that had some things in common. My opinion of what belongs in that category and what doesn't belong has no more authority than anyone else's - which is a long way of saying that my opinion shouldn't affect yours in the least.⁵⁷

His first point illustrates the minimal popularity of *The Recognitions* twenty years after it was published. Mendelson was writing an essay that would become the cornerstone for a new literary genre, so it is understandable that he would take his audience into consideration when citing evidence. *Gravity's Rainbow* was published in 1973 and was popular in the academic world at the time. *The Recognitions* was still too obscure. His second point, though, provides an interesting addition to his understanding of the encyclopedic narrative. For Mendelson, encyclopedic novels share "a vision of the way in which a world – even an unjust one – is held together in some ultimately cohesive way." I do not think he communicates this idea so directly in his essay. To me, his essay argues that encyclopedic texts all attempt to

⁵⁷ Edward Mendelson, letter to the author, 30 March 2008.

communicate the totality of their eras. The all-encompassing works provide facts about language, professions, disciplines, and popular thought, but they do not provide the links between them. The text is a canvas on which information gathers, painting a picture of society as seen by some viewer. This stresses totality, rather than unity or cohesiveness. However, I think in our correspondence Mendelson emphasizes that encyclopedic texts provide a vision of unity. Mendelson also stresses that he did not set out to define the encyclopedic narrative for the first time or once and for all. These characteristics were suggestive rather than authoritative. He wanted to show similarities between texts and give them a name. I think this distinction sets apart encyclopedic texts from works of other genres, because the structure is so uncertain; however, it also gives them their allure for thought-provoking interpretations.

Finally, I want to respond to the novel's reputation. Mendelson calls the book "essentially satiric and negative." I can understand how the novel is read this way; the reader sees all the characters' attempts at authentic art as failures. Without an answer to the central question of the book, the reader may be left in a hopeless state. In an interview, Gaddis acknowledges and yet disproves a pessimistic reading:

Many reviewers and critics draw attention to all my books as being hopeless, that no good is going to come of anything, that everything is winding down in the entire en-tropic concept. But Wyatt's line, I think late in the book, says that one must simply live through the corruption, even become part of it. As Esme, the model, is a quite corrupted person but still an innocent in some way. Well, Wyatt has been part of the corruption, but at the end he says we must simply live it through and make a fresh start. I mean you could almost say—though the way the phrase is used now is *not* what I mean — that it is a notion of being born again in *this* life, with no reference to our "born again" Christians, and the next one.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Abádi-Nagy 54-89.

The Recognitions can be read as an entirely negative novel that cynically describes a decaying modern world. This image has lasted throughout the last fifty years, although perhaps no longer to its disadvantage. Gaddis, however, did not see it that way and I do not either. Even though it is cynical, it does not end with a negative worldview. Through my essay, I hope to have shown that The Recognitions provides possibility for literature and art. I believe Gaddis creates a method for authentic creation, however indirectly he chooses to do so. He forces the reader to actively participate in the text; difficult literature makes us better readers, and in turn better writers. I think it would be a mistake to perpetuate a negative image of The Recognitions, and thus I participate in the literary criticism of the novel in order to demonstrate to readers that The Recognitions is a brilliant and constructive work of literature.

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