



## **Tradition's Locus: Religiosity, Modernism, and the Simulacrum in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions***

Adam Kerker  
*Illinois College*

### **Abstract**

*William Gaddis's The Recognitions (1955) serves as a detailed and systematic critique of literary modernism, specifically of that artistic movement's core drive to experiment and to, as Ezra Pound once stated, "make it new" by developing new literary forms that broke sharply with those of the past. This paper hypothesizes that Gaddis, foreseeing the development of postmodernism, implicitly criticizes modernism's proponents for contradicting the professed goal of the movement. By examining works assigned by literary historians to the modernist period, Gaddis posits that very little about them was wholly new—many modernist works of literature are instead collages of old works pieced together by erudite writers. The Recognitions, according to this paper, parodies modernism by presenting characters (poets, painters, and composers) who cannot create anything without relying on the past. Furthermore, Gaddis takes his novel one step further, quoting a vast array of writers, obscure and prominent, who highlight his work's two-pronged chief ambition: the elevating of the pastiche so that it becomes a method for the author's criticism of modernism and a way to state plainly that the modern artist can only become great through an awareness of the advancements made in the past.*

William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (pub. 1955) analyzes the contentious relationship between original art (mainly paintings, classical music, and poetry) and the picture-perfect forgeries disseminated by those who lack originality. Gaddis uses the novel to ambitiously encapsulate much of artistic history. His ambition does not come without a price; the labyrinthine nature of the work relegates this essay to a discussion of only a handful of its major themes. By creating his novel as a narrative about inspired artists slogging their way through the laborious process of creation, the author astutely comments on the nature of art, one defined by the inevitable failure of artists to cast aside the weighted influences of the canonical artistic past, dogmatic family members opposed to their endeavors, and the venal artistic underground. Failing repeatedly to create

original work, artists subsequently become reproducers of past artistic creations who mechanize the process of creation. Blending his prose with the poetic lines of T.S. Eliot and his themes with the Faustian mythos, respectively the most renowned poet in the modernist tradition and the most often-cited European story of individualistic hubris, Gaddis presents a realistic world in which artists find themselves unable to create without plagiarizing, forging, or at the very least alluding to the works of others, and thus they actively refute the modernist notion of the autonomous work.

The direct quotation of works without citation defines the author's method of composition, so that, in effect, authenticity is an absentee quality in the gargantuan, intellectually self-indulgent context of *The Recognitions*. The characters of the novel mirror this plagiaristic ethos in their various vocations and avocations. In a sense, nearly all of the major characters in this ambitious novel constitute a cadre of forgers and plagiarizers. *The Recognitions*, by relating the story of these forgers and plagiarizers to its sometimes bewildered readers, forces them to consider the simulacrum and its subsequent effect on literary heritage, canonicity, and outright parody through the medium of the encyclopedic novel, a device for which Gaddis perhaps serves as the American progenitor as seen through its unorthodox literary lens. The simulacrum here is taken to the furthest extremes; on nearly every page of the work, one can find allusions and/or quotations of other works that were preserved for posterity. A grandiose literary portrait of the simulacrum, *The Recognitions* reacts to the great works of the early twentieth century, particularly the novels and poems categorized in the modernist period. Gaddis's discontent with the artistic expressions of modernist writers and painters is expressed by the unattributed quotation of works, a method of plagiarism that ironically enables the work itself to comment on the exhausted and equally exhausting art of the modernist period. Quotations form the corpus of the work's textual simulacrum. The plot, a complex formation consisting of occasionally incongruous parts, takes as its central thread the story of an artist at the midpoint of the twentieth century. Originality in this context is not impossible; after all, *The Recognitions* is a highly original work of literary fiction, but its literary power is fueled by intertextuality, a tendency to quote or allude to other works of fiction and nonfiction. The plot of the novel presents a world in which originality is possible, but the references inserted covertly within the work highlight what is Gaddis's tacit argument in formulating his parodic simulacrum: that art must be influenced by and based on the work of the past and that the chief goals of modernism were both flawed and futile in the context of the postwar period when art had become so heavily canonized.

In beginning this discussion, a perhaps unintended connection can be formed between *The Recognitions* and Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin theorized long before Gaddis that "[i]n principle a work of art has always been reproducible" (1167). Benjamin's intent in writing on reproduction was to address a fact that

had become explicit in modern life—the rapid and industrial reproduction of artwork(s) had by his time become possible with the advent of new printing technology, brought about in part by the sustained development of the international manufacturing economy and by the emergence of mass print culture that facilitated the techno-revolution as a necessary development. Unlike the various artworks either mentioned in passing or given plot-based significance in *The Recognitions*, the reproductions discussed as the primary subject of Benjamin’s essay were produced through technological means rather than raw artistic skill. However, Benjamin theorized that “[e]ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (1168). Apropos to *The Recognitions*, much of the artistic material falls strictly into the category of reproductions, with few original works coming under Gaddis’s seemingly all-inclusive gaze.

The great artists of previous centuries have, in the case of this novel, provided the material necessary for the protagonist to accomplish his forgeries. The protagonist validates Benjamin’s claim. For Benjamin, writing during the heyday of the European modernists, art in the modern age would be produced mechanistically, and the “distinction between author and [the] public [could] lose its basic character” (1178). Giving his work a New Critical edge, Benjamin asserts that “[a]t any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (1178). Gaddis, the reader of myths, used the material he read to construct his own unique novel. Now that artists could reproduce great art with some alterations made to the original content, the line between the author and the plagiarist had been blurred. Those who read a wide range of texts could then use them as material for their novels. So, Gaddis personifies the plagiarist, the central character archetype of *The Recognitions*, one who pulls from traditions to create an “original” novel that contains many ideas, phrases, and statements extracted from other works. According to Benjamin, “for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipate[d] the work of art from its . . . dependence on ritual” (1172). The process of artistic production in *The Recognition* does depend on a ritual, but not on the traditional practice of artistic production (i.e., creating anew from one’s mind). The characters of the novel take the production of art as their personal industry, although this personal resourcefulness and intuition about creation defies the tradition because nothing new is actually formed by the numerous characters who populate Gaddis’s sprawling and encyclopedic work. The aforementioned ritual is actually forgery/plagiarism.

Artistic reproduction and plagiarism become recurring motifs in the novel via the Bildungsroman of its protagonist. The novelist and critic Cynthia Ozick offers a lucid interpretation of the novel’s purpose within the tradition of American letters. In her view, “‘The Recognitions’ is a mocking recognition of the implausibility of originality: a vast fiction about fabrication and forgery” (1). Indeed, the work when taken at its most basic level is precisely about this subject, but Ozick’s terse definition fails to extract from the text a nuanced portrait of

its plot or purpose. This essay shall try to pull out themes deemed central to the reader's interpretation while maintaining a focus on the subjects given by Ozick as the primary yet basic subjects of *The Recognitions*.

Essentially, the sinuous plot of this unconventional novel limns a nearly all-inclusive portrait of struggling artists wrestling with their creations after the Second World War. Best identified as a *Kunstlerroman*, a story about the development of an artist, *The Recognitions* begins its labyrinthine plot with the story of Wyatt Gwyon, and its narrative serves in its early pages as an account of this character's unusual childhood. As a boy, Wyatt is influenced by his puritanical Aunt May, a pernicious family member. An exaggerated figure intended for comedic or satirical purposes, she chastises her nephew for producing art, both new and forged, that opposes her guiding theology, the doctrine of Calvinistic fundamentalism. She represents the conventions of that theology to an absurd extreme, and her insistence that Wyatt willingly follow that dogma stifles the development of his independent, intellectual self, which assumes throughout his life a distinct passion for the arts. In conversation with Reverend Gwyon, Wyatt's father, who later becomes a cultist fanatic, Aunt May claims that "[h]e [Wyatt] comes up with all sorts of fabrications . . . things he invents and pretends they are so . . . He's told me about seven heavens, made out of different kinds of metal, indeed!" (Gaddis 28). For Aunt May, Wyatt's youthful curiosity steered him away from the sanctity of her god's grace, and implicating Wyatt in sinful activities, she begins a magnanimous quest to lead her wayward nephew back to the path of righteousness. It is made clear by Gaddis's tone in the early pages of *The Recognitions* that his goal was to establish in Aunt May a character to embody religious fanaticism and anti-intellectual inclinations. Even before his aunt attempts to indoctrinate the dubious Wyatt with her bigoted theology, she criticizes her nephew for showing in his ordinary childhood actions and speech—boyhood stinginess and his inclusion of minor swear words ("darn" and "heck") in his developing vocabulary—the covert and alarming (at least for her) presence of original sin. Observing Wyatt, she notes that he "seemed already to have piled up a tidy store of sin" (Gaddis 20). Her paranoid fundamentalism inclines her to subject her blank-slated nephew to a rigorous theological realignment in favor not with religious orthodoxy but with extremism as a reaction to Wyatt's iniquity. The drive of this extremist to pervert her nephew's thought extends beyond her mere chastisement of his seemingly normal childhood behavior to his later choice to become an artist. "To sin," she believes, "is to falsify something in the Divine Order, and that is what Lucifer did . . . He tried to become original" (Gaddis 34). Wyatt, creating art that copies that of the Flemish painters, tries to become an original creator, a role derided by his overzealous and verbally abusive aunt. Suppressing his creative drive for its supposed opposition to the Christian deity, Aunt May additionally claims all attempts made at constructing original work steal the authority of her god, the only being in her mind who has the right to create new material (Gaddis 34). Though she passes away when Wyatt is only twelve,

her influence remains central to the novel following her early death. Creation and the artist's creative soul are, in her view, inexplicably tied up with theology. Yet, Chingshun Sheu offers another interpretation of her religious intentions. "It is evident," Sheu claims, "that Aunt May is devout but not religious; more than she believes in God, she believes in believing," and "[s]he utterly lacks the capacity for sin" (Sheu 240). Gaddis attacks her faith (her "believing in believing"), satirizing its precipitous ability to lead its followers to simple-mindedness and an inability to accept new art: "She was, indeed, far on the way to that simple-mindedness which many despairingly intelligent people believe requisite for entering the kingdom of Heaven" (36). Refusing to create anything, Aunt May cannot have a capacity for sin against her seemingly totalitarian deity if her actions are devoted almost entirely to espousing the unuttered commands of this metaphysical being. Following her theology simple-mindedly without questioning it, Aunt May's rigid attitude toward faith precipitates Wyatt's later rejection of originality.

Aunt May is not the sole example of religious dogma that Gaddis portrays in his text. In fact, "all of the novel's major characters can be grouped into those 'having, or about to have, or at the very least valiantly fighting off, a religious experience' (*TR* 900), with the majority falling into the third category" (Moore 17). True, Cynthia Ozick admits that the novel can be considered to be about the intertwined concepts of art and religion (1), but this is an overgeneralization of an overwhelmingly complex novel whose resultant plot functions as a synthesis of many broad concepts, art and religion notwithstanding. Aunt May's religious diatribe against original creators leads to Wyatt's later decision to forge paintings once deemed sacred to artists and those who study art. Through her influence, Wyatt learns that artistic endeavors must be undertaken privately and that artists should not aspire to originality (Alberts 11). Deciding not to pursue the creation of original work, Wyatt assumes a new role in mid-twentieth century society—that of a forger who for a time paints work that demonstrates his personal talent as an artist and his propensity for railing against what is normally expected of an original creator. Artists enter the underground world of art with the expectation that they will manage to create original work in varied mediums, but some of them, Wyatt and most of the novel's other characters included, plagiarize the more highly innovative artists of preceding historical periods.

Some of Wyatt's plagiaristic ambition is driven by his conversations with Esther, his wife. She recognizes early in their relationship that Wyatt has lost a sense of his artistic identity. In one of their emotionally charged conversations, she tells him, "you could do better, you could do more" (Gaddis 84). Her admonition to do more fails to have an effect on Wyatt. He decides to do precisely the opposite of what she tells him: to become a forger who lacks the ambition required to create original work.

Originality and its pursuit permeate the narrative of *The Recognitions*. However, originality serves as something to which the protagonist directs his contempt. Indeed, this attitude develops because of Aunt May's attempt to

convince Wyatt that his prior activities were sinful. After Aunt May's death, Wyatt derides the necessity of originality as an idealistic and pernicious view of creation, instead vilifying it as a "romantic disease" that idealists and indolent creators use to excuse themselves for creating subpar art (Gaddis 89). Underlying this view is a rejection of the art created by the mid-century abstractionists. This view, though certainly rational from Wyatt's perspective, ignores his own creative laziness as displayed by his aforementioned penchant for copying the works of masters without offering original work to demonstrate his own skill, independent of primordial influences. Early in the novel, Gaddis gives the readers an example of precisely what the creative process is like for his protagonist. "Every week or so," he tells us, "[Wyatt] would begin something original. It would last for a few days, but before any lines of completion had been drawn he abandoned it" (55). Wyatt's clear abandonment of originality intimates the presence of a dissenting view of creation. For him, the absence of original artistic styles and skill has perpetually driven creators, because of their inability to differentiate their work from that of their more innovative contemporaries, to a point where they can only copy others, and he himself directly symbolizes this group of forgers and plagiarizers. Gaddis names the Flemish masters of the northern Renaissance, personified in the novel by Hieronymous Bosch, as patrons of the style which Wyatt seeks to emulate and copy. He begins forging Bosch's *Seven Deadly Sins* on a table in adolescence before he, like the modernist American expatriates, ventures to Paris to pursue an artistic career. In Paris, Wyatt generates the crucial elements of his aesthetic philosophy.

Wyatt reassesses the notion of originality, intentionally assigning it a negative connotation in the context of *The Recognitions*. Klaus Benesch expounds on the nature of originality in *The Recognitions*, reaching the conclusion that it prefigures repetition and negatively leads to the mechanization of art (36), which Benjamin thought could undermine the uniqueness of original art so that it would become "imbedded in the fabric of tradition" (Benjamin 1171). In short, anyone can produce great art in Gaddis's novel, and so, the once romanticized process of creation has been negated to a mere shadow of its former self. Wyatt and the other characters are neither great intellectuals nor original stylists. Gaddis, Christopher Knight rightly claims, saw that an attempt "[t]o make art self-contained, autonomous, something that relates to nothing else, except if that relation be one of opposition, [was] the error of the age" (31). So, considering both Benesch's assumption that art after World War II had entered a period of mechanization—a model of production akin to that of industry—and Knight's view, Wyatt embodies that shift specified by Benesch and counters attempts by artists to make their art autonomous from potential influences. Originality does not by itself lead to repetition. However, Wyatt's creative ideology—his unwavering opposition to originality—prompted this shift to repetition and forgery over his earlier propensity for innovation. As we shall later see, this is also true of *The Recognitions* itself beyond the confines of its plot and characters; quotations and

allusions show plainly the author's machine-like ability to create new work in a collage of the old that refutes any possible arguments for the work's intrinsic originality.

Wyatt forges paintings for the devilish Reckall Brown. Steven Moore offers a descriptor of Wyatt's development thus far: "When Wyatt starts out he is not a genius, but he is a very talented painter . . . he turns to forgery, which is to say involvement with the material . . . world" (13). Reckall Brown enables Wyatt to become involved with the artistic underground, a hidden world preoccupied not with aesthetics but with the arbitrarily assigned monetary value of art. Reckall Brown is precisely concerned with the material world, for his only intention is to get out of Wyatt's forgeries the money necessary to pursue his materialistic convictions. John Stark hypothesizes that Brown "is the Satan who presides over this hell [the artistic underground mentioned before] and thus Gaddis's embodiment of contemporary evil" (3). Stark's decision to place emphasis on Brown's role, particularly his fulfillment of the second part of the "human versus Satan" dichotomy, is appropriate given the religious under- and overtones of the narrative. Here, Gaddis argues implicitly that rugged materialism trumps art in a hierarchy of importance, an arrangement that Gaddis found both erroneous and inhibiting, adopting instead in Wyatt's story the mentality of aestheticists in conflict against the pragmatic yet avaricious patrons who care solely about their potential gains from the sale of the art rather than the work's meaning and artistic relevance/significance. Christopher Knight concurs with this claim, stating that Gaddis's cadre of forgers and plagiarizers "embrace an art-for-art's-sake aesthetic" (26). The notion of authenticity highlights Gaddis's conception of hell; those who abandon their authentic existences as artists by forging and/or plagiarizing cast aside their individual identities as creators, which is precisely what Wyatt has done in colluding wittingly (at least for a time) with Reckall Brown.

The relationship of Wyatt and Brown is sharply dichotomous and symbolic of the aforementioned relationship. The dichotomy can be simplified in this way: the aestheticist versus the businessman. Birger Vanwesenbeeck expands this by stating that "the relationship appears to be a confrontational and even inimical one, one that pits the artist's search for authenticity and truth against the money-driven schemes of contemporary society" (2). In other words, the artist—Wyatt—searches for authentic notions of aesthetics while being prevented from finding them by the self-interested, financially-driven Brown. Brown's materialism stands in stark contrast to Wyatt's intellectualism. The protagonist is deeply concerned with the creative process, even at times going so far as to debate issues related to it primarily with the women—Esther, Esme, and others—in his life who are not aware of the artist's travails and the impasse of creativity Wyatt has reached, while Brown simple-mindedly wants nothing but money from Wyatt's art. Before he begins his far from ideal relationship with Brown, Wyatt articulates precisely what is bothering him as an artist, though in fairly vague terms:

How . . . how fragile situations are. But not tenuous. Delicate, but not flimsy, not indulgent. Delicate, that's why they keep breaking, they must break and you must get the pieces together and show it before it breaks again, or put them aside for a moment when something else breaks and turn to that, and all this keeps going on. (Gaddis 113)

One might ask, what is falling apart in this descriptive passage? The passage indeed invokes Yeats's famous poem on the perpetual and cyclical decay of man, but its true meaning remains pervasively unclear throughout the book. Gaddis's later oeuvre puts on display a marked fascination with entropy—a scientific concept adapted here for the sake of clarifying the chaotic and unimpeded foundering of high art from its once prominent place in the pantheon of human creativity. Nevertheless, this more philosophical approach to assessing Wyatt's dialogue, apropos to his clearly attenuated ontological state, distracts readers from arriving at the truer but admittedly translucent purpose, which lies behind its delivery and its composition by Gaddis. Here begins the author's disingenuous critique of modernism and those who profess the originality of their art. His dialogue provides a terse theory of artistic history and its cyclical nature. Eventually, if the implications of Wyatt's words are taken seriously, all art (especially the styles that dominate historical periods) falls out of popularity. Future generations of artists, representing their own respective movements or personal interests, figuratively “pick up the pieces” left in the wake of the earlier style's sudden and sometimes covert disappearance. This is precisely what Gaddis is getting at here, and he remains consistent in addressing this theme even until the denouement of *The Recognitions*.

Wyatt's relationship to Recktal Brown forces the reluctant and culturally overwhelmed artist to think about his chosen vocation. Eager to disseminate copies of artistic masterworks for financial gain, Brown represents all that Wyatt opposes, though he may not know that until the end of his tenure as Brown's forger. In Gaddis's view, the desire for lucre, embodied by Brown, has overwhelmed the spirit of creativity and innovation shown by Wyatt prior to his suppression by Aunt May. This situation and all of the events in Wyatt's early life “work like mirrors to reflect light on Wyatt's search for understanding, which, because of the important religious theme [established by his aunt], appears to be a search for salvation” (Stark 2). Susan Strehle Klemtner asserts that Wyatt “assumes heroic stature from the outset” (18). The heroic Wyatt seeks the salvation of his artistic soul, an inner being corrupted by his personal guilt and the crime (or sin, if Aunt May's view is considered) of forgery/plagiarism in conjunction with the influence of the miscreant Brown. For Chingsheun Sheu, Wyatt's “search for his own authentic existence . . . provides a common background to facilitate discussion of the other epiphanies” (239). Though there are many characters in *The Recognitions*, Wyatt, the only character whose childhood is depicted in great detail, perhaps unwittingly serves as the center around which they all oscillate.



Like the other, non-centralized characters of the story, Wyatt strives to become a great artist, ignoring the protests of his aunt and father who merely wanted him to enter the ministry. That incessant striving to create original works in similitude to his aunt's unseen god propels him in adulthood to forgery for his supposed sin, and the fetters of originality have thus been broken. Aunt May's condemnation of Wyatt's original art caused him to consider his artistic innovations sinful.

Yet Gaddis, much like Wyatt, was not entirely authentic in his composition of this novel; he relied on other texts in writing it, and much of the novel consequently alludes to earlier work. Goethe's *Faust* and the numerous other versions of the Faust narrative—Marlowe's *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* and Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus* being the most prominent among them—demonstrate the writer's preoccupation both with the study of postclassical literature and in using that literature to shape the events and character psychologies presented in his novel. John Beer claims that "Gaddis began the novel as a parodic retelling of *Faust*" (83). Beer is correct—*The Recognitions* contains multiple allusions to *Faust* and its variations—but it does not constitute a true retelling of the German legend. Rather, Gaddis extracted from that text components he deemed essential and then molded them into his narrative, all while neglecting to give the uninformed readers much to latch onto in order to definitively posit the novel's connection to the Faustian legend in all of its literary varieties. Eventually deciding to abandon his initial goal of forming a plot indebted entirely to the mythos of Faust so that he could construct a narrative detached to a certain extent from that myth, Gaddis chose to keep an element of that narrative in his novel to place it (meaning *The Recognitions*) within a larger canon of works considered essential by the learned and to link the myth's protagonist (who eventually seeks his own salvation in Marlowe's version) to Wyatt and his personal struggles. But, a reader may ask, what is the purpose of the Faust myth, the most prominent of the many separate plotlines affecting the novel's development, in the metropolitan context—New York City's Greenwich Village—given as the primary setting of *The Recognitions*?

The Faustian pact—the deal formed between an intellectual who believes he can gain knowledge of something previously unrecognized and a miscreant whose intentions, though on the surface benign, are markedly guided in the direction of corruption—ultimately fails to produce any sort of epiphany in Wyatt while he resides in Brown's clutches. His deal here forces a stalemate in the plot, a period where virtually nothing, at least with respect to Wyatt, occurs to indicate a transition in setting or feeling until its very sudden, quasi-comedic end.

But the myth, despite its allusive presence, has a complicated role in evincing the themes of the work beyond its temporal plot. "The myth [that of Dr. Faustus]," Matthias Mosch contends, "is crucial as regards the theme of accruing knowledge, especially in terms of the interrelation of unstable epistemological frameworks and ethics" (Mosch 51). In clearer terms, the myth's presence highlights ethical questions related to the production of art and the monetarily-

driven schemes of its funders. Reck tall Brown, the corrupt art dealer and patron who acts within *The Recognitions* as the demonic foil to Wyatt, provides the clearest evidence for the link between the novel and the Faust myth, and his insidious vocation brings to mind certain ethical quandaries and rhetorical questions that imply his relationship to ethics or, better yet, the lack thereof. Brown has his archetypal role as a villain who, with his avaricious scheme to gain illicit wealth from Wyatt's forgeries, fulfills one of the two roles in the Faustian paradigm, that of the demon Mephistopheles, the trickster and tempter of the intellectual. Wyatt, the obvious intellectual in this relationship, ultimately strikes a deal with Gaddis's Mephistopheles, one that relegates the intellectual to a state of servitude, enslavement to the whims of the businessman. For those who have not yet become acquainted with Goethe's *Faust*, the connection between the two men may not seem obvious, so Gaddis places allusions to the German drama around *The Recognitions*. Mephistopheles, the instigator of Faust's fall from righteousness, once assumes the form of a dog before showing himself in humanoid form. Faust and his companion Wagner observe "a black dog loose in the seed and stubble ground" (Goethe 40) that proceeds to follow the pair to the titular character's place of residence. Gaddis appropriates this plot event in his narrative, using it not to introduce an otherworldly character—*The Recognitions* is, despite a few phantasmagorical digressions from reality, usually grounded in it—but to symbolize the casting off of Brown's control over a minor character, the corrupt art dealer's African American manservant Fuller, and the protagonist. The black dog found in *The Recognitions* is owned by Brown, and Fuller, in an act of rebellion against his master, kills the black poodle, the "[e]vidence of the great power watchin [sic] over [him]" (Gaddis 693), and the animalistic representative of Brown's oppression of Fuller and Wyatt. Thus, by tracing the dog allusion's etiology back to Goethe's *Faust*, this paper evinces a clear connection between Gaddis's novel and the literature of his artistic forefathers. That connection, Matthia Mosch correctly claims, is "exemplified in the . . . fall of the novel's protagonist" (52), a downfall mirroring Dr. Faustus's wish to atone for his wrongdoing, penance from the sin of selling his soul to the devil. Whereas Marlowe's Dr. Faustus expresses this wish, Wyatt atones for his sin of forgery by other means in a scene laden with references to Goethe's *Faust*.

The dog, an overt reference to Goethe's *Faust*, is not the only allusion to that work which Gaddis placed in his text. Others are, even for those who have read Goethe's text, more obscure, requiring an intricate knowledge of the original text in order to point out the allusion. Reck tall Brown, for example, meets his demise after Gaddis parades out an allusion to *Faust*. In this scene, Gaddis reinforces the aforementioned parallel between Brown and Mephistopheles via the presentation of an absurd situation. Inebriated after a night of revelry at his Christmas party, the drunken Brown climbs into his suit of armor—a replica intended only for display—and falls down a flight of stairs to an early death. The art critic Basil Valentine observes Brown at the top of the stairs: "Mephistopheles don't you

know, in . . . that ponderous thing by Goethe. Good heavens, yes wearing false calves, don't you know, to cover his cloven feet" (Gaddis 676). Gaddis used a fairly archaic translation (by contemporary standards) of Goethe's work when writing this passage. The dedicated compilers of WilliamGaddis.org provide the original translated material from which Gaddis quoted:

Tail, talons, horns, are nowhere to be traced!  
 As for the foot, with which I can't dispense,  
 'Twould injure me in company, and hence,  
 Like many a youthful cavalier,  
*False calves* I now have worn for many a year. (WilliamGaddis.org)

For composing the comical scene of Brown's drunken fall down the stairs, Gaddis used an earlier translation of *Faust* that is now out of print, but the annotators on WilliamGaddis.org have preserved this passage to aid readers' interpretations and their writing on the link between Gaddis and Goethe. Through the scene of Brown's death, his naming of Mephistopheles, and his quotation of Goethe, Gaddis makes known again the religious theme and its not so tenuous link to the art world, especially Wyatt's experience of it in antipathy to his aunt's earlier diatribes against human creation(s). The devil Brown convinced Wyatt to live in sin through forgery, an almost daily desecration of art for financial gain. His aunt would not approve of this vocation, for creation, even the copying of others for profit, undermines the authority of a god whose divine authority (according to her theology) gives he/she/it the sole right above its human creations to make art. This analysis notwithstanding, the passage still highlights Gaddis's parodic intentions. Gaddis incorporated part of a poetic line in Goethe's *Faust*—material from a scene serious in tone—in the pursuit of parody, an unwritten intent to lend his work a semblance of comedy by quoting other works of literature whose themes and tone do not coincide with those of *The Recognitions* on a consistent basis.

Aunt May and Recktail Brown symbolically represent two parts of a religious paradigm. One adheres strictly to the rules put forth by her god, and the other breaks those rules by enabling Wyatt to become a creator, though an unoriginal one. The direct influence of these characters, however, ends at the novel's halfway point with the death of Brown. Wyatt, traveling to a monastery in Spain, takes up the habit of a Franciscan monk, using the appellation "Stephen" to cloak his identity. The monastery here is the product of a pre-modern, heavily Christianized age, a time when men practiced asceticism in penance for immoral actions or out of abject fear of an unseen deity influencing events. Wyatt's decision to flee America for the isolation of the monastery shows religion and art's effect on his psychological well-being. The style of this penultimate section of the novel reflects Wyatt's increasingly deteriorating psyche and the style that Gaddis would adopt henceforth in all of his remaining works of fiction. This passage exemplifies the altered style of dialogue delivery:

- Listen! There’s a moment, traveling . . .
- Offered shelter, there they were, all the family at dinner . . .
- Usually working on something . . . (Gaddis 897)

The habit of beginning lines of dialogue with a dash is a hallmark of Gaddis’s fiction (and that of Joyce), but in this dialogue we see a shift from the understandable dialogue of the novel in its early phases to discontinued lines whose speaker(s) are rarely identified.

The myth of Doctor Faustus, though its presence in the text is clearer than other myths disseminated colloquially in the medieval period and the Renaissance for Gaddis’s eventual adaptation and appropriation, does not remain the sole mythological plotline that places its weight on *The Recognitions*. For Kevin Attell, *The Recognitions*, like its modernist counterpart *Ulysses*, “makes similar use of a literary model, one that . . . gives the book its title, for ‘The Recognitions’ is also the name of a second- or third-century Christian text” (262). This text, the Clementine *Recognitions*, has been relegated to the periphery of literature; few have heard of it, and even fewer have read it. By utilizing this early theological work to lend his work its name, Gaddis categorizes his novel as a work worthy of inclusion in a canon of works stretching back to late Roman society and the obscure ecclesiastical texts of the early church fathers. This implementation of an earlier work’s title implies Gaddis’s intent to connect *The Recognitions* to religious orthodoxy, namely to that fundamentalist strain of Christianity put in practice by the pathological Aunt May, and in an ambitious gesture of his work’s place in the canon, make clear to some his work’s hypertextuality.

Gaddis’s reliance on other texts in shaping his narrative enables his novel to transcend typical models of literature, those texts existing chiefly as plot-driven works of fiction, the Faust myth included. Klaus Benesch postulates that “postmodern writers seemed to be at odds with the belief that great art is solely constituted by original acts” (29). Difficult to semantically define because of its complexity, *The Recognitions* essentially portrays the relationship of the artist to his or her work. This relationship is, however, strained by the modernist notion of “newness.” Artists like Wyatt seek to create new work that is wholly independent of that which came before, a veritable impossibility when considering the canonized nature of the postwar aesthetic, but they all must rely on the artistic and intellectual developments of the past.

Gaddis’s work (and the work of his protagonist) relies on the works of the past, and this is revealed through the quotation of other works, most notably the poems of T.S. Eliot. Eliot is quoted more frequently in *The Recognitions* than any other author, and therefore Gaddis connects his work to the modernist aesthetic espoused in the works of Eliot and the other Euro-American modernists—a philosophy preoccupied especially with the pursuit of new art forms that rebelled iconoclastically against the rigid conformity stressed in the socially conservative Victorian period. Given the content of *The Recognitions* and its discussed literary influences, Eliot is an appropriate choice for quotation. In his poetry,

most obviously the works produced before 1930, Eliot—similar to Gaddis—incorporated a massive array of allusions and direct quotes so that reading his work without having an intricate knowledge of classical mythology, European languages besides English, and canonical literature (*The Canterbury Tales*, *The Divine Comedy*, etc.), one could not grasp fully the place of the poetry in literary history. This hypertextual drive was not an innovation in Eliot's day, nor was it so upon the first publication of *The Recognitions*, but these works serve along with *Ulysses* as some of the most encyclopedic fiction available for reading.

Although an example of modernist literature, Eliot's early poetry preceded its author's staunch traditionalism. What marks Eliot's later poetic and critical career is his literary and social conservatism, a stunning break from the earlier recalcitrance exhibited in his most stylistically experimental work. Gaddis, whether it is acknowledged or not, adopted an element of Eliot's later philosophy for his own appropriation. In Eliot's most famous essay, his "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he portrayed a grandiose literary and historical aesthetic from which artists almost unconsciously pulled in the process of creating their original works. For Eliot, "His [the artist] significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (1093). This denies the artist his unadulterated originality, an impossibility stemming from a romanticized notion of what art should be rather than its true nature. Any new work must have residing within it the vestiges of the past. With *The Recognitions*, however, the past overshadows the present.

Gaddis identifies a central query for the postwar artist: how can one create new work—paintings, poems, novels, stories, and musical compositions—without using the past as guidance? For Joseph Tabbi, Gaddis is "postmodern in the sense that, in his work, modernity is irrevocable; its large organizational structures have left neither the author nor the reader any independent literary standpoint" ("Technology" 2). Modernity and its cultural offshoot—modernism—shadowed artistic life at the midpoint of the twentieth century, and these art forms represented traits that Gaddis found difficult, perhaps impossible, to ignore in *The Recognitions*. Though the specter of modernism looms over the content of this novel, Gaddis counters modernism by showing the futility of innovation, the veritable impossibility of true "newness," through unattributed quotations in an effort to criticize modernist assertions and show that his work clearly relies on artistic works of the past.

The irony of the work lies in the author's choice to oppose modernism in forming a novel indebted to the ideas of that movement within the arts. Elaine Safer supports this assertion with one of her own. In her opinion, "Gaddis alludes to earlier literature in order to show an ironic contrast with the precepts of his era" (73). The irony here is located in Wyatt's early assumption that he can create wholly new work. What Safer means by the "precepts of his era," though, is translucent without examining Wyatt's predicament in a historical context. As stated before, the heavy-handed canonization of artwork, for much

of the narrative, stifled Wyatt's in his creative pursuits. Unable to create anything new, Wyatt actively counters Ezra Pound's maxim ("make it new"), perhaps the guiding principle of modernism, with his vocation, one in which the old—primarily paintings—replaces the new.

Gaddis, clearly not the first literary writer to produce a work so entrenched in the classical and modern traditions in aesthetics, followed in the artistic footsteps of T. S. Eliot, the modernist poet who underwent a radical philosophical transformation at the midpoint of his literary career, a shift from the rebel poet espousing the aesthetic virtues of modernity to the staunch traditionalist and cultural conservative. According to Birger Vanwesenbeeck, Gaddis "was deeply concerned with exploring the complex relationship between art and community" (1). From a narrative perspective, this is true. Wyatt and other characters—mainly Esme, Otto, and Stanley—interact with the community of aspiring artists, including execrable individuals such as the morally reprehensible Brown, in New York City's Greenwich Village. But this claim can be taken into consideration beyond the textual delimitations of the novel. By quoting writers from various nationalities, Gaddis interacted with the globalized artistic community of his era by parodying the works of Eliot and others.

Gaddis was himself a reproducer of great art, mainly that which is literary. Quotation in *The Recognitions* exists as a connective method, an attempt by the author to integrate modernist and pre-modernist texts with his original ideas, sentences, and phrases while countering the ideas of these periods with repetitious parody. Therefore, *The Recognitions* could be characterized as a web or network of themes differing in their historicity. Two categories of literature or philosophy dominate the textual content of *The Recognitions* and suggest its themes—modernism and archaic Christian mythology (such as hagiography). The most prominent and most obvious of the two categories, and the one which this essay shall most eagerly substantiate, is modernism, namely that particular literary variety of the American expatriates. Often misunderstood or ignored because of its esoteric nature, Miriam Fuchs states that "one aspect of it [*The Recognitions* itself] remains clear, and that is the profound impact of T.S. Eliot" (42). In one of the novel's most powerful sentences, Gaddis plagiarizes a line from Eliot's poem "East Coker":

Tragedy was foresworn, in ritual denial of the ripe knowledge that we are drawing away from one another, that we share only one thing, *share the fear of belonging to another, or to others, or to God*; love or money, tender equated in advertising and the world, where only money is currency, and under dead trees and brittle ornaments prehensile hands exchange forgeries of what the heart dare not surrender (103).

An indubitably more famous Eliot poem, his "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," is echoed by the playwright Otto Pivner in his response to Esme:

—Why do you say he slept with me?  
 —*That isn't what I meant at all*, said Otto (Gaddis 447).

And an early reference, the first allusion to “Prufrock,” can be found in the dialogue of Wyatt’s father, in which he laments the death of his wife:

—*If there had only been time . . .* He could hear her voice in this wistful complaint all of her life. —*If only there were time . . .*, she would have asked for instructions (Gaddis 15).

Reverberations of Prufrockian phrases are placed sporadically throughout the text. Wyatt’s mother dies before he was able to truly know her. If Reverend Gwyon (Wyatt’s father) laments the loss of his wife Camilla, Gaddis could be subsequently implying the end of modernism with his use of a modernist text to describe the death of the mother and Reverend Gwyon’s imagined conversation with her. Questioning the veracity of this claim is futile, as its truth is unfortunately unobtainable. However, given Gaddis’s tendency to have characters represent concepts and themes allegorically (mainly Reck tall Brown and Wyatt), the discovery of hidden meanings layered around the gargantuan text may not surprise a reader. All of this aside, what cannot be doubted is that Gaddis manages to inconspicuously weave the poet’s language into his prose.

Eliot, the oft-quoted writer of poems thematically analogous to modernism, best represents Gaddis’s compositional tendency to quote his favorite writers. To complement this fact and articulate the writer’s intentions in plagiarizing texts written by Eliot, Crystal Alberts claims that Gaddis once thought about parodying the entirety of Eliot’s “Four Quartets” in *The Recognitions* (18). This endeavor, if Gaddis had undertaken it, would have delineated his profound admiration for Eliot and the poet’s modernist works. Resolving not to let ambition and the work of others completely supersede the message and unique content of his novel, Gaddis instead chose to quote several famous Eliot poems without writing *The Recognitions* solely as a parody of the poet’s four most famous post-*Waste Land* poems. All of these quotations, when taken into serious consideration by the most well-informed readers, display a notable aspect of the work, namely the notion that it contains multiple semantic layers, including the hidden contempt for notions of originality. Other than the idea that very little is truly original in *The Recognitions*, the quotations seem to imply feelings of despair or nihilism in the lives of the novel’s characters. The artists of *The Recognitions* try to become creators of great renown or notoriety, but their despair is deepened when it is realized that their work entails nothing but the construction of facsimiles of prior creations.

The modernist dilemma of creation—the attempt to create autonomous work—is one of the novel’s most distinctive themes. Gaddis biographer Joseph Tabbi affirms that the novelist was an admirer of Eliot beginning in adolescence

,but he claims that Gaddis had “worked through Eliot’s traditionalism to something new and different” (*Nobody Grew* 11). The traditionalism of which Tabbi writes in relation to Eliot’s work is religious. Eliot’s Anglican dramas, particularly his devotional *Murder in the Cathedral*, position him post-*Waste Land* as a staunch devotee of Anglo-Catholicism. In *The Recognitions*, Gaddis is not necessarily rebelling against Christian traditions, but rather the modernist tradition which Eliot symbolizes. *The Recognitions* does not merely serve as a loving ode to the poet; after all, Gaddis foreshadows the decay of modernism through Wyatt’s dialogue. Yet, Matthew Wilkens seems to disagree with Tabbi’s assertion to a certain extent; for the former, the novel “presents the once-defamiliarizing techniques of canonical modernists . . . as codified and enumerable” (598). Gaddis incorporated some of the modernist techniques Wilkens promulgates, but forming a distinctly new novel was likely his goal.

Modernism at the time (generally the 1950s) had become a literary tradition, so Gaddis’s covert quotations of Eliot’s poems reveal his fascination with and willingness to implement elements of that tradition in his novel. Gaddis himself clarifies his connection to modernism via his characters—a hodgepodge of artistic types who try and inevitably fail for the most part to create new art. Wilkens bolsters this claim:

Rather than presenting a muddled dissertation on art, the text . . . is an allegorical response to precisely the difficulty of such a project and is therefore illustrative both of the specific crisis of literary modernism in the postwar years and of the technical and epistemic demands imposed by any such moment of transformation. (597)

Gaddis develops this character-based struggle, ingrained in the modernist desire to “make it new,” but the protagonist ultimately rejects modernism and its professed desire for originality. Wyatt, in a discourse with his wife Esther, condemns the “originality of incompetent idiots, [who] could draw nothing, paint nothing, just so the mess they make is original” (Gaddis 89). Wyatt’s psychological trauma, caused by Aunt May, factors in to this tirade. Her invective against originality persuaded Wyatt to thereafter abandon originality and disparage those who chose to pursue it. Thus originality is more than a simple quality which defines artists; instead, it represents something oppressive, a factor which occludes artists of all kinds from forming art which they truly hope to create. In this novel, the mere notion of originality, though implying a desire for innovation, fetters artists to modernist philosophy. Gaddis uses Wyatt, his protagonist, as a narrative vehicle for expressing his disillusionment with modernist philosophy. Wyatt functions narratively as the individual who signifies the chime for modernism’s obsequy. Wilkens identifies *The Recognitions* as a “rare and valuable model through which to evaluate the mechanics of the move away from modernism after the Second World War” (597). Again, the work’s status—one with quotations disjointedly patched together—schematizes the writer’s ideological shift away from modernist



views.

New revelations about American culture in the 1950s are common after a reader absorbs *The Recognitions* and all of its arcane quotations. Joseph Tabbi postulates that “[w]hat he [Gaddis] found himself living through . . . was not so easily mapped onto Eliot’s earlier postwar sensibility: it was not the destruction of an old order so much as the acceleration of a new, hypertrophied capitalism” (*Nobody Grew* 11). Capitalism, when taken to its absurd and unrestrained free-market extremes, forms a substantial part of Gaddis’s second novel’s (*JR*) caustic indictment of bourgeois greed and the role an economic agenda can sometimes play in ebbing the flow of artworks produced by enterprising artists. To focus solely on *JR*, though, would be to ignore the presence of a capitalistic critique in *The Recognitions*. Reckfall Brown and his schemes for the acquisition of illicit funds (obtained from selling Wyatt’s forgeries) demonstrate the acceleration of culture toward a point in which even the most beautiful artworks could be reproduced and then sold to the highest bidder, a person who would be incapable of distinguishing the forgeries from the originals. This no doubt defies the tradition in art, for we can assume that the public character had mostly been guided until Gaddis’s arrival on the literary scene by creators who, though admitting their influences, did not elevate intertextuality beyond mere playfulness. Differentiating Eliot’s traditionalism from the style of his own work, Gaddis spoke for his indecisive generation in his rejection of modernism and prescience in foreseeing further developments in the novelistic medium.

One should not assert that the quotations of Eliot demonstrate Gaddis’s preoccupation with randomness. Entropy and the structural disintegration of narrative may have become major postmodern motifs, but it is likely that Gaddis quoted Eliot for a distinct purpose. The Eliot quotes, according to Miriam Fuchs, “should not give the impression that Gaddis borrows liberally and randomly from Eliot” (44). All of these quotes contribute to the development of modernism and its criticism in the text. In the early stages of his life, Wyatt cannot pull himself away from originality, a trait of modernism made endemic by Pound, Eliot’s mentor.

Implicit in *The Recognitions*, as expressed by Gaddis’s quotations, is the conflict between the traditions of yesteryear (i.e., modernism) and the burgeoning artists of Wyatt’s time. Wyatt, by producing copies of masterworks from the great Flemish painters, rebels against the aforesaid tradition of “newness” propagated by renowned modernists. Modernist values, clearly evidenced throughout the text by Eliot’s commanding presence and Wyatt’s philosophical conflict with them, especially the perceived necessity of originality, allow the writer to show the lassitude of the postwar artist, an individual formed by old traditions and styles who now appears averse to them. The protagonist’s role is to signify this status. After returning from an abbreviated stint in Europe, Wyatt engages in an argument with his wife Esther. During this discourse, he bemoans the state of postwar aesthetics. The “discipline and the detail” of aesthetic canons have disabled the

artist, and forced him or her to deal with a comprehensive, veritably encyclopedic, accumulation of styles, themes, and traditions (Gaddis 114). However, the rush to create new work is, for the disillusioned Wyatt, a pointless race because the proliferation of artistic pieces has exhausted the standards for judging great art and subsequently tired the artists who produce it. In *The Recognitions*, Gaddis pulled from an eclectic and seemingly unrelated array of fields, subjects “as diverse as alchemy, witchcraft, art history, mummification, medical history, hagiography, mythology, anthropology, astronomy, and metaphysics” (Moore 15). This collection of diverse subjects can be viewed as textual evidence of a proliferation of pre-modern themes and artistic styles.

But, one might ask, what could this mountain of styles mean for the artist?

Vanwesenbeeck argues that *The Recognitions* shows the “non-institutional” structure of artistic communities (3). Gaddis, by quoting writers and making paintings notable facets of his narrative, contributed his commentary on the aesthetic crisis in the twentieth century. Gaddis’s novel was mostly unappreciated at the time of its release, and so his “recognition of this crisis did not in itself produce a coherent alternative formula for aesthetic practice” (Wilkins 598). Indeed, it is true that quotation had not yet been elevated to the profligate form of parody—the pastiche—presented in *The Recognitions*, but Gaddis offers no solutions for resolving the modernist dilemma, instead opting to demonstrate the penchant for plagiarism in an exaggerated artistic underground divided on lines of medium and personal taste. Joseph Tabbi argues that “[i]n Gaddis’s work, the increasing textualization of reality reduces multiple dissonant voices to an indistinguishable hum” (“Technology” 2). The disembodiment of these characters and their voices prevents Gaddis’s novel from acquiring a clear message, and even Wyatt’s presence is elucidated not by his name but by aliases and pronouns after an early point in *The Recognitions*. In the novel’s second and arguably more experimental half, the voices of the characters, the protagonist included, are superseded by Gaddis’s attempt to extract from their dissonant psyches an element of his densely abstract philosophy. Though Tabbi is arguing mainly for the prescience of *JR*, the author’s second novel, as a significant piece of literature for the prediction of hypertextual mediums, a similar literary technique—the quotation of other writers—has already been substantiated in this essay.

It would be pertinent before continuing to think of Wyatt as symbolic but not entirely indicative of his author. In response to her husband’s long monologue on the nature of postwar art, Esther exclaims, “How ambitious you are!” (114) Steven Moore clarifies that “it was Gaddis’s ambition in this first novel to do no less than to excavate the very foundations of Western civilization,” and thus Gaddis perhaps mirrors the protagonist in his ambition (15). Further connections are yet to be formed, but Gaddis’s philosophy seems to resemble that of his protagonist.

So, by predicting the hypertextual revolution within the digital humanities, Gaddis positions his work as a novel in opposition to modernism. Joseph Tabbi counters this claim, positing instead that Gaddis may have started writing *The Recognitions* “with some residual modernist nostalgia for ‘tradition’” (*Nobody Grew* 11). Nostalgia here is juxtaposed with Gaddis’s overt consciousness of being on the cusp of a new age in literature and culture, one that is fully aware of literary influences and their role in the formation of an emerging postmodern literature. While some appreciation for modernism and its most eminent proponents still resides in the text, Wyatt, as stated before, attacks the modernist notion of originality, implying instead via his forgeries that originality is obsolescent and impossible. Gaddis presents his characters as forgers and plagiarizers, and he complements their actions by also choosing to appropriate the words of other writers. Wyatt, for example, ultimately becomes alienated from that small pocket in society, represented by Recktall Brown, that in its corruption values forgery since it provides the means necessary for exorbitant and illegal financial gain, in addition to intimate human contact. This obscenely venal practice aside, Wyatt assumes his place in the material world by working with Brown.

The effects of Wyatt’s frequent plagiarizing on his mentality can be noted by examining the final scene in which he is present. Near the conclusion of the novel, Wyatt (at this time under the alias of Stephen) departs from the Spanish monastery with his newly found goal, to “live deliberately” (900). This vague phrase, stolen from Thoreau’s *Walden*, delineates with brevity the protagonist’s wish to live without experiencing the profound effects of his illegal profession as a forger. The second half of the narrative descends into a hell of utter cognitive dissonance, and it is possible that Gaddis is hereby textually echoing the consciousness of Wyatt by altering the once cohesive and straightforward narrative of *The Recognitions*. Its descent into stylistic and thematic chaos marks the endpoint of the Faustian paradigm’s influence on Wyatt, made clear by Brown’s death. Wyatt has now cast off the creative shackles imposed on him by Recktall Brown, and he has arrived at his last epiphany—a *recognition* of Gaddis’s notion that art relies on pre-established traditions. This lends meaning to the work’s title. As a monk using an alias, Wyatt no longer has an artistic identity of his own, and he seems to have given up the practice of artistic production altogether by the last time we see him.

Maligned by mainstream critics when it was first published in the heyday of the Beat poets, William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* has been granted a second life by critics willingly spelunking its esoteric depths. What they have found is a distinctly intertextual work whose author ambitiously decided to make quotation a narrative and stylistic device. Throughout *The Recognitions*, quotations from obscure and renowned pieces of literature when taken in their totality facilitate the transcendence of the work beyond its oversimplified classification in the postmodern period. The modernist period in literature, guided by the intent to construct original works of fiction that could establish new styles, is perhaps

the most important movement within art that Gaddis attempted to criticize with *The Recognitions*. This is made immediately lucid by his penchant for quoting T.S. Eliot, the Nobel Prize-winning modernist poet. Despite his admiration for the poet's work, by quoting Eliot and by creating a protagonist who defiantly refuses to create original work for the majority of the plot, Gaddis rebels against modernist notions of originality, deciding on an alternative—to parody modernist texts and highlight modernist hypocrisy via quotation. In doing so, Gaddis has formed a novel that, unlike its contemporaries, ironically criticizes the “original” experiments of modernist writers by quoting them to signify the end of modernism. Now, with the realization that no artist can create new work without relying on work of the past, regardless of artistic medium, Gaddis suggests art production is merely a dialectical process through which works mediate the creative process and subsequently influence all artists, sometimes bringing about traditional incoherence or the inability to recognize (hence the novel's title) the real or authentic when juxtaposed with the forged or the inauthentic.

The importance of this complicated interpretation lies in placing *The Recognitions* by its content alone within an American canon of literary works. An argument that takes the insertion of Gaddis's novel in the historical interim between the end of modernism and the very transitory prominence of the black humorists—that predominantly male generation of writers often labeled collectively “the postmodernists”—would recapitulate only what other scholars/critics have claimed and perhaps say merely the obvious. Their hypothesis that *The Recognitions* predicted the rise of postmodernism is likely true, but this leaning on New Historicism to substantiate the importance of the work ignores its content in favor of depicting the novel as an augury of what creations were to come out of the brief countercultural period. The content here is saturated by parodic methods and the notion of the simulacrum. This essay, by using only a few of Gaddis's influences, Eliot and Goethe especially, lends credibility to a strain of thought that argues not simply for the novel's influence on future writers but for its being somewhat a culmination of pre-existing literary traditions.

### Works Cited

- Alberts, Crystal. “Mapping William Gaddis: The Man, *The Recognitions*, and His Time.” *William Gaddis, The Last of Something*. Eds. Crystal Alberts, Christopher Leise, and Birger Vanwesenbeeck. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010. 9-26. Print.
- Benesch, Klaus. “In the Diaspora of Words: William Gaddis, Kierkegaard, and the Art of Recognition(s).” *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*. Eds. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007. 28-45. Print.

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Vincent B. Leitch and William E. Cain. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. 1166-86. Print.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views*. Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Complete Poems & Plays*. London: Faber and Faber, 2004. Print.
- Fuchs, Miriam. "'il miglior fabbro': Gaddis' Debt to T.S. Eliot." Bloom 43-56.
- Gaddis, William. *The Recognitions*. 3rd edition. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015. Print.
- Klemtner, Susan Strehle. "'For a Very Small Audience': The Fiction of William Gaddis." Bloom 17-29.
- Knight, Christopher J. *Hints & Guesses: William Gaddis's Fiction of Longing*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. Print.
- Moore, Steven. *William Gaddis*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989. Print.
- Mosch, Matthias. *The Faust Myth in William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon: Postmodern Negotiations of Western Modernity*. Diss. Durham University, 2012. Web.
- Ozick, Cynthia. "Fakery and Stony Truths." *Nytimes.com*. The New York Times, 7 July 1985. Web. 14 March 2017.
- Safer, Elaine B. "Ironic Allusiveness and Satire in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*." Bloom 71-100.
- Sheu, Chingshun. "When Love Becomes Necessity: The Role of Epiphany in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*." *Critique* 55 (2014): 237-59. *Illinois College Database*. Web. 3 January 2017.
- Stark, John. "William Gaddis: Just Recognition." *Hollins Critic* 14.2 (1977): 1-9. *MLA*. Web. 2 Oct. 2016.
- Tabbi, Joseph. *Nobody Grew But the Business: On the Life and Work of William Gaddis*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015. Print.

---. "The Technology of Quotation: William Gaddis's *J R* and Contemporary Media." *Mosaic* 28.4 (1995): 1-16. *MLA*. Web. 9 Aug. 2016.

Vanwesenbeeck, Birger. "Art and Community in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*." *Mosaic* 42.3 (2009): 1-14. *MLA*. Web. 25 Sep. 2016.

Wilkins, Matthew. "Nothing as He Thought It Would Be: William Gaddis and American Postwar Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* 51.3 (2010): 596-628. *JSTOR*. Web. 9 Aug. 2016.