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“Plaintive Last Act, Full of Jagged Rhythms”

Agapē Agape: A Novel

William Gaddis

Afterword by Joseph Tabbi

Viking

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The Rush for Second Place: Essays and Occasional Writings

William Gaddis

Edited with Notes and Introduction by Joseph Tabbi

Penguin

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by Jeff Bursey

“...[W]e are all in the same line of business: that of concocting, arranging, and peddling fictions to get us safely through the night,” writes William Gaddis (1922-1998), comparing fiction writers and the religious. It is likely that more readers of U.S. fiction will have heard about Gaddis’s concoctions than have read them. His first novel, *The Recognitions*, came out in 1955, and critics typed Gaddis as a difficult writer. In prose imbued with humour and a peculiar lyricism, there occur stimulating discussions of authenticity, forgery, painting, Christianity and other topics. The erudition and length of this 956-page novel irritated and defeated reviewers insensitive to inventiveness. They did not read *The Recognitions* thoroughly but talked as if they had, and their hostile opinions helped insure the novel sold poorly. It gradually assumed cult status nonetheless. Don DeLillo and William Gass drew encouragement from this vital work, as did later authors like David Foster Wallace and William Vollman.

Twenty years later Gaddis’s reputation as ‘difficult’ was confirmed, for those predisposed to think that way, by his second novel, *JR*. Most of the 726-page novel is in dialogue without speech tags to indicate transitions from one character to another. Choppy, broken sentences create a picture of disorder on the communicative level that mirrors the misshapen composition of a financial empire ruled by an eleven-year-old. Gaddis placed a defiant remark about his aesthetics, aimed at inattentive readers, in the mouth of the character Jack Gibbs: “Most God damned readers rather be at the movies...” Thanks to Gass and Mary McCarthy, who recognized the quality of this exuberant, probing analysis of the financial world, *JR* won the 1976 National Book Award.

Carpenter’s Gothic (1985), a work of 262 pages that respects Aristotelian unities, met with relative success, and Gaddis was no longer strictly a cult author. There is none of his plentiful humour (by turns dark, witty, slapstick, and occasionally sophomoric) in this novel that deals with, among other things, Christian fundamentalism, the U.S. grabbing another country’s resources, and looming Armageddon. Gaddis’s outlook over the course of the three novels had darkened from satire through meliorism to pessimism.

His fourth and last novel was the 586-page *A Frolic of His Own*. Comprising a traditional narrative, legal opinions, court transcriptions and excerpts from a play Gaddis had attempted to write, then abandoned, and could here recycle, it won the National Book Award for 1994. Gaddis's successful explorations of the novel and its potential, his complex structures, and the use of unusual material finally gained the respect he had been denied for forty years. Yet he was still classed as difficult, when all that was required was patience and an active participation on the part of a reader.

The Rush for Second Place collects essays, speeches and reviews spanning 1951 to 1998. There are articles and notes on the player piano and certain essays—“Old Foes with New Faces”, on religion; “The Rush for Second Place”, on the desire to be first; his NBA acceptance speeches—that will be of general interest. A few will appeal primarily to Gaddis readers. All are headed by Joseph Tabbi's informative notes. In the introduction he writes:

What blocks the literary imagination is precisely what stimulated Gaddis to further creativity. By setting himself challenges equal to the world's own constraints and resistances, he could discover what freedom and autonomy might be possible, in the here and now, for an individual life and talent.

Agapē Agape, Gaddis's most recent work, retains his uncompromising vision and desire to create fiction that challenges the reader. It is the ninety-six page single-paragraph monologue of an elderly dying man as he attempts to complete a history of the player piano. Like the stock market and the law, this seems an unpromising topic for fiction. Gaddis wrestled with the material in the 1960s, as shown in *The Rush for Second Place*—almost a companion volume to the novella—and in *JR Gibbs* struggles to write the book Gaddis could not. Eventually, inspired by the work of Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, Gaddis discarded an historical approach illustrating how the technology behind the mechanical loom led to player pianos and, ultimately, to computers. He recast the research in the form of a rambling address from an unnamed man. *Agapē Agape* recapitulates many Gaddis themes: authenticity versus the counterfeit, the declining role of the artist, entropy, loss and failure. Tabbi's afterword is of considerable help and, as with the essay collection, he is a sympathetic and discerning commentator.

The narrator of *Agapē Agape* is either in a hospital or a disorderly room in his own house. The location is vague because knowing where he is doesn't matter. What is important for Gaddis is the dislocation the reader experiences in order to enter the narrator's mind. Surrounded by books and papers the narrator frets about his work and about dispensing property:

divide everything three ways one for each daughter and we all benefit... I spend a third of the year with each of them, get on with my work... and I'm allowed to show my generosity and they have the opportunity to show their love for me.

He considers how this will be perceived: “where they'll say I never really planned the whole property transfer to them out of love but just as a scheme to avoid taxes?” As in the novels, individuals are constrained within a system (religious, economic, legal) and actions potentially stem from a variety of motives. The narrator's situation is a crudely forged version of Lear's predicament. After quoting from one of Bernhard's books he says: “It's my opening page, he's plagiarized my work right here in front of me before I've even written it!” What is one's own

and what is stolen—questions from what constitutes plagiarism to what makes us individuals—also drives *The Recognitions* and *A Frolic of His Own*.

While managing legal affairs does concern the narrator, it comes second to organizing his player piano material. “Chance and disorder sweeping in” disrupt everything. Papers fall over, books are lost then found, a pencil appears and disappears. Physically, the narrator is deteriorating. Blood leaks from cuts to his stapled, parchment-like skin. Part flesh, part paper, part synthetic, his speech replete with quotations, allusions and historical references, the drugged, visually impaired and occasionally disoriented narrator is a cyborg. Unable to finish his work on paper, he expresses it to an Other. This Other is himself, the writers he arranges against each other—Flaubert, Tolstoy, Walter Benjamin, Plato, and others—and the reader. Often it is “some monstrous, some detachable self, some dangerous demon.” At other times it is benign.

It is also the only companion the narrator has. To this Other he can confide his bitterness over personal and career failures, about being a “buffoon all two dimensional some cartoon...” Anguished, he gradually focuses on how his potential, his better self, disappeared. From the opening the narrator has hinted at the seriousness of his failure to be a different man. In the last three pages he confronts this harsh realization, avoiding the digressions and hesitations that are features of the bulk of his monologue; in this tight focus, order is finally present, though only temporarily. The narrator concedes he abandoned his “ideas and opinions to suit public opinion and be part of it a, a yes a nonperson looking back at the arrogant self-made self...” The image of himself as a /16/ cartoon—a preliminary sketch of a full man—now acquires full meaning, and is tied to some of Michelangelo’s words which reverberate through the narrator’s mind—“the self who can do more”; this phrase appears in every Gaddis novel. The end of *Agapē Agape* is a passionate outburst spoken into that night through which safe passage is desired:

That was Youth with its reckless exuberance when all things were possible pursued by Age where we are now, looking back at what we destroyed, what we tore away from that self who could do more, and its work that’s become my enemy because that’s what I can tell you about, that Youth who could do anything.

Agapē Agape is a fitting conclusion to a career shaped by artistic integrity and inventiveness. Gaddis transforms a small tutorial on the player piano into a plaintive last act, filled with jagged rhythms and darting wit. He is a superb stylist and a bracing author who has been too little read. Tabbi’s notes in both books serve as a good introduction, and readers can find more at <<http://www.williamgaddis.org>>, an excellent web site devoted to Gaddis’s works.

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