



## The Recognitions

William Gaddis, William H. Gass (Introduction)

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The book Jonathan Franzen dubbed the "ur-text of postwar fiction" and the "first great cultural critique, which, even if Heller and Pynchon hadn't read it while composing *Catch-22* and *V.*, managed to anticipate the spirit of both"—*The Recognitions* is a masterwork about art and forgery, and the increasingly thin line between the counterfeit and the fake. Gaddis anticipates by almost half a century the crisis of reality that we currently face, where the real and the virtual are combining in alarming ways, and the sources of legitimacy and power are often obscure to us.

## The Recognitions Details

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Author : William Gaddis , William H. Gass (Introduction)

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## **From Reader Review The Recognitions for online ebook**

**Ian "Marvin" Graye says**

### **100 Words in Search of Precision**

The purpose of both Religion and Alchemy is to realise Perfection.

Christianity places an obstacle in the path: Original Sin. We are born with an Inherent Vice. Nobody will give us assurance.

Our need for meaning and happiness is so great that we fall victim to fraud and pretence.

Gaddis suggests we must love and we must be active, in order to be happy.

We need to construct an undivided Self, a Whole, not a Soul.

There is only the Self that Lives, therefore the Life that is Lived, the Life that is Loved, the Life that is Contemplated.

### **Review:**

My Review is here:

<http://www.goodreads.com/story/show/2...>

### **Voyage Out of the Marina (Haiku)**

We are awakened,  
Lips parted, ready to sail  
In hope and new ships.

[Apologies to T.S. Eliot for Hai-jacking his poem "Marina"]

### **Fake You (Haiku)**

Are you real or fake?  
How would I recognise you  
If I saw your face?

### **Inherent Vice (Haiku)**

I remember you  
As the Inherent Vice Guy,

Voiceing great AdVice.

### **Recognition (Haiku)**

I crave for you the  
Recognition you deserve,  
Even though you're dead.

### **Reading Progress:**

The quotations in my Reading Progress are parts of the text that stood out in my quest for significance and meaning in the novel.

### **A Few of My Favourite Things**

At the link below are some passages fashioned out of indigo that appealed to me for their economy, simplicity and/or beauty:

<http://www.goodreads.com/story/show/2...>

### **A Glossary of Abstractions**

As I made my progress through the novel, I decided to make a Glossary of Key Words, almost all of which were Abstractions.

You can find the first section here:

<http://www.goodreads.com/story/show/2...>

It's quite intuitive and incomplete.

I did it before I got a pdf copy of the novel that I could search.

One day, when I have the time, I'll have a crack at the 81 references to "recognition".

### **Annotations:**

There is an invaluable reading and thinking resource here:

<http://www.williamgaddis.org/recognit...>

### **My Reading Experience:**

I've written about my experience of reading the novel here:

<http://www.goodreads.com/story/show/2...>

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### **Christopher says**

No, I cannot review this. Yes, it took some work. No, your library doesn't have it. Yes, you should read it. Have I answered all your questions? This book has impacted me in ways which I've only provisionally understood.

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### **Paul Bryant says**

I found a great article on

#### LITERARY STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

by Mark O'Connell which uses *The Recognitions* as its main example - here is the bit I liked, but the whole article is worth a read (<http://www.themillions.com/2011/05/th...>)

*the greatness of a novel in the mind of its readers is often alloyed with those readers' sense of their own greatness (as readers) for having conquered it. I don't think William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, for instance, is nearly as fantastic a novel as people often claim it is. But it is one of the most memorable and monumental experiences of my reading life. And these are the reasons why: because the thing was just so long; because I had such a hard time with it; and because I eventually finished it. (I read it as part of an academic reading group devoted to long and difficult American novels, and I'm not sure I would have got to the end of it otherwise). Reading a novel of punishing difficulty and length is a version of climbing Everest for people who prefer not to leave the house. And people who climb Everest don't howl with exhilaration at the summit because the mountain was a good or a well made or an interesting mountain *per se*, but because they're overawed at themselves for having done such a fantastically difficult thing. (I'm willing to concede that they may not howl with exhilaration at all, what with the tiredness, the lack of oxygen and very possibly the frostbite. I'll admit to being on shaky ground here, as I've never met anyone who's climbed Everest, nor am I likely to if I continue not going out of the house.)*

*And there is, connected with this phenomenon, what I think of as Long Novel Stockholm syndrome. My own first experience of it—or at least my first conscious experience of it—was, again, with *The Recognitions*. With any novel of that difficulty and length (976 pages in my prestigiously scuffed and battered Penguin edition), the reader's aggregate experience is bound to be composed of a mixture of frustrations and pleasures. But what I found with Gaddis's gigantic exploration of fraudulence and creativity was that, though they were greatly outnumbered by the frustrations, the pleasures seemed to register much more firmly. If I were fully honest with myself, I would have had to admit that I was finding the novel grueling, unsparingly tedious. But I wasn't prepared to be fully honest with myself. Because every couple of hundred pages or so, Gaddis would take pity on me and throw me a bone in the form of an engaging, genuinely compelling set piece. Like the wonderful episode in which one of the characters, under the impression that he is being given a gift of \$5,000 by his long-lost father whom he has arranged to meet at a hotel, is in fact*

*mistakenly being given a suitcase full of counterfeit cash by a failed confidence man. And then Gaddis would roll up his sleeves again and get back to the real business of boring me insensible with endless pages of direct-dialogue bluster about art, theology and the shallowness of post-war American culture.*

*I kept at it, doughtily ploughing my way through this seemingly inexhaustible stuff, holding out for another interlude of clemency from an author I knew was capable of entertaining and provoking me. At some point towards the end of the book it occurred to me that what I was experiencing could be looked at as a kind of literary variant of the Stockholm syndrome phenomenon, whereby hostages experience a perverse devotion to their captors, interpreting any abstention from violence and cruelty, however brief or arbitrary, as acts of kindness and even love. Psychologically, this is understood as a defense mechanism in which the victim fabricates a “good” side of the aggressor in order to avoid confronting the overwhelming terror of his or her situation. Perhaps I’m stretching the bonds of credulity by implicitly comparing William Gaddis to a FARC guerilla commander, but I’m convinced there’s something that happens when we get into a captive situation with a long and difficult book that is roughly analogous to the Stockholm syndrome scenario. For a start, the book’s very length lays out (for a certain kind of reader, at least) its own special form of imperative—part challenge, part command. The thousand-pager is something you measure yourself against, something you psyche yourself up for and tell yourself you’re going to endure and/or conquer. And this does, I think, amount to a kind of captivity: once you’ve got to Everest base camp, you really don’t want to pack up your stuff and turn back. I think it’s this principle that explains, for example, the fact that I’ve read Gravity’s Rainbow but gave up halfway through The Crying of Lot 49, when the latter could be used as a handy little bookmark for the former. When you combine this (admittedly self-imposed) captivity with a novel’s formidable reputation for greatness, you’ve got a perfect set of conditions for the literary Stockholm syndrome to kick in.*

*In order for a very long novel to get away with long, cruel sessions of boredom-torture, it has to commit, every so often, an act of kindness such as the counterfeit cash set piece in The Recognitions. This is why Ulysses is so deeply loved by so many readers—as well it should be—while Finnegans Wake has been read almost exclusively by Joyce scholars (of whom I’m tempted to think as the Patty Hearsts of literature). After the grueling ordeal of the “Scylla and Charybdis” episode, in which Stephen stands around in the National Library for dozens of pages boring everyone to damn-near-literal tears with his theories about the provenance of Hamlet, we are given the unrestrained pleasure of the “Wandering Rocks” episode. Ulysses might treat us like crap for seemingly interminable stretches of time, but it extends just enough in the way of writerly benevolence to keep us onside. And this kindness is the key to Stockholm syndrome. You don’t know when it’s going to come, or what form it’s going to take, but you get enough of it to keep you from despising your captor, or mounting a brave escape attempt by flinging the wretched thing across the room.*

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## **Edward says**

***What I get a kick out of is serious writers who write a book where they say money gives a false significance to art, and then they raise hell when their book doesn’t make any money.***

*- William Gaddis, The Recognitions*

I've never seen a novel by William Gaddis available in any library or bookstore, and the fact that he is not more widely known is something of a crime. You could compare his prose against that of any of the great

writers of the last century without exception, and it would more than hold its own. And a titanic novel like *The Recognitions* demonstrates his talent not only through its wonderful prose, but also in its astounding diversity and scope of ambition.

Take this description of Madrid's Retiro Park, seen through the eyes of Reverend Gwyon, early in the novel:

*In that undawned light the solid granite benches were commensurably sized and wrought to appear as the unburied caskets of children. Behind them the trees stood leafless, waiting for life, but as yet coldly exposed in their differences, waiting formally arranged, like the moment of silence when one enters a party of people abruptly turned, holding their glasses at attention, a party of people all the wrong size. There, balanced upon pedestals, thrusting their own weight against the weight of time never yielded to nor beaten off but absorbed in the chipped vacancies, the weathering, the negligent unbending of white stone, waited figures of the unlaid past.*

What a tremendously vivid description, awash with desolation and melancholy, which yet evokes a sense of the eternal and the mythic. There's something about the syntax, the word choice and the mood created by these kinds of passages are reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's style. But that's not to say that Gaddis writes like McCarthy (or more accurately, vice versa). What is striking is his ability to adopt changing styles; these virtuosic shifts from poetry to realism, to dream-like surrealism; in one moment colloquial, in the next erudite, in a way that is masterful, surprising, and constantly challenges the reader. How about this account of Stanley's frantic sexual desire, suppressed by religious proscriptions, and made manifest:

*Directly he was alone, he was assailed by her simulacra, in all states of acute sorrow, or smiling, of complete abstraction or painful animation, of dress and undress, as he had seen her these last few days: directly he was alone, the images came to mock everything he had seen. Her sadness became shrieking grief, and her animation riotous, immodest in dress and licentious in nakedness, many-limbed as some wild avatar of the Hindu cosmology assaulting the days he spent copying his work on clean scores, and the nights he passed alone in his chair where, instantly the lights went out, everything was transformed, and the body he had seen a moment before with no more surprise than its simple lines and modest unself-conscious movement permitted, rose up on him full-breasted and vaunting the belly, limbs indistinguishable until he was brought down between them and stifled in moist collapse.*

Gaddis has blurred the line between reality and fantasy, and we are never really certain of precisely what is taking place. There is more going on here than is initially apparent to the reader, and this is a constant feature of Gaddis's writing. If you happen to dislike Faulkner for his obfuscatory style, you will find Gaddis infuriating. Each new chapter is an exercise in reasoning and deduction: it is not unusual for main characters in a scene not to be named and for dialogue to be unattributed, with the expectation that the reader should be able to infer the necessary detail from clues in the context, and from the distinct personality and voice that Gaddis has imbued each character. This presupposes that the reader has been paying very close attention, and is able to fill in the gaps without exposition. Much of what occurs in this book, then, occurs between the lines. Take this wonderful description of Mr. Pivner, in a rush:

*Over and under the ground he hurried toward the place where he lived. No fragment of time nor space anywhere was wasted, every instant and every cubic centimeter crowded crushing outward upon the next with the concentrated activity of a continent spending itself upon a rock island, made a world to itself where no present existed. Each minute and each cubic inch was hurled against that which would follow, measured in terms of it, dictating a future as inevitable as the past, coined upon eight million counterfeits who moved with the plumbing weight of lead coated with the frenzied hope of quicksilver, protecting at every pass the cherished falsity of their milled edges against the threat of hardness in their neighbors as they were rung together, fallen from the Hand they feared but could no longer name, upon the pitiless table stretching all about them, tumbling there in all the desperate variety of which counterfeit is capable, from the perfect alloy recast under weight to the thudding heaviness of lead, and the thinly coated brittle terror of glass.*

This is a complex metaphor worthy of Pynchon. It's mostly incomprehensible on initial reading, and the first clue comes several pages later when it is noted that the population of Manhattan is eight million people, and we have confirmation for the first time of the setting for this scene, and upon rereading the above passage can begin to unpack what it might be implying about these eight million inhabitants who spend themselves as counterfeit currency there. The metaphor roots itself in the core themes of the novel: counterfeit, forgery, plagiarism, imitation. *The Recognitions* explores imitation and originality as moral ambiguities within the overall context of art and life. It explores artistic ambition, genius and mediocrity, and the surprising consequences of each. There is Wyatt's genius for imitation, which is accepted as original; Otto's mediocre originality, which is seen as plagiarism (of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, of all things), and there is Stanley's drive to create an original musical piece that encompasses everything: we see the disastrous effects of his ambition, and the paltry products of his success. All lives are revealed to be driven by counterfeit representations, counterfeit desires, counterfeit personalities, deteriorating to the final inevitable condition: the trading of counterfeit identities, and finally, counterfeit human bodies.

*The Recognitions* is dripping with postmodern self-awareness. There are recurring leitmotifs (a tale of an anchor dropped from the celestial sea, the song *Return to Sorrento*), as well as references to real-world books (*The Sound and the Fury*, *Nightwood*), and people (A Big Unshaven Man who may or may not be Ernest Hemingway): Gaddis infuses his novel with an awareness that he himself as an artist and his novel as an artistic work are subject to the same rules and criticisms as those of his characters. There is an acknowledgment that true originality is an impossibility, and that art by necessity must draw from its predecessors in order to be recognisable and accepted. Gaddis realised that comparisons to other writers (Joyce and Faulkner, for example) would be inevitable, and by including these references in the book and writing with such clear self-awareness he both anticipates these criticisms and expands the *The Recognitions* into a kind of metafiction: an exploration of art and the artist in a way that manages to transcend the natural boundaries of the novel form.

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### **Mariel says**

*Is that how he meant it? Before Otto could answer she went on, lowering her eye again, - No, how did he know what he meant. When people tell a truth they do not understand what they mean, they say it by accident, it goes through them and they do not recognize it until someone accuses them of telling the truth, then they try to recover it as their own and it escapes.*

I want to tell what I mean, what my truth is, without fearing what came out is not what I meant, without hoping what came out sounded smarter than what I really meant, without pretending that was what I meant if someone else puts what I said in wider words than my chasm could fit. I can't finish reading my reviews the whole way through to even spell check them. I want to write what I mean and be understood. Is there a way to tell the truth as a bell? I want faces, lives, stories, truths, people being real, other people, places. Touching, not owned, not my life. It is my not alone. I know the world is fake, cold, spent. It doesn't have to be that way. That's what I want. The enough part when I know it doesn't have to be that way. It's not always that way.

*"-This ... these ... the art historians and the critics talking about every objects and ... everything having its own form and density and ... its own character in Flemish paintings, but is that all there is to it? Do you know why everything does? Because they found God everywhere. There was nothing God did not watch over, nothing, and so this ... and so in the painting every detail reflects ... God's concern with the most insignificant objects in life, with everything, because God did not relax for an instant then, and neither could the painter then. Do you get the perspective in this? he demanded, thrusting the rumpled reproduction before them. -There isn't any."*

I want to tell you that I want this. I think about this all of the time. I write about this all of the time. It's my running into my fire even though I'm going to be wrong, it's going to get me no where. I just want stories to be real. Stories are real. They are everywhere. Some people see the perspective in everything and they can tell that truth.

*It was the uncircumscribed, unbearable, infinitely extended, indefinitely divisible void where she swam in orgasm, soaring into a vastness away from the heaving indignity of the posture she shared; the world of music so intensely known that nothing exists but the music; it was the world of ecstasy they all approximated by different paths, one world in which temporary residence is prohibited, as the agonies of recall attest: "Love's dart" that wounds but does not kill; the ill complained of, but prized above every joy and earthly good; "sweet cautery", the "stolen heart," the "ravished understanding," the "rape of love": in Provencal, conoscenza. Thus Saint Teresa, quadrupedis, "dying of not being able to die".*

I'll tell you that I don't believe anyone wants to be a painting, a muse, the rowboat or the book of love/heaven/Santa's list.

*He wants to be Ibsen for just that moment, and dedicate his play to someone who's been kind to him, is that lying? It isn't as bad as people doing work they have no respect for at all. Everybody has that feeling when they look at a work of art and it's right, that sudden familiarity, a sort of... recognition, as though they were creating it themselves, as though it were being created through them while they look at it or listen to it and, it shouldn't be sinful to want to have created beauty?*

This is all I have ever wanted.

*Tell them, as the composer predicted, there's nothing left but knowledge and evidence, and art's become a sort of tailbone surviving in us from that good prehensile tail we held on with then.*

No, people die. There will be another eye, another feeling and God is not dead.

I wanted mirrors. I wanted to see something. When they become real to me and people who are real become

more real to me because it is all together in me of things that happened. I would want to read How to Make Friends and Influence People to make friends too. The burned sun spots on the retinas when your dream is allowed like when Stanley is alone on the ship to see hard and arms and fire. When you are alone with the god dreams art and you are painting it yourself. It's when you dream your life away instead of what really happens like romantic encounters that never actually happened. You want this, you expect this. Maybe they don't really want the world. Maybe people don't actually want to pry into anyone's life. It doesn't have to mean that. I want the enough part that's not suspicion. I guess they say that this is a girl thing to do to analyze encounters to death until they don't resemble what transpired. It's playing a song in your head until you can get home to listen to it on repeat for hours. One way is painfully better and the other is not enough and it is the best you've got. It's making your own life. Maybe it's wrong or maybe it's trying to live on separate planes. One isn't always as hard as the other. I liked reading about the people interactions and seeing the two sides, like different places to live that's not always as hard as the real one. Who am I kidding? I never want to get married.

I love art. I never gave a shit about what anyone expected to happen once they made the art. I'm copying and copying and not living and living for what could be good enough. I want to tell you that is what art is to me. It's a way to not be suspicious. To capture a lost moment, without being suspicious. I want to recognize and make art so that everything can always be like that. I would copy and not even know I was doing it. I'd repeat their faces and try to find everyone. I don't blame anyone.

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

I'm awfully tired of me going on about what I wanted to say, what I couldn't say, what I meant to say. Can someone say it for me so I could sing along? There can be another The Recognitions review. I know about trying to live life and trying to find ways that makes it not so hard.

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### **Vit Babenco says**

“He'd only to smile, to yawn, or frankly raise his upper lip and he could show more gold than any of them could wear, even in their most offensive aspirations to taste: jewels by the pound-weight, rings so heavy that they looked like weapons.”

Reading *The Recognitions* is as looking for one's way in the thickest jungle but it pays manyfold – the novel is like a crock of gold found at the end of the rainbow.

“What greater comfort does time afford, than the objects of terror re-encountered, and their fraudulence exposed in the flash of reason?”

The book is a painstaking investigation of all possible types of falsehood – in history, in art, in love, in religion, in human beings. And it is an authentic tour de force without any hints at dishonesty.

“How real is any of the past, being every moment revalued to make the present possible?”

Those who dwell in the world of fake values are forced to become frauds.

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## Drew says

I started reading this book the same way I assume many others did: after a yearlong staring contest. I'd be wondering, hmm, what should I read now, and there it'd be, the biggest book on the shelf. And I'd say....nah. Until finally I decided to stop being a bitch and actually read it.

And you know what? It's pretty good. Definitely a work of genius, extremely well put together, chock-full of symbolism and flattish characters and all sorts of other pomo English-majory stuff. Endless riffs on fraudulence and forgery in all their incarnations. There are counterfeiters, quack doctors, plagiarists, and admens. And all that stuff is good, even if a certain distance concerning the characters makes it a little difficult to really like any of them. But what I can't figure out (and this is also the reason it's not one of my favorite books) is why *The Recognitions* has to be so fucking *hostile*.

Wait, no. First, a few examples of what passes for the "dazzling wit" for which *The Recognitions* is (un)known. And it's not that these aren't funny; they are. But they are so stubbornly academic that it becomes a turnoff after a while.

"--Scatological? --Eschatological, the doctrine of last things... --Good Lord, Willie, you are drunk. Either that or you're writing for a very small audience. --So...? how many people were there in Plato's Republic?"

"She offered salad; but they were out of whisky."

"If it is Meniere's syndrome, we'll have you up staggering around in no time. Of course I don't know where you'll stagger to, with no papers. What's your name? We can't name a disease after you if you don't have a name."

"...the Virgin stark in an icon looking like a playing-card queen, the Infant with a hand out as though hailing a passing cab." (nothing is safe from Gaddis)

"The separate words were in capital letters, and included: FAITH HOPE CHARITY CONSCIENCE FAIR PLAY COURAGE and HUMBLE." (this being, apparently, a joke about less educated folks not using parallel structure on their signage)

And yeah, all that stuff is funny, but it's usually buried in mountains of obscure art and literary references and painful line-by-line descriptions of insufferable party-goers and parties. It's really easy to miss stuff. I don't mind a book that demands a second reading, but it should deliver at least some of the proverbial goods the first time around.

But Gaddis is also profoundly and obviously misanthropic, and that makes it difficult to get involved with the story, since the story is basically at the *expense* of all the main characters. And they're all so goddamn pathetic. Wyatt is more or less insane for large parts of the book, Esther is a succubus, Otto is basically the same character as Keating from *The Fountainhead*, and most of the other characters are either neurotic or criminal. And pretty much none of their arcs conform to the basic plot arcs with which we're so familiar. How clever on Gaddis's part. Too bad no amount of cleverness can replace empathy.

But there's no denying that *The Recognitions* now has a presence for me in a way that only Big Ambitious books can. It was memorable, and carrying it around for 3 months was memorable too, although not in as good of a way. And it both demands and deserves rereading.

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## **Nick Craske says**

Is Bob Dylan Authentic?

Robert anglicised himself and veiled his roots. Zimmerman changed to Dylan...

What is Authenticity then?

The dictionary definition: true to one's personality, spirit, or character.

The Recognitions is many things, but ultimately, it's an artist's quest of for an authentic self, told stylistically through satire and the exploration of forgery on all levels.

Wyatt Gwyon is an artist, who after meeting a rather dubious character with a fabulously dubious name, Rektall Brown, makes a Faustian deal to forge the paintings of the Flemish artists. And so begins Wyatt's psychological odyssey to define his sense of self as he wrangles with a sentiment inherited in his youth and religious upbringing, 'to sin is to falsify something in the Divine Order'.

Although Wyatt's quest for an authentic self is at the core, he is —like the Infinite Jest cartridge of its namesake novel— largely absent throughout the story; a phantom protagonist or as in a painting, a negative space to accent other areas. The remains of the story are narrated in several varying styles from several different points of view and characters.

Many of these characters undergo significant changes, including their names —like Mr. Robert Zimmerman— that can go unrecognised and it's not until later on in the text that one recognises their voice, their tone and character. Their reappearance, in their different guises, pulls one's attention into focus, as you begin to realise —like scrutinising a painting up close— you could be missing the wider effect and to pay greater attention to the these amorphous characters.

Echoes, motifs and repetition of statements, phrases and even dialog reinforce these multiple viewpoints and encourage one to scrutinise who is the originator of the thought and the theme and reiterates the question of authenticity. And several times I questioned my sanity... Did I read that already? Was this something I read elsewhere, both in the book or otherwise?

The book is structured in three parts and with many layers of interest such as multiple languages and cultural history; and like Gravity's Rainbow, in its complexity of form, draws upon numerous esoteric forms of reference such as art history and religion, mythology, meta physics, astronomy, mummification and even witchcraft.

While the entire book is incredible the two opening chapters are especially captivating and I knew early on I was reading a writing style which is the DNA of so much of the writing I admire. It's the prototype of Delillo, Gass, Pynchon and Salinger. Especially Delillo.

While Delillo has a more visual style, it's Gaddis's style of character dialog which unites them in tone and texture. In numerous party scenes speech is grammatically incorrect, colloquial and frequently truncated. Characters constantly interrupt each other, directly and in passing, as well as disruptions from external

ambient invasions such as radio chatter, telephone calls, televisions, and nearby music. It's a stimulating and heady cacophony of vernacular voice and measure and creates drama and momentum. And like Delillo, Gaddis draws out tremendously genuine and real subtleties, nuances and character traits which in turn depict the societal pressures that drive people to change their names, project their alter egos and wear their masks. Masks and alternates selves are a recurring theme throughout.

In a mythic novel nothing is inconsequential. And it becomes apparent through the repetitions, recursions and recognitions that Gaddis cross references myth, religion and world literature, but never does he compromises the sophistication of storytelling or the craft of his prose style - of which is compact and taut in description and poetic in form.

*The Recognitions* is funny, tragic and moving. It's a fierce satire on authenticity in art and the act of creation; on fraudulence and fakery at all levels...

Since 1958 to 2013 Art and the art world has undergone significant change. Painting is no longer deemed as important, or as key an artistic medium as it once was; media, technology and the internet-of-things, apps, connectivity and social media are all impacting how we define and project ourselves. The masks we wear, consciously or subconsciously, are even more complex and multifarious.

William Gaddis was only 30 when this, his debut novel, was first published in 1958. Incredible.

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'The sky was perfectly clear. It was a rare, explicit clarity, to sanction revelation. People looked up; finding nothing, they rescued their senses from exile, and looked down again'

### **Jonathan says**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEe24q...>

*"It rained; then it snowed, and the snow stayed on the paved ground for long enough to become evenly blacked with soot and smoke-fall, evenly but for islands of yellow left by uptown dogs. Then it rained again, and the whole creation was transformed into cold slop, which made walking adventuresome. Then it froze; and every corner presented opportunity for entertainment, the vastly amusing spectacle of well-dressed people suspended in the indecorous positions which precede skull fractures."*

Humour/beauty/sadness/rage.

Look at that technique: the alliteration, the bounce of buried n's, the repetition of "evenly", the choice of "smoke-fall" and "adventuresome" and "indecorous" and "cold slop". This is how one makes a cliché come alive – for how can the snow/slop/yellow-dog-piss/slipping be anything but a cliché? –and make it funny (it is the use of "indecorous" which does it, I think).

Gaddis, with his ruinous Cassandra complex, places pins precisely and most exquisitely painfully in the torso of our society, as it was then, is now, and shall be forevermore. We are facile, self-absorbed, cruel creatures, wilfully gullible, deafened by the monotony of our own voices. We are to be pitied and to be laughed at. And yet, any attempt to judge from the side-lines must always already be a failure, and only by straining towards

the authentic can we even approach that which lies outside our-Selves, though we must be prepared to drown in the process.

*This story was about some people coming out of church, and they saw an anchor dangling by a rope from the sky. The anchor caught in the tombstones, and then they watched and saw a man coming down the rope, to unhook it. But when he reached the earth they went over to him and he was dead...He looked up at both of them from the glass. – Dead as though he'd been drowned.*

Gaddis says in an interview somewhere that he re-read this novel after its publication and was embarrassed by its youthful arrogance, its narcissism, its desire to demonstrate great learning. He is correct, I think. But I love it for that. I love that he just goes all out, strips himself naked and streaks across the pitch. And when what is being put on display is so damn beautiful, and so damn interesting, who can care that the rules of decorum are breached, that the police (with Mr Franzen in their midst, his hipster-dark glasses slightly askew) are hot on his heels with blankets to cover and smother and bury him deep. I shall stick out my legs to trip them. I shall eternally cheer him on from the side-lines.

But how, as an atheist, can I feel so strongly these struggles with Christ? It is because there is something wonderfully, and devastatingly, *human* in these lacerations of the heart. How must it be to live in a universe rich with God? How must it be to truly feel all this, as Marlow did: *"See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament. / One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ!"*. The pain is real, and the suffering runs deep, the fact that I may see only man fighting Fight-Club-style with himself is entirely beside the point.

One more thing. I kept regular "updates" here to disprove the theory that 'big' and 'difficult' (big compared to what? difficult compared to what?) books are loved solely in hindsight, that the euphoria felt at Everest's summit blinds us to the struggle of the climb. This is simply not true. There was not a single damn page of this book that was not pleasurable, interesting, engaging and heartfelt. I knew from less than 20 pages in that I was in the presence of a Master, and one whom I could trust with the long journey ahead. Not once did this trust seem misplaced, and not once did I notice the blisters. Of course it is not perfect, nothing is, and of course one could point to paragraphs where the cogs can be seen, but this does not matter in the least, and does nothing to diminish the Work.

I have my personal Pantheon, those few books I place above all the others: The Death of Virgil; The Waves; Doctor Faustus; Poems of Paul Celan. This novel joins them. I intend, before the year is through, to read all of his novels and the letters. Thy Will be done, on My shelf as it is on Yours.

Or, to put it another way, this novel is chavenet, totally chavenet.

*Let mind be more precious than soul; it will not  
Endure. Soul grasps its price, begs its own peace,  
Settles with tears and sweat, is possibly  
Indestructible. That I can believe.  
Though I would scorn the mere instinct of faith,  
Expediency of assent, if I dared,  
What I dare not is a waste history  
Or void rule. Averroes, old heathen,  
If only you had been right, if Intellect  
Itself were absolute law, sufficient grace,  
Our lives could be a myth of captivity*

*Which we might enter: an unpeopled region  
Of ever new-fallen snow, a palace blazing  
With perpetual silence as with torches.*

**Geoffrey Hill**

*List! for no more the presage of my soul,  
Bride-like, shall peer from its secluding veil;  
But as the morning wind blows clear the east,  
More bright shall blow the wind of prophecy,  
And as against the low bright line of dawn  
Heaves high and higher yet the rolling wave,  
So in the clearing skies of prescience  
Dawns on my soul a further, deadlier woe,  
And I will speak, but in dark speech no more.  
Bear witness, ye, and follow at my side—  
I scent the trail of blood, shed long ago.  
Within this house a choir abidingly  
Chants in harsh unison the chant of ill;  
Yea, and they drink, for more enhardened joy,  
Man's blood for wine, and revel in the halls,  
Departing never, Furies of the home.  
They sit within, they chant the primal curse,  
Each spitting hatred on that crime of old,  
The brother's couch, the love incestuous  
That brought forth hatred to the ravisher.  
Say, is my speech or wild and erring now,  
Or doth its arrow cleave the mark indeed?  
They called me once, The prophetess of lies,  
The wandering hag, the pest of every door—  
Attest ye now, She knows in very sooth  
The house's curse, the storied infamy.*

- **Cassandra** (Agamemnon)

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**Szplug says**

*The Recognitions*—my favourite Gaddis, although he wrote several wonderful books—delves deeply into the theme amongst the most intriguing to me in a novel: exploration of the dichotomy between the increase in both man's material well-being and his spiritual anguish in this, the modern age of consumer capitalism and progressive democracy; an age in which even the sacred and the beautiful are debauched by being made to *sell* themselves in the ubiquitous marketplace.

The principal characters in Gaddis' world are continually forced to make the choice between embracing searing, difficult truths or being seduced by the painless blandishments of an endless parade of fraudulence and forgeries—the latter aptly represented by the constant references to people enthusiastically endorsing

Dale Carnegie's seminal mask-making handbook *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. What is art in the modern age? Is it determined by mass appeal, by those who care less for the inspiration and universality and beauty of a particular piece, and more about whether the *in* crowd has embraced it, whether it is popular? In such a world, what separates the forger from the creator? Does such a distinction actually matter? Indeed, since even the greatest of artists have *stolen* from the past, does forgery exist any more as a crime? What is authenticity? Does it become great art if it is born from suffering? Can a world seeking anodyne similarity acknowledge the blood-price and soul-rendering required to capture moments of subcutaneous truth? Do we require God for art to truly exist? It is into this hazy world that we are plunged.

And what a terrific stock of characters Gaddis has created for us, too: Wyatt Gwyon, the master forger and tortured soul, sweating blood to make money for himself and others; his father Reverend Gwyon, who, not finding the answers and solace he seeks in Christianity, turns to the worship of the sun-god Mithras; Otto, a plagiarist and dilettante would-be writer and naïf-redeemer, a self-portrait of the author brilliantly realized; the book-ending forger and event-initiator Sinisterra; pious musician Stanely, a spiritual-seeker and creator of a requiem-mass (spoken of highly, though seldom-played); Esme, painter, poet, beauty, the perfect manifestation of the desired virgin-whore; and this just scratches the tip of the rich palette of personalities we are given.

The text itself alternates from labyrinthine paragraphs of rich and complex prose, to page-after-page of rapid-fire dialogue—ringing absolutely true, at times disorienting and difficult to follow—the latter a style that would comprise almost the entirety of Gaddis' two-decades-later followup *JR*. There are many works which tackle this subject, but few which succeed so masterfully, are written in such dense, probing, magnificent language, and are so capable of being both riotously funny and intensely moving as *The Recognitions*.

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### **Franco Santos says**

Gaddis, en su última obra antes de morir, *Ágape se paga*: "... a fin de cuentas de eso se trata, de eso trata mi obra, del derrumbe absoluto de todo, del sentido, del lenguaje, de los valores, del arte, del desorden y de la dislocación que se ve en donde sea que mires, la entropía engullendo todo a su alrededor". Y eso mismo es lo que encierra entre sus páginas *Los reconocimientos*, el colapso de los ideales, del ser, de la búsqueda verdadera de sentido, todo aquello con una narrativa que junta múltiples estilos dispares para contar la historia del mundo, mezclando humor absurdo y una prosa que ha logrado más de una vez ponerme la piel de gallina. Una historia que explora un universo de temas: la fraudulencia, el suicidio, la religión, el arte, el dinero, el amor, la soledad, el espionaje, pero principalmente la incesante y arrolladora necesidad humana de encontrarle respuesta a la pregunta: ¿por qué seguimos viviendo?

No voy a decir mucho más. No puedo. No estoy a la altura. Solo voy a decir que, cuando hace unos meses me preguntaron: "Si tuvieses que vivir solo en una isla, ¿qué libro te llevarías?", estaba completamente seguro de cuál libro me traería conmigo. Hoy ya no. Tendría que ver la manera de llevarme este también.

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### **Bram says**

Probably the best part of the *The Recognitions* is the very beginning. The novel seems destined to unravel as an absolute masterpiece after the evocative opening in Spain and small town New England, followed by a

quick stay in Paris before descending (in the Dantean sense) into New York City for the majority of the book. But then it begins to meander while taking on a new agenda, one less of allusion-heavy storytelling than of society satire sans commentary: Gaddis lets large swaths of the book unfold in dialogue, with varying results in story-telling clarity and appeal. This change in focus isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it outstays its welcome so that its initial power commences to slowly dissipate, over a few hundred pages in the days just before Christmas 1949, along with any claims to sardonic subtlety. Things pick back up when the major characters head out of New York to Europe and South America, but ultimately the book either needed to say more or stay shorter to achieve the level of impact and greatness to which its author aspired.

Regardless, there's a lot to love: the discussions of art, of old masters of the 15th and 16th century Flemish variety, is particularly fascinating and nuanced. Big money art forgery/theft is one of those topics—like religion, sex, and pirates—that's interesting just because...just because it is. And when Gaddis is on with his dark humor, he is *on* and is able to provoke plenty of wry smiles by cleverly deriding the religious, the faux-intellectual, and the materialistic. His writing style is cold but extravagant: flowery, but in a German sort of way. Many sentences, especially those at the beginning and the end of chapters, are quirky and knotted, requiring a few minutes to unwind and comprehend—something that I generally, masochistically enjoy.

Furthermore, I'm very sympathetic to Gaddis' overarching point about falsity, about the counterfeit nature of the world from which it's nearly impossible to escape into a life of integrity-fueled deliberateness, particularly given the excessive materialism/ advertising/ bullshitting that goes on. Very sympathetic to this. In fact, I love the theme. But it becomes repetitive and occasionally over-obvious: some of the absurd dialogue, which can be very funny, often devolves into a game of point-and-laugh at the idiot that eventually makes you and the author feel like the only genuine, intelligent, and well-meaning people in the world. I.e. you get your ego stroked, but well past the moment of climax until it becomes uncomfortable and even painful. You are conditioned to see fakers, forgers, and counterfeiters everywhere—and you will—but you begin to realize that the book doesn't have much else to say. And though it does take us on an interesting journey to another time and other places, very little is suggested for avoiding the ever-present trappings of a bullshit life.

Most of the large cast of characters exist to be mocked by Gaddis via their own unsubtle dialogue, and while this provides a significant portion of the book's humor (which, unfortunately, can disappear for hundreds of pages at time), it gets tiresome. Gaddis was clearly influenced by Proust's aims to document and expose certain social classes of his time, and he attempts something similar to Proust's handling of the Faubourg Saint-Germain with New York's post-war Village art scenesters. Multiple long parties pervade the book's middle section, including one (short by Proust standards) that nears 100 pages, and they consist mostly of dialogue designed to bring scorn upon the pseudo-intellectual and the bourgeois. The ethical incuriousness, the intellectual vacancy, and the self-serving idiocy are soon fully apparent. And then remain apparent. Still. Over and over. Again. And while this kind of thing can work in the right hands (Proust's), Gaddis' writing talents, while impressive, aren't able to arouse and maintain the same level of interest in the characters and their petty lives. We're left with a scathing and prescient indictment of a social class and movement, but one that doesn't translate into the most compelling fiction. Thankfully some of the novel's most memorable and inspiring characters come out of this quirky social group, including my personal favorites: Stanley, the painfully naïve and devout Catholic who's working on an ambitious organ piece; and Anselm, the conflicted, crawling and acne-riddled wild card.

The criticisms mentioned so far have been relatively minor; the real problems exist with the protagonists. Recently I've run into the dilemma of reviewing books that impressed me while leaving little room to fall in love. Or, more accurately, too much room—a remoteness from the major characters and a lack of palpable humanity or believable human insight. After spending hundreds of pages with Hal Incandenza from *Infinite*

*Jest* or Tyrone Slothrop from *Gravity's Rainbow*, I can't say that I got to know them or believe in them as real people with truly *human* concerns and motivations. I didn't love, hate, like, dislike, or care much about them. I can now add Wyatt Gwyon and even the more recognizably human Otto from *The Recognitions* to this dubious list of protagonists from sprawling 20th century white man epics. Wyatt, like Slothrop after him, is an unpredictable semi-human, someone to marvel at rather than learn from, always maintaining a safe distance from the reader with his extraordinary talent and bizarrely antisocial behavior.

The failure to connect meaningfully with the protagonists in these novels is paradoxical given the time spent with them, page by page. A 200-page book with big type, wide margins, and healthy spacing can make me cry, but *The Recognitions*'s most prominent player feels as remote and inhuman as Keanu Reeves in (\_\_\_\_). That doesn't seem quite right. I'm not looking for visceral thrills here, but I'm also not reading fiction just to learn things about things. I'm trying to gain exposure to those with a gift for prying open humanity to look into some small part of its multifaceted and contradictory glory, those who can maybe lead me toward piecing things together-about me, others-that I'm too stupid, lazy, or unaware to figure out on my own. Unfortunately *The Recognitions* joins my growing shelf of impressive and impressively un-emotive books. Which isn't to say that this book or the two mentioned above don't have many rewarding or exciting aspects. It rarely felt like a chore to read, and I probably hold longer books to a higher standard, if for no other reason than that they require a greater investment.

The fact that this book is good in so many ways serves to increase my disappointment with the characterization. Wyatt, the protagonist, spends most of the book balancing on the edge of sanity while spewing hyper-erudite musings on ancient religions and painting details in a mostly disconnected, stuttering fashion. His stream of consciousness often feels so divorced from sanity that it's complete gibberish to anyone without a serious background in ancient religions, alchemy, and other esoterica (i.e. pretty much everyone). Without the knowledge to contextualize Wyatt's or his father's mutterings, these often read like foreign languages-which, I should point out, are used quite liberally throughout the text. Gaddis certainly doesn't wear his knowledge or sources lightly, and a cynical person could say this untethered recondite regurgitation may have been employed to mask laziness or limited understanding on the part of the author. Additionally, and I don't say this lightly, Gaddis' use of language often leans toward the pretentious. George Eliot (if I remember correctly, one of Gaddis' literary heroes) could have been speaking about Gaddis himself when she writes teasingly in *Middlemarch*: "Things never began with Mr. Borthrop Trumbull: they always commenced." Without fail, Gaddis substitutes "commence" for "start" or "begin", and it creates a somewhat strange, if memorable, reading experience.

One reason why some of the characters failed to work for me is that they seem to exist primarily to carry out the literary, medieval, magical, and religious allusions in strikingly literal terms (e.g. sex with a bull, self-castration, Mithraism church service, crucifixion, animal sacrifice to please/plead with God), which can feel overdone and distinctly inhuman. Sure, you could argue that these are the areas where the book bridges realism and modernism with postmodernism, part of what makes this novel so unique. I'm not sure that I'd characterize this book—mostly *pre-modern* in feel—as such a bridge, and regardless, this approach doesn't work. While Gaddis derides a novelist overheard in Rome toward the end of the book who claims that his "novel is written, I just have to add the motivation," I think that his own approach—the exact opposite—is equally problematic. He started out attempting to rewrite *Faust* within the modern age, and much of that story still exists in the text, but in addition, his characters frequently behave in ways that *only* make sense in the context of the sources that Gaddis weaves into the story. This is backwards. When Wyatt steals the gold bull from Valentine, this should have been in service of the plot of *The Recognitions*. It isn't really, and confusion only subsides with a little allusive sleuthing: the gold bull is a "symbol of creative force, breaking the egg to give birth to the earth", and you realize later that this theft coincides with the end of Wyatt's amazing forgery work. So his creative force is taken *out* of the service of Brown and Valentine, perhaps to be

recommenced elsewhere. Clever, but the action itself is simply bizarre and explained away as a sequela of Wyatt's temporary insanity. This is the manner in which the plot often unfolds, with characters in service of the novel's sources rather than the other way around. Gaddis began with "the motivation" and forgot that living, breathing characters were just as, if not more, important.

It just occurred to me that there's probably a reason why this book is little known and little read, even by cult epic standards. *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Ulysses* are more difficult and *Infinite Jest* is certainly longer, but each of these books enjoys more popularity than *The Recognitions*. So while I think it's a good book, its place (or lack thereof) in 20th century literature 55 years later is probably justified and unlikely to change significantly in the future. I wouldn't try to talk anyone out of reading this, but I'd suggest you try many of the other books you're "supposed to" read from this century first. As the *The Recognitions* itself suggests: if you think that you may have stumbled upon a rarefied, out-of-the-way masterpiece, a scenario that appears just too good to be true...well...yes.

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## Paul says

I've had *The Recognitions* on my horizon for some time. What really spurred me on to read it was a fellow Goodreader; Bonnie, whose review of this book is magnificent. Sadly Bonnie died last year and I still miss her wit, wisdom and perspicacity; she survives in her reviews and I would recommend you read her review of this.

This is not a book that you can pick up and casually read; it demands work of the reader. However erudite or well read you are you will not get all the references because they are so varied. There are sites available which provide annotated notes so you can follow the references and I would recommend one of these as you can get more out of the whole experience. Gaddis quotes Shakespeare a good deal; there is also a lot of T S Eliot, especially the Four Quartets and *The Wasteland*. On reflection it is more difficult to list things that are not included! As there is a religious theme running through the book knowledge of the Early Christian Fathers and varieties of theology (not to mention the cult of Mithras) is a necessity (hence the need for a guide). Gaddis also makes reference to a great deal of early twentieth century popular American culture (songs and popular novels). Goethe's *Faust* is a backdrop and starting point and the relationship between Wyatt and Recktall Brown is fascinating. The *Faust* legend goes back to Clementine literature, supposedly written by an early Pope called Clement. Part of this literature is the Clementine *Recognitions* (hence the title) and here is found the story of Faustus. There are myriads of other references and it is a complex and enthralling work.

The story itself is fairly simple; Wyatt means to follow his father into the Christian ministry, but takes to art and forgery for a dealer called Recktall Brown. He becomes disillusioned, his father becomes attracted to Mithras and goes mad and there is a supporting cast of many interesting characters who revolve around Wyatt and his doings. Most of the story is set in New York around Christmas. As stories go it is ok and would rattle along nicely in a 200 page novel. There is humour; the suit of armour, counterfeit money (forgery and what is real figures a lot) and there is tragedy; all the necessary ingredients. The minor characters are excellent; Otto in particular, Agnes Deigh (the play on words of course has meaning). Anselm is fascinating and there is a self-inflicted Abelard moment in a public toilet.

So far I've managed to avoid saying what I thought of it. *The Recognitions* is undoubtedly a great novel and it was fun and challenging to read. I loved the trails that Gaddis leaves and following links and it is undoubtedly a literary masterpiece, worthy of its place in all the lists. The "but" you are sensing is that although I thoroughly enjoyed reading it; I didn't love it. It didn't invoke the passion that my favourite novels have, great though it is. But do read it for yourself and make your own mind up.

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## Michael Finocchiaro says

This book clearly influenced Pynchon and DFW and I would imagine Cormac McCarthy as well, but it is pretty damn unreadable. Looking behind *The Recognitions*, many level that criticism at *Ulysses*. Well, *Ulysses* does require some work, but the difference is that Stephen Daedalus as well as the Blooms are fantastic deeply moving and well-drawn characters and we WANT to see them succeed. In *The Recognitions*, there is a plethora of characters, but none of which I could have more than a shred of sympathy for: Otto is too pathetic, Wyatt is too broken, Recktail disappears before the end...and the characters around the have amusing characteristics (like the guy measuring the cracks in the ceiling, but I was like, so what.

As for comparing it to the next of post-moderns, I think that Pynchon tells a more interesting story, that DFW draws more interesting characters and McCarthy doesn't overload his novels with 1000s of irrelevant characters.

The book is written as a triptych where, for me, the first part starts clean and becomes incoherent, the second part is incoherent and the 3rd part starts coherent and makes a tiny bit of sense at the end. This generates quite a lot of stress to me as a reader.

The term "recognition" is used a lot in part 1 and then disappears which left me a bit rudderless. I think this book is interesting only in the historical part it played in influencing other writers, but as a standalone piece of art, it does not hold much appeal.

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## B0nnie says

This book has me in its grip.

Reading *The Recognitions* is like wandering in a labyrinth, and around each corner there's a new revelation. One feels a little lost at times, but there are familiar sights. Can we trust our guide? Gaddis gives you the sense he knows the way...until he lets go of your hand...and pushes you into the darkness saying, *dilige et quod vis fac*. You must cling to those words, because that's the only thread this Ariadne offers - except for the follow up text message he sends: *btw thngs fal aprt* :-()

We begin our recognitions...at the beginning. The title. It's a reference to a text mistakenly attributed to Pope Clement I. One of the characters, Basil Valentine, later explains,

The what? *The Recognitions*? No, it's Clement of Rome. Mostly talk, talk, talk. The young man's deepest concern is for the immortality of his soul, he goes to Egypt to find the magicians and learn their secrets. It's been referred to as the first Christian novel. What? Yes, it's really the beginning of the whole Faust legend...What can drive anyone to write novel...?

That's almost an outline of Gaddis's book too.

There's an apocryphal account that Clement was martyred, thrown into the sea with an anchor tied around his

neck.

*The Recognitions* revisits this in various ways with the reoccurring image of "that tale about the sky being a sea, the celestial sea, and a man coming down a rope to undo an anchor that's gotten caught on a tombstone".

This novel is an exercise in recognitions - within the text, the characters, ourselves. Gaddis intended that we recognize and understand these references and allusions, and apply their meaning to the overall story. He has paid us a high compliment, and respects us as thinking readers who are willing to work with him,

What writing is all about is what happens on the page between the reader and the page . . .  
What I want is a collaboration, really, with the reader on the page where the reader is also making an effort, is putting something of himself into it in the way of understanding, in the way of helping to construct the fiction that I am giving him. - William Gaddis, Albany, April 4, 1990

The effort is worth it, for this book is a delight. But never mind - it stands on its own even if we don't get all the references. As Jonathan Franzen says about it, "Peel away the erudition, and you have *The Catcher in the Rye*: a grim winter sojourn in a seedy Manhattan, a quest for authenticity in a phony modern world."

There's help with the erudition - it's been enthusiastically annotated

Gaddis has a style of writing that I easily respond to. His themes are ones I want to read and think about.

Eliot and Dostoyevski are the most significant names here; none of Gaddis's reviewers described *The Recognitions* as *The Waste Land* rewritten by Dostoyevski (with additional dialogue by Ronald Firbank), but that would be a more accurate description than the *Ulysses* parallel so many of them harped upon. Not only do Gaddis's novels contain dozens of "whole lines lifted bodily from Eliot," but *The Recognitions* can be read as an epic sermon using *The Waste Land* as its text. The novel employs the same techniques of reference, allusion, collage, multiple perspective, and contrasting voices; the same kinds of fire and water imagery drawn from religion and myth; and both call for the same kinds of artistic, moral, and religious sensibilities.

...Life proved terrible enough by the 1950s to produce in *The Recognitions* the most "Russian" novel in American literature. Gaddis's love for nineteenth-century Russian literature in general crops up in his novels, his letters, and in his few lectures, where references are made to the major works of Dostoyevski, Tolstoy (especially the plays), Gogol, Turgenev, Gorky, Goncharov, and Chekhov. Gaddis shares with these authors not only their metaphysical concerns and often bizarre sense of humor, but their nationalistic impulses as well. - *William Gaddis* by Steven Moore

The first few pages of *The Recognitions* are like a separate novel, pared to its essentials. Call it *The Spanish Affair*. It's an account of the ship *Purdue Victory*, Camilla, Spain, and Reverend Gwyon. It ends with "They never forgave him for not bringing the body home". These pages sit in my memory like whole other books

do.

The rest of the novel can be seen as the sequel. The story continues with the son Wyatt. We first meet him as a "small disgruntled person", four years old, shocking his stern (great) Aunt May by exclaiming "You're the by-Goddest rabbit I ever damn saw!" I wanted to hug that child right there. I love this unhappy mirror version of Christopher Robin.

#### IN WHICH WYATT EMPTIES THE POT ON WHICH HE MEDITATED FOR AN HOUR OR SO EACH MORNING INTO A FLOOR REGISTER.

The old Aunt May who raises him is a hard woman, yet oh, she breaks one's heart too, "when she made things, even her baking, she kept the blinds closed in the butler's pantry when she frosted a cake, nobody ever saw anything of hers until it was done".

The father, Reverend Gwyon, had "the look of a man who was waiting for something which had happened long before", buries himself in old obscured religious writings...but "the book most often taken from its place was *Obras Completas de S Juan de la Cruz*, a volume large enough to hold a bottle of schnapps in the cavity cut ruthlessly out of the *Dark Night of the Soul*.

Later he falls under Mithra's spell.

Wyatt grows up warped by this upbringing.

He becomes the man who seems to believe that, where there is God, do not stay; where there is no God run away as fast as you can. He planned to enter the ministry, but early on had found the Christian system suspect.

There's a long cast of characters that drift in and out and we lose sight of Wyatt for long stretches. Names are changed! Identities are mistaken! Life and art are so entangled that their boundaries are not clear. We constantly overhear fragments of conversations, catch glimpses of the characters as they hurry by.

The frame of *The Recognitions* is forgery: in culture, religion, art, relationships, sex, business, money. Its subject is an examination of meaning - what is real? what is love? what is God? can we ever really know who we are?

The personage Wyatt was in part based on the real life infamous art forger Han van Meegeren. His paintings are at best competent, and without mystery or depth. See if you agree from this sample.

And take a quiz: Vermeer or Meegeren?

Meegeren made clumsy technical mistakes that should have alarmed the experts.

Copying masterpieces is now an industry in Southern China, "the world's leading center for mass-produced works of art. One village of artists exports about five million paintings every year — most of them copies of famous masterpieces. The fastest workers can paint up to 30 paintings a day."

Millions of \*masterpieces\* churned out like cheap garments...(said in the voice of an angry Dr. McCoy).

Wyatt, I think, was a better painter than all these, starting with his copy of Bosch's table painting. He carried its themes in his head too, the ever watching eye of God and *The Seven Deadly Sins*.

The copy of this painting underscores one of the themes of *The Recognitions*, the theme of forgery, and it is asking: what is original? Is it even possible to be original?

That romantic disease, originality, all around we see originality of incompetent idiots, they could draw nothing, paint nothing, just so the mess they make is original...Even two hundred years ago who wanted to be original, to be original was to admit that you could not do a thing the right way, so you could only do it your own way. When you paint you do not try to be original, only you think about your work, how to make it better, so you copy masters, only masters, for with each copy of a copy the form degenerates...you do not invent shapes, you know them, atiswendig wissen Sie, by heart...

And to carry the question further, has mankind, that master forger, outdone the creator? Each one of us is merely the latest link in the chain of human experience. Everything we know, believe, have, is founded on what has been passed down from the previous generations. Religion, culture, music, science, art. Nursery rhymes. Jokes. What claim to originality do we really have?

Everything is a collage built from previous works, a blatant example being *The WasteLand* yes, and *The Recognitions* too.

So, we can search out the allusions, and the bits and pieces directly copied from other writers. Our understanding is deeper, the experience is richer of course. But the new work stands on its own.

Bosch's painting is also used to introduce the theme of existential meaning and purpose. Its watchful eye of God raises a question: does anything mean anything at all, if it is not looked at by God? Wyatt says,

This...these...the art historians and the critics talking about every object and...everything having its own form and density and ...its own character in Flemish paintings, but is that all there is to it? Do you know why everything does? Because they found God everywhere. There was

nothing God did not watch over, nothing, and so this...and so in the painting every detail reflects...God's concern with the most insignificant objects in life, with everything, because God did not relax for an instant then, and neither could the painter then. Do you get the perspective in this? he demanded, thrusting the rumpled reproduction before them. -There isn't any. 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...Like everything today is conscious of being looked at, looked at by something else but not by God, and that's the only way anything can have its own form and its own character, and...and shape and smell, being looked at by God.

The cynic Basil Valentine replies:

Yes, I remember your little talk, your insane upside-down apology for these pictures, every figure and every object with its own presence, its own consciousness because it was being looked at by God! Do you know what it was? What it really was? that everything was so afraid, so uncertain God saw it, that it insisted its vanity on His eyes? 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. Oh, this pious cult of the Middle Ages! Being looked at by God! Is there a moment of faith in any of their work, in one centimeter of canvas? or is it vanity and fear, the same decadence that surrounds us now. A profound mistrust in God, and they need every idea out where they can see it, where they can get their hands on it. Your...detail, he commenced to falter a little,- your Bouts, was there ever a worse bourgeois than your Dierick Bouts? and his damned details? Talk to me of separate consciousness, being looked at by God, and then swear by all that's ugly!

[image error]

Like Eliot, sometimes Gaddis steals his material outright. The letter that begins "You: The demands of painting have the most astonishing consequences" was entirely written by Sheri Martinelli and used without her knowledge. She was the inspiration for the character who wrote it, Esme.

There are so many odd characters in this book worthy of mention:

**Ed Feasley** "He was not afraid: not a grain of that fear which is granted in any definition of sanity. In college, he had entertained himself and others, quiet evenings in his rooms when his allowance was cut off, by beating the back of his fist with a stiff-bristled hairbrush, then swinging his hand in circles until the pressure of descending blood broke small capillaries and spotted the rug and ceiling with spots turned brown by morning; or standing before a mirror with thumb and forefinger pressed against his carotid arteries until his face lost all color and he was caught by consciousness as he fell....He liked a Good Time."

**Fuller** "We would believe that Fuller had had a childhood only in helpless empiricism, because we all have. But it was as unreal to him by now as to anyone looking at his face, where time had long since stopped

experimenting. That childhood was like a book read, misplaced, forgotten, to be recalled when one sees another copy, the cheap edition in a railway station newsstand, which is bought, thumbed through, and like as not left on the train when the station is called."

**Recktall Brown** "Recktall Brown's laughter might seem to rise the entire distance of his frame, a laborious journey, complicated by ducts and veins, cavities and sedulous organs whose functions are interrupted by the passage of this billowing shape which escapes in shambles of smoke"

**Basil Valentine** "There were moments when Basil Valentine looked sixteen, days when he looked sixty. In profile, his face was strong and flexible; but, when he turned full face as he did now, the narrowness of his chin seemed to sap the face of that strength so impressive an instant before. Temples faintly graying, distinguished enough to be artificial (though the time was gone when anyone might have said premature, and gone the time when it was necessary to dye them so, instead now to tint them with black occasionally), he looked like an old person who looks very young, hair-ends slightly too long, he wore a perfectly fitted gray pinstripe suit, soft powder-blue Oxford-cloth shirt, and a slender black tie whose pattern, woven in the silk, was barely discernible. He raised a gold cigarette case in long fingers. Gold glittered at his cuff."

**Agnes Deigh** "...a stout woman [with a muscular arm which, on a man, might have been called brawny] She wore a knee-length fur cape, a green summer cocktail dress with a scalloped hem, what appeared to be gold paper stars pasted on it, and décolletage which exposed a neckline of woolen underwear. She advanced with a distinct rattling sound"

**Frank Sinisterra** "...he found himself rescued from oblivion by agents of that country not Christian enough to rest assured in the faith that he would pay fully for his sins in the next world...he tried a brief defense of his medical practice on the grounds that he had once assisted a vivisection."

Gaddis obviously was fond of these creations of his, in spite of their flaws.

And there are so many quotable passages - if God did not relax for an instant in the Flemish paintings, neither did Gaddis in his descriptions. A character's suit is given a paragraph,

Crémer's shrug still hung in his shoulders, and he emphasized it with a twitch, throwing the exact lines of his neat blue suit off, for it was a thing of careful French construction, and fit only when the figure inside it was apathetically erect, arms hung at the sides, at which choice moment the coat stood up neat and square as a box, and the trousers did not billow as they did in walking, but hung in wide envelopes with all the elegance that right angles confer, until they broke over the shoes, which they were, fortunately, almost wide enough at the bottoms, and enough too long, to cover.

That's too much - and it's brilliant.

I think of the infamous opening,

It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents - except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.

Ha, that makes me laugh every time. Though I'm laughing \*at\* it.

There's a lot of laughing \*with\* in *The Recognitions*. It's satire at its finest.

And there are animals: a Barbary ape; a black poodle that "spies" on Fuller; an ill-fated kitten; Huki-lau the Hawaiian poodle dog in a chastity belt; Paris cats that "go to sleep on Paris windowsills and ledges high up, and fall off, and plunge through the glass roof of the lavabo; "cats hung in telephone wires, Cow kills woman. Rooster kills woman. Dogs eat Eskimo".

And Mad Men ad men campaigns:

**Kanthold Korsets**

**Necrostyle** - the wafer-shaped sleeping pill, no chewing, no aftertaste.

**Zap** - the wonder-wakener.

**Cuff** - it's on the cuff.

**Pubies** - for men and women over forty, start living again.

**THE GHOST ARTISTS** ...We Paint It You Sign It Why Not Give an Exhibition?

**Arsole Acres** - from the Latin ars meaning art

Some of the many motifs that run through *The Recognitions*: the constant random snatches of overheard conversations are like a Greek chorus; Christianity is relentlessly contrasted to its pagan origin; characters pause in distress to brush a spot of moonlight off the sleeve; mirrors - distorting, creating, confirming, paralyzing "Wyatt was sent to bed for saying he could not move, as though the mirrors in the arms of the cross on the wall had gripped him from behind". Art, so much art - paintings, sculptures, churches, ornaments. Mummies and babies, roses and lavender, windows. Body parts. And death: suicide, murder, disease, drowning, calamity.

And suits!

Jonathan Franzen bitterly claims *The Recognitions* is "difficult". Maybe. I'll confess that I was better prepared for it than most people. I shrewdly majored in painting at university. The skeletons in my closet were helpful too - some closely resemble the characters in this book. Perhaps that is why I... umm...I tell you *The Recognitions* is MY book...I don't want to share it. I...I'll bury it. And dig it up from time to time! just as I did with those poor feral kittens from my childhood: dead from worms, buried elaborately with solemn service, the free Gideon bible from school in hand, laying flowers kindly donated from mommy's flowerbed - and yes - exhumed on the odd occasion to see how things were coming along.

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**Greg says**

I've been meaning to read one of Gaddis' big novels for years now, ten or so actually. I'd always been drawn more to trying my hand with *JR*, but after reading Franzen's essay a few years ago on Gaddis I sort of changed my mind, and decided that if the day ever came when I'd read Gaddis I'd start at the beginning of his work. Then of course at some point I realized that being the type of person I am I had to read this book because it fills out the lower rung of the trinity of difficult post-1950 American novels. A lot of good things can be said of this book, and for the first about six hundred pages it's really fucking good and then Gaddis decided to get a little weird. Is this a spoiler coming up? I don't know. Around the page of the beast he starts

killing off characters, and about the same time he decides that it's best to kill them off sometimes with it being very difficult for the reader to follow who is dying, and even in the non-death parts, and who exactly is taking part in scenes. At the book's worst it turns into the awful dialog parts of the *Left Behind* novels, where the only way to tell which character is speaking is to count back the paragraphs, in the Lahaye books though the characters and the form of the writing don't have silences to mess up the count. So at a certain point I got a little lost, I started to feel like I felt when reading the first chapter of *Ulysses* when I had no idea what was going on, or even a point of reference to place the text in, unlike in Joyce though, when everything feels like it is all coming together in this book it begins to move towards entropy from about 2/3's of the book till the end.

Reading the book at the time it came out must have been something though. A few years later the Beats would supposedly smash up American Literature with their little revolution, but seeing what Gaddis did in this book was much more defining of American serious literature than the half-assed autobiographical masturbatory 'look how cool me and my friends are' books that would categorize the high points of Beat literature. There is something in this book that is aspiring to the high Modernism of the works of Joyce and Proust, but then there is something leaning towards the meta-fiction to come on the scene in the next decade. It is this position the book straddles that makes for a particular unease and I think, in historical retrospect, a kind of failing. Gaddis is on the path to something new, but he doesn't quite pull it off. This doesn't make any sense probably. I guess what I'm meaning to say is that he is paving the way for some of my favorite books to be written, and he's obviously an influence of some kind on Pynchon and DFW and their ilk, but in his own *masterpiece* he falls short of achieving what they would be able to, but at the same time he is out of touch just enough with what came before him that this novel sits uncomfortably between two difficult styles. (nov 6, 08)

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## Garima says

*Images surround us; cavorting broadcast in the minds of others, we wear the motley tailored by their bad digestions, the shame and failure, plague pandemics and private indecencies, unpaid bills, and animal ecstasies remembered in hospital beds, our worst deeds and best intentions will not stay still, scolding, mocking, or merely chattering they assail each other, shocked at recognition.*

Shocked, surprised and mesmerized by these *Recognitions*. Sometimes reading of a book happens without any noticeable event while other times, a single sentence affords the brilliance of a memorable experience. The perceptible sameness of things stimulates an unalterable change, a connection emerges out of nowhere and the voice of a stranger becomes familiar and captivating since it seems to carry the virtues and vices of the whole wide universe within it. This all happened for me after reading Gaddis's tour-de-force and I can vouch for the same simply because:

There are words- Words which are in perfect harmony with each other and words which constantly try to find a visible shore for themselves amidst the sea of inadmissible emotions. Everything from the lucid description of a private space to the reckless telling of bared thoughts is done so masterfully here that one can't help but wonder at the images that are born out of the revelation of retrospective truth and concealment of destined lies. In between, I found poetry too.

There are colors- Colors of the patient sky and impatient homes. Colors of Flemish paintings and forged wonders. Colors of innovative minds and frustrated hearts. Colors of a colorful history and colorless present.

And a quest. A quest for identifying real and fake behind the several layers of these colors that emphasize the purity of a blank canvass and the misery of a disquieted soul. I became acquainted with many new shades whose existence was unknown to me.

There is music- *In this Flamenco music [there is] this same arrogance of suffering, listen. The strength of it's what's so overpowering, the self-sufficiency that's so delicate and tender without an instant of sentimentality. With infinite pity but refusing pity, it's a precision of suffering.* I listened.

There is nature- A customary meeting that takes place between sun and moon to greet a new dawn and dusk is an essential and my most favorite part of this book. I have never read any writer who embraced nature so intimately and unifies it effortlessly with the emotional upheavals experienced by mankind.

*The lust of summer gone, the sun made its visits shorter and more uncertain, appearing to the city with that discomfited reserve, that sense of duty of the lover who no longer loves.*

Wherever Gaddis took me, he offered the sublime company of warm rays and bright moonlight and during the instances of foggy days; I relished the unusual beauty of a silent landscape. I walked.

There is noise- People meet everywhere here. At a random café, at causeless parties, on busy streets, in desolate apartments and in distant lands. They always have so much to say to each other and there is so much which is left unsaid. Chaos prevails, which overwhelms at times but otherwise these voices convey the most profound, entertaining and sarcastic elements that present human psychology both as fascinating and a pitiful spectacle. The trick is to find a comfortable sitting position that will give you the best view possible.

—*We've had plenty of experiences to write home about already, said the woman with the ring at the long table where lunch had just commenced.*

—*We even got held up by a highwayman, her husband confirmed.*

—*It was on a train.*

—*You still call it a highwayman anyway, her husband said patiently, smiling his cheery smile.*

—*And he even talked English.*

—*It was broken English. And what do you think he told us? That we're just as much to blame, because we're there, that the victim abets the violence just by being there, he said, and he even made a quotation to prove it.*

—*From Dante he told us. He took all our money, at gun-point.*

I laughed.

There is meditation- The Recognitions screamed 'challenging' from every angle. It is. The challenge lies not in following the thoughts of countless characters or placing the source of various cultural/religious references but rather not bothering too much about the same. This book is mainly made up of numerous moments, each bearing a significant thread to a central message. There are things which will remain incomprehensible and elusive due to different reasons for different readers, so going-with-the-flow worked pretty well for me. With a little concentration, a little acceptance and a little surrender, it was all akin to a sort of meditation. I was at peace.

There is everything- Including a plot which I didn't describe and several names which I didn't take, the beauty which is inexplicable and ugliness that is inevitable, a madness which is the sanest and sanity which is fatal; this book certainly have everything to give a reader small but substantial rewards which slowly and steadily culminates into a nonpareil experience.

Do recognize these Recognitions.

*What greater comfort does time afford, than the objects of terror re-encountered, and their fraudulence exposed in the flash of reason? Triumph! as though it were any cleaner, or happier, or more bare of disappointment, than the deadening shock of re-encounter with the object of love.*

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### Geoff says

Gaddis's first novel is a big, ambitious thing, a juggernaut, overwhelming, a planetary body's worth of kinetic energy packed into its 956 pages. "Planetary" is a descriptor I come back to again and again while thinking about this book- it not only reflects the geographic scope of the novel, which unfolds across oceans and continents (though for the greater part we do not leave the microcosmic nocturama of New York City), but also the attempt to put a world's sum of knowledge and history into one work, to recreate the world of accumulated human experience within this massive triptych's unity. "Unity" is another word appropriate for *The Recognitions*, for as multifaceted and hydra-headed and sprawling as the novel appears, the book is affixed to a structure as deliberate as a map of the stars for any particular season- warp *The Recognitions* back in on itself, make of it a mobius strip, and I believe one would find the beginning and ending of the novel conversing with each other, events unfolding in parallel, phrases and images resurfacing at precise moments, which of course adds depth and resonance to that all too perfect title. As you sail your way across the churning ocean of this book, you will have your moments of recognition, not only within the reflexive texture of the text, whose component parts speak to and among each other, but your own personal world, the world outside, will begin to engage a conversation with the novel. For there is something mysteriously breathing about this book, and descending into it or rising out of it is akin to what it must be like to penetrate the atmosphere of a planet and fall into the rich air of earth, for those who have spent a stint on a space station. Or, more apropos of the novel, like the emergence from the abyss of the sea into the fecund air and bright blue cloud-ripped sunlight sailors on submarines must experience when returning home- a world retrieved- brought from the depths into the air as if fished for. Going into or out of the novel, from its world into your own or vice versa. Ascent and descent. Emergence and recognition.

Of course, everything is achieved through language. Gaddis's use of language in *The Recognitions*, the style of *The Recognitions*, its mythologizing and allusion-laden style, is where the "American heir to Joyce" comparison is validated. Gaddis appears especially like the Joyce of *Ulysses* in this context, but we must delimit and narrow this comparison, because the similarity in the appropriation and layering of mythical, historical, and religious language and imagery into the text, and a certain kind of "writing around scenes", where important narrative points are told obliquely, is where the similarity ends. Gaddis is not playing the parodist of styles that Joyce is in *Ulysses*, Gaddis is not interested in interior dialogue, stream of consciousness, in fact he remains distinctly *exterior* to his characters, eliding dialogue with ellipses and fragmented sentences, leaving much to be completed by the reader, assumed, read into- there is no interior representation of Gaddis's characters, only their actions are shown and their broken voices remade into mosaic. If one had to compare the Gaddis of *The Recognitions* with Joyce, it would be, I think, more the Joyce of *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man*. There is the same obsessive infiltration and exploration of Catholic ritual, that ritual extended into the secular world, there is the same brooding over the spirit and the Ideal as represented in religious texts and contrasted with their representation and use in secular artworks, there is the exploration of the suffering caused by seeking perfection and coming into contact with beauty, the suffering of the artist and the conflict of attempting the spiritual within the material world. The allusion-heavy, mythologized language in *The Recognitions* serves to eliminate centuries, to collapse the intellectual

history of humanity, so that into these moments in the months surrounding Christmas 1949 in New York City and the world at large, the eternal can flow through the gestures of these characters. It gives a seemingly limitless depth to the reading experience, as allusion and reference bloom into recognition, as image and word create resonance that echoes beyond the walls of the specific place of 1949 America. Gaddis, like Joyce, universalizes the mundane, very effectively, through precise reference. And while *The Recognitions* is most certainly a (postmodern?) comedy, a scathing satire and a polemical cultural critique of the shallow products of “The Age of Publicity”, it shares a great deal thematically, and in its tone, its prose-hues, with the Russian-Christian morality epics of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. The spiritual struggle at the heart of the book, the manner of characterization, the moral dilemmas it presents, even the descriptions of New York City as a frozen winterscape, recall vividly moments out of *Crime and Punishment* or *The Brothers Karamazov*, even to some extent the social satire of *Anna Karenina*. The same kind of weary, exhausted late-Christian conflict, searching representations of eternity for something to validate the finite, flawed nature of human life, and coming away empty-handed and with no answer wetting the lips, pervades.

And so *The Recognitions* is about art and art forgery, about authenticity and (the impossibility of) originality, about the crisis of the individual in a universe at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile to dignified living. It is a brilliant, necessary cultural critique that emerged from mid-20th century America, dripping with that thick black blood (*sangre negro de mi corazón*) that courses coldly through the mechanized American heart, that seems now to ring more true than ever (especially in the party scenes composed of the overlapping babbling of voices ultimately testifying to nothing but the vanity of the speakers, a prophecy of the social media age if ever there was one), a satire of the narcissism and shallow preening of contemporary mores, which have since only progressed further into fragmentation and alienation, an excoriation of the money-driven society, of blind faith in technology, market forces, media, the myth of “progress” and the vulgarization and commodification of personality, religion, art, conversation, relationships, information. It is howlingly funny and at the same time bleakly pessimistic. It reaches to find meaning in the higher pursuits of man, but collides only with layer upon layer of fraud. It finds the reek of money at the heart of everything. It is an epic of a fallen, sunken world, a world submerged, where everyone is already drowned and trying to claw their way out of personal purgatories and into the light of a sham sun in the sky that might as well be the fires of hell in the underworld. It is two mirrors turned to each other and the retreat of the face reflected into the winnowing abyss, but all the reflections have something to sell, and are thus validated as real, here in this chimeric world. It pursues the pursuit of redemption and atonement. As much as it is about Art and Artifice it is about Death, as much as a painting (or a book) is dead as soon as it is completed, and feigns eternity, and feigns timelessness, as do all of our higher aspirations.

The dedication that opens the book, to Gaddis’s daughter Sarah, is from TS Eliot’s poem “Marina”. It is a thing of great beauty itself, and any reader of *The Recognitions* will find in it echoes of that text, those texts communicating, so why not, in the spirit of appropriation, reproduce it here in full, if for no other reason than to beautify my own work with someone else’s labor.

### **Marina**

*Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga?*

What seas what shore what grey rocks and what islands  
What water lapping the bow  
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog  
What images return  
O my daughter.

Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning

Death

Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning

Death

Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning

Death

Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning

Death

Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,

A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog

By this grace dissolved in place

What is this face, less clear and clearer

The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger—

Given or lent? more distant than stars and nearer than the eye

Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet

Under sleep, where all the waters meet.

Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat.

I made this, I have forgotten

And remember.

The rigging weak and the canvas rotten

Between one June and another September.

Made this unknowing, half conscious, unknown, my own.

The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking.

This form, this face, this life

Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me

Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,

The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.

What seas what shores what granite islands towards my timbers

And woodthrush calling through the fog

My daughter.

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### **Erik F. says**

Overlong? Probably. Grandiose? Almost certainly. Brilliant? Most definitely. This swollen, acerbic cult classic bursts with such wild imagination, vivid characterization and profound eloquence that I couldn't help but love it. Its many characters swirl in and out of each other's lives throughout the nearly thousand-page text, their paths and conversations overlapping like a most rambunctious Altman ensemble film (though with Gaddis's relentless and sometimes hallucinatory skewering of organized religion and the bourgeoisie, it might seem closer to a Buñuel satire).

The novel is a literary triptych, divided into three distinct segments that focus on various forms of art and forgery, and the perpetually blurred line between reality and illusion (not to mention the poisonous relationship between art and capitalism). The art world is not the only subject to be impaled upon Gaddis's

eviscerating pen: the realms of business, politics, and religion also get their fair share of (often well-deserved) scorn and cynicism. The book's second and largest segment, set mostly in a feverish, forbidding vision of New York City, hinges together the smaller outer segments which mirror each other in many ways. Within this framework the reader enters a social whirlwind containing sinister art dealers, eccentric writers, struggling musicians, corrupt clergymen, con artists, counterfeiters, advertising agents, hitmen, WASPs, bohemians, transvestites, desperate housewives, and so forth, as they talk, travel, eavesdrop, cheat, steal, murder and deceive their ways through their pointless days. Gaddis captures a culture of people too self-absorbed to perceive any sort of higher truth, and too emotionally atrophied to form meaningful connections with others. While the obsessive artists yearn to transcend modern humanity with their works, everyone else sinks deeper into a fog of fraud and miscommunication. The transatlantic voyage that many of the characters take in Part III dispels this fog for some, but thickens it for others, as the novel builds toward its tragic yet strangely triumphant conclusion.

*The Recognitions* is remarkably dense and erudite; Gaddis has a striking way of intertwining historical, artistic, literary, theological and mythological arcana and symbolism with his descriptions, crafting multilayered allusions that resonate throughout the text and across centuries of human thought and creation. When he succeeds at this, it is stunning. When it seems a little strained, well, it's still educational. Readers flustered by his range of esoteric knowledge can still find much to admire elsewhere; his sardonic sense of humor will appeal to a certain audience, and his often breathtaking writing skills will appeal to anyone who loves language. So, whether or not this fiery novel is truly the missing link between literary modernism and postmodernism, it simply must be experienced on its own terms — even when it threatens to collapse under the weight of its own obese ambitions.

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## Matthew says

See the face on the book cover? That is my face now as I finish this book. That was my face every step of the way.

I heard somewhere while reading this that Gaddis is praised for this work in that he made it the ultimate challenge for the reader. Yay! Let's make reading hard! #sarcasm

You know how you might read a book with 5 storylines that will change each chapter. It might be a bit confusing, but at least chapter breaks give you the chance to regroup. This book frequently mixes many storylines, changing paragraph to paragraph with no break - it is up to you to figure out which one is going on! To add to this, there are no quotation marks for dialogue - good luck figuring out who is talking.

In response to one of my updates while reading this, someone posted an article about this book (I am too exhausted from this book right now to find the article and directly quote it, but if you Google "Why are large, painful books considered classics?" and you will find it.) The gist of it is that people tend to rate these books highly because they are rating their accomplishment of finishing a chunky tome and not necessarily the quality of said tome. I can definitely see that being the case with *The Recognitions*.

Another thing that I read was that the book was not well received at first, but then it started getting accolades later on because of its complexity and difficulty to read. I am not sure why that is a good thing, but it was enough for it to become a staple on many "must read before you die" lists.

Summary - I am glad this is over. I only recommend it if you like difficult and painful reading experiences - or so you can check another book off a list.

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