And the Last Shall Be the First
by Ralph Clare
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Ralph Clare sees the new essay collection on William Gaddis as engaging a growing reassessment of the novelist's work. Taking up the task of moving the scholarship past the postmodern theories that framed and determined it for some time, Clare argues that 'The Last of Something' turns out to be the beginning of something more. Approaches in the collection range from new forms of biographical and contextual criticism, to theories of data storage and "bare life," but the nuance and ambition of the scholarship re-asserts the relevance of Gaddis.


In William Gaddis, The Last of Something, editors Crystal Alberts, Christopher Leise, and Birger Vanwesenbeeck bring together emerging and established Gaddis scholars in a welcome addition to the modest, but growing, corpus of Gaddis criticism. Not quite as ambitious and theoretically unified as Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers' Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System (2007), this newer essay collection is more for the hardcore Gaddis reader and harkens back to John Kuehl and Steven Moore's collection, In Recognition of William Gaddis (1984). Indeed, the editors' introductory remark that 'The Last of Something' "looks to update the body of thought on Gaddis' fiction by emphasizing its traditional and innovative aspects" (3) establishes this latest collection, curiously, as a kind of link between the two earlier books. True to the editors' vision, the essays in The Last of Something are wide-ranging, revisiting familiar themes in Gaddis criticism as well breaking new critical ground.

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language within Gaddis’ texts” (14). Drawing from her work on the Gaddis archives at Washington University, St. Louis, Alberts offers an interesting examination of how Gaddis transformed his own European wanderings into Wyatt Gwyon’s pilgrimages in *The Recognitions*, thereby demonstrating a linguistically based “geography” that “creates a map of the novel’s structure” (14). Alberts does spend some time justifying this mapping: on the one hand, notes Alberts, Gaddis’ work needs to be rescued from a postmodern packaging of it as a mere scrabble bag of sliding signifiers; on the other, his work must avoid being slated into an easy binary of biography-textual meaning, since “Gaddis did not want hunters of sources and personal information to kill the text and make the author its trophy” (10). While this shows a respect for Gaddis’ artistic views, it seems to me an unnecessary theoretical hem-haw. The fact is that “(auto)biographical” criticism, no matter Eliot’s (and Gaddis’ inherited) modernist worries, is simply not reductive of the work itself but is rather—when employed sensitively—expansive of it. Indeed, there is something amusing about an important, yet woefully underappreciated, writer worrying about his unknown person taking precedence over his little-read work, and ironically so when such posing only strengthens the image of the writer/artist in many readers’ opinions as someone who is above concerns of conventional success and market considerations, as Pierre Bordieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) makes clear. The “(auto)biographical” criticism of the kind Alberts engages in here (and in her essay in *Paper Empire*) is welcome, and we should look forward to more of it in the future.

The same concern with theoretically straightjacketing Gaddis’ works fuels Joseph Conway’s “Failing Criticism: *The Recognitions*.” Similar to Alberts, Conway takes exception to Johnston’s and other critics’ readings of Gaddis, which, he claims, “mistake the position of critical partiality for the fullness of interpretative totality” (70). In response, Conway cites Gregory Connes’s method put forth in *The Ethics of Indeterminacy in the Novels of William Gaddis* (1994) that respects the heterogeneity of Gaddis’ work. Though this method supposedly justifies Conway’s “stray[ing] somewhat from establishing an overarching thesis” (72), it does not make for the smoothest of readings. Conway’s essay is well-written, occasionally insightful, and provides an interesting comparison of Hemmingway’s and Gaddis’ prose and aesthetic visions (a comparison sparked by a Gaddis notebook entry on Hemmingway), but its tracing of several intertextual allusions (Pope, Ovid, and Eliot) in one passage of *The Recognitions* leads to extended visits to the sources of these allusions. While this is meant to underscore the “distracted” quality of Gaddis’ work, it is unfortunately reproduced in Conway’s essay. To be sure, from time to time a reflexive look at the trends of literary theory as they have affected, and been affected by, an object of study is a healthy and necessary thing. But to point out the failures of criticism does not a criticism make. One benefit of providing a clear theoretical foundation to a critique is that it automatically works against any kind of “interpretive totality” by laying out its assumptions for all to see—and in a clear and orderly fashion. Moreover, what we decidedly do get when we place Johnston in dialogue with Steven Moore and other critics—Conway included—are multiple points of view on Gaddis’ work from radically different voices, which is the very thing Conway desires of criticism in the first place, and, ironically, that which provides him the very frame for his argument.

Birger Vanwesenbeeck chastises the postmodern and posthuman turn in Gaddis studies for excommunicating religion from their critical congregations in “*Agape*: *The Last Christian Novel(s).*” Vanwesenbeeck
returns to Gaddis’ comment that *The Recognitions* constitutes the “last Christian novel” and argues for seeing the writer as trying to “write himself loose from a religious doctrine, which [...] he loathed as much as he [...] realized its deep contiguity to the art of fiction” (88). For Vanwesenbeeck, this bind comes to the fore in *Agape Agape*, as Gaddis’ views of (artistic) community are communicated through the metaphor of Christian communion via the Eucharist. Vanwesenbeeck gives a creative “eucharistic reading” of the “wafer-like” novella, whereby “the dying narrator offers up his narrative—in the manner of the Christian host—for it to be internalized by the reader” (97). This is an ingenious reading that meets the cybernetic readings of Gaddis in the heart of their system. Moreover, Vanwesenbeeck sees Gaddis’ Christian-influenced notion of community as “an awareness [...] of the impossibility for any Western writer to conceive of community outside of the Christian paradigm of communion” (98) and an attempt “to redefine agapē from a more individualized point of view,” or what Gaddis called the “‘self’ who can do more” (99). Gaddis’ attempt to out-write Christianity and to end, outright, its influence on his work, Vanwesenbeeck suggests, means the “last Christian novel” is perhaps not the termination of a series, but instead the most recent example of it.

There is also much in the way of more “traditional” criticism in this collection that is not so anxious about refuting a certain sort of postmodern Gaddis and that most certainly could have found a home in *In Recognition of William Gaddis*. Moreover, these essays are fresh and insightful, suggesting that employing fashionable theoretical paradigms is not always necessary for writing original criticism, even in these so-called theoretical end-days. Among these essays is John Soutter’s “*The Recognitions* and *Carpenter’s Gothic*: Gaddis’ Anti-Pauline Novels,” which, like Vanwesenbeeck’s essay, explores the fraught theme of religion in Gaddis’ works. Soutter puts Gaddis into an anti-Pauline tradition, especially as formulated by the philosophical work of Hans Vaihinger, which criticizes the practice of placing a representation, fiction, or systematized belief before immediate first-hand experience. In this view, Paul’s mediation of Christ’s teachings is a distortion of Christ’s words, especially because the tentative medium becomes the institutionalized message. Soutter argues that the effect, in *The Recognitions* and *CG*, is that characters frequently submit themselves to the manipulated narratives of others in an attempt at secular salvation. Thus, while “Gaddis’ novels condemn institutional perspectives” they “are all imbued with a religious impulse” (121 and 125).

Lisa Siraganian’s “‘A disciplined nostalgia,’ Gaddis and the Modern Art Object” gives a new perspective on Wyatt Gwyon’s, and by extension Gaddis’, views on modern art. Moving past earlier critical assessments focusing either on art as redemption or art as simulacra, Siraganian places *The Recognitions* in the context of the New York Art scene of the ‘40s and ‘50s, arguing that Wyatt’s aesthetics imply a different “theory of art and the art object’s relation to the beholder” (111). This becomes the very incorporation of “theory” into art itself, wherein Wyatt’s “forgeries are intended as both an art object and a form of criticism” (113). Siraganian’s discussion of the changing trends in art theory and criticism at the time works well to spur a reconsideration of Wyatt’s aesthetics and Gaddis’ view of modern art.

‘*The Last of Something*’ also hosts a wonderful entry by William H. Gass, Gaddis’ long time friend. In “The Kvetch, the Bitch, and the Rant,” Gass, in his typically supple prose, offers an amusing generic typology of one of Gaddis’ favorite formal devices (the rant), especially as displayed in *Carpenter’s Gothic*. Gass describes the rant as “angry in tone, blasphemous in expression, pell-mell in delivery, built of associations rather than logical connections” and ultimately “driven by despair” (27). The rant, it seems, fits
well with Sacvan Berkovitch’s definition of the American Jeremiad. The kvetch and bitch each have their own provenance too. “The kvetch,” Gass writes, “is hinged to the rant like a door to a frame: the kvetch is particular, the rant general; the kvetch intimate, the rant impersonal” (27). Opposed to this is the bitch, which is “low toned,” common, and not as personal or “purely egocentric” as the kvetch. By this definition, Job is the kvetcher par excellence. And if I were allowed my own Bercobitch here it would be to ask for more regarding the relationship between the rant and the Jeremiad. However, Gass’ new rhetorical genres, or sub-genres, offer a different and humorous way of conceiving of the secularized version of the Jeremiad, and not by merely calling it an anti-Jeremiad.

Christopher J. Knight’s essay, “Trying to Make Negative Things Do the Work of Positive Ones: Gaddis and Apophaticism,” positions Gaddis as part of different tradition (one distinguished by Eliot and Evelyn Waugh) than critics have heretofore placed him in. Indeed, Knight posits a tradition that weaves together the Coleridgean “willful suspension of disbelief” with satire by the common thread of their “apophatic character.” This tradition is instructive for Gaddis because it “tend[s] to approach the positive […] via Eliotian indirection and Waughian satire” (59). Knight even reads Gaddis, and Eliot, in the tradition of New England writers, at least because each writer imagined himself as such, and examines their stances on spirituality and Christianity as an institution. In light of this discussion, Knight shows how Gaddis is not unlike many twentieth century authors in his inability and refusal to put his faith in any system, religious or otherwise, that proclaims absolute “knowledge.” Instead, Gaddis employs the “willful suspension of disbelief” and ambiguity in his writing as “negatives,” so to speak, that might compel “positive” outcomes. Knight’s essay is wide-ranging in its artistic and intellectual references—among them Kierkagaard, William James, Conrad, Paul Ricoeur, Shakespeare, Twain, and Tennyson—and, as such, it is as rich and tapestried as Gaddis’ own work, and surely comprises a formalist homage of sorts.

Tim Conley’s “This Little Prodigy Went to Market: The Education of J R” gives a sharp reading of J R as a Bildungsroman starring the young J R Vansant. Employing Rousseau’s notions of childhood innocence developed in Emile, Conley argues that Gaddis’ novel depicts J R not as an inherently ruthless and greedy child, but as an innocent babe, at best a product of a cutthroat, “play to win” capitalist society, one in which schooling and education are merely Gradgrindian and factory-like exercises. “Education,” Conley claims, “is the absent centre of the book” (sic, 130). Conley even extends Gaddis’ “educational treatise” to Edward Bast’s failed attempt to teach J R the value of Bach and art in general, since Bast turns out to be “no better an expositor of the significance of music” than is J R’s terrible music teacher (135). This rather controversial interpretation of a key scene involving one of the more sympathetic artist-characters in the book (a scene that many critics cite as evidence of the postmodern age’s hostility to true art) is thought provoking. If even the artists and caring teachers in the novel can be implicated in the hegemony of cutthroat capitalism through their failure to counteract its teachings, then J R’s “innocence” means he is not responsible for his actions—though at what point before he stands, all grown up, in front of Congress to answer allegations of financial chicanery in Gaddis’ “J R Up to Date” (1987) does he become responsible for his actions? Nonetheless, this claim allows Conley to further his argument that Gaddis does not criticize J R’s type of “innocent” greed and, by extension, capitalism per se. Notwithstanding whether or not it is fair to endow Gaddis’ vision of children, and J R especially, in a manner as idealistic as Rousseau’s, Conley’s essay offers a compelling reading of the education of J R and the failures of the American educational system, and how this ties into Gaddis’ guarded censure of the capitalist system.
A touch of theory, however, does leave a faint print on *The Last of Something*, as evidenced in Christopher Leise’s essay “The Power of Babel: Art, Entropy, and Aporia in the Novels.” Leise, continuing the systems theory turn in Gaddis criticism initiated by Paper Empire (and particularly in Stephen Schryer’s essay therein, “The Aesthetics of First- and Second-Order Cybernetics in William Gaddis’ *J R*”), applies the concepts of second-order cybernetic theory to Gaddis’ “difficult” entropy-mimicking prose. For Leise, the reader’s role as a second-order observer of textual chaos, who can see the blind spots of others (though not her own), allows her “to seize upon the positive potential of confusion” (40). As such, Gaddis’ art is one that “plays at aporia” and works against “America’s desire to simplify the complex, to apprehend what is inherently elusive, while constructing potential pathways […] toward its improvement” (50).

Perhaps the most intriguing and original essay in this collection, and certainly the most theoretically novel, is Mathieu Duplay’s “Field’s Ripe for Harvest: Carpenter’s Gothic, Africa, and the Avatars of Biopolitical Control.” Duplay’s piece gives a much-needed postcolonial reading of *Carpenter’s Gothic* that few other critics have attempted. Focusing his analysis on biopolitics in the novel, Duplay turns to Georgio Agamben’s work on sovereignty and the state of exception in the modern world, in which Agamben reveals the paradoxes at the heart of Western law and politics. Of particular use to Duplay is the notion of homo sacer, a term Agamben takes from ancient Roman law that referred to a person whose societal status meant he could be killed by anyone with impunity, yet could not be legally sacrificed to the gods. Abandoned before the law and society, homo sacer is a figure for those excluded by society who are reduced to, or treated as if they are merely, “bare life,” or life at its most basic biological state of existence. Homo Sacer, however, is also necessary for marking or circumscribing the very limits of law, the sovereign, and the State. Indeed, the reduction of homo sacer to “bare life” or “bios” reveals the fundamentally biopolitical nature of Western law. Duplay goes on to explain how biopolitical control is waged in *Carpenter’s Gothic*, not only in the more obvious political, economic, and religious machinations the novel portrays, but also through the ways in which the characters’ bodies and behaviors are affected in their day-to-day lives (particularly through a keen reading of “rifts” in the novel, form the Great Rift to those of interpersonal relations). Duplay goes so far as to read the characters themselves as examples of homines sacri.

To claim that the characters in the *Carpenter’s Gothic* are homines sacri, however, should give us pause. While in Home Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998) Agamben argues that the Nazi death camp is the model of society today and its prisoner the homo sacer (166-180), he gives no specific contemporary examples of homo sacer. Critics sympathetic to Agamben’s work suggest homo sacer is a concept useful when considering Brazil’s favelas or even the slums of India. In any event, we are talking here about the effects of biopolitical power on those radically excluded from society and “sacrificed” in the name of civilization. The novel’s indirect mention of the many African peoples suffering from malnutrition or abandoned by their by governments in the midst of civil wars—the “souls” that Reverend Ude wants to harvest—are more properly examples of homines sacri than are a few middle-to-upper class New Yorkers gathered in a dilapidated house on the Hudson. Liz, in her position as secretary to all who walk through the office she calls home, is perhaps the closest to this level of exclusion, but if we were to seek examples of homines sacri in America, we might begin with the millions of undocumented workers living and working in this country without any security or rights.

Nevertheless, Duplay is right to examine how the characters in *Carpenter’s Gothic* are affected by biopower and biopolitical production. It is simply a different, and less drastic (if nevertheless prophetic), version of biopolitical control that we see at work in the novel than is evidenced in certain parts of the world today, and one with different immediate effects. Moreover, in a move sympatico with much Gaddis criticism that eschews excessive theory,
Duplay links the notion of biopower to Gaddis' use of language in the novel, which suggests that "the forcible reduction of human existence to ‘bare life’ cannot be resisted unless the working of language are more correctly apprehended" (156). Thus, Duplay, like Leise, balances a new theoretical reading of CG by joining it with the oft-addressed critical function of Gaddis’ aesthetics.

Finally, in “After Gaddis: Data Storage and the Novel,” Stephen J. Burn rightly takes Jonathan Franzen to task for his one-time dis of Gaddis in his 2002 New Yorker article, “Mr. Difficult.” Burn’s discussion of Gaddis’ skepticism of the novel as an encyclopedia or storehouse of data undercuts Franzen’s own denouncement of the novel’s ability to capture and preserve “reality.” Gaddis, Burn argues, “does not simply use the novel to store data, but rather explores the negative impact endlessly proliferating information has upon the lives of his characters” (163). More importantly, Burn establishes the influence of Gaddis’ encyclopedic tendencies not just in Franzen’s early work but also in the work of Richard Powers and David Foster Wallace. In this context, Franzen’s love/hate relationship with Gaddis clearly reveals a Bloomian anxiety of influence, which Burn deftly demonstrates by calling attention to the striking similarities between the characters of Chip in Franzen’s The Corrections and Oscar in Gaddis’ A Frolic of his Own. Thus, Burn reveals that even after Franzen’s turn away from writing “postmodern” encyclopedic novels to penning more accessible realist works, the influence of Gaddis remains. Burn’s essay is a necessary, yet careful, look at the touchy subject of literary influence, especially when dealing with a generation of fairly young writers who both resist certain postmodern influences, yet have clearly been shaped by them.

While several essays in the collection deal with Gaddis’ latest and posthumously published Agape Agape, little attention is devoted to A Frolic of One’s Own, which is perhaps Gaddis’ least critically explored text. There was perhaps a chance here to cover some critical territory still sorely in need of exploration. Too, though many of the essays overlap in their concerns, some of them are isolated and, as a result, the book’s flow compromised. The collection could have benefited from being organized into sections dealing with religion, rhetoric, aesthetics, etc. Yet, all in all William Gaddis, ‘The Last of Something’ is a reminder that this is certainly not the last word in Gaddis criticism but the beginning of something more.

Works Cited and Consulted


Comments

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