CHAPTER 1

Faustian Pacts
William Gaddis' Postwar Melancholy

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines one of tragedy's central concepts, "anagnorisis," as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune."[1] Anagnorisis refers to the epiphany that reveals to the tragic hero the narrative or social conditions by which they have been ensnared. According to Aristotle, the narrative coincidence of resolution and recognition is at its most affectively powerful "when it occurs simultaneously with a reversal, like the one in Oedipus."[2] Terence Cave, a more modern critic on this ancient figure, has written of Aristotle's formulation: "it is the moment at which the characters understand their predicament fully for the first time, the moment that resolves a sequence of unexplained and often implausible occurrences; it makes the world (and the text) intelligible."[3] The transition from ignorance to knowledge is a persistent trope structuring multiple works of tragic drama. It is what we encounter in Creon's realization that his edict against the burial of Polynices is all too punitive and that he alone bears the weight of Antigone's and subsequently of Jocasta's death. We also encounter it in Oedipus' eventual unraveling of the Sphinx's riddle and his discovery that it is he who has killed his father and married his mother. As with Sophocles' Oedipus, Shakespeare literalizes the difference between ignorance and knowledge by the gouging of the Earl of Gloucester's eyeballs in *King Lear*, but anagnorisis also makes itself known in Othello's belated discovery of Desdemona's innocence and of his manipulation by Iago, in Juliet's regaining consciousness only to find Romeo had consumed the fatal poison, and when Lear himself is ultimately overwhelmed by his experiences and dies.

If anagnorisis or tragic recognition depends on the relation between ignorance and knowledge, then perhaps among the more interesting manifestations of this dramatic trope are the multiple renderings of the Faust myth, a tragedy whose narrative arc curves around the possession and objectification of knowledge. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* adapts this Germanic myth for English Renaissance culture by presenting a

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hero whose fatal flaw is his insatiable appetite for knowledge and culture, and whose moment of anagnorisis amounts to the recognition that his pact with Mephistopheles cannot be reversed by the omnipotent knowledge he has thus attained. Recognition, understood as the embodied movement from ignorance to knowledge, is central to the dramatic action of the play, manifesting as a chiasmus of epistemology: the knowledge that demands a reversal of the situation is precisely that which has become irreversible. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Thomas Mann's modern renditions of the Faust myth further challenge the pursuit of enlightenment, insofar as they present a character who has exhausted learning and who now seeks more material satisfactions.

In William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (1955), Faust is used for satire, updating both this tragic myth and narrative figure for the context of New York City's postwar culture industry.[4] Rather than focusing myopically on knowledge, Gaddis' central protagonist is, like the author, preoccupied by the question of creative vocation and its value – of "what is worth doing" within the context of twentieth-century corporate America. This notion of "doing" is a repeated refrain both within the novel and in the author's letters discussing its composition. In one letter, when called to account for the significance of the Faust story, the very question of "what is worth doing" reemerges almost twenty years after the novel's first publication:

> Basically, I suppose what seems to have drained away is any but the faintest nostalgia for absolutes, finite imperfectability without Wyatt's grateful revelation that "there was the gold to forge." What's remained seems to be preoccupation with the Faust legend as pivotal posing the question: what is worth doing? (Wyatt was meant to be not the depth of genius, which knows, but just short of it & therewith the dilemma, the very height of talent, which doesn't.) At any rate it is this question what is worth doing? that has dogged me all my life, both in terms of my own life and work where I am trying now again in another book to fight off its destructive element and paralyzing effects; and in terms of America which has been in such a desperate haste to succeed in finding all the wrong answers. In this present book satire comic of what have you on money and business I get the feeling sometimes I'm writing a secular version of its predecessor.[5]

While there are many ways we might interpret the problem of vocation, it is worth emphasizing that Gaddis voices the "destructive element" in his own creative labors, a phrase that echoes the capitalist myth of "creative destruction" while also recognizing its tendency toward ruination. So, too, in this chapter I want to argue that this "feeling" of destruction, a sense of the failure or brokenness of something, is hardwired into the vocation of

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multiple characters laboring under mid-century America's accelerating commercial structures. While, in this letter, Gaddis casts the question of vocation and its value in an almost abstract or philosophical register, the question also has everything to do with "worth" in the very economic sense. Likewise, in the novel, "doing" is always relative to the acquisition of money and profit in ways that draw on both Faustian myth and tragic form. In other words, recognition of the "destructive element" appears to articulate what it means and what it feels like to work under the market forces of late capitalism. All throughout the novel, these forces threaten lives and livelihoods, but it is Wyatt's pact with Recktall Brown that becomes the novel's central point of reckoning with the wholesale destruction, or commodification, of art and life under capital. Wyatt is a problematic individual in every sense of Lukács' definition, and Gaddis composes *The Recognitions* – all 900 pages – very much in the spirit of an "epic of a world that has been abandoned by God." Perhaps it is of no coincidence that both Gaddis and Lukács are thinking through the demonic psychology of novelistic form by way of Goethe.[6]

The Devil Underground

The decade Gaddis wrote *The Recognitions*, between 1945 and 1955, marks a decisive moment for both the geopolitical and economic ascendency of the United States as global hegemon, and for the structure and organization of the local labor market during a period of financialization. It will be worth sketching here the confluence of historical factors that set the scene for a great reversal of fortune in the working lives of Americans, not least because they fuel that "destructive element" registering all throughout the narrative and ultimately providing the substance of tragic recognition. Counter to any reversal of fortune, the narrative of the US economy in the 1940s is generally considered one of economic growth and prosperity, with the state-sponsored recovery plans coinciding with the full-scale mobilization of a war economy. Between strong state interventions producing a safety net, the Great Compression of income inequality, and close to full employment, the average working American is said to have enjoyed a period of relative stability and security, in which the kind of social mobility that Turslow Adams preached as the American dream in 1931 finally appeared graspable as a reality. And yet this promise of equality of life, and quality of life, was and is absolutely relative to the wage relation. Security and stability were and are dependent on the largess of the economy, and whatever concessions granted to the working person

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during these "golden" years needs to be tempered by a recognition that they were temporary at best and that any permanent experience of economic security and mobility is a structural impossibility for the many under the general law of capitalist accumulation. Moreover, the immediate postwar years articulate something like a coming to consciousness of the fact that the kind of economic prosperity and social mobility being won at home was forged alongside brutal wars of imperial expansion abroad. As we know from Fredric Jameson, "the whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructual expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world; in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror."[7]

Gaddis seems to have been attuned to all of this, and he contemplates these contradictions both at home and abroad. Indeed, *The Recognitions* was conceived of and written while Gaddis traveled between Greenwich Village, Mexico City, and the Panama Canal, and it was in the Canal Zone that many of the formative ideas for this novel germinated. "In the Canal Zone," he writes in 1948, "I have done a great deal of 'thinking' (I want it to be) about our country, which depresses me but must not to the point of simply saying oh dear . . ."[8] Specifically, Gaddis' experience in Panama opened his eyes to what he would describe as a world "all wrong, a transgression because of its sterility," conjoining a lived experience in the American heartland to its geopolitical underside. "Bloodless somehow," he muses, "the Panamanians have blood, and the west Indians who are ***** and are held off with disapproval and low wages but the Americans have radios, you can walk up a street past the house the same colour (that is the regulation, they are grey) and hear every radio playing the same programme, the mechanical-laugh programme from the States."[9] Indeed, this militarily contested region is itself a site of colonial geopolitics, not only linking South and Central America but also an imperial core to its peripheral territories – and with that comes an upsurge of well-nigh Faustian imaginings. "Today," writes Michael Taussig in a celebrated study of the region and its colonial entanglements, "the devil has disappeared or gone underground in the cane fields owned by a handful of white families – mostly living abroad in places such as Panama or Miami – who now control the destiny of the Cauca Valley because sugar has found a new and growing market as a biofuel to ensure yet more automobiles."[10]

Gaddis registers this distinctly postmodern cultural formation as both racialized and as a matter of labor when, in a short piece, he recollects experiences from his time working with a local Panamanian, Murrell:

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> He was on the silver payroll at $18 a week and I made $65 on the gold payroll: convenient euphemisms held over from the building of the canal when, I had it explained, white workers were paid in gold, local in silver. These survived on our pay slips, simply marked Gold and Silver, like the separate work elevators down the lock walls, but the silver payroll's separate drinking fountains were a forthright brown. [. . .] Murrell's other and far less substantial hope of deliverance lay in his own inspired vision of returning with me to New York as my valet. I could never really convince him that the decision wasn't just a matter of whim on my part, though out there under the stars he seemed as resigned to being canceled out eight hours of the twenty-four for his $18 a week as I was vexed at almost four times the pay for the same proposition.[11]

The language of Murrell's deliverance and destiny as transpiring under the "stars" articulates the brutal realities of racial capitalism through archetypally tragic figuration. Later in the article, Gaddis extrapolates further on the larger geopolitics of this racial capitalism in terms that more specifically conjure the experience of anagnorisis. He situates Panama as the receptacle for a peculiar kind of ignorant bliss, pre-recognition. Is America "trying to hang onto its own lost youth down there?" he asks. "To those days of privilege when we could put a whole nation on the silver payroll and slum in smaller countries' wars, protected for so long, both of us, by everything but history from the sheer remorse of growing up?"[12]

This line of thinking finds its way into *The Recognitions* in several forms. At one point, a minor character, Otto, travels to Panama and is described in terms that recall a young Gaddis writing to his mother asking for a linen Brooks Brothers suit. In *The Recognitions*, Otto, wearing precisely the same suit described in Gaddis' letter, explains the accumulation of capital in the crudest terms: "the hours of work were hours of vacant existence, but the minutes were pennies, and in each dollar was held captive the hour gone for it: here time was held in thrall, to be spent at a man's wish" (160). Itself a moment of recognition, Otto registers what is already lost, and what will continue to be taken, when one submits to wage labor; the personification, "held captive," only adumbrates this sense by conjuring the specter of slavery. Likewise, Wyatt's aspiration is tempered by a tragic recognition that his artistic labor is forged by the original sin of money.

It is in these ways that *The Recognitions* recognizes a new configuration of cultural and economic spheres under the emergent forces of late capitalism. This context is key to understanding Gaddis' satiric treatment of Faust as well as why recognition still registers as tragic in spite of the abundant comedy. If Faust is primarily a tragedy of bargaining, it is no wonder that Karl Marx also draws on the drama when setting up the laws

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of exchange, identifying the man who possesses marketable goods with the comic rendering of Faust struggling to translate the opening of St. John's gospel. "In their difficulties our commodity owners think like Faust," quotes Marx. "They have therefore already acted before thinking."[13] With a modification of the biblical "in the beginning was the word," Marx registers the economy's determination of the individual and the way that, through the action of labor, the wage relation has seized hold of all acting subjects. Since humanity's fateful pact with the demonic powers of the commodity, the capital relation has been internalized by the individual at every level in the mode of production. While we can trace these laws imposed by the nature of commodities back to the industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century, the historical matrix of the immediate postwar years generates economic conditions for the emergence of late market capitalism: a moment when the cultural sphere can no longer claim any autonomy from the economic. While much critical attention has been directed toward Gaddis' second book, *JR*, and its critique of American-style market capitalism, or what Gaddis describes as "money and business," I want to suggest that questions of making money are just as significant in Gaddis' first novel, where labor mediates between the book's satire of the Faust myth, on the one hand, and a prevailing mood or feeling of tragedy, on the other hand. *JR*'s reckoning with the false and destructive promises of market capitalism is focalized around the adolescent J.R. building an empire out of trading penny stock via his school's payphone. The first sentences foreground this central concern with value:

– Money . . . ? in a voice that rustled.
– Paper, yes.
– And we'd never seen it. Paper money.
– We never saw paper money till we came east.
– It looked so strange the first time we saw it. Lifeless.
– You couldn't believe it was worth a thing.
– Not after Father jingling his change.
– Those were silver dollars.[14]

There's a strange meditation here on the materiality of money – the notion of value materializing in something as worthless as paper. As Peter Dempsey writes, "through conversations, letters, and telephone calls, we come to understand what Marx called 'the distorting power of money,' how all value under capitalism is transformed into economic value."[15] Moreover, this idea of value as undergoing a quasi-magical transformation speaks to the preoccupation with alchemy all throughout *The Recognitions*,

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and not just via the obvious references to Faust. Gaddis has stated that "the key line" in *The Recognitions* is "when at some despairing moment Wyatt says – when he realizes that the table of the Seven Deadly Sins is the original and not his copy – 'Thank God there was the gold to forge.'"[16] This line appears within a central recognition scene, when Wyatt has a bloody reckoning with both Brown and Valentine, his businesses associates. While the line has been read primarily to confirm Wyatt having come into some greater realization of value, it is also a moment that foregrounds the economy of the novel as a whole:

> Fuller went back to his suitcases. – Seem I goin to enjoy the legacy of some excellent cigars, he said picking up the flat cedar case, unable to resist opening it wide enough to peep in, and sniff the contents. Then the dull jangle of the radio ceased, and Fuller watched him cross the carpet slowly, finishing the brandy he'd poured earlier. In the silence he stood looking down at the expanse of the table painting, the contour of his figure still before the fire until the movement of an arm broke it, and the empty glass shattered over the burning logs. Then the figure was all movement, sliding the glass top off of the table, smashing a foot down into the table's surface, hands rending the painted panel into one piece after another small enough to throw into the fire, while he whispered, – Cave, caveat emptor, Dominus videt, Christ! the original! . . . a whisper broken by laughter, – yes, thank God there was the gold to forge! (670)

While it is tempting to read this scene as something like a fetish – in Wyatt's realization that there might be, after all, some kind of irreducible referent, or authenticity, in a world of copies and forgeries – we might also read this as a warning of the fact that this referent is money. This is a scene, as we shall see, that also appears to once again register racial capitalism within the matrix of Faustian alchemy. It is not just Wyatt left as a last witness to the bloody ending of Brown and Valentine's forgery business, either, as the scene is focalized to Fuller, an enslaved man from the West Indies, whose indentured service was bought by Brown on the promise that Brown could magically turn Fuller's skin from black to white. Alchemy thus undergoes its own metamorphosis, from a process for generating surplus value to a genetic transfiguration in the age of racial capitalism.

Melancholic Masquerade

If the question of "what's worth doing" is central to *The Recognitions*' engagement with Faust, then it is also mediated by a preoccupation with

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what Gaddis describes as "false values." In one of Gaddis' few interviews, he reflects that this novel "started as a short piece of work, quite undirected, but based on the Faust story." And it was out of this concept that a narrative of falsification emerged. "Then," he adds, "as I got the idea of forgery, the entire concept of forgery became – I wouldn't say an obsession – but a central part of everything I thought and saw; so the book expanded from simply the central character of the forger to forgery, falsification and cheapening of values and what have you, everywhere."[17] For Gaddis, the conflux of forgery, false appearances and the erosion of values is distinctly American – and, within *The Recognitions,* it would take on the form of the masquerade, to which we are introduced from the very first sentence.

"Even Camilla had enjoyed masquerades," the novel begins, "of the safe sort where the mask may be dropped at that critical moment it presumes itself as reality" (1). This opening provides a first insight into the function of anagnorisis in this novel: it both acts as narrative desire to unveil an unmediated aesthetic object but also highlights the impossibility of creative autonomy in the twentieth century's culture industries. The central narrative is focused on Camilla's son, Wyatt, an artist preoccupied with finding something like truth in his forged paintings of Dutch and Flemish masters – whose art he holds up as an aesthetic ideal – which are sold on as originals as part of Recktall Brown's counterfeiting racket. "Through this unhealthy, uncertain world," claims Peter Koenig, "Wyatt attempts to journey from the counterfeit to the genuine, from sin to redemption, chaos to design. The structure of Gaddis' novel," he continues, "symbolizes voyage and return, dislocation and re-establishment, lost recognitions and found."[18] While this summary risks oversimplifying the complex dialectic that Gaddis stages between illusion and reality, it accurately suggests the manner in which recognition is akin to its development in tragedy – that it is not just reducible to resolution but that, as Cave qualifies, it "links the recovery of knowledge with a disquieting sense, when the trap is sprung, that the commonly accepted coordinates of knowledge have gone awry."[19] Multiple characters across the encyclopedic breadth of this novel are preoccupied with the search for real knowledge in the emerging counterfeit culture of which they find themselves a part, from the slick advertising towers of Madison Avenue to the intellectual posturing of Greenwich Village bohemia. All of this, the commodification of art and life, is refracted in a mood or atmosphere that hangs heavily. The masquerades of contemporary culture are intended to be innocently enjoyed but instead pose an ominous threat and often turn deadly. The

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opening lines, quoted above, refer to Wyatt's mother, Camilla, who suffers an early and decidedly tragic death at the hands of an imposter-doctor who attempts to remove her appendix in a botched surgery at sea. Similarly, one of the novel's central recognition scenes involves the accidental death of the Mephistophelian character, Brown, whose head is fatally entombed in an armored mask at the very moment Wyatt decides to publicly reveal their criminal deception.

But more than scenes of scandal and shock, recognition sediments in the irrevocable feeling of loss: it is not just that we have discovered that something is lost, or that knowledge has gone astray in the act of recognition, but that anagnorisis constitutes the experience of loss itself. Indeed, this kind of recognition is unique to tragedy. Whereas, in comedy, the subject's new frame of reference points to the possibility of a different sort of future, in tragedy it denotes the absolute foreclosure of alternative futures. Northrop Frye describes this loss, paradoxically, as "the uncreated potential life" that the hero "has forsaken."[20] This, the absence of all futurity, will be our starting point to thinking through how one of the novel's affective dominants, melancholia – an attachment to the lost object – might be seen to have a deep, structural investment in tragedy by way of recognition. Melancholia occupies a complex position in the history of emotions. It was conceived as one of the four humors, naming a depression supposedly caused by an excess of black bile in the liver.[21] It was modernized in the early twentieth century by Freud and interrogated as a pathological condition, an affect of grief in contradistinction to the act of mourning: "the distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity and a lowering of self-regarding feelings."[22] More recently, and drawing from Freud's group psychology, the political left reads melancholy as a structure of feeling peculiar to capitalist modernity.[23] The specific historical coordinates of melancholia this chapter will be interested in result from the perceived disappointments of the Popular Front, emblematized in the rise of McCarthyism and in Hollywood blacklists, as well as in failed revolutions across the globe in the earlier half of the twentieth century.[24] As Michael Denning writes, "the laboring of American culture was no doubt a failure, pummeled by the new postmodern forms of commodity fetishism."[25] All of this, coupled with the emergence of a new and wealthy corporate class, gave rise to a pervasive sense of melancholy in the passage through the mid-century. That melancholy is consonant with the "negativistic quiet" Walter Benjamin once sensed in "the attitude" of a left politics for "which

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there is no longer, in general, any corresponding political action."[26] This structure of feeling found a particular home among the impoverished artists of New York City who had been energized by the revolutionary fervor of the 1930s but who were now facing off against abject poverty or subsumed within the forces of gentrification.

Mostly set during the 1940s and 1950s, *The Recognitions* orients its central narrative around a new creative class whose members come up against the forces of commercialization and who collectively vocalize precariousness as it attaches itself to the material actualities of their low-waged and often unpaid work, which for all of them involves a surplus investiture of emotional and mental labor, both real and performed. If postwar American literature is percipient of a shift toward immaterial labor, experienced acutely by those employed in the service industries, there is an argument to be made that an early iteration of this labor is found in the culture industries and their emergent class of creative workers. These affective energies merge in the central and tragic character, Wyatt. Born of a clergyman, Wyatt is a devoted antiquarian and martyr-enthusiast, and is predominately characterized as a miserable (and immiserated) artist living in and around the bohemian enclave of Greenwich Village. The novel orchestrates multiple plots and numerous characters around Wyatt, whose virtuosic skills as a boy copying illustrations from "leather-bound marathons of suffering and disaster" (35) eventually lead him into what can only be described as a Faustian pact with the book's villain, Recktall Brown, and into an international counterfeiting operation dealing in the reproduction of Dutch and Flemish masters, which are illegally sold as originals. It is not just Wyatt's ability to copy the styles of these master painters, but also the sheer poverty of working as an artist in New York City that leads him into the criminal contract with Brown. Wyatt and his wife, Esther, live in a one-room apartment – one of those "grimy intellectual households in Greenwich Village" (83) – and in order to support their meager subsistence Wyatt has been forced to channel his artistic genius into drawing bridges for town planners before selling his soul to this other, more nefarious trade. In many ways, the meeting of Wyatt and Brown epitomizes a dynamic of subsumption operating between the cultural production of the working class and the agents of commerce, which would eventually contribute to the failure of the Popular Front.

The characters Wyatt encounters – including Esther (an aspiring writer), Otto (a playwright having an affair with Esther), Esme (a muse to Wyatt who also dabbles in poetry), and Stanley (a musician) – form a motley crew of plebeian artists, who are by no means successful but who

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make artistic labor, in all of its forms, their life's work. While there are many overlaps between Wyatt and Gaddis' biography – during the period of writing *The Recognitions* Gaddis spent time living in and around Greenwich Village and, like Wyatt, Gaddis struggled throughout his career as a writer to make creative work support basic living subsistence – it is the condition of melancholia that generates some of the most interesting intersections between author and character. While neither Gaddis nor Wyatt was a radical activist, to live in Greenwich Village in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s would have required some serious evaluation of one's place, as an artist, in relation to both the energies of the Popular Front and the overwhelming threat of capitalist subsumption, and often these two seemingly incompatible forces would enter into pragmatic admixture. The fact that Gaddis worked in advertising made him acutely attuned to the tensions, as well as intersections, between creative and commercial economies.

Enzo Traverso describes a social context in which this book's melancholia finds purchase: "the economic instability and extreme social fragility of Bohemia," he suggests, "also determines its changeable political character. On the one hand, its anti-bourgeois nature makes it a center for revolt," while, "on the other hand, the poverty of its members exposes them to temptation of corruption, denunciation, and betrayal."[27] The bohemian enclave of Greenwich Village is an echo of those communities in continental Europe. For Traverso, the tragic dimension of bohemia first emerges at the beginning of the twentieth century in Paris with the "picturesque multitude on the fringe who lived between Belleville and Montmartre, who were often also on the fringe of the law."[28] In the postwar years, living a life of artistic freedom frequently merged with states of existential if not material crisis. Before settling into the art scene of Greenwich Village, Wyatt makes a pilgrimage to these exact streets in Paris; but instead of experiencing the creative buzz one might have expected of a young artist first visiting that city, the description captures the properly melancholic feel of the streets:

> Montmartre stood out in preternatural whiteness, the ceremonial specter of a peak, an abrupt Alp in the wrong direction. Walking home alone, the cold bearing in a dread weight of anxiety, the sense of something lost, passing people closely he passed them in wonder as though he'd seen no one in years, looking into every face as though hoping to recognize something there. (68)

The melancholic atmosphere is palpable, and it is hard to tell where it is emanating from, whether it is being projected outward from Wyatt's depressive persona or whether it is inhabiting the materiality of space,

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where a once colorful milieu has turned anemic and where the pulse of community has been replaced by structures of loss and loneliness. Here recognition is tantamount to a desire for connection to someone or something, which seems impossible in a space where all hope has been eclipsed.

Grim Paintwork

All throughout the novel, history, culture and art seem to have turned the wrong direction, and with that some ideal has been irrevocably lost. The dread weight of anxiety seems to respond to the forsaken life, an alternative future, that Frye places at the center of tragic recognition. We encounter this in another description of Wyatt in a post-painting haze, walking through the same Parisian streets:

> This can happen: staying awake, the absolutes become confused, time the patient seen at full living length, in exhaustion. One afternoon he went to sleep, woke alone at twilight, believed he had slept the night through, lost it, here was dawn. He went out for coffee. The streets were full, but unevenly. There was a pall on every face, a gathering of remnants in suspicion of the end, a melancholia of things completed. (69)

Melancholia thus named attaches itself to a sense of termination – to the notion of "things completed." This "suspicion of an end," of things brought to conclusion, is associated with a feeling of exhaustion lived out in the detached observation that takes Wyatt through the motions of the day (afternoon, twilight, night, dawn) before alighting on a poetic flourish that only intensifies emotional dejection. The pall on the faces might be just a figurative shadow or veil, but it also evokes the more ceremonial mask of a coffin, which collocates here with the confluence of endings. While melancholia amounts to a suspicion, in so many instances through the narrative its loss is materially actualized.

Wyatt's grim melancholy seems to infect the novel's entire network of characters. Reverend Gwyon has "the look of a man who was waiting for something which had happened long before" (7); Aunt May's life "was bounded by terms of negation" (40); and Esther, we are told, "set out from the start seeking identity with misfortune, recognition in disaster" (88). Indeed, Esther considers herself the "conglomerate tragic figure" (80), for she is always being abandoned – first by Wyatt and then by his character-double, Otto. In all moments of recognition, of which there are many, characters either appear to be stuck in the past or become projected into

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the future as anticipated loss. Our first encounter with Wyatt bears the mark of loss – his mother dies of appendicitis when he is barely out of infancy, and her maternal replacement, Aunt May, is struck dead after the fall of her beloved hawthorn tree when Wyatt is just twelve years old. Shortly afterward, Wyatt is left to suffer a mysterious polio-like illness, which renders him unable to walk and which subjects him to all manner of medical trauma, some of which appears particularly medieval (blood is extracted by the bottleful, live diseases are intravenously injected, fluid is tapped from his backbone, skin sliced off, and fragments of muscle removed). It is during these weeks of sickness that Wyatt discovers painting: "when he could not read, he painted, with an extraordinary deftness which consumed his whole consciousness, and often left him so tense that he passed into delirium" (44).

We could speculate further and say that Wyatt's condition has its psychic roots in the death of his mother, that most primal of all loved objects, who was lost to him before he was barely conscious. Camilla, Wyatt's mother, returns to Wyatt as an apparition and later on in one of his paintings. In this sense, melancholia is not only born of the experience of being an artist in the postwar world, but is also the germ of Wyatt's artistic labor. Hers is the first portrait he attempts, one of his only originals, which remains incomplete through the course of his life. This unfinished portrait of his mother is yet another symptom or working-through of his black bile, with the black lines of its incompletion germinating from a fear of foreclosing on an impossible perfection. "It was done in black on a smooth gesso ground, on strong linen, a stark likeness which left its lines of completion to the eye of the beholder." But in its incompletion it feeds a whole new emptiness: "Every week or so he would begin something original," we read. "It would last for a few days, but before any lines of completion had been drawn he abandoned it" (55). There is also something of the incomplete portrait that freezes Camilla in time, as if she were not totally lost, but which paradoxically has the effect of fixing Wyatt on her loss even more.

"It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography," writes Benjamin. "The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuse for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face."[29] Benjamin has shown that this melancholy is the last vestige of a form or medium that, by the 1930s, would be co-opted by fascism. Caught in perpetual melancholy, fixated on the face of his mother, Wyatt has also lost the capacity to love anyone or anything else. His relationship with Esther is characterized by indifference: not only do they

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decide to get married before they "know too much about each other" (78), but Wyatt's decision to marry is itself "indecision crystalized, insofar as he was not deciding against it" (79). All the while, the unfinished portrait of Camilla sits against the wall of their apartment, the space of which refracts the loneliness of their partnership, described in terms of accumulated desolation: "piles of drawing paper," "empty and besmirched canvases," illuminated by a "bare electric bulb" (84). All of this emptiness becomes transmuted into an affective intensity, a scent that, we are told, "lay heavily on the air, the smell of varnish, oils, and turpentine, quickened by the pervasive delicacy of lavender, oil of lavender which he used sometimes as a medium" (84).

Pathos to Bathos

Although Wyatt lives in and through the "creative economy,"[30] he also appears as alienated, in the Marxist sense, from that sphere: he is a figure largely removed from circulation and exchange, oblivious to how much his virtuosic skill is earning him or his employer, if he is getting remunerated at all. Wyatt is concerned only with painting, with the painstaking detail of his craft, which for him registers as labor. Put differently, Wyatt remains entirely within the sphere of production, laboring day and night over his canvases, whereas his employer, Brown, is engaged purely in the realm of speculative exchange. In this way, we might view Wyatt as the prototype of a modern melancholic insofar as he is engaged in an artistic labor completely anachronistic to the modern means of production. *The Recognitions* is formally distended by this kind of anachronism or, more accurately, contradiction. "When modern devices fail," claims the narrator, "it is our nature to reach back among the cures of our fathers. If those fail, there were fathers before them. We can reach back for centuries" (45). And indeed, all throughout *The Recognitions*, Gaddis is reaching back into primitive mythology – Christian scripture, art history and the literary tradition. This sense of anachronism also constitutes the melancholic dimension of the novel. Not only is Wyatt grasping at a lost ideal, which for him is embodied in the Dutch and Flemish masters of the sixteenth century; he can also be seen as a tragic hero because he is an anachronistic figure whose livelihood depends on superannuated regimes of patronage, practicing an art form totally out of place in a world where the mode of production facilitates the technological subsumption of human labor: where time costs money and where the commodity has become a standardized, exchangeable and easily consumable piece of merchandise. While

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we might expect Wyatt to be creating Andy Warhol prints for the age of technical reproducibility, there is nothing mechanically efficient about the production of Wyatt's copies, which are instead the result of hundreds of hours of intensive labor, where methods are repeated until Wyatt comes close to an impossibly perfect imperfection.

Wyatt's obsolete craft is, to be sure, a reaction against the sheer superficiality that surrounds him and the artists who have surrendered to the commercial market. Wyatt makes this complaint to Esther, in relation to her writing and on the role of writers in general: "They write for people who read with the surface of their minds, people with reading habits that make the smallest demands on them" (113). As if by example, Wyatt further extrapolates in a rhetorical flourish:

> Listen, there are so many delicate fixtures, moving toward you, you'll see. Like a man going into a dark room, holding his hands down guarding his parts for fear of a table corner, and . . . Why, all this around us is for people who can keep their balance only in the light, where they move as though nothing were fragile, nothing tempered by possibility, and all of a sudden bang! something breaks. Then you have to stop and put the pieces together again. But you never can put them back together quite the same way. You stop when you can and expose things, and leave them within reach, and others come on by themselves, and they break, and even then you may put the pieces aside just out of reach until you can bring them back and show them, put together slightly different, maybe a little more enduring, until you've broken it and picked up the pieces enough times, and you have the whole thing in all its dimensions. But the discipline, the detail, is just . . . sometimes the accumulation is too much too bear. (113–14)

There are allusions here to Jewish mysticism of the kind Benjamin evokes: the shattering of the vessels from the Kabbalah in which ten ships that were said to contain God's light broke under the weight of that light, and so thereafter the order of the universe was condemned to be out of place.[31] Its rhetoric similarly reaches toward pre-lapsarian biblical images of paradise, or to that impossible primordial unity before we are castrated by immersion in language. At some level, all desire is for an impossible return to that ideal moment and that oceanic feeling before everything is broken; here, as ever, that sensibility takes more specific shape as it breaks on the shores of individual experience. The frustrated futility of the melancholiac's desire is laid bare, putting "the pieces together again," but never being able to "put them back together quite the same way." The accumulation is similar to the manner in which Gaddis has described his own writing: "It is as though (I thought last night, thinking how should I say to you what it is like) one were in deep water, and this accumulation

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bobbing all around, as far as can be seen but all within reach."[32] Yet the pathos of Wyatt's musing is matched in equal parts by the bathetic – in this instance, human consciousness is framed by the initial joke of a man trying to avoid a blow to the groin. Similarly, the melancholic tone of Wyatt's rhetoric is swiftly undone by Esther's witheringly sarcastic rejoinder: "How ambitious you are!" (114). So often, Wyatt's epiphanies, which are delivered in the form of dramatic monologue, are reduced to overblown ramblings. And with that, Gaddis' self-stated parody of the Faustian hero-turned-artist who does not know "what's worth doing" is articulated in the figure of a painter who spends too much time navel-gazing.[33] There are numerous other examples like this, when Wyatt's speech attains to pathos but in so doing comes closer to a parody of a tragic figure.

Making Pacts

While there is much that is properly melancholic about Wyatt's habitation of postwar US culture – much of which has to do with his anachronistic place within that culture – this melancholia is met (and effectively deconstructed) by a narrative tendency toward the ridiculous. "What's tragedy to you is an anecdote to everybody else," or so insists one minor character. "We're comic. We're all comics. We live in a comic time. And the worse it gets the more comic we are" (640). These sentences describe the irony of Gaddis' recapitulation of Faustian tragedy: the bleaker the content becomes, the more characters pontificate about their tragic lives; and the more they pontificate, the more comic the overall effect. Comedy may well be the overarching narrative mode or even mood of the novel. Koenig emphasizes the novel's comic origins when he alights on one of Gaddis' unpublished notes, describing it as "quite explicitly a parody on the FAUST story, except the artist taking the place of the learned doctor."[34] But what kind of comedy is this – or, better still, at what is the comedy directed?

"Satire," writes Keston Sutherland, "is always at someone's expense." More specifically, as Sutherland continues, "satire is activated for one constituency of readers through its infliction of another. Satire is more than a modality of the picturesque: it is the concentrated literary exposure of social contradiction. It does not merely provide a distorted image of social reality, it is in active conflict with social reality."[35] The victim of Gaddis' cruelest ridicule is not the Faustian figure of Wyatt but his Mephistophelian counterpart, Brown. Brown embodies the "gross tyranny of business enterprise" (320) as well as representing a new class of salesman

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who achieved something like cultural hegemony from Madison Avenue during the 1950s. The fact that Brown fits into this caricature of the corrupt and sleazy entrepreneur is apparent from his very first introduction: "People who don't know me, they say a lot of things about me. He laughed then, but the laughter did not leave his throat. – A lot of things. You'd think I was wicked as hell, even if what I do for them turns out good. I'm a business man" (141). The very name (true to its Freudian potential) conjures the image of a man gleefully dirtying his hands with the anal filth of money. And this, the modern commercialization of art, is where Gaddis' criticism is aimed. Satire, like anagnorisis, structures itself around a moment of demystification. If the melancholic dimension of the novel is fixated on mourning and defeat, then satire in its active criticism of present circumstances might be seen to contemplate the possibility of an alternative world.[36]

While one half of Gaddis' grandiose vision has a tragic telos, performing a swan song for the novel and for art more broadly, the other half of this vision was for *The Recognitions* "to be a large comic novel in the great tradition."[37] Gaddis was surprised that so many found the novel serious and depressing, and that few reviewers found it funny even if the humor often came in the form of a "heavy handed satire," to use Gaddis' own words.[38] Indeed, the admixture of the comic and the melancholic makes for a strange concoction, and at times it is hard to determine where one generic predilection ends and the other begins; and, while the author's intended affect may well have been humor, it is hard to rid oneself of the "lines of morbidity," which, as William Gass writes in his preface to the 2012 edition, comprise the novel's "bones" (vii). Much of the recent critical field has been concerned with the satiric use of Faustian tragedy and rightly so, as this is Gaddis' prime mode of social critique as delivered in dialogue-heavy episodes.[39] If Gaddis is lamenting the death of older forms of storytelling and of creative labor more generally, then the tone of this lament is not just one of melancholy but also comic. In one particularly funny dialogue between Wyatt, Brown and Valentine, regarding their counterfeiting venture, Brown proffers the idea of a "novel factory, a sort of assembly line of writers, each one with his own especial little job. Mass production, he said, and tailored to the public taste" (243). Here Gaddis' criticism is pointed directly at the technical reproducibility of art as it became coterminous with the emergence of the culture industries at the beginning of the twentieth century.

But why should all of this, as a localized social dynamic, feed into the Faust myth more particularly? Put differently, why is this myth used as a

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vehicle with which to satirize the evils of mass production and consumption? Faust is a learned man very much engaged in cultural forms and production. In both Marlowe's and Goethe's dramatic adaptions, he is a scholar, and in Mann's novel he is a composer. In all of these versions, and several more, the central action of the drama involves Faust selling his soul to the Devil in order to arrive at some sort of genius and all the material pleasures that unlimited worldly knowledge will give him. Mann's novelization of the drama in 1947 is perhaps closest to the historical concerns shared by Gaddis. In a near inversion of Wyatt's concern about artistic degradation, in Mann's telling the Mephistophelian being warns the Faustian composer of the public's skepticism of the culture industry's play with pure appearance. "Work, time, and pretence, they are one, and together they fall victim to critique," says the devil to Dr Faustus. "It no longer tolerates pretence and play, the fiction, the self-glorification of form, which censors the passions and human suffering, divides out the parts, translates into pictures."[40]

Not only does Wyatt repeat the tragedy of making a pact with the devil, but a whole host of other Faustian figures are also given comic rendering. Perhaps most notably, there is Fuller, Brown's servant who only agrees to servitude in the belief that Brown has the magical power to change his skin from black to white, thus invoking a history of slavery and exploitation here ongoing at the master's behest. There is Brown's dog, who mimics the poodle from the opening scene of Faust and who Fuller eventually kills. There is also Esme, whose indifferent treatment by Wyatt resembles Faust's behavior toward Gretchen but whose tragic disposition is undermined by a prevailing sense of melodrama, which cheapens the stated tragedy to which she is said to be inclined. "A brittle humor," writes Elaine B. Safer, "develops, in spite of the danger to Wyatt, because of the exaggerated details that make the characters appear to be cartoon figures of Faustian originals."[41] And then there are the copies within copies, such as Otto, who is a sort of pastiche of Wyatt. As Safer has noted, "Gaddis parallels the important actions of Wyatt with the farcical behavior of the minor character Otto, just as Goethe burlesques Faust's actions with those of his comic counterpart Wagner."[42] All of this performance lends the novel its theatrical effect particularly as it plays out in passages that comprise streams of dialogue. At a formal level, it is no wonder that Gaddis' satire is most sharply felt when his prose attaches itself most intimately to these characters, as their speech, while what we have been calling melancholy seems to be delivered by an omniscient narrator.

Allusions to Faust are made all throughout the course of the novel, but perhaps they reach peak intensity at the conclusion of the second part, which coincides with the termination of Wyatt's business relationship with

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Brown and Valentine and so, in effect, with Gaddis' rewrite of the Faust story. Wyatt finds himself at a business party of Brown's in aid of unveiling one of the latest forgeries. In this comic episode, the art scene engages in vacuous conversation:

> And the guests drifted past on courses which left no more trace than water, glassy-eyed, with as little purpose apparent as movement undersea but, as there, interrupted by swift predatory sweeps, and darting search for cover. In striking differences of shape, and protective coloration, exotically helpless, deceptively dull, distinct varieties fed together in clusters, or tended to move separately, here and there raising wide-open eyes, and bumping the sides of the tank.
>
> – We're shooting Faust now, a sort of bop version, we've changed him to this refugee artists, and Mephistopheles is . . .
>
> – But it's funny seeing pictures of yourself everywhere, starin out at you eatin things and drinkin things and smoking things you never heard of . . . went on the one with no more forehead than a black bass; and in spite of the shocks of sound that broke the surface, a pelagian quiet drenched the whole space. (661)

This kind of run-on dialogue is one of Gaddis' chief formal methods for capturing the superficiality of a new emerging consumer culture, by approximating the noisy chatter of mindless conversation.[43] Gaddis' use of dialogue does not just conform to more traditional forms of direct speech – "she said, he said" – but instead comes across as a panoply of competing voices.[44] Indeed, much of Gaddis' satire is enabled by this sort of "verse medley" comprising "uprooted voices," which would seem particularly suited to critiquing a commercialized artworld.[45] As Joseph Tabbi writes, "the increasing *textualization* of reality reduces multiple dissonant voices to an indistinguishable hum."[46] This is a sociality where sincere feeling is ironized out of existence and where the culture industry has remixed Faustian tragedy into a plagiarized "bop version" of itself. Moreover, here the book self-consciously reflects on its own reproduction of the Faust tragedy, that Gaddis has taken Faustian characters and reanimated them to comic effect: if not a "bop version," then a version that shifts from the ivory towers of Enlightenment culture to the West Village streets of New York City.[47]

Decapitated Satire

All of this foregrounds a tragic recognition scene, albeit as a comic inversion of Aristotelian anagnorisis. Wyatt attempts to impart to the guests the truth about the forged paintings Brown is attempting to sell them, but

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rather than position this great revelation at the center of the narrative action, it is presented as if off-stage and via the broken-English of Brown's indentured whipping boy, Fuller:

> – So he restrain himself very peaceable, all the wile wearin one suit atop the other one as he go about addressin the dignitaries gathered in there until no-one take notice of what he so carefully speakin to them about, and then at long last so it seem to me he arise very excited to proclaim he can prove all this what he so perseveringly try to inform them of is the tryth, and upon hastenin his departure say he goin in search of you, sar. (654)

This revelation is not only of the forgery but also, in its vernacular form not less than narrative content, of the racialized underside of the bohemian milieu, whereby someone who is literally enslaved bears witness and speaks truth against all falsification. It is, then, not only the paintings that are forged, but the whole milieu that presents itself as a false front, concealing the social truth of racial and class domination.

Wyatt leaves before returning to the chorus of inane guests who ridicule his deranged appearance, the moment of recognition thus reduced to "a morbid condition aggravated by drink" (671). His fumbling for redemption is narrated as a burlesque performance wherein the hero dresses up in layers of business suits. Other guests "turn their attention" to "this diverting visitor who stood looking feverishly round, holding up a handful of charged wood, whispering – Where is he?" (677). And yet, before Wyatt has a chance to confront Brown with a public recognition of the truth, that his paintings are worthless forgeries, Brown – who has in the meantime dressed up in a sixteenth-century knight's armor – proceeds to fall down the stairs and garrote himself with the tightly fitting helmet. This, which should be a truly horrific death, reads as purely comic.

The most cathartic instance in this whole comedy of errors comes about, despite itself, when Valentine – Brown's business partner who authenticates Wyatt's forgeries – confronts Wyatt, as Brown lays limp at their feet:

> – You and your work, your precious work, your precious van der Goes, your precious van Eyck, your precious not van Eyck but what I want! And your precious Chancellor Rolin, look at him there, look at him.
>
> . . .
>
> – And your precious van Eyche, do you think he didn't live up to his neck in a loud vulgar court? In a world where everything was done for the same reasons everything's done now? For vanity and avarice and lust? And the boundless egoism of these Chancellor Rolins? Do you think they knew the

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

Kevin Attell writes that this scene could be viewed as "a critical event, an old-fashioned peripeteia in the narrative of the protagonist's development."[48] It marks the moment at which Wyatt undergoes a reversal, not just in his breaking away from the counterfeiting business but also in a more literal sense: when we encounter Wyatt in the third and final part of the novel, he has reverted to his original Christian name, Stephen, and has fled from New York City to live out the rest of his days in a Spanish monastery. But more than this transformation, the recognition Valentine is attempting to force on Wyatt speaks to how Frye frames anagnorisis in *Anatomy of Criticism*. "In the greatest moments of Dante and Shakespeare," he claims, "we have a feeling of converging significance, the feeling that here we are close to seeing what our whole literary experience has been about," only to alight on the affective structure of this literary recognition: "the feeling that we have moved into the still center of the order of words."[49] While Valentine's "criticism" of art amounts to another comic overreaction to Wyatt's obsessive posturing about the sanctity of art – delivered once again in a rambling and rushed dialogue – a tragic structure of feeling nevertheless persists in anagnorisis or recognition.

Recognition

We have seen that melancholy attaches itself to Wyatt, and to the other characters of the book, and how it is troubled by an overarching narrative that constantly bends toward the comic. An atmosphere of melancholia is matched by a tragic plot delivered as satire, and, for this reason, what might otherwise reach toward tragedy is sublimated into comedy. Of course, comedy is not the only form that undermines a unity of tragic action and thereby blunts the force of tragic feeling in this novel. *The Recognitions* presents a multiplicity of characters, plots, and styles that consistently bursts any Aristotelian notion of a unified tragic drama. Combining the interrelated foreclosures of personal and collective possibility, anagnorisis appears to internalize multiplicity as it too is rendered

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multiple, partial, incomplete and ultimately broken. Recognition, in this way, conforms to what Cave writes of Jean Racine's tragedies, which turn the classical form – such as we might see in Oedipus – on its head: "recognition is not only fragmented but also perpetually deferred: error and uncertainty only stop at death."[50] Wyatt and Valentine's recognition scene defers a sense of resolution, even though Brown dies and their contract breaks. The fact that this scene is satiric also negates the moment of cathartic discovery, but this is not to say that recognition is entirely comic. According to Frye, "comic discovery, *anagnorisis* or *cognition*" necessitate the "recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph."[51] This is not what we encounter in Gaddis' novel. The satire, if anything, directs itself to something bleaker and more akin to how Frye conceives of tragedy. "The discovery of anagnorisis which comes at the end of the tragic plot is not simply the knowledge by the hero of what has happened" but, rather, "the recognition of the determined shape of the life he has created for himself, with an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he has forsaken."[52] This provides a neat gloss of Wyatt's desire for artistic autonomy, which Valentine ruthlessly demystifies when he preaches that art is always already subject to market principles, and so to the withdrawal of artistic aspiration's social referent.

Despite the comedy and despite the failures of the recognition plot, a mood persists in *The Recognitions* irreducible to the multiple forms of comedy. This is what we can now describe as the affective forcefield of Gaddis' tragic style. The prose is tragic not just because it describes sadness, or loneliness, or indeed morbidity as it lingers on loss and endings; it is tragic, rather, because these atmospherics occupy a narrative arc whose origins are in literary tragedy. In other words, the confluence of melancholy and satire might still generate its own peculiar tragic affect. This affect will have to take place at a remove from both narrative and character – as the two are invested in the book's dialogic structures – and emanate from somewhere else within the margins. This narrative non-space is precisely where Jameson locates the realm of affect, as a "pure form of storytelling with impulses of scenic elaboration, description and above all affective investment, which allow it to develop toward a scenic present which in reality, but secretly, abhors the other temporalities which constitute the forces of the tale or récit in the first place."[53] Affect, for Jameson, is the scenic present, a temporally impossible moment of narration that has no place within the flow of narrative. Similarly, in *The Recognitions*, a specifically tragic affect returns at some remove from the central narrative satire and the noisy chatter of characters and is set free as something post-subjectively nameless and unclassifiable.

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Gaddis seems to theorize such a version of tragedy from within the novel. In one episode, Esme makes herself up garishly with Wyatt's paint – materializing her anxiety that she only exists for him as a painting – and writes a long suicide letter. While the episode is excessively baroque, with the letter itself appearing as a melodramatic performance of suicide, there is a line in the note that gives us an insight into how tragedy might still exist despite its satire. "A tragic gesture," muses Esme, "that actually leads to tragedy but diabolically exists only in an absence of tragedy, nevertheless procreating it . . ." (473). We should not underestimate the irony of these lines: their very contrived and overthought account of tragedy seems to bolster an insincere attempt at suicide, which subsequently (and appositely) fails. However, the description also suggests that tragedy should be conceived as a sort of structure with an absent center – perhaps even what Frye calls a "still center" in the "order of words" or, alternatively, that tragedy cannot simply be reduced to the presence of any one action or named emotion in a drama.

This emphasis on an affective realm of "pure description," as Jameson puts it, would at first seem counter to those narrative tendencies we have witnessed in Gaddis' dialogue, particularly as it develops across his oeuvre. Paul Maliszewski observes that "the novels after *The Recognitions* consist almost entirely of dialogue, the narrators have gone the way of God in a philosophy class after Nietzsche: They are absent."[54] We can certainly detect the first signs of this departure in *The Recognitions*, insofar as so much of our knowledge of Wyatt is made up of conversation cut-ups. For Gaddis, omniscient narration seems to harbor a sort of sincerity the characters cannot. More particularly, it is when narration directs its attention away from character and toward more scenic description that something like tragic recognition is liberated. Take the following moment, which occurs after an exchange between Wyatt and Esther concerning their loveless marriage and individual frustrations as they search for artistic recognition. All is rendered farcically, when the properly miserable dimension of the relationship is projected into a deracinated urban landscape, which subsequently allows for tragedy's nomination into being but only at the moment of its eclipse:

> 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)

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In this description of New York City, the syntactical destinations, the potential objects of the syntax, draw away from one another – they are pried apart by the conjunction "or," which has the effect of rendering indifferent any distinction between human tenderness and commercial tender. All of this ramifies the tragic coordinates of loss. The mixed tense of this passage implies the irreparability of human relations; tragedy "was" (is already) foresworn in the knowledge that "we are" (currently) atomizing. The equivalence is to acknowledge that which is denied to knowledge: that life and meaning obtain exclusively within the realm of exchange. This is a world where a choice has already been made – money has been chosen over love insofar as love has been sacrificed to the matrix of market equivalence, in a culture where "only money is currency." This paragraph emphasizes, among other things, the melancholic environment where the vanquished bohemians of the postwar world retired to "meditate on their defeat."[55]

This sense of defeat registers affectively not in the psychological dispositions of the individual characters but in the topography of the postwar world's new polis, when the city of opportunity is revealed as anything but that. In an image similarly anemic to the "whiteness" of Montmartre, New York City is infused with a crushing sense of fatigue:

> It is a naked city. Faith is not pampered, nor hope encouraged; there is no place to lay one's exhaustion: but instead pinnacles skewer it undisguised against vacancy. At this hour it was delivered over to those who inherit it between the spasms of its life, those who live underground and come out, the ones who do not come out and the ones who do not carry the keys, the ones who look with interest at small objects on the ground, the ones who look without interest, the ones who do not know the hour for the darkness, the ones who look for illuminated clocks with apprehension, the ones who look at passing show-tops with dread, the ones who look at passing faces from waist level, the ones who look in separate directions, the ones who look from whitened eyeballs, the ones who wear one eye-glass blacked, the ones who are tattooed, the ones who walk like wind-mills, the ones who spread disease, the ones who receive extreme unction with salted peanuts on their breadth. (114)

Negativity is spread throughout this paragraph via a personifying language that connotes depressed space – naked, exhaustion, vacancy, underground, darkness, blacked – and threaded through a run of negations: "not," "nor," "no," "do not," "do not know." Here, any sense of the collective is atomized into a successive march of "the ones," those for whom being no longer articulates within a social system but who have, like Ralph Ellison's invisible man, disappeared into the cracks of the cityscape. There is something automated in the characterized indifference. While

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these sentences reach toward something like existential dread, there is an argument to be made that with them Gaddis is gesturing to a particular feeling of abject disappointment that was pervasive at the time he was writing *The Recognitions*. This is the period of what Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin call the "invention in the US of the modern corporate form," which gave rise to a new advertising culture made up of "Hollywood-style narrative and visual schemes stripped to their most abstract."[56] The new corporate capitalism with its new regime of advertising did two things that are relevant here: first, it defeated the Popular Front in a war of position; and second, it subsumed the resulting melancholia of that defeat back into its own order, so that the only means of filling the void was through mindless consumerism, which is to buy into precisely those same corporations and advertising.

Tragic affect in *The Recognitions* is not registered as a mere gag confined to the final pages, but instead omnisciently acknowledged throughout the narrative in passages of burnished prose that, like the Dutch paintings simulated by Wyatt, exist well after their market use-by date, and which are given narrative space and syntactical ballast on which to effloresce as though for one last time. That is what we encounter here, in one of Gaddis' loving accounts of Wyatt's métier:

> The room was filled with the odor of destruction: as though there might arise on the smoke a difference, when a storehouse of chemical burned: here in the squat fireplace were chemicals, some of them inorganic, and the organic transmutations suffering oxidation with the immediacy of a chain reaction on the page of a chemistry text; but where in this consummation, the law of the conservation of energy? Could brush strokes make the difference, then? Science in magnitude, biology and chemistry as triumphantly articulate as subordinates are always, offer no choice but abjure it in frantic effort to perfect a system without alternatives, the very fact of their science based on measurement; and measurement, designed to predicate finalities, refusing the truth which shelters in possibility: in the weight of the smell of the smoke there was more than the death of the body, the cellular sucking construction, hunger of tissues unconscious of any end but identical reproduction. But if strokes of creation fed the flames, strokes in whose every instant possibility had been explored for the finality which is perfection, torn apart in the attempt to free it into the delineation of that baffled enclosure of its own medium, here were brushstrokes whose future had been dictated by the thwarting enclosure of the past, a past whose future was struck dying with every instant of the delineation of its everlasting life. (469)

This passage generates its energies as though by feeding on Wyatt's artistic labor. The unnamed auratic energy inhering in the production of the

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artwork points toward a moment of anagnorisis, to a "truth which shelters in possibility: in the weight of the smell of the smoke there was more than the death of the body." This anagnorisis, for Gaddis, amounts to the recognition of his own art form's reversal of fortune: a "finality which is perfection, torn apart in the attempt to free it into the delineation of the baffled enclosure of its own medium." This is why Gaddis' first book is also a good point of entry into a genealogy of tragedy in postwar fiction: this novel evinces its own form of tragic recognition insofar as it recognizes the apparent obsolescence of its medium within the market it engages as content. It knows that it is made up of "brushstrokes whose future had been dictated by the thwarting enclosure of the past, a past whose future was struck dying." In this moment of recognition, Gaddis is able to cognitively map this totalized world in its temporal flux; as such, the book's own consciousness, its own tragic recognition, is the dull ember of artistic blaze burned out by a commoditized world.

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