Canvas in the Cold War

William Gaddis and the Context of Art

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Abstract and Keywords

William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* is an encyclopaedic collage of 1940s and 1950s American culture, including its art: Abstract Expressionism, appropriation, and a booming market in forgeries. Drawing on letters and unpublished archival material, this chapter shows the ways in which the novel’s focus on authenticity in art, and Gaddis’s work more broadly, arose from his experience of Cold War paranoia and polarization, and his engagement with the legacy of modernist fiction. It then moves on to show the ways in which *The Recognitions* anticipates with uncanny precision some of the key tensions in subsequent American art between art and objecthood and originality and appropriation, and incorporates these tensions into its own relationship to its historical moment.

*Keywords*: William Gaddis, *The Recognitions*, modernism, Abstract Expressionism, the novel, the Cold War
William Gaddis’s last novel *Agapē Agape* (2002) begins with a dying writer launching into one final monologue: ‘No but you see I’ve got to explain all this because I don’t, we don’t know how much time there is left and I have to work on the, to finish this work of mine’.¹ This work was a project Gaddis himself had pursued intermittently for almost forty years, ‘The Secret History of the Player Piano’, which he described in the 1960s as ‘a satirical celebration of the conquest of technology and of the place of art and the artist in a technological democracy’.² Lying in his sickbed, the narrator realizes he will never be able to complete this history, and rues the life he has spent writing fiction. If a fiction is only ever a fake, ‘what Plato calls the lie in words that’s only sort of an imitation’, what to make of a life devoted to its creation (58–9)? His history abandoned, the monologue ends with the narrator looking back to ‘my first book … the only reality where the work that’s become my enemy got done’ (92). As Hal Foster has written, ‘as the dying man works to get his estate into order, he identifies with Lear, but he is a High Modernist Lear maddened by a neglectful world gone to the mass cultural dogs’.³ Modernism’s attempts to justify its imitations haunt his monologue: ‘Pound’s cry for the new’ (61), Beckett’s claim that *Finnegans Wake* was ‘not about something Madam it is something’, The Unnamable’s realization that it ‘can’t go on and I’m, I am the other. I am the other’ (19–20). Although the novel’s style was most influenced by Thomas Bernhard, these references to Beckett, informed by Gaddis’s reading of Beckett’s biography in 1997, sketch out a modernist lineage for this dying writer. In an observation true for Gaddis’s *oeuvre* as a whole, Foster writes that ‘Agapē Agape exists on the threshold between the [p.64] collage technique of many Modernists and some other mode or archive that is not yet adequately theorized’⁴.
It is telling that an art critic like Foster was such a perceptive reader of *Agapē Agape*, for few postwar novelists have been as concerned as Gaddis with the ambivalent legacy of modernist art in the United States. From Abstract Expressionism in *The Recognitions* (1955) and the Rothko-like paintings decorating corporate offices in *JR* (1975), to the sculptures of Richard Serra inspiring the legal conundrums of *A Frolic of His Own* (1994), Gaddis has chronicled the American version of what T. J. Clark has called ‘the bad dream of modernism’: its commodification of culture and subjectivity and its smooth and willing assimilation into the institutions of neoliberal finance capitalism.\(^5\) Yet at the same time, as *Agapē Agape* shows, Gaddis never quite gave up the belief that exposing this complicity could be the act of a critical modernism. Don DeLillo’s view of Gaddis as ‘belonging to the great line of modernist writers who want to get everything down, who think of the novel as a kind of warehouse or museum’, with a ‘recycling’ style that ‘takes tired voices, jargon, self-interest, and makes literary capital out of them’, pinpoints how Gaddis’s style takes the collage technique of modernism and uses it to create an archive of modernism itself.\(^6\) DeLillo identifies how Gaddis’s archival poetics replicate on a formal level the historical process his novels describe: modernism becoming tired and quotable jargon, a form of cultural and financial capital, yet he also points to the complicity of this poetics with the bad dream of modernism *The Recognitions* critiques and aspires to at one and the same time. Gaddis’s belated relationship to literary modernism has also been noted by Cynthia Ozick, who observed that in *The Recognitions* Gaddis suffered from the ‘Modernist Dream ... coming on the scene when it was already too late to be ambitious in that huge way with a vast modernist novel’.\(^7\) What then to make of the modernist dreams of Pollock, Rothko, and Serra that Gaddis’s novels present not as belated, but as the most present symptoms of the fate of art in the United States’ postwar ‘technological democracy’? If Gaddis now seems better understood situated less at the origins of American postmodernism than within a ‘long modernist era’, as Lisa Siraganian has argued, Gaddis’s distinctive engagement with the legacy of modernist art must occupy centre stage in elucidating his relationship to that era, as well as to the broader history of the postwar novel’s engagement with visual art.\(^8\)
If *The Recognitions* marks its belatedness in relationship to literary modernism in its satirical parodies of the styles of Joyce, James, and Barnes, it at the same time presents visual modernism in the form of Abstract Expressionism as raising issues surrounding art, objecthood, and context that are fundamental to understanding the Cold War politics of the novel’s historical present. Gaddis’s novel takes as its starting point the differential periodization of modernism across the twentieth century and draws on postwar visual modernism to model how *The Recognitions* relates to a present defined by Cold War paranoia. For Gaddis, Abstract Expressionist painting raised the question of whether an artwork could only be distinguished from an ordinary object by virtue of its context or by an artist’s act of choice—why is it not just a cloth spattered in painting? This situation where the autonomy of aesthetic meaning threatens to become wholly context-dependent exemplified the relationship of the novel to his historical present under the twin pressures of the Cold War and the mass media of a technological democracy. In the same way that an Abstract Expressionist painting could in the view of Harold Rosenberg signify the individualism produced by liberal democracy and globalized free trade (as early as 1948!), so too might a novel’s meaning be wholly determined by the systems of Cold War politics and mass media capitalism. Gaddis’s satirical engagement with Abstract Expressionism leads to a means of relating the novel to history. If the meaning of a novel threatens to become wholly determined by its context, then only by making that novel in part about its relationship to that context can this substitution of aesthetic autonomy with context-dependency be acknowledged, exposed, and critiqued.
In a similar manner, only a novel which admits its status as an inauthentic ‘forgery’ by commenting on its own fictionality and through the structure of its plotting can suggest there is a meaningful difference between originality and forgery, the kind of difference assumed to be meaningless in the work of a writer like Kathy Acker, who drew this contrasting lesson from her own engagement with postmodern art. Tony Tanner has argued that the ‘notion that the ordinary individual and the artist alike may be living their lives within an intricate system of patterns or fictions, and the related search for some recognition of non-fictional reality, form a recurrent American theme which no one has explored at greater length than William Gaddis in his novel *The Recognitions*,9 Tanner was more insightful than he knew: in his notes Gaddis wrote ‘The Recognitions as a title I like perfectly because it implies the impossibility of escape from a (the) pattern’.10 (p.66) The issues surrounding authenticity and forgery raised by Gaddis’s engagement with visual art from van Eyck to Pollock inform and historicize the novel’s use of intricate plots and failed recognitions. Through the structure of its plotting, the novel performs a shift in the use of multiple narrative perspectives and recognition scenes as formal devices to represent epiphanies in the consciousness of individual characters towards their use for generating complex plots whose intricacies would come to allegorize the complexity of the social systems of postwar American life in the works of writers like William Burroughs, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon. The recognition scene as epiphany was one of modernist fiction’s characteristic traits, and Gaddis’s study of literary modernism, a study which only compounded his sense that it was past—or at least institutionalized into something different by his professors at Harvard and colleagues at *The New Yorker* —was a central element in the early composition of *The Recognitions*.

Art and Objecthood as Paintings and Shirts
T. S. Eliot’s lecture on ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’ to an audience of 14,000 people at the University of Minnesota in 1956 has long been taken as characteristic of the dissolution of literary modernism’s revolutionary energies into what Dwight MacDonald called the ‘tepid ooze of Midcult’.11 Alternatively, as Donal Harris has more recently argued, the popularity of Eliot across academia and mass magazines during the 1940s and 1950s reveals a network of mutually...
sustaining relationships between modernism, mass media, the academy, and discourses of United States nationalism that caution against assumptions of how revolutionary modernist poetry was seen by mid-century readers. This was preceded by the incorporation of modernist literature into academic syllabi well before the vast expansion of university teaching of English that accompanied the GI Bill of 1944. Gaddis’s study of English at Harvard in the 1940s saw him encounter an institutionalized version of literary modernism that compounded his (p.67) sense of it being something that had passed; his plan to pay homage to Eliot by parodying every line of Four Quartets (1943) in The Recognitions is one indication of the ambivalent relationship to modernism shared by the novel and its characters alike, where what was perceived as a literary movement defined by the expression of an alienated subjectivity through a unique style had been transformed into a homogenizing upper-middle-class sensibility informing Partisan Review and Madison Avenue. While the visual modernism of Abstract Expressionism, in contrast, appears as wholly contemporaneous to The Recognitions’ Greenwich Village denizens and Left Bank exiles, it too is seen as raising questions about aesthetic autonomy and institutional contexts, albeit for very different reasons. The novel’s intricately conflicting accounts of a ‘painting’ by the artist Max pose a question about Abstract Expressionist painting that would later become central to the theories of modernism developed by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. If a modernist artwork defines itself by a reduction to its medium, what makes it a painting and not a coloured piece of canvas? What is the difference between art and objecthood? The Recognitions refuses an answer to this endgame of modernist aesthetics, one which has appeared repeatedly since Duchamp’s urinal. It also disproves Duchamp’s claim that the postwar US art simply repeated the questions raised by abstraction and Dada—a claim similarly queried by Pierre Bourdieu—by showing the very different status these questions have in the context of the Cold War considered as the very limit and definition of a context.

Gaddis never graduated from Harvard: he left to work as a fact checker at The New Yorker in 1945 after being suspended for drunken behaviour and never returned. Despite this, his letters and notebooks document his enrolment in English courses taught by scholars like Theodor Spencer, at that time
contributing to Joyce’s academic canonization through editing *Stephen Hero*, and his reading of writers as diverse as Kafka, Woolf, Stein, Mansfield, and Gide (although he never read *Ulysses*, contrary to what many early critics of *The Recognitions* claimed). Although he began to write the novel while travelling through Mexico and Panama in 1947–8, and would continue to do so across Spain and Paris before completing it back in Long Island in 1952, he continued his reflection on the legacy of literary modernism on his travels. A harshly critical 1947 essay on Gertrude Stein by Katherine Anne Porter in *Harper’s Magazine*, attacking Stein’s self-promotion and support of the Pétain regime—her enjoyment of ‘both the wars’—prompted a short correspondence between Gaddis and Porter. Porter’s attack on Stein for her support of Pétain was in stark contrast to her decision a few months later, as part of the judging committee, to award Ezra Pound the Bollingen Prize, evidence of the inconsistencies and contradictions involved in the institutionalization and critique of modernism in the immediate postwar years. Porter had argued that Stein’s style was evidence of a suspension of aesthetic as well as moral judgement: ‘Everything being equal, unimportant in itself, important because it happened to her and because she was writing about it’. This same interpretation of Stein’s style was shared by Clement Greenberg in an essay on ‘The Crisis of the Easel Picture’ published in *Partisan Review* the following year: she was ‘the parallel in literature’ to ‘a mode of painting, now practiced by some of our most “advanced” artists, that threatens the identity of the easel picture ... the “decentralized”, “polyphonic”, all-over picture which with a surface knit together of a multiplicity of identical or similar elements, repeats itself without strong variation from one end of the canvas to the other and dispenses, apparently, with beginning, middle, and ending’. A decade earlier, Beckett had argued Stein’s ‘nominalistic irony’ had revealed the ‘arbitrary materialism of the word surface’, and he too connected her eschewal of syntactical and narrative logic with the influence of post-Cubist abstraction. These different readings show that Stein’s prose was being received both before and after the war as an instance of modernist fiction’s aspiration to formal autonomy through imitating the techniques of abstract painting. Conversely, the ability of Greenberg to compare Pollock’s style to Stein’s was evidence of Pollock’s modernism: its ability to turn ‘uniformity’, a
seemingly ‘antiaesthetic’ notion, into an expression of ‘sheer texture, sheer sensation [that] seems to answer something deep-seated in contemporary sensibility’.19

Gaddis’s response to Stein was ambiguous. He confessed to Porter a long obsession with Stein, ‘[b]ecause she has worried me’, having ‘read and been and excited and consternated’ by her work. Gaddis agreed with Porter that Stein’s style involved a complete suspension of judgement. For Porter this was simply a moral failure, but for Gaddis it was an aesthetic practice of ‘monumental thoroughness’. Even if it eventually led to the ‘nihilism’ of colluding with Pétain, it ‘must have been a fantastically big (p.69) talent’. ‘Her absolute denial of responsibility—and this is what always troubled me the most—made so much possible’. For Gaddis, Stein represented a limit case of modernist autonomy, where her denial of social responsibility was a condition for making ‘so much possible’. However, while Stein’s aesthetic practice of suspending judgement as to the importance of subject matter could be separated at least partially from her support for Pétain, her ultimate lesson was that such a conception of modernist autonomy was no longer possible: ‘in our time if we do not understand and recognize the responsibility of freedom we are lost’.20 Although Gaddis never directly connects Stein’s style to abstract painting in the manner of Beckett and Greenberg, Greenberg’s view that an ‘all-over picture’, where no decision is made as to the relative importance of any surface element, causes a crisis in the easel picture by calling into question its separation from its context of display would be shared in the novel’s treatment of Max’s picture. If all painted elements are equally important, why stop at the arbitrary border of a piece of canvas? Gaddis’s ambivalent attitude towards Stein is written into The Recognitions. The letter Agnes Deigh sends to Doctor Weisgall, apologizing for the false accusation of sexual assault that leads to Agnes’s breakdown, is written in a parody of Stein’s style, signalled with an allusion: ‘The book I am going to write will be called Flowers of Friendship’.21 While Agnes initially represents the corruption of the New York literary world, with her omnipresent Mickey Mouse watch a sign of her embrace of mass culture, her mimicry of Stein’s style opens up a possible moment of redemption. Adopting Stein’s technique of writing in the third person—‘Do you understand her, doctor?’—enables her to allude to a past of horrific sexual abuse, ‘[r]aped across three state lines’,
explaining why a imagined scene of abuse caused her to break
down (760). Here, the complexity of Stein’s mode of
expression is given an ethical purpose, one which passes
unnoticed by Agnes’s doctors: ‘for those lines written in frantic
haste took time to interpret’ (763). This observation also
warns the reader not to pass over the ambivalences in the
novel’s quotations and détournments of modernist styles.

The notebooks Gaddis kept while travelling record his study of
modernist fiction, a study in which Katherine Mansfield
emerged as the most influential theorist. Gaddis took notes
from Mansfield’s Novels and Novelists (1930) that reveal her
as a source for his treatment of character, the theme and
formal device of recognition, and one of the many sources (p.
70) for the title The Recognitions itself. Gaddis transcribed
one of Mansfield’s most penetrating critiques of the stream-of-
consciousness technique, a critique which David Trotter takes
as marking a ‘significant disagreement’ between Mansfield
and other modernist novelists.22 From Mansfield’s review of
Dorothy Richardson’s Interim (1919) Gaddis copied: ‘(In
certain modern authors) the whole arc of writing consists in
the power with which they are able to register that faint shock
of recognition. Glancing through life they make the discovery
that there are certain experiences which are ... peculiarly
theirs ... instead of attempting to relate their “experiences” to
life or to see them against any kind of background’.23
Richardson’s heroine Miriam receives ‘as usual, shock after
shock of inward recognition ... produced by such things as
well-browned mutton, gas jets, varnished wallpapers ...
[which] leaves us feeling, as before, that everything being of
equal importance to her, it is impossible that everything
should not be of equal unimportance’.24 Mansfield is criticizing
Interim’s undifferentiated narrative attention towards
incident, thought, and object, a style producing a flowing
temporality associated with cinematic recording and dreaming
where anything can enter the narrative frame and everything
is of equal importance. This recalls Gaddis’s agreement with
Porter’s critique of Stein, for whom ‘everything being equal,
[was] unimportant in itself’. Gaddis’s notes suggest Stein and
Richardson’s drive towards undifferentiated narrative
attention was contrasted with that of Mansfield and Conrad.
Gaddis also transcribed the entirety of the ‘Preface’ to The
Nigger of the Narcissus (1897), underlining that the goal of
the novelist was to ‘make you see’, to ‘snatch in a moment of
courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life’, and to hold up ‘the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood’. In the margin to this description of one purpose of fiction—to produce a moment of recognition in the reader, rather than portray inward recognition in a character—Gaddis wrote: ‘Mansfield’. The opposition which emerges is between Stein and Richardson’s narratives of undifferentiated attention and flow, and Mansfield’s and Conrad’s narratives where the plot is shaped around a pivotal ‘moment’ of ‘recognition’, rescued from the flow of time, and intended to be experienced by the reader.
Mansfield’s concern with ‘recognition’ in fiction is more complex than it at first seems, for her review of Richardson is also a comment on her own writing. ‘A Dill Pickle’ (1917) opens with Vera recognizing a past lover in the ‘“special” way’ he peels his orange, and imagining that ‘[h]e must have felt that shock of recognition in her’. Yet the story fails to live up to the expectation that the reader will gain access to the complex of associations that made up this moment, alternating between the disastrous meeting between Vera and her lover, and her memories of the past. It undercuts narrative expectations, placing the recognition scene that traditionally concludes a plot at the opening of the story. Short as it is, the story plays self-reflexively with an expected association between narrative and psychological recognition in fiction. As with the inexplicable feeling that is the subject of ‘Bliss’, or the ellipses that conclude ‘Prelude’, Mansfield’s stories turn around expected yet frustrated scenes of narrative recognition in order to present, as in ‘Prelude’, a ‘false self’. Gaddis took from his reading of Mansfield this association between the failure to include moments of narrative recognition and the exposure of a false or forged self. As with Stein, Gaddis’s reading of Mansfield is archived into The Recognitions, with a quote from Mansfield about the soul being ‘set before its Maker, hatless, dishevelled and gay’ referenced three times, each time ironically plagiarized and misunderstood (125; 304; 716). It was a symptom of the highly gendered construction of the mid-century modernist canon that rather than responding to such textual allusions, The Recognitions was long dogged with the shadow of Joyce’s influence, no doubt in part due to a jacket blurb by Stuart Gilbert calling the novel the American Ulysses, a novel Gaddis had never in fact read. Gaddis’s archive reveals the far more diverse and complicated lines of modernist influence that shaped his work’s turn away from the depiction of psychological depth, lines of influence that fed into the postwar novel more broadly.
Begun in 1947 yet only completed in 1954, the long gestation of *The Recognitions* led to a quirk of literary history where Gaddis had appeared in two novels before he had published his own. In Chandler Brossard’s *Who Walk in Darkness* (1952), Harry Lees is nostalgic for the 1920s and writing an ‘exposé’ of the present that is also about the end of the Renaissance. Gaddis was also the source for Harold Sand in Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans* (1958), written in three days in 1953. Sand is ‘a young novelist looking like Leslie Howard who’d just had a manuscript accepted’ and so acquired a strange grace in my eyes’, always ‘chattering about every tom dick and harry in art’.

Aloof, erudite, and bookish, Sand is an outsider to the subterraneans of the Beat generation, a characterization that enables *The Recognitions* to be positioned in part as a reaction to the aesthetic values underlying Beat writing. This can be illustrated by their contrasting reactions to Abstract Expressionism. In 1957 Kerouac declared that one of the ‘Essentials of Spontaneous Prose’ was that ‘[t]he object is set before the mind ... as in sketching’, and ‘this sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal-secret idea words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image’.

In a letter the same year Kerouac placed the spontaneous sketch at the origins of Beat writing, telling Ed White ‘you started a whole new movement of American literature (spontaneous prose & poetry) when (1951) in that Chinese restaurant on 125th street one night you told me to start sketching in the streets ... how in Dickens did you know I wd. become a painter somehow’. The ‘spontaneous brush stroke’ is equated to a literary poetics of non-revision summed up in the command to ‘[n]ever afterthink to “improve” or defray impressions’, a poetics fetishized by the preservation of the original scroll of *On the Road*.

Spontaneity was the aesthetic value shared by Beat writing and ‘[a]rtists of genius, like Jackson Pollock, [who] have painted things never seen before. Anybody who’s seen his immense Samapattis of colour has no right to criticize his “crazy method” of splashing and throwing and dancing around’. The manuscript scroll and the drip painting: twin totems of the authentic artistic genius.
T. J. Clark has argued that one reason for the resonance of Pollock’s work in this period lay in how its style provided ‘a relatively stable set of signifiers’ for ‘previously dis-organized aspects of self-representation—the wordless, the somatic, the wild, the self-risking, spontaneous, uncontrolled, “existential,” the “beyond” or “before” the conscious activities of mind’. Kerouac certainly proves this true, where splashes of paint signify spontaneity, authenticity, and originality by being records of an inaccessible moment of inspiration. Gaddis’s work does so too, but negatively, his poetics of parody, quotation, and forgery submitting the very status of dripped paint as a signifier to probing scepticism. Pollock is referenced at the end of the novel, when the action returns to Paris in 1950 to catalogue the intellectual fashions of the American expatriates at the existentialist Café Flore: ‘Anyone could have seen it was Partisan Review she was reading’; ‘a passably dressed man had compounded a new philosophy’; and a voice asks: ‘And you know how he paints them? He climbs up a ladder with a piece of string soaked in ink, and he drops it from the ceiling onto a canvas on the floor’ (938; 939; 940). While not absolutely exact description, Pollock’s use of a ladder in creating his drip paintings had been widely advertised in print media from 1948 onwards. When asked in 1982 whether The Recognitions was intended as an ‘attack on modernism in art’, Gaddis responded: ‘That was not my purpose … [but] abstract expressionism … seems part of the disorder’. Gaddis’s knowledge of debates surrounding the meaning of Pollock’s technique was informed, as his Parisian allusions suggest, by his reading of Partisan Review: his editor at Harcourt Brace, Catherine Carver, was one of the journal’s editors, a role reprised in the novel by Don Bildow. Were one to correlate the dates, the issue being read at the Flore included one of a series of articles by William Barrett declaring ‘The End of Literature’ in Paris due to the French capitulation to ‘[c]ommunism and communist ideology’. Pollock’s appearance in the chatter of Americans in Paris ironizes a critical rhetoric, like that of Rosenberg, that framed Abstract Expressionist style as signifying American liberalism in opposition to decadent European Communism, showing how the stability of Abstract Expressionism’s signification was secured by its mediation by mass media and nationalist politics. But a painting appearing earlier in the novel calls into question the ability of that style to signify at all.
Appropriately enough, this painting doesn’t have a single name. Herschel calls it ‘L’Ame d’un Chantier’ and Maude translates it as ‘[t]he soul of a singer’, but a more accurate translation would be ‘The Soul of a Building Site’ or ‘The Soul of a Mess’ (131). The painting, whose presentation is the reason for the first Greenwich Village party, is first described in an omniscient narrative voice:

No one was looking at it. The unframed canvas was tan. Across the middle a few bright spots of red lead had been spattered. The spots in the lower left-hand corner were rust, above them long streaks of green paint, and to the (p.74) upper right a large smudge of what appeared to be black grease. It looked as though the back of an honest workman’s shirt had been mounted for exhibition, that the sleeves, collar, and tails might be found among the rubble in the fireplace (176).

Later, at the second Greenwich Village party, Anselm offers his own account of the painting: ‘Christ, don’t you know Max by now? Like that shirt he cut up and framed, he called it a painting, “The Workman’s Soul”? ’ (623). Lisa Siraganian rightly points out that we cannot tell ‘whether this “honoured” painting actually is an honest workman’s shirt, a dishonest workman’s shirt, a painting of a workman’s shirt, or a painting designed to counterfeit a workman’s shirt’. But in suggesting that it could allude to either ‘a Pollock, a Kline, a De Kooning, or slightly anachronistically, an early work of Pop art such as Rauschenberg’s Bed (1955)’, she elides a distinction between two radically different forms of postwar American art, and in so doing elides what is at stake in the ambiguous presentation of Marx’s painting in relationship to the novel’s engagement with visual art as a whole.

This distinction is expressed by the contradictory descriptions of Max’s ‘canvas’ as ‘unframed’ by the omniscient narration and ‘framed’ by Anselm. If the canvas really is ‘unframed’, so that it is a workman’s shirt, then it stands in silent judgement over the party:
Above them all the Worker’s Soul hung silent, refusing comment; though the red lead recalled bridges built by horny hands, sexually unlike any that fluttered glasses beneath it now, the spots of rust a heavy male back straining between girders, generically different from any weaving here. For all its spatters of brightness, that canvas looked very tired, hanging foreign and forlorn over the sad garden (185).
In order to provide a critique of Greenwich Village superficiality, the ‘canvas’ really does need to be a worker’s shirt designated and ‘framed’ as a work of art by Max’s act of choice, the kind of art work defined by the acts of appropriation and recontextualization that Thierry de Duve has argued originates with Duchamp’s readymade. On the other hand, if the canvas is a Pollock-style painting which merely looks like the expression of a ‘worker’s soul’, this critical perspective is lost, and Max is simply a cynic exploiting a simulacrum of labour for the profit of exchange. However: the twist of the screw is that if the canvas as art work is to offer a critical perspective on the Village party-goers, its ability to do so lies not in any property it possesses in itself; rather, its critical meaning derives from Max’s act of ‘framing’ and recontextualizing a found object in a specific site. If it is a painting created by Max, its style plagiarizes the signification of labour in the service of profit—the autonomous art work as the worst kind of commodity. If it is a recontextualized shirt turned into a critical art work by Max’s act of choice, a different kind of mystification takes place. Max succeeds in not only selling his ‘shirt’, but also other abstract paintings that Anselm claims plagiarize close-up photographs of Constable canvases (an idea stolen from an anonymous voice at the party). The act of recontextualizing an object as ‘art’ in service of critique appears as an act of autonomous authorial choice, but in fact depends on the recognition of the object as a commodity: its purchase as a commodity is what makes the act of recontextualization an act of aesthetic production. Max’s canvas points up a limitation of the institutional theory of art upon which appropriation depends, which is also the major limitation of Duchamp’s readymades: if institutions determine what is art, what determines how institutions gain that power of determination? All The Recognitions suggests is that neither the aesthetic autonomy claimed by Abstract Expressionism nor the ironic appropriations of an artist like Rauschenberg can provide an answer to that question. Both options available to the art work in the economy of New York art in the late 1940s are forgeries of what art could be, and the fact that the conflicting perspectives cannot be resolved in terms of the narrative information supplied suggests they cannot be resolved in the social world that the novel depicts.
The novel's treatment of Max's shirt anticipates to an uncanny degree Michael Fried's later sense that Greenberg's theory of modernism, if not the Abstract Expressionist practice based on it, raised the question of the difference between art and objecthood that it could not answer on its own terms. As early as 1948 Greenberg had written that Pollock's 'all-over' style had precipitated the 'crisis' of the easel picture: dispensing with 'beginning, middle, or end', it produced an 'ambiguity' as to why representation ended within the confines of a canvas rather than continuing out into a larger physical environment. Rather than being solved, this ambiguity as to what a painting is was accentuated by the crystallization of Greenberg's definition of 'Modernist Painting' in 1960 as a practice based on self-criticism and medium specificity. In that essay, Greenberg claimed that in the case of painting, 'Modernism has found that these limits can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object'. However, only two years later Greenberg admitted that by his own logic, if the 'essence' of pictorial art was 'flatness and the delimitation of flatness ... then a stretched or tacked up canvas exists as a picture—though not necessarily a successful one'. Fried's attempt to avoid the implication that modernist painting ends up erasing itself into objecthood was to adopt Stanley Cavell's notion of acknowledgement and argue that modernism involved not the reduction to a medium, but the production of art works that acknowledge the historically changing conventions that constitute art in different media. Objects, in contrast, always only appear as 'objects in a situation—one that, by definition, includes the beholder'; or quoting Robert Morris, an object situated 'under varying conditions of light and spatial context'; Art defines itself through its own acknowledgement of its conventions; objects are defined by their beholders and contexts. 'Art and Objecthood', Rosalind E. Krauss has written, drove a 'theoretical wedge into '60s discourse on art, somehow dividing that period into a before and after'; it also drove a wedge of discourse into art that similarly divided a period into a before and after. Since modernist art was at base 'a criticism of itself', criticism had become necessary to art: 'Criticism that shares the basic premises of modernist painting finds itself compelled to play a role in its development closely akin to, and only somewhat less important than, that of new paintings themselves'. In attempting to preserve aesthetic autonomy when threatened by
minimalism’s context-dependency, Fried’s essay blurred the difference between work and criticism, between ‘art’ as something beheld and between art as the product of a linguistic statement, and for this reason it was, perversely, seen as a point of origin for conceptual art. With this ‘intolerably arrogant conception of the critic’s job’, who decides where art ends and objecthood begins: artist, or critic?
What about the novelist? In this case, the novelist chose not to
decide. By presenting a ‘canvas’ where it is impossible to
determine whether it is an abstract painting or a worker’s
shirt, an autonomous art work or a recontextualized object,
The Recognitions foregrounds the limitations of both these
definitions of art. Believing it to be an abstract painting, Otto’s
view of Max’s canvas pushes to a reductio ad absurdum the
concept of medium specificity as the ground for aesthetic
autonomy: ‘Of course, a painter is limited by his materials,
isn’t he? I mean there are pigments you can’t just mix together
in certain mediums and expect them to bind. I mean of course
they break up … Inherent vice, I believe they call it’ (181–2).
Basil Valentine also sees (p.77) ‘[i]nherent vice’ as the
essence of painting, an essence revealed by the market: ‘no
one will insure against inherent vice’ (234). At a certain level,
a medium is simply an assemblage of matter, and all paint
decays without restoration. This ‘inherent’ quality of the
medium is what enables Valentine’s forgeries, since it enables
fakes to be disguised as restorations. At the same time as
Gaddis was writing The Recognitions, Robert Rauschenberg
was exploring the inherent vice of the medium specificity
claimed by modernist painting in a number of works. A set of
pure white and black paintings, White Paintings (1950–1) and
Untitled (1951), present themselves as merely paint and
canvas, but they simply repeat the reductions of Malevich’s
White on White (1915) and Black Square (1915), works whose
material disintegration exposes the inherent vice of attempts
to ground abstraction in either the transcendence of
materiality, or a return to its mere facticity. Inherent vice also
appears in Untitled (ca. 1951), where black paint is layered
over newsprint so it cracks over time, and Dirt Painting (for
John Cage) (ca. 1953) is simply dirt: the medium as decaying
matter. In Untitled (Gold Painting) (ca. 1953), the canvas is
covered in peeling gold leaf and fabric on newspaper: as for
Basil Valentine, the inherent vice of the medium grounds not
aesthetic autonomy but forgery’s ability to turn painting into a
commodity.
If one strand of Rauschenberg’s interrogation of Abstract Expressionism’s claims for aesthetic autonomy illuminates that undertaken in *The Recognitions*, another shows the stark differences between Gaddis’s novel and much subsequent American art of the 1950s. The same year *The Recognitions* was published, Rauschenberg produced a combine called *Untitled* (ca. 1955) that is strikingly similar to Max’s ‘canvas’: a canvas shirt spattered with green and rust-coloured painting, layered with newsprint and kitsch reproductions of Old Masters (Fig. 2.1).

But whereas in *The Recognitions*, Max’s production of works of art by recontextualizing found objects is presented as a Faustian pact where social critique is purchased at the cost of mystifying the commodification that makes this possible by pretending that it is Max’s act of choice alone that makes the object an art work, Rauschenberg’s practice embraced this mystified status of the artist’s role. As his 1962 telegram declared: ‘This is a Portrait of Iris Clert if I Say So’. As Charles Harrison has archly observed of this telegram, ‘the idea that a
work of art achieves its identity as such through the stipulating power of the individual artist is a weak form of the critique of the fetishization of the artist as author’. That Iris Clert was a gallerist, and this act involved producing a commodity, only compounds the weakness of this critique. Of course, the bad dream of modernism that haunts Gaddis’s The Recognitions is that this critique is meant to be weak, that a weak critique of the art market is what drives its repeated innovations—that modernist artists have always been like Max. The importance of The Recognition’s interrogation of these issues in visual modernism was retrospectively confirmed by A Frolic of His Own, which returns to the ways in which site-specific art seems to shift the source of aesthetic autonomy from the medium to the artist’s act of choice—in this case, the choice of a site—only to mystify the social systems in which such an act is possible. Based on the actual controversy surrounding Richard’s Serra’s Tilted Arc sculpture, the novel shows that the ‘site-specificity’ and context-dependency claimed by Serra as the grounds of the uniqueness of his art work were contingent by-products of a legal system that he could not acknowledge. When in the case of Serra’s sculpture the law ruled that the sculpture should be relocated, Serra claimed the work no longer existed. Better to produce nothing at all than works forced to acknowledge the problems with modernist conceptions of both site-specificity and aesthetic autonomy.
The stakes of Gaddis’s attempt to show the limitations of appropriation can be shown by comparison with the work of Kathy Acker. Acker positioned her practice as continuing one of the two contrasting legacies of visual modernism similarly identified in *The Recognitions*. ‘The artist’, she wrote, ‘doesn’t need to find the limits of his or her medium, to “make it new”‘; however, if Pound’s demand to ‘MAKE IT NEW’ also included the critique of authorship and property through appropriation, then she belonged to that tradition.\(^{50}\) While that tradition did include writers like William Burroughs, Acker’s main model was then-contemporary visual art. ‘When I did *Don Quixote*’, she explained, ‘what I really wanted to do was a Sherri Levine painting. I’m fascinated by Sherrie’s work’. Levine’s work involved ‘pure plagiarism’—the practice pursued for its own sake, rather than to explore questions of identity or gender.\(^{51}\) As opposed to ‘where you copy something with theoretical justification behind what you’re doing,’ the pure plagiarism Acker was interested in made literary production solely an act of choice: the choice of which text to copy.\(^{52}\) This obviously can have significant theoretical implications—in the case of *Don Quixote*, the rewriting of canonical male texts to tell stories of female desire—but for Acker, appropriation must first and foremost be understood as the act of choice, the ability to realize desire in choice being the definition of the freedom coursing through all of Acker’s work. Michael Clune has argued that in its attempt to pursue this freedom to its limit, Acker’s later work turns to visions of ‘a radically free market, “the anarchy of private enterprise”, where universal values and undistorted forms of exchange are founded within rather than without the body, and where free (p.80) individuals encounter no limit but the economic’.\(^{53}\) Acker’s interest in plagiarism not as a theoretical investigation but as a pure expression of desire through choice is consonant with this understanding of freedom: the ‘choice’ involved in appropriation is the ‘choice’ involved in economic exchange. Acker’s understanding of writing, as Walter Benn Michaels has argued, is thus post-historical: as in the act of plagiarism, style and form index not historical change but individual choice within a natural system of economic exchange.\(^{54}\) Plagiarism and appropriation are models for a literature which seeks to escape history.
What then is Gaddis’s novel: a painting or a shirt? A Pollock or a Rauschenberg? Does its value lie in its ability to ‘refuse comment’ on the context in which it is produced, or does its criticality lie in its satirical dependency upon a context with which the novel is complicit? By identifying this bifurcation within postwar visual modernism, *The Recognitions* is able to suggest that the novel should be neither. Neither aesthetic autonomy nor context-dependent critique offer convincing alternatives to the seductions of forgery and complicity with commodification that tempt the novel’s artists and writers, Wyatt, Otto, and Max. However, the form and poetics of the novel itself constitute a way out of this double-bind that at the same time figures how the novel is to be related to history. Just as how *A Frolic of His Own* draws from the texts of the legal system in which it is produced—situating itself within the system it is critiquing in order to effect that critique—Gaddis’s composition of *The Recognitions* involved an exposure of the ways in which the novel’s historical context had determined its scope to pose questions about aesthetic autonomy and context-dependency: the novel is as much about its historical context as it is about the difficulties of artistic production in that context. In exposing its own context, the novel presents a different cause for the threatening of modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy and the seductions and obsessions of forgery: the Cold War.

Cold War as Context, Forgery as Reproduction
'The book is a novel about forgery'. Of all the people to whom a notoriously reclusive Gaddis could offer this simple description of *The Recognitions* shortly before it was published, why J. Robert Oppenheimer, inventor of the atomic bomb and recent victim of a bout of anti-Communist paranoia in which his national security clearance was publicly revoked? 'But for having read your recent address at Columbia’s anniversary … I was so stricken by the succinctness, and the use of language, with which you stated the problems which it has taken me seven years to assemble and almost a thousand pages to present'. The novel had been summed up by Oppenheimer’s view that the ‘radical, formal experimentation’ of the arts and sciences in the first half of the century had led to something unexpectedly ‘new in the world’, the ‘massive dissolution and corruption of authority, in belief, in ritual, and in temporal order. Yet this is the world we have come to live in … To assail the changes that have unmoored us from the past is futile, and in a deep sense, it is wicked. We need to recognize the change and learn what resources we have’. *The Recognitions*, then, is a novel about the legacy of modernism in the Cold War. The novel’s concern with forgery, its status, as Gaddis later wrote, as ‘itself … a kind of forgery’, is the way in which it responded to Oppenheimer’s demand. Oppenheimer’s persecution had been caused by a Cold War obsession with authenticity, the fear of being unable to tell what is real and what is fake, what is fiction and what is reality: an obsession allegorized into the terrain of art by *The Recognitions*. Yet Gaddis’s experience of government propaganda and FBI investigation led to his own distinct understanding of the Cold War as a historical context: first, the Cold War as a interpretative regime in which it was impossible to ‘mean out of context’ and thus one reason why claims for the autonomy of Abstract Expressionism had come to seem dubious; and second, the Cold War as the latest stage in the development of a ‘technological democracy’ aimed at the substitution of artistic risk and failure through technological reproduction and programming. If Abstract Expressionism raised the question as to what extent the meaning of a work of art is determined by its context, Gaddis’s experience of the Cold War served to define the historical context he wrote into his novel.

The intention to write about the Cold War was present from the novel’s inception. In Mexico in 1947, Gaddis wrote to his
mother: ‘I have the idea—which as you know I have had for some time—that war comes soon. And *Blague* must be done before that, concerning itself with Armageddon &c [italics original].’ When *Blague* was abandoned and *The Recognitions* begun, his attitude towards the Truman Doctrine darkened: ‘America I have such pity at, such fury at ... Barren ignorance is most horrible when (p.82) it is in power—the picture of the American soldier abroad will never cease to make me shudder. And the prospect of another war, wanting to fight the good fight and not finding it in my country’s side, worst of all’. When Gaddis returned to America, the Cold War intruded in a more direct manner upon his writing. From October 1951 to mid-1952 Gaddis worked for the New York Office of the US State Department’s Office of International Information and Current Affairs, working for the Voice of America radio service and writing articles for the magazine *America Illustrated*, which appeared in Russian and Farsi. One article, which he later admitted was a piece of ‘propaganda’, praised a 1951 stage adaptation of Melville’s *Billy Budd*. For the adaptors of the play, Melville’s story of ‘good, evil, and the way the world takes such absolutes was material enough for two veterans of a war, a depression, and the moving cold front ... This is a morality play and we do not apologize for its being such’. Gaddis was not the only propagandist turning to Melville at the start of the Cold War. William V. Spanos has argued that the rediscovery of Melville inaugurated by F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941) saw ‘the harnessing of *Moby-Dick* as such to the global Cold War scenario, the scenario that privileged Ishmaelite America as the symbolic agent of the “free-world” in its self-ordained effort to resist Ahabian communist aggression’. Geraldine Murphy has written that for the ‘anti-Stalinist modernists’ associated with *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* in the late 1940s and early 1950s, ‘*Billy Budd* became their object lesson in the danger of innocence’. In Lionel Trilling’s novel *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), differing interpretations of *Billy Budd* expose, as Trilling claimed in 1975, ‘the clandestine negation of the political life which Stalinist Communism had fostered among the intellectuals of the West’. Gaddis also participated in this reinterpretation of Melville, but his recognition that this was Government-sponsored ‘propaganda’ shows a more sceptical and self-aware grasp of the ways in which historical events were determining the act of literary interpretation.
The composition of *The Recognitions* became subject to the power of Cold War paranoia to determine the interpretation of texts. In 1952, due to repeated suspicions that it harboured Communist sympathizers, the *New York Voice of America* office was investigated by the FBI. Gaddis was interviewed by FBI agents, and the Bureau maintained a file on him until the end of the 1980s. The declassified file, obtained by Gaddis for his archive, reveals the extent of his experience of Cold War domestic surveillance. After Gaddis started working for the Voice of America in August 1951, J. Edgar Hoover personally authorized an investigation and interview of Gaddis as part of the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation into the law that established ‘information’ programmes like Voice of America, Public Law 402. Gaddis blamed the ‘*Voice of America* business’ on Joseph McCarthy ‘and the way things can be twisted’. Anxiety about the twisting of meaning was how the Cold War impacted his writing, as shown by a letter to his mother whose self-conscious enactment of interpretative paranoia justifies a lengthy quotation:

> As taking things out of their original context (as, as far as this goes, and, as far as, like an idiot, I told the State Dept ‘Special Investigator’ cops could quite easily be done with my work to support their side (I mean this work I’m now on, the Dale Carnegie business for instance; not what I wrote for the State last winter)) is a common and obviously effective ‘trick’, and that’s what propaganda is, you know. I mean falsifying to the extent of not telling the whole story (the way women lie). What advertising is, and that’s what’s risible at this point, that we’re being eaten out from the inside by advertising like no other nation in history (‘selling’) and from the outside by this bullying voice on the radio now.
Good God, maybe Martin Dworkin’s a top-Communist, maybe Bill Haygood is, (this I suppose should be burned, you know how I mean it but those lines ‘out of context’:—
Now Mr Gaddis, you do respect your Mother?/Yes sir./
And I would assume that you usually tell her the truth about things which concern you and your affairs?/ Yes sir./ Is it true that you wrote her a personal letter dated 19 February 1953, in which you mentioned the possibility of two men whom you knew and worked with in the State Department being ‘top-Communists’?/Yes sir, but I … /And did you use it in reference to these two men who had been your close associates? But I …

But I …

But I … 67
Aside from some crude misogyny, this letter enacts the same uncertainty about meaning and context as that shown by the treatment of Max’s ‘canvas’. The trick of the FBI’s ‘Special Investigator’ cops is to recontextualize statements in order to produce the meanings they require, and as Gaddis admits, this could quite easily be done with sections of *The Recognitions* he was writing at the time. However, these sections about the ‘Carnegie business’ themselves involve lines taken ‘out of context’ from Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), quoted as they are read by Mr Pivner, a character lying somewhere between the sociological signposts of David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956). In the context of a scene describing Pivner’s lonely apartment and failed dreams, the meaning of such lines is viciously ironized: ‘Let me repeat: the principles taught in this book will work only when they come from the heart. I am not advocating a bag of tricks. I am talking about a new way of life’ (498).

Even more recursively, Carnegie’s writing technique also involves recontextualizing material: ‘The carefully selected quotations were impressive, and from as many sources as the success stories’ (499). Across the spheres of law, art, the market, and literature, the Cold War here names not only a historical period, but an interpretative practice where it becomes almost impossible to ‘mean out of context’. This effect of the Cold War as a totalizing context has been aptly described by Donald E. Pease as coming from its ability to be ‘*the explanation* [italics original]’, to appear ‘persuasive without having undergone the work of persuasion’.

In *The Recognitions*, the ‘Cold War’ simply is this contextual determination of meaning.
Pivner’s failure to even suspect that he is being fed lines lifted out of context—his failure to be the kind of Cold War paranoiac that would become a fixture of the postwar American novel—is the reason for his susceptibility to nationalist propaganda; as the narrative voice observes, to question Carnegie’s writing would be to question ‘that conspiracy of self-preservation known as patriotism’ (501). It would also be to question that conspiracy known as capitalism, with Pivner being an equally trusting reader of the advertisements of Rootsicoola soda and Necrostyle medication. Pivner also ‘automatically’ reads advertisements for guides to art forgeries: the ‘Paint It Yourself Collection’ (563) and ‘THE GHOST ARTISTS … We Paint It You Sign It Why Not Give an Exhibition?’ (741). If Pivner’s character shows a life where all forms of self-expression and creativity have been colonized by consumer capitalism, the fact that forgery is part of this colonization means that Wyatt’s forgeries, conceived as a form of resistance to a corrupt modern art world, are also subsumed into the logic of consumerism. Wyatt is less different from Pivner than he thinks: while his problem might not be a lack of paranoia, his attempted return to artistic values of the past as a form of critique of his present fails due to his wholly ahistorical view of art. Wyatt’s art is tainted by the suspicion of forgery from his very first drawing: to draw a robin usurps the role of the Protestant God, ‘the only true creator’ (34). Valentine’s Faustian seduction of Wyatt succeeds because of Wyatt’s faith in the ability of his forgeries to be perfect reproductions, in the ability of a mimesis of a mimesis to transcend history, and the impossibly polarized field of Cold War artistic production represented by Max’s canvas.
In contrast, Valentine’s historical sense undermines Wyatt’s theory of forgery: ‘Most forgeries last only a few generations, because they’re so carefully done in the taste of the period, a forged Rembrandt, for instance, confirms everything that that period sees in Rembrandt’ (230). Valentine is clear on the difference between an original and a fake. ‘Forgery is calumny’, he accuses Wyatt, ‘[e]very piece you do is calumny on the artist you forge’ (250). The ellipses in Wyatt’s response signify what he cannot call his ‘work’: ‘No it’s … the recognitions go much deeper, much further back, and I … this … the X-ray tests, and ultraviolet and infra-red, the experts with their photomicrography and … macrophotography, do you think that’s all there is to it?’ His work attempts to ‘look with memories that … go beyond themselves, that go back to … where mine goes’ (250). Wyatt opposes his forgeries to the copies produced by technological reproduction: ‘This … these reproductions … they have no right to try to spread one painting out like this, these cheap fakes is what they are, being scattered everywhere’ (250). Ironically, however, Wyatt uses these very reproductions to produce his own painted forgeries. Shortly after Wyatt’s debate with Valentine, we see in his studio that ‘[l]ittered about the room were details of paintings, magnified reproductions of details from Bouts, van der Weyden, van der Goes; and some photographs of such high magnification that few experts could have told whose work they represented, details of brush work’ (271). Right to the end, Wyatt sees the test of his forgeries as deceiving ‘X-ray pictures’, ‘a Leitz mirror condenser’ and ‘a micro extraction apparatus’, not realizing these are the technologies which provide his knowledge of what pigments and oils he should use (874). Among the many ironic misrecognitions that lead to Wyatt’s failure first as a modern artist and then as a forger is his inability to recognize his dependence on the technological reproductions he claims are destroying art. Valentine’s debate with Wyatt reveals an important distinction: a historicist approach to art enables Valentine to tell the difference between an original and a fake. It takes the wilfully inauthentic figure of Valentine to suggest that the crises of inauthenticity suffered by characters throughout the novel stem from a flawed conception of artistic creation as pure originality, one which ignores the historicity of concepts such as originality and authenticity themselves.
Paradoxically, Wyatt’s belief that forgery can return him to the aesthetic values of the past involves ignoring history, encapsulated in the novel by technological change, his fate underlining Oppenheimer’s belief that ‘[t]o assail the changes that have unmoored us from the past is futile, and in a deep sense, it is wicked’. Wyatt’s seemingly antiquarian forgeries engage with a wider question of aesthetic modernity: what is the status of painting after the invention of the technical reproduction of images? And if Wyatt is an allegory of writer: what is the status of fiction’s claim to reproduce reality in the postwar explosion of technical images that permeates The Recognitions? If Wyatt has no sense of how technology and Cold War politics have transformed the meaning of aesthetic values like autonomy, originality, and authenticity, another character does: Benny’s friend who has ‘written a whole history of the player piano. A whole history. It took me two years, its got everything in it’ (579). This is Gaddis in disguise, the project an early version of that which still obsessed the narrator of Agapē Agape: the history of the player piano as an investigation into ‘the place of art and the artist in technological democracy’. Gaddis told Katherine Anne Porter in 1948 that he had begun work on the player piano project at the same time as The Recognitions, suggesting there was a close kinship between these two projects, and that the novel was exploring in the realm of visual art what the uncompleted history of the player piano was exploring in relation to music, a history which outlined the ways in which the Cold War as a phase in technological democracy impacted on artistic production.69
In the notes Gaddis compiled for the history of the player piano while writing *The Recognitions*, the player piano’s rise and fall is an allegory of art’s transition from the industrial to the digital age. In a summary written when *The Recognitions* was completed, the player piano is credited with introducing ‘(1) punched-roll programming of “information”, which is the basis of modern automation communications and control systems, and (2) the possibility of “creative participation” in artistic endeavor’. But the real secret history of the player piano is that it represents a wider onset of the ‘application of systems designed to accomplish tangible and predetermined ends, to such intangible goals as those of the arts, which are determined only in their accomplishment’. From the retrospective view of the 1950s, ‘mechanization itself was not that era’s real contribution to our modern technology, but rather the related but more pervasive principle of organization and programming manifest today in the anxious concern with patterns in automation and cybernetics, mathematics and physics, sociology, game theory, and, finally, genetics’. With this thesis of the goal (p.87) of modernity as the management of risk, and the distinctive Cold War disciplines of game theory and cybernetics the tools of that management, Gaddis anticipates the influential theories of postindustrial society developed by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Niklas Luhmann, themselves products of a shift of focus in theorizations of modernity away from mechanization to the production and management of information. Unlike these sociologists, however, Gaddis’s interest in the history of the player piano lies in what happens when the drive towards the management of risk is applied to ‘the areas of the arts where truth and error are interdependent possibilities in the search for unpredetermined perfection’. Instead of a sociological dissertation, Gaddis declares that ‘only satire can project the pathos of a society at the peak of its development seeking … to demonstrate that the illusion of intimacy and proficiency is but the first step toward alienation’.72
The Recognitions was that satire, and an early extract from the player piano project published in 1951 as ‘Stop Player: Joke No. 4’ illustrates the ideas developed in fiction, rather than in a historical survey. ‘Roused by the steam whistle, democracy’s claims devoured technology’s promise, banishing failure to inherent vice where in painting it remains today’.\(^{73}\) Painting becomes the art form which can register most fully the effects of technological modernity precisely because it has become an obsolete ‘failure’: inherently imperfect, risk cannot be eliminated from even the most mechanical of painting techniques—such as Wyatt’s forgeries. Gaddis’s interest in painting’s failure is a socio-historical version of Beckett’s aesthetic valorization of Bram van Velde’s art of failure: for both writers, the belief of painting’s pending obsolescence makes it a model for their fiction. Gaddis’s research notes on the player piano project are clear on this relationship between painting and The Recognitions, and on the Cold War as the historical context changing the status of a foundational trope of visual modernism, predictions of painting’s obsolescence going back to Baudelaire and Manet. Anticipating the kind of comparison made by Herbert Marcuse in One Dimensional Man (1964), his notes saw the ‘[c]oalescence of US/USSR in Soviet NAM’s dialectical materialism; total organization (technology and collective society)’. Cold War rhetoric only disguised the similarities between the US and the USSR. Both societies were engaged in the ‘obliteration of arts’ through ‘[b]oredom and entertainment; USSR theory to practice; US practice to theory’. Both societies were intent on the (p.88) ‘[e]limination of the artist—and forgery /// Elimination of failure’, adding: ‘(then what of painting?)’. The dialectical approach of Agapē Agape is muted yet discernible in these notes: ‘Art the parent of technology; ie boredom parent of entertainment (Schopenhauer)’, both aimed at ‘[r]uling out failure’. In conclusion he noted ‘mention THE RECOGNITIONS’.\(^{74}\) In this sketch for a history of the relationship between art and technology that defined the Cold War as an era where the substitution of artistic risk with technological reproduction was part of a broader strategy of social control, Gaddis planned to present The Recognitions as a depiction of that era. The novel’s exploration of the failure of painting is a means to show exactly what is working to eliminate artistic risk.
Wyatt, however, lacks the historical perspective of Benny’s friend, author of this history of the piano player: he fails to recognize his own striving for a perfect reproduction of images from the past, and his desire to return to a pre-modern regime of artistic production involves his own attempt at eliminating the risk of failure that for Gaddis is a form of resistance against Cold War rationalization. When told by Ellery the advertising executive that his forgery skills would be perfect for his new campaign for *Mother of God* pain relief, Wyatt’s inability to admit the similarities between his work and that of the production of advertising images is shown by his sudden disappearance from the narrative. Ellery and the television producer are ushering in ‘The Age of Publicity’, whose psychoanalytic strategy is ‘sublimation, see? This is the whoring of the arts and we’re the pimps, see?’ (736). The recurring advertisements for *Necrostyle* products reveal the goal of postwar capitalism as the control of sexual and biological risk: ‘*Necrostyle*, in the vanguard of modern civilized living … *Necrostyle*, the wafer-shaped sleeping pill, no chewing no aftertaste. *Zap*, the wonder-wakener. *Cuff*, its on the cuff. And *Pubies*, the newest … [italics original]’ (737–8). Advertising and television have become the new avant-garde, where 1949’s biggest television hit is a live feed of a suicide attempt. Wyatt is not set up as a noble failure in the novel, a counterpart to the duplicity of Max. Rather, the significance of Wyatt’s plot is to show that his failure to recognize his dependency upon technologically reproduced images and his denial of the historicity of art leave him using the same strategies of forgery as Dale Carnegie and *Necrostyle*’s ad men.
If the Cold War as an interpretative regime and phase in the history of technology is aimed at the elimination of painting, what then of writing? Basil Valentine is already planning to use the story of Wyatt’s forgeries for a ‘novel’ he plans to write (252), and he provides information to a ‘Willie’, (p.89) via a friend, about the Clementine Recognitions for a ‘novel’ Willie is writing. The last time ‘Willie’ appears, he is working for Ellery’s television production company as a script writer. Willie the novelist participates in those systems of forgery that Wyatt resists. By including a character in the novel who is in the process of turning the events of the novel into something that sounds an awful lot like that novel, The Recognitions self-reflexively draws attention to its own fictionality, its status as a different kind of object from the paintings it discusses even while taking them as models for the predicament of the novel in Cold War modernity. The ability for a novel to acknowledge and thematize its own fictionality and process of composition is presented as what paintings as art objects lack—at least these paintings. However, it is carefully never made certain whether Willie is actually the author of The Recognitions, the novel hovering on the border of the kind of explicit metafictional self-reference caused by including the author of a fiction in that fiction present in the work of John Barth, for example. Instead, The Recognitions points to its own fictionality with a different literary technique, one proclaimed with much less subtlety than the fleeting appearances of Willie: the technique of the recognition scene.

The Recognition of Fiction
In building up a portrait of a world where it has become impossible to distinguish an original from a fake, to establish either aesthetic autonomy or context-dependency, *The Recognitions* weaves together numerous plots structured around failed moments of recognition. Wyatt’s failure to recognize the implications of his dependency upon photographic images; Otto’s failure to recognize his play’s plagiarism of Faulkner; Sinisterra’s failure to recognize Otto when handing over forged money; Revered Gwyn’s failure to recognize that his Christian faith copies pre-Christian rituals: the list of plots climaxing in characters falling ever further into confusion could be extended as long as this very long novel itself. The form of the novel’s plotting serves to limit the knowledge of its characters at the moment it expands that of its reader; or rather, of what Wolfgang Iser called the ‘implied reader’ of a fictional text, implied because of the fact that plot patterns are structured to facilitate hermeneutic discovery of meaning. *The Recognitions* ironizes the literary technique of recognition, or *anagnorisis*, by contrasting its function for a character and a reader, and historicizes its formal innovations in relation to a modernist poetics of recognition and in relation to a longer history of modernity as the increasing subjectivization of knowledge. By making the function of a failed recognition scene the revelation not of knowledge shared by protagonist (p.90) and reader, but of the difference between the knowledge available to fictional characters and their readers, *The Recognitions* marks the difference between what Tanner identified as the patterning of fictionality and the possibility of recognizing some non-fictional reality, the form of the novel making possible the very distinction absent for the characters in the novel.
The Recognitions’ ability to ironize literary recognition stems from what Terence Cave has argued is an ambiguity identified as early as Aristotle’s discussion of anagnorisis in his Poetics. As Cave has written, the recognition scene is a necessary element of plot, a topic largely neglected in academic narratology up until the work of Peter Brooks and Paul Ricoeur, tainted by its association with popular genres such as melodrama or romance. Recognition is a structural feature of a plot that ‘brings about a shift from ignorance to knowledge; it is the moment when characters understand their predicament for the first time, the moment that resolves a sequence of unexplained and often impossible occurrences; it makes the world (and the text) intelligible’. The recognition scene becomes in narrative theory and literary practice ‘a focus for reflections on the way fictions as such are constituted, the way in which they play with and on the reader, their distinctive marks as fictions—untruth, disguise, trickery, “suspense” or deferment, the creation of effects of shock and amazement, and so on’. However, because of its ‘double character’ as both a ‘formal device and vehicle of themes of knowledge’, the recognition scene risks blurring the difference between fiction and reality by implying that the conditions for understanding a text and the world are one and the same. Rather than clarifying the difference between a novel and reality, a novel which comments upon how reality is like a novel can often serve to elide the difference between the two, as examples from Austen’s Northanger Abbey (1817) to James’s The Ambassadors (1903) make it their point to show.
As Gaddis’s own study of the ‘shock of recognition’ in the fiction of Mansfield and Conrad indicates, the poetics of recognition underwent a gradual transformation culminating in the modernist period. According to Cave, plot events increasingly take place in a character’s psyche, a shift epitomized in Freud’s rewriting of the Oedipus plot as a psychoanalytical drama. At the same time, plots of ‘imperfect recognition’ became more prominent in novels by James, Proust, or Faulkner, where ‘imperfect recognitions are usually a direct function of a character’s limited point of view, so that novels which experiment with such limitations may well lead (p.91) towards moments of incomplete, uncertain or illusory knowledge or present more than one angle from which a given set of relations or state of affairs may be seen’. The imperfect recognition plot is closely bound up with multiple perspectives in narrative focalization. At ‘the extreme limit of this class (and indeed of the possibility of anagnorisis itself) there appears—again in modern narrative and drama—the instance in which an expected recognition wholly fails to materialize: Waiting for Godot.’

In this history of narrative form, The Recognitions historicizes itself at this point of atrophy of the modernist narrative of imperfect recognitions and multiple perspectives, a historical positioning achieved by the inclusion of numerous readers of modernist fiction in the novel. This is further underlined by the parodies of the modernist styles the characters read. Dialogue is reported without a speaker, as in Faulkner; narrative is focalized around characters like Esther, as in James; Wyatt’s descent into madness is an exhausting exhaustion of the Joycean interior monologue. The modernist notion of a unique style as the signature of an individual artist is incorporated within and satirized by the novel’s economy of forgery. The novel pushes the multiplication of narrative points of view to the point of parody, with almost every major event related from contrasting and often irreconcilable points of view—Max’s canvas/painting being but one case in point.
What ‘Aristotle says’ about plot is mentioned in the novel by the composer Stanley, when he complains about the ‘modern disease’ of conceiving time not as a ‘continuum’, but in ‘fragments’: ‘every fragment consists of itself, and that’s why we live among palimpsests, because finally all the work should fit into one whole, and express an entire perfect action, as Aristotle says’ (615–16). This is one of the novel’s many allusions to T. S. Eliot and his belief that poetry could shore fragments against ruins, but Stanley’s music, which ends by destroying a church, shows how an aesthetics of fragmentation has been outpaced by the reality of the ‘breakage’ caused, as a voice explains, by ‘atom bombs’ (616). Stanley here alludes to Aristotle’s discussion in the Poetics of ‘well-constructed plots ... [which] should make use of the patterns stated’—those of ‘reversals and recognitions’. ‘A plot is not unified, as some think’, Aristotle states, ‘if built around an individual’. Instead, just as ‘in the other mimetic arts’—exemplified by painting—a unitary mimesis has a unitary object, so too the plot, since it is mimesis of an action, should be of a unitary and indeed whole action’, otherwise ‘the sense of the whole is disturbed and dislocated’. The Recognitions begins by setting up the expectation that it will be unified around Wyatt as the novel’s hero, or anti-hero, only to have him disappear from the action and return under a different name, Stephen, in Spain. Instead, as its title suggests, and as Stanley’s allusion to Aristotle self-reflexively explains, the object of the novel—what it represents—is not the fate of an individual character, but a complex pattern of plots and failed recognitions, making the content of the novel’s form the possibility and potential of literary recognition in the postwar era. In terms of the neo-Aristotelian typology that R. S. Crane developed at the same time Gaddis was writing The Recognitions, his novel enacts a shift from a modernist ‘plot of thought’ to a postwar ‘plot of action’. What Pynchon’s Oedipa Mass calls ‘a plot, an elaborate, seduction, plot [italics original]’ becomes in the work of writers like Pynchon, DeLillo, and Foster Wallace one of the prime devices for representing the complex systems structuring the relationship of the individual to society.
Gaddis’s own sense of how constructing a novel around patterns of plot and conflicting perspectives rather than the fate of an individual acted as an index of historical change can be shown by his reading of an essay entitled ‘The Hero in Crisis’ by the Italian novelist Corrado Alvaro, which appeared alongside Gaddis’s short story ‘Les Chemin des Anes’ in the 1952 anthology *New World Writing*. For Alvaro, the central issue in debates on the state of the novel ‘is nearly always the hero of the novel, that is, the protagonist of our time. But does our time have a protagonist, a hero?’ Gaddis noted a number of passages of Alvaro’s essay that bear upon his own novel. First, his argument that the European novel from *Madame Bovary* (1856) to *Lord Jim* (1900) is structured around the protagonist’s ‘struggle against a limitation, a law which cannot be broken without impunity’, governing the society in which they live. But in the upheavals of the postwar era, all ‘the old certainties … have now become open to doubt … fiction today no longer has a hero along the lines of the adventurous Ulysses’. This, as Gaddis noted, ‘is all the stranger because, though the hero is gone, true protagonists are not lacking in our daily life. But they are occult, their name is a collective name, that of great undertakings, great companies, great political formations, great states, great ideologies’. The cumulative effect is one of ‘depersonalization’ that the novel must find a new way to address. Around the same time, as Sianne Ngai has observed, Theodor W. Adorno’s 1953 analysis of the occult explanations offered for behaviour in the astrology column of the *Los Angeles Times* suggested that there might be something ‘increasingly funny about character as an aesthetic form’. For Adorno, the popularity of explaining behaviour by the movement of the stars showed an awareness that individual agency had been compromised, coupled with an inability to represent the collective formations doing so. Wyatt’s initial appearance as what seems to be the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*, and his decision to renounce painting in favour of copying art from the past, only to have what he imagines is a form of resistance subsumed and controlled by Valentine’s elaborate network for the production of forgeries, charts the novel’s turn towards the systems governing artistic production, just as the ambiguity over the status of Max’s ‘canvas’ turns attention to the contexts in which artistic creation as an act of choice is possible.
Wyatt’s forgeries and the commentary they engender serve to historicize within a larger frame the novel’s attempt to use the formal technique of complex plots and multiple perspectives to depict the relationship of the individual to social systems. Wyatt only forges paintings from a specific moment in art history: Flemish works from the fifteenth century by artists such as Bouts, Memling, van der Goes, and Hubert van Eyck. He is well aware of their art historical significance:

the art historians and the critics talking about every object and ... everything having its own form and density ... Do you know why everything does? Because they found God everywhere. There was nothing God did not watch over ... There isn’t any single perspective, like the camera eye, the one we all look through now and call it realism, there ... I take five or six or ten ... the Flemish painter took twenty perspectives if he wished, and even in a small painting you can’t include it all in your single vision, your one miserable pair of eyes, like you can a photograph, like you can painting when it ... when it degenerates, and becomes conscious of being looked at (251).
Max—the modernist painter Wyatt failed to be—echoes Wyatt’s opinion of the ‘great sense of lucency and multiple perspectives about these early Flemish’, and Otto concurs: ‘The separate multiple consciousness of the ... things in these Flemish primitives, that is really the force and the flaw in these paintings’ (460). Valentine, characteristically, underlines the flaw rather than the force in this visual mode when stripping Wyatt of any illusions about the nobility of his forgeries, his ‘insane upside-down apology for these pictures, every figure and every object with its own presence ... Do you know what it was? ... Fear, fear, pessimism and fear and depression everywhere, the way it is today, that’s why your pictures are so cluttered with detail, this terror of emptiness, this absolute terror of space. Because maybe God isn’t watching. Maybe he doesn’t see’ (690). In these appropriately conflicting perspectives, the object of Wyatt’s forgeries is a world where the limitations of individual subjectivity can be either the sign of God’s presence or absence. Like Beckett, Gaddis figures the beginning of modernity in terms of the birth of a mode of visual representation, but (p.94) whereas for Beckett single-point perspective historicized the rise and fall of the humanist subject, for Gaddis, modernity begins with the relativizing of each individual’s subjective perspective, with only a Christian God in which no one believes—and which the novel exposes as a forgery—able to guarantee objective knowledge. The culmination of the subjectivism is seen in the only modernist painting admired by Wyatt, Picasso’s Night Fishing in Antibes (1939), which prompts in him ‘one of those moments of reality, of near-recognition of reality ... When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see, you never see it’ (91–2). The parallel between Wyatt’s forging of paintings with multiple perspectives and the novel’s own technique of multiple perspectives prompts the question: is the novel an equally pessimistic tangle of multiple perspectives which fail to cohere, or can the novel provide the recognition of reality that visual art cannot?

The periodic appearance of ‘Willie’ the novelist, working on a novel about forgery and recognition for a ‘very small audience’, takes The Recognitions close, but not ultimately up to, a metafictional strategy of subsequent writers such as John Barth and Kurt Vonnegut, wherein the inclusion of the author as a character in a novel reveals the world a novel represents
to be a second-order representation, as for example in Barth’s ‘Life-Story’. According to Barth, there is no difference between novels which ‘imitate actions more or less directly’—the Aristotelian definition of mimesis The Recognitions plays with—and novels ‘which attempt to represent not life directly but a representation of life’. Such works are not removed from life, since novels as texts are like documents, and as such part of life, therefore ‘the subject of both, ultimately, is life’. But if a representation of life is the same as life itself, then the distinction between fiction and reality disappears—and what is at stake here is not the historically changing definitions of concepts like ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’, but the possibility of their distinction. The disappearance of this difference into an economy of forgery is the theme of The Recognitions, and it would blunt the force of the novel’s satire to claim any of its characters have a convincing rejoinder to Barth. However, by consistently ironizing moments of recognition, so that each time a failed recognition takes place the distance and difference between character and reader is emphasized, the novel’s formal marks of fictionality serve to underline the difference between fiction and reality, the very difference unavailable to the characters in the novel. Fictional form, rather than any systems of belief or aesthetic theories such as modernism, produces a position outside the patterns governing life in Cold War commodity capitalism. Taking up the language of systems theory, Martin Lüdke has argued that Gaddis’s oeuvre as a whole can be seen as a move from ‘description to second-order description’, or from the representation of social life to the representation of the social systems of art, economics, religion, and law in which social life takes place. However, this project should be distinguished from postmodern metafiction because even in the ‘confusion that his novels depict, which convey, conceptually speaking, that blindness and insight are on one side of a distinction the other side of which we cannot know’, the possibility of a position outside the system ‘at least still sounds for Gaddis, if softly, in the background’. To doubt the possibility of recognizing the difference between fiction from reality whilst providing a form in which that recognition can take place is very different from denying that possibility altogether.
What Gaddis’s subsequent work does doubt is that visual art offers a model of a position outside economic and legal institutions from which a critique of those institutions could be effected. Willie’s final career as a television script writer saw Gaddis anticipating his own future: after *The Recognitions* was published, Gaddis took up a job as a writer of television plays. One play, although rejected, stands as an apt coda to *The Recognitions*. The action takes place in the engine room of a freighter ship, where a failing painter called Michael spends his time idly pulling out handfuls of waste from a pile of trash. Michael discovers a priceless and stolen Old Master that a crew member has hidden in the trash, and the play ends with Michael choosing to take the painting ashore and risk a jail sentence, ending his own career, rather than let the painting be sold on the black market. But Michael doesn’t care: ‘I used to study painting, I used to think it was the most important thing in the world, I used to think I’d give up anything I had if ... but now its all ... like this, like this waste, these threads, all these different colours, tangled up, knotted, twisted (his hand closes slowly on the waste) with no pattern and no point at all ...’ In this description of a Pollock-like work, which has no point because it cannot represent the ‘pattern[s]’ governing postwar society, art is wholly ruled by the pattern of the market wherein it can either remain sealed in a museum, or will eventually become just another piece of waste. In *JR*, abstract painting is just a valuable tax dodge, and in *A Frolic of His Own*, the site-specific modernist art object is a by-product of a corrupt legal systems conception of property rights.
JR also marks a distinct shift to the left in a literary politics that in *The Recognitions*, as if always in imitation of T. S. Eliot, hovered on the line between avant-garde provocation and arrière-garde reaction. In a rare interview in 1997 Gaddis admitted to being ‘politically so far to the left, so very much against wealth and the present Republican Congress and against the system … not against the capitalist system, but against its abuse and this abuse is what my satire generally represents’.

Marx’s Communist slogan of ‘from each according to his ability’ is the motto of JR’s school—not that any character notices. The novel continues an exploration of modes of failure first represented in *The Recognitions* by the failure of painting to find a position outside of the institutions of economic forgery. Nicky Marsh has written that in JR, ‘Gaddis poses failure as a formal and thematic alternative to the tautological success story that neoliberalism has promulgated for so long’. If the absence of painting in the novel implies it has become redundant for a novelistic project informed by a critique of neoliberal capitalism, its role as the original ‘failure’ in Gaddis’s aesthetics underlines its importance in his work as a whole. Belief in the failure of painting was widespread among visual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, with the critique of its commodity status a recurring justification for conceptual art’s ‘dematerialization of the art object’.

Among postwar novelists, a melancholic attitude towards the ebbing of the critical potential of painting would be shared by a writer at some distance from Gaddis: John Berger. But if Gaddis’s fiction marks a passage away from the work of art in postwar fiction, Berger’s novels represent a different trajectory, one which moves backwards to Cubism to escape from the polarizing effects of the Cold War, in order to move forward to develop the possibilities of postwar fiction in Britain.

Notes:


(5) Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 3.


(10) William Gaddis, ‘Reading Notes’, 85, MSS049 32/206, Olin Library, Washington University, St Louis


(25) William Gaddis, ‘Record Notebook on The Recognitions’, 1948, 35–9, MSS049 54/248, William Gaddis Collection, Olin Library, Washington University, St Louis


(33) Jack Kerouac, ‘Are Writers Made or Born?’, in *Good Blonde & Others*, ed. by Donald Allen (San Francisco, CA, 1993), 77


(44) Rosalind E. Krauss, ‘Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop’, in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture: Number 1*, ed. by Hal Foster (Seattle, WA, 1987), 59


(49) Martha Buskirk and Clara Weyergraf-Serra, eds., *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents* (Cambridge, MA; London, 1991)


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(56) J. Robert Oppenheimer, The Open Mind (New York, 1955), 135; 141

(57) 18 September 1978, Gaddis, Letters, 338.


(59) 29 January 1948, Letters, 87.

(60) [April–May?] 1954, Letters, 215.


(62) William V. Spanos, The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies (Durham, NC; London, 1995), 33

(63) Geraldine Murphy, ‘The Politics of Reading Billy Budd’, American Literary History, 1/2 (1989), 377

(64) Lionel Trilling, The Middle of the Journey (Oxford, 1981), xx–xi


(68) Donald E. Pease, ‘Moby Dick and the Cold War’, in The American Renaissance Reconsidered, ed. by Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease (Baltimore, MD; London, 1985), 113–14

(70) *The Rush for Second Place*, 142; 143.


(72) Gaddis, *The Rush for Second Place*, 144; 143.


(74) William Gaddis, ‘“PP Out” (1950s); Notes on “Player”’, MSS049 119/419, Olin Library, Washington University, St Louis.


(76) Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford, 1988), 1; 46


(83) John Barth, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’, in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (Baltimore, MD; London, 1997), 72


