"What Mean?": The Postmodern Metafiction Within William Gaddis's "The Recognitions"

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"Wht mean?:
THE POSTMODERN METAFICTION WITHIN
WILLIAM GADDIS'S THE RECOGNITIONS

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Colleen Kennedy, Chair

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ABSTRACT

As a novel about the contemporary art world, William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* comments upon itself as a narrative wrought from the materials of its own modernist literary tradition. Initially, Gaddis's novel appears to assume attributes commonly associated with the high modernist works of James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. For instance, the novel is very self-reflexive. The novel also appears to sympathize with its characters, who espouse modernist aesthetic beliefs and attempt to create art works that transcend the world of corruption and greed that surrounds them. However, the metafiction within *The Recognitions* gradually undercuts the novel's ability to achieve the modernist ideal of an art work that possesses a timeless, inherent meaning relating to ontological "truths." Moreover, the novel's apparent endorsement of its modernist characters transforms into parody. Ultimately, *The Recognitions* provides its readers with a postmodern view of art. The novel finally reveals itself to be a time-bound, equivocal text trapped in an earthly realm where a capitalist art market manufactures fantastic versions of "higher truths," and offers them up for sale as commodities.
"wht mean?:
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As a self-reflexive novel ostensibly based upon a classical Christian epic, The Recognitions initially appears to be a modernist novel that signifies timeless truths. Ultimately, however, the novel’s apparent deference to high modernism gives way to parody. The Recognitions not only undermines art’s ability to signify transcendental truths, but it charges that art perpetuates fictions which preclude knowing any definitive "reality." The novel relies on metafiction, a narrative practice that draws the reader’s attention to the logic and construction of the very narrative that he or she is reading. Gaddis’s peculiar kind of metafiction places The Recognitions within its own particular critique of the modernist literary aesthetic. For instance, the novel’s main characters espouse the traditional notion of art works as self-sustaining, transcendental signifiers, but the novel reveals that these characters are themselves fictions that merely simulate insights into higher truths. Thus, the novel implies that the literary practice of characterization, a subspecies of the larger aesthetic of representation, is itself an inherently suspect convention.

Moreover, the novel’s metafiction establishes the book as a "text"—rather than an independent "work"—dependent upon an intertextual network for meaning. In The Death of
the Author, Roland Barthes defines a "work" as a written composition preserving the univocal viewpoint (or "hypostases") of the author (147). Barthes claims that a more recent view of literature has replaced "works" with "texts," or collections of signifiers with erratic meanings that vary according to forces operating "outside" the composition. In the end, the novel’s metafiction traps the very text of The Recognitions within a network of money and corruption that question its transcendental or redemptive value. As such a "text," The Recognitions aligns itself with the post-structuralist critical thought of Fredrick Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, both of whom deny the possibility of "works" elevating themselves above the corruption of the earthly sphere.

At first, The Recognitions seems to faithfully defer to its own literary tradition. As an art work that traces its own origins to an ancient narrative which it parallels, the novel seems to exemplify a modernist art work: that is, a self-contained "object of duration" meant for spiritual enlightenment. The novel’s apparently modernist agenda has led many scholars to view The Recognitions as an endorsement of the writing conventions founded by High Modernists such as James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. Bernard Benstock, for instance, claims that while the book tries to expand upon the innovations of Ulysses, it also pays tribute to Joyce’s profoundly influential epic novel (189). Other critics assert that Gaddis’s self-referential narrative joins with
its literary predecessors in exalting art into the transcendental realm. Joseph P. Salemi claims, for example, that *The Recognitions* portrays art as the "ultimate expiation" through which "the falsehood that lies at the core of existence is transfigured beyond the pettiness and sordidness of its contexts and origins" (56). Similarly, John Leverence asserts that the novel's artist figures are heroic because they "share an uncompromising devotion to something higher than themselves by means of acts of [artistic] recognition" (42).

This thesis, however, will demonstrate how the novel uses metafiction to deny its own potential as an ideal modernist art work, and how the novel's self-critique can be turned upon its own artistic tradition. As such, this analysis diverges from the readings of such critics as Benstock, Salemi, and Leverence, and sides instead with more recent criticism demonstrating the novel's antagonism towards Modernism. Both Tony Tanner and Craig Werner, for instance, assert that the novel parodies rather than emulates Joyce's *Ulysses*. Steven Weisenberger's article, "Paper Currencies: Reading William Gaddis," closely scrutinizes Gaddis's use of monetary language within *The Recognitions*, which Weisenburger views as indicting the "hidden [modernist] devotion to the Church of Money" (160). Weisenberger contends that *The Recognitions* portrays the Modernist project as hopelessly dependent upon the corrupt
marketplace that it attempted to transcend. Weisenburger also asserts that Gaddis portrays his characters as "exemplars of modernist doctrine" who are also "counterfeits," or spurious "versions of reality" that originate from greed (148). Weisenburger, however, treats little of the metafiction within *The Recognitions*, and he fails to demonstrate how the novel's self-reflexivity parodies specific elements of the modernist movement.

According to Daniel Singal, modernist thought was a response to the general anomie of the early twentieth century, a period in which extensive social change suddenly outmoded the old, extremely rigid Victorian world-view (9). Beliefs that were once widely regarded as universal were suddenly suspect, and a disquieting sense of chaos agitated the Western intellectual elite (Singal 9). Artists often described this sense of chaos in terms of fragmentation: the different systems or "fragments" of belief and knowledge no longer supported one another (Singal 14). Consequently, no one comprehensive world view could resolve the uncomfortable puzzles of human existence.

Singal claims that modernist thought generally endeavored to uncover a new "sense of order" that lay hidden behind the apparent chaos of the twentieth century (8). According to Singal, modernist culture offered an "unprecedented stature" to art, primarily because it was perceived as the best medium for achieving synthesis, which
is the merging of disparate entities (15). Since modernists believed that art could blend the scattered fragments of human experience into a comprehensible aesthetic unity, they perceived it as "the principle means of creating whatever provisional order human beings [could] attain" (Singal 15).

For example, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* deals with a modern persona's inability to reconcile his spiritual and physical needs. The persona seeks a lost understanding in order to orchestrate the conflicting needs for sexual and spiritual fulfillment into a coherent plan of action that will allow him to "set [his] lands in order" (*The Waste Land* 66). Thus, he might clear the way for further spiritual enlightenment. Moreover, Eliot parallels the modern persona's predicament with those of the Fisher King and the Grail Questor in an attempt to make the former's isolation fit into the less time-constrained framework of a myth. While *The Waste Land* laments the absence of a higher understanding that will synthesize the disparate elements of human experience, it nonetheless suggests that such a timeless principle exists.

Many modernist artists and critics believed that certain kinds of art could accurately record an apprehension of timeless, transcendental truths (Singal 15). In Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist*, for instance, Stephen Dedalus articulates a High Modernist faith in the power of art. Stephen claims that art renders a "self-bounded and self
contained" "esthetic" image that is separated "from the immeasurable background of space and time which it is not it..." (Joyce, Portrait 212). Art renders an object in a static, timeless form, thus delineating its inherent quality, a phenomenon which Stephen calls the "quidditas" or "whatness" of a "thing" (213). Stephen maintains that when an art work, such as a painting, allows a viewer to apprehend the quidditas of an entity, then that art work is "an image of the beauty we have come to understand" (202). This so-called beauty, he claims, is "the splendor of truth" (207-209). Stephen's sentiments reflect the general modernist belief that art works could occasion a mystical expansion of human awareness that transcends quotidian perception (Singal 15).

For most High Modernist artists, the "truth" embodied in art was necessarily timeless. As Robert Martin Adams asserts, modernists believed the past "wasn't a series of incremental stages on the road to the present, it was a single pattern, replicated pointlessly and potentially into infinity" (22). Since modernists believed that meanings inherent in works are never outdated, these meanings appear again and again in different narratives. Eliot, Pound, and Joyce based their literary works upon classical narratives because they believed that history is a "series of all-but-identical arabesques traced on sheets of transparent plastic lined up one behind the other," and that with regard to
artistic depiction, "a slight shift in perspective could transpose any particular story into the Homeric age, the medieval era, the renaissance, or the 'present'" (Adams 22). Adams claims when Joyce based *Ulysses* upon *The Odyssey*, or when Eliot based *The Waste Land* upon the Grail Legend, they sought to describe modern versions of timeless "truths" using literary formats that were themselves authentic, unchanging patterns (22).

After High Modernism's climax in the 1920's and 30's, a sympathetic critical movement arose to explicate the modernist belief that art works are self-contained vessels of transcendental truths. The New Critical school, which borrowed from the theoretical works of High Modernists such as T.S.Eliot, dominated American academia well into the 1960's (Richter 727). Since, as Eliot maintained, poetry contained "objective correlatives," or images which closely correspond to prevalent human feelings, poetry could be discussed objectively (qtd. in Richter 727). This objective viewpoint led scholars to isolate texts from their historical or semiotic contexts, and to treat them as "verbal icons" with structures containing harmonies and tensions dependant solely upon that work's own genetic principle (727). These "essential structures," as Cleanth Brooks maintained, are found in most "good" art works, including architecture, painting, and music (qtd. in Richter 729). Many scholars, such as John Crowe Ransom, began to
connect these genetic principles to "higher" truths, and concluded that poems could thus enclose "a logical object or universal" (qtd. in Richter 729). In "Criticism as Pure Speculation," Ransom concluded that proper criticism is "profundely ontological," and that a critic's considerations of a work should ultimately be "ontological in such a homely and compelling sense that perhaps a child might intuit the principles which the critic will arrive at analytically, and with much labor" (514). Supposedly, the ontological truths embodied in works would elevate them above social and economic strife, thus providing them with a potentially redemptive significance.

Ultimately, the modernist belief in art's elevated status also exalted the artistic process itself. For instance, in his essay "Tradition and The Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot claims that true art comes from a definite, time-tested tradition that provides artists with an authorized creative framework (784). In this essay, Eliot encourages poets to study and venerate their literary tradition, in order to "procure a consciousness of the past" (Weisenburger 156). Eliot implies that through this consciousness an artist can transcend his own mundane personal experience to obtain a more universal voice (784).

Since modernist writers and critics saw themselves as dealing in universals, they were led to describe their respective occupations in spiritual terms (Richter 728). In
Portrait of the Artist, for instance, Stephen Dedalus likens artistic creation to that of Divine creation. He claims that an art work depicting an unchanging reality will not immediately reflect its creator’s personality, but will instead reflect his apprehension of some "static" reality:

The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the imagination. The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or above his handiwork, invisible... (215)

When Stephen implies that the "mystery of esthetic" creation parallels that of divine creation, he also implies that both kinds of production operate upon the same transcendental principles.

According to the above logic, the work itself becomes a religious signifier since the work embodies the artist’s understanding of the cosmological blueprint. Terry Eagleton claims that the New Critics transformed works into icons that transcended the work’s social or historical contexts, thus charging interpretation with a religious significance as well (47). Eagleton asserts that the New Critics turned poetry into a haven free from the unsettling social, economic, and intellectual flux of the 1950’s (46). Indeed, Cleanth Brooks, a renowned New Critic, explicitly acknowledged the rarefied status he elite assigned to
poetry, admitting that "it is no wonder that so many of the
[New Critics] have gone on...to avow an orthodox religious
position..." (qtd. in Richter 728). Thus, while High
modernists exalted art and artistry "to the status of a Holy
Communion" (Weisenberger 148), the New Critical school made
itself into a "priesthood of twentieth century humanism
making the [art work] accessible to the laity" (Richter
730). One of the chief aims of the modernist project,
therefore, was to place the artistic process above the
earthly sphere of corruption and greed (Weisenburger 148).
Accordingly, in Portrait, Stephen Dedalus elevates artistic
beauty above the "marketplace," where he claims that the
word beauty has a more narrow, less transcendent
"sense" (213).

The modernist belief that "works" were self-contained
vessels of timeless truths resulted in a tendency to create
self-reflexive works. Since, as the modernists believed, the
work contained essential structures mirroring universal
paradigms--structures elevated above the earthly realm of
"false" or corruptible constructs--then works ought to draw
attention to themselves as the embodiments of these truths.
Thus, for modernists, the work (the signifier) was as
important as the meaning (the signified), since meaning and
form were one and the same. In other words, the art work's
"materials," such as structure and form, were the very
"truths" they sought to depict. The Waste Land, for example
is a collection of "fragments," or separate poems, phrases, and allusions with no apparent logical connection. As Gregory S Jay asserts, these fragments, which deal with separate themes such as politics, sex, and religion, underlie the foregoing modernist crisis of fragmentation (127). Jay claims that the poem also mirrors Eliot's sense of a fragmentation within the various discourses of knowledge and sensibility (130). Thus, *The Waste Land* draws attention to itself as an amalgam of disparate dialogues that will not immediately organize into a larger discourse describing the whole of human experience. Jay asserts, however, that the absent cohesion within the poem is "invest[ed] with the status of Origin," or a structuring principle for language and knowledge that exists, but which is tragically hidden (126). While the poem's transcendental signified supposedly lies in the gaps between the poem's fragments, *The Waste Land's* broken form necessitates that the reader look beyond the images of earthly sordidness and spiritual crisis in order to find a higher truth that would provide the poem with a "transcendental image of harmony" (Jay 131). Thus, *The Waste Land* draws attention to itself as an artistic fount for discovering transcendental truths.

On a very general level, *The Recognitions* is a self-reflexive novel that seems to sympathize with the modernist artists that it depicts. The novel's metafictional nature
first reveals itself near the end of Part I, when Wyatt Gwyon, the novel's protagonist, claims that the complex events of his recent past have left him with the feeling that he is "reading a novel," and that this novel's "hero fails to appear, fails to be working out some plan of comedy, or, disaster..." (263). Indeed, Wyatt has unwittingly described Gaddis's novel, in which artists such as Wyatt and Stanley dauntlessly struggle to translate their supposed recognitions of "higher" truths into an artistic medium (Leverence 42). Craig Werner asserts that when Wyatt and Stanley place credence in art's capacity to render any Platonic awareness faithfully, they demonstrate a fundamentally modernist belief in the power of art (170). Not only do they speculate upon an art work's ability to signify transcendental truths, but they elaborate upon the artistic process that produces such art works, and even go so far as to speculate upon the spiritual implications of their modernist aesthetic.

As John Leverence asserts, both Wyatt and Stanley believe that certain art works embody a priori forms that Leverence calls "archetypes," which he defines as timeless and omnipresent structures or patterns that supposedly organize the universe according to some sweeping cosmic plan (39). Leverence claims that Wyatt and Stanley believe that when art works somehow contain these archetypes, then those works can provide viewers and listeners with an
uplifting glimpse of harmony and order (39). Such art supposedly prompts a viewer, reader or listener to recognize these archetypes existing behind the transient (and thus "false") forms seen in daily life (39). For instance, Stanley praises the works of Bach, which he claims delineate the "origins of design" (Salemi 53-54). Along these lines, Wyatt claims to have experienced a kind of epiphany when he witnessed the "reality" contained in Picasso’s Night Fishing in Antibes: "When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, really freed into a reality we never see..." (92). This "reality" is contained in a singularly modernist form, since, according to Adams, Picasso’s paintings and collages are considered "the most graphic manifestation" of the modernist convention of synthesis (13). Picasso used multiple perspective in an attempt to render the wholeness (or, borrowing a phrase from Stephen Dedalus, "integritas") of an object not available to the naked eye (13). Accordingly, Wyatt feels that Picasso’s canvas has occasioned an awareness of a reality that "you never see" until an enlightened appreciation of an art work allows for its "recognition." In this way, he recounts an augmentation of consciousness that fits perfectly into modernist aesthetic creed.

Since The Recognitions was written during the early 50’s, a period when New Criticism enjoyed an academic primacy, the novel also uses Wyatt and Stanley to represent
the New Critical approach to art. Wyatt and Stanley’s aesthetic beliefs mimic Ransom’s New Critical notion that understanding art is ultimately an intuitive exercise. Stanley lectures other characters about Van Gogh, who claimed that his paintings were not inventions, but copies of "memories" that he uncovered in his "interpretation(s)" of Delacroix drawings (461). According to Stanley, the right art work can actuate anyone’s intuition of a priori truth:

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 it were being created through them while they look at it or listen to it... (534-535)

Similarly, Wyatt alludes to Cicero, a classical critic who "gives Praxiteles no credit for anything of his own work, but just for removing the excess marble until he reached the real form that was there all the time" (Leverence 39). Because Wyatt feels that this sense of recall is a Platonic recognition that allows the critic to truly understand a work, he later calls for a criticism promoting "disciplined recognitions," a phrase implying the kind of scholarly approach to ontology that the New Critics would have endorsed (335).

More importantly, Wyatt and Stanley not only attest to art’s ability to signify transcendental truths, they share the modernist belief that the true artistic process records
an expanded, transcendental consciousness. Just as Stanley claims that composing music "isn't making it up, inventing music, it's like...remembering..." (461), Wyatt claims that when he recreates van der Goes paintings he delves into a consciousness that goes "much deeper, much further back" than an mere awareness of style and resemblance (250). Consequently, both Wyatt and Stanley maintain that inspiration is not an act of originality, but a Platonic realization of a priori, ontological realities available to all artists throughout time (Knight 60). When Wyatt mimics van der Goes's style with uncanny accuracy, he claims that he is doing more than merely copying "the way all other forging has been done..."; he believes instead that he records the same unchanging awareness that van der Goes himself encountered centuries before (Knight 63). Similarly, Stanley strives to compose a requiem that is "finished to a thorough perfection...prepared against time as old masters prepared their canvases and their pigments, so that when they were called to appear the work would still hold the perfection they had embraced there" (323). The artist's task, therefore, is to translate his personal recognition of universal truths into the tangible form of an art work, and the art work itself is therefore "nothing but a part of [the artist's] understanding itself" (Salemi 52).

Wyatt and Stanley also reflect T.S. Eliot's belief that true art comes from a definite artistic tradition. In
the spirit of Eliot's warning against unlearned poetic innovation, Stanley laments the contemporary emphasis upon complete originality, which he sees as inherently inartistic:

Some of them have set out to kill art[...] And some of them are so excited about discovering new mediums and new forms... that they never have time to work in one that's established. (186)

Likewise, Wyatt harkens to the words of a drawing instructor, Herr Koppel, who preaches that originality is the "romantic's disease," or the undesirable side effects of incompetent artists unable to operate within painting convention (Salemi 47). For Wyatt, however, his artistic tradition does much more than insure quality craftsmanship: it allows the artist to transcend the present and "procure the consciousness of the past," and thus build upon the ageless truths discovered by preceding artists (Tanner 396). Hence, Wyatt claims that when he forges Flemish masterpieces, he is transported through time to 15th century Flanders when he is a "Master painter in the Guild," working under "the Guild oath... to use pure materials, to work in the sight of God" (250).

Ultimately, Wyatt and Stanley translate their ontological views of art and artistry into spiritual or religious terms, a tendency that, as Weisenberger notes, is commonly associated with the modernist artists and critics (148). Stanley claims that "[i]t isn't for love of the thing
itself that an artist works, but so that through it he's expressing love for something higher..." (632).

Consequently, he believes that the Baroque Masters's music "touched the origins of design" because it was composed "for the Church," and not for fame, wealth, or other forms of selfish gratification (322). Similarly, Wyatt finds spiritual significance in highly detailed 15th Century Flemish paintings because he believes that these intricate works reflected a guild member's faith. He claims that the painters "found God everywhere":

There was nothing God did not watch over...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... (251)

Wyatt and Stanley's belief in art's sacred potential parallels an ecumenical modernist acclivity towards religion, particularly Christianity. Basil Valentine, a cynical art critic, vaguely alludes to the High Modernists when he discusses an elite group of cerebral artists who "spend all their time criticizing each other's attempts in terms of cosmic proportions, and then defend each other against the outside world" (353). He refers specifically to one member, apparently an amalgam of Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot, who "joined a notorious political group, behaved treasonably..." and who then "joined a respectable remnant
of the Protestant Church and settled down to pour out his [soul]" (353). The Recognitions further reinforces the modernist connection between art and religion with its subtle play upon a line from Joyce's Ulysses: while Valentine asks Wyatt if he "has a bit of the priest in" him (261), a character in Ulysses claims that Bloom, the novel's "hero," "has a bit of the artist in him" (193, emphasis added). Just as Wyatt claims as there is a "fatal likeness" between the two vocations, The Recognitions's playful allusion to a line from a Joyce's masterpiece typifies the modernist association of art with religion. Ultimately, Wyatt's and Stanley's desire to keep their respective crafts raised above the earthly decay and corruption surrounding them reflects this Modernist tendency to view art as a spiritual vocation rather than an economic enterprise (Weisenburger 148).

It should be quite clear, then, that The Recognitions uses characters such as Wyatt and Stanley, who ascribe an "unprecedented stature" to art, to present the reader with an apparently sympathetic view of modernism. In the most general sense, these characters hope to engage in mystical acts of artistic creation, producing priceless works that outlast the earthly corruption surrounding them. In this spirit, The Recognitions uses alchemy as a metaphor for the modernist artistic project, since the alchemical aim is to redeem inherently corrupt earthly matter by converting it to
gold (Leverence 41). The novel’s narrative voice informs the reader that Medieval alchemists saw "in gold the image of the sun, spun in the earth by its countless revolutions, then, when the sun might yet be taken for the image of God" (131-132). The reader is further informed, however, that in order for an alchemist to succeed, he must work through "the way of progressive revelation, that doctrine which finds man incapable of receiving Truth all of a lump, but offers it to him only in a series of distorted fragments..." (132). Indeed, the modernist hope for an expansion of awareness through an artistic synthesis of fragmented feelings and thoughts coincides intimately with the alchemical ambition. The modernist preoccupation with their mediums, or the materials of their craft, reflects the alchemical preoccupation with redeeming the earthly materials within their cauldrons. Just as The Waste Land persona challenges the reader to "shore the fragments" of the poem’s materials around a higher structuring principle, modernist artists like Wyatt and Stanley seek to paint and compose the timeless archetypes that will transform their works from earthly constructs into transcendental signifiers (Leverence 42).

Ultimately, however, The Recognitions’s plot precludes the fulfillment of these modernist hopes. The novel uses characters such as Wyatt and Stanley to posit the heroic nature of the modernist project, but never produces a hero
who is equal to the task. The Recognitions slowly reveals its parody of modernism through these two characters, who struggle to perfect their respective crafts and promote their modernist beliefs throughout most of the novel. However, the reader gradually learns that the capitalist culture within The Recognitions, which engulfs everything, has doomed Wyatt's and Stanley's aspirations from the start. The novel's final effect makes Wyatt and Stanley's struggles and beliefs comically out of touch with their environment.

Thus, when Wyatt senses that he is reading a novel without a hero, he unwittingly describes the very novel in which he "is lived" (262-263). More importantly, when Wyatt describes his feelings in literary terms, he draws the reader's attention to the general mode of representation that entraps him. As such, Gaddis's novel is essentially metafictional: it comments upon its own formation, and informs its readers how to read the novel that we hold in front of us. Gaddis's use of metafiction is interesting because of its stealthy intent: the novel's self-reflexivity may trap the reader, especially a learned one, into thinking that The Recognitions is a modernist novel that explicitly addresses modernist concerns. Just as The Waste Land draws attention to its disparate fragments as a possible starting point for a higher understanding, Gaddis's book simulates a typically modernist preoccupation with its own "materials."

In the end, however, the novel's self-referential treatment
of both its characters and its intertextuality denies its own existence as a self-sufficient work capable of representing truth, and thus lampoons itself, its modernist tradition, and perhaps even the reader as well.

More importantly, as the novel's apparently modernist self-reflexivity gradually gives way to parody, *The Recognitions* slowly awakens the reader to a postmodern view of art. According to postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard, art does not depict timeless truths, but perpetuates the fictions or fantasies of a capitalist culture. For example, in his essay, "The Procession of the Simulacra," Baudrillard claims that all signifiers insidiously conceal the absence of the "basic" realities that they supposedly signify. He asserts that cultures initially create signifiers, such as art works, in an attempt to reflect some "basic reality" (256). Baudrillard claims, however, that any attempt to represent reality necessarily distorts that reality, much as a map flattens a three dimensional landscape in order to make that landscape accessible to a traveler (253). More importantly, the image dissimulates or hides the fact that it misrepresents (256). Thus, the image eventually "masks the absence of a basic reality," and becomes a simulacrum, or a representation "pretending" to reflect something real (256). In the last order of its development, the image becomes an independent entity that replaces the original "basic reality" it was meant to depict (256). Baudrillard
claims that, ultimately, culture artificially produces "reality," and he thus confutes the idea of a fundamental, unalterable "truth."

As the metafiction within The Recognitions unfolds, it closely mirrors Baudrillard's development of the simulacra. Initially, the novel appears to endorse the notion that art can represent "some basic reality." Furthermore, Wyatt's heroic quest to embody truths within his art reinforces the reader's initial tendency to read the novel as an endorsement of the modernist project. Ultimately, however, Gaddis's metafiction not only reduces Wyatt's paintings to materials that merely play at signifying higher truths, but it also alerts the reader to the distortions and simulacra within the novel itself. Moreover, when The Recognitions finally reveals itself to be a time-bound, equivocal text comprised of characters who are themselves simulations, the novel places itself an earthly realm where meaning becomes transitory and where economics in part determines what is "real" or "true."

This is precisely the view of contemporary art that Frederick Jameson articulates in his essay, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." In this essay, Jameson attempts to fit different aspects of post-structuralist critical thought, such as theories of intertextuality and of the production of simulacra, into a general theory maintaining that art reflects an economy's
mode of production rather than "higher truths" (56). Postmodernism, claims Jameson, is no mere isolated artistic movement, but is instead a "cultural dominant" that arises from a capitalist system that produces "culture" and offers it as merchandise (56). Jameson asserts that in reality, this mass produced culture only gives off the appearance of having a natural development. He claims that our understanding of our past is comprised of artistic and nostalgic versions of history (such as the movie American Graffiti) which are themselves fantastic products of the capitalist system (67). The resulting culture is one predicated upon appearances, or a "set of dusty spectacles" which resemble Baudrillard's simulacra. These "dusty spectacles" attempt to represent basic realities which never existed, and thus reduce history to mere surfaces that merely simulate "depth," or truth.

Jameson claims that the resulting "depthlessness" of postmodern civilization "finds its prolongation in both contemporary 'theory,' and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" (58). Jameson claims that the belief that there is nothing behind surfaces has resulted in the widespread abandonment in the belief that art works, which are visible cultural products, are "symptom[s] for some vaster reality which replaces it as ultimate truth" (59). Jameson demonstrates how postmodern painting and architecture accentuate their own surface features, and
thus repudiate any claim to depth. More importantly, he explains that literary have been similarly reduced to surfaces, or texts, which are collections of signifiers with no necessary relation to a predetermined signified (62). Texts therefore give way to "textual play," or a profusion of possible readings that are not locked inside poems (which have no depth), but which are determined by a myriad of outside factors (62).

Indeed, as The Recognitions draws attention to its own surface, it reveals an underlying postmodern character. For example, the novel draws attention to its characters as characters, or fictional representations of people, and in doing so discredits a basic literary convention (Weisenburger 149). As certain characters espouse their modernist beliefs, the novel strips away their claim to connect with timeless truths. In this way, the novel not only attacks the modernist ideal of an artist-hero who endeavors to master his medium and thus create artistic versions of truth, but it also attacks the larger aesthetic practice of representation. Thus, The Recognitions implies that any attempt to render reality artistically only results in that reality's distortion, and that art eventually clutters the world with a series of complex alternate versions of what is "real," thus removing the possibility of any single, authentic "reality."

The Recognitions initially presents Wyatt as a kind of
archetype for the struggling artistic genius. Several characters, most of whom are would-be artists, reinforce this view of Wyatt as an artistic prodigy (Madden 293). Esther, Wyatt’s wife, senses in Wyatt an "indiscernible underlying reality" originating "somewhere beyond her," implying that Wyatt himself is a visible manifestation of a timeless archetype. Esther’s sense of awe is shared by other characters such as Esme, a poet, Valentine, an art critic, and Benny, an ex-architect. Indeed, Wyatt is a very complicated and intelligent character who contrasts a score of crude, vain, and greedy characters. As such, he easily attracts the reader’s sympathies as he attempts to rise above his unattractive surroundings. Ultimately, however, when The Recognitions turns Wyatt into "Wyatt-Stephen," the novel conspicuously patterns its own character after Stephen Dedalus. The novel links the two characters when Wyatt accepts the name of "Stephen Asche," a name on a forged Swiss passport offered by an inveterate counterfeiter, Sinisterra (172). As Bernard Benstock points out, there are several parallels between Wyatt and Stephen Dedalus: both are developing artistic geniuses, both were marked for the priesthood, and both are sought after as surrogate sons by characters such as Sinisterra and Leopold Bloom (180). Furthermore, "Stephen Asche’s" Swiss nationality connects his origins to Zurich, the city where Joyce polished the character of Stephen Dedalus in his epic novel,
Ulysses (Benstock 181). And, according to Werner, Wyatt not only copies Dedalus's surface qualities, he borrows Stephen's aesthetic beliefs (171). Like his predecessor, Wyatt sees the artistic process as an apprehension of a timeless, universal "beauty" or truth resulting in a "self-sufficient" artifact with inherent qualities. In the end, Wyatt becomes the novel's model for the heroic artist, but his development also serves the ulterior purpose of drawing attention to the fact that he is just another Stephen Dedalus, and is thus a product of the suspect convention of characterization. More importantly, The Recognitions goes on to use another character, Otto, to create a laughable simulation of Wyatt that eventually debases the original notion of the modernist artist-hero.

The Gaddis's extremely humorous development of Otto, a struggling playwright, is his novel's most obvious metafictional treatment of a character. Otto, who is unwittingly vain and shallow, seeks to win fame, fortune, and women with his assumed artistic sensibilities. Otto's attempts to appear artistic are outrageous: in order to assume Hemingway's celebrated romantic and worldly sophistication, he finishes a play in South America, and returns to New York to flaunt his tropical tan and fake war wound. He is one of many characters who meander throughout the novel's extensive party scenes advertising their artistic inclinations. In one passage, these characters are
not only described as posturing Greenwich Village "types,"
but they are subtly described as characters when they are
compared to artificial plants:

...in as great a variety of jealous identities
assembled as the tenants of an expensive
florist’s window...arranged...in that
slightly frantic symmetry which dazed passers-
by called artistic, and move on, never hazard-
ing the senses to violation by wire and the
treachery of paper petals. (610)

These people are not only artificial in the sense that they
try to appear "artistic," but also in the sense that they
are "paper" artifices supported by the artist’s "wires" that
construct the careful arrangement presented in the "window"
of Gaddis’s novel, a phenomenon that any reader might also
call "artistic." Similarly, Otto calls attention to his own
existence as a somewhat dubious character when he checks his
Tropical suit in a mirror (in New York, during December) and
asks himself, "If I were a character in a play...would I be
credible?" (524). In this way, The Recognitions draws
attention to its characters qua characters.

While the novel initially posits Wyatt as the
prototype, vain and self-serving Otto functions a "lesser"
counterfeit of Wyatt (Weisenburger 155). Otto’s character
development continues to draw the reader’s attention to the
fact that he is a fictional representation of a person,
while the nature of this development suggests that the
process is inherently suspect. Rather than developing into a complex and unique character, Otto is conspicuously turned into a flat and ridiculous character who elicits laughter rather than sympathy. In his play, Otto creates "Gordon," a character who represents Otto's romantic conception of the ideal sophisticated artist. Otto patterns "Gordon" after Wyatt: "Gordon" not only plagiarizes Wyatt, but mimics his gestures, even assumes a similar appearance, and Otto is forced to admit that he "was commencing to envy Gordon" (123). Otto repeats Wyatt's modernist sentiments in an attempt to appear profound, but his more selfish motives plunges these sentiments into less lofty contexts. While Otto quotes freely from Wyatt, he does so without understanding: in order to impress Esther he repeats Wyatt's assertion that "God devotes as much time to a moment as He does to an hour," but later writes "wht mean?" next to the same sentiment in his notes (124,131).

"Gordon" thus becomes Otto's fictional representation of an ideal, in this case the ideal artistic genius that he discerns in Wyatt. Eventually, however, The Recognitions reminds the reader of Otto's existence as a literary character when he becomes the character in his own play. Otto is unintentionally involved in counterfeiting, flees the country, is knocked unconscious in South America (where he receives a "real" war wound), and when he awakes with partial amnesia he calls himself "Gordon"(732). Although
Otto's character receives much attention throughout the novel, he fails to develop into anything other than a less complicated and believable version of Wyatt, who is merely a more convincing "simulation."

More important, however, is the fact that "Gordon" is nothing more than a deflation of the archetype that he was meant to depict: the "Gordon" that Otto becomes is neither profound or romantic, but ridiculous. Since Otto's development into "Gordon" is essentially metafictional, it implies that fictional characterization only creates its own fakes rather than depicting realities. When "Gordon" wakes the care of Dr. Fell, a mad scientist, he is infected by a disease that Dr. Fell feels is "entirely original" (731). The phrase can be seen to refer to Herr Koppel's disgust with the "romantic's disease" -- the desire to create original art -- but it can also be seen to comment upon "Gordon's" origin, which is Otto, another character whose fictitiousness is merely less conspicuous. Gaddis's novel implies that as a fictional type, "Gordon" is the diseased result of an attempt to depict the supposed "reality" of an "ideal" in character form. Just as Otto collapses into just another character, literary characterization does not embody realities, but simply gives way to other fictions. As such, Gaddis's treatment of Otto differs from the modernist deflation typified in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Pufrock." One could argue that while Eliot wanted Pufrock's
experience to pale in comparison to an unrealized, more complete possibility, "Otto-Gordon" is the mockery of something that is itself absurd. When Stanley questions the existence of Dom Sucio, a cryptic dwarf residing with Mrs. Deigh, Mrs. Deigh’s reply subtly implicates the sum of the novel’s characters: "But dear boy...he’s as real as we are" (927). Mrs. Deigh highlights the fact that all of the novel’s characters are fictions, and as such they are all equally unreal.

More importantly, The Recognitions expands its critique of its own literary mode of representation to a larger critique of aesthetic representation. The novel’s treatment of Wyatt’s painting parallels the novel’s skeptical view of characterization, and thus turns its self-critique onto the overall modernist aesthetic. As previously asserted, Wyatt believes that his art is much more than uncanny pastiche of van der Goes; he believes his painting is a product of the same Platonic recognitions that the Flemish master experienced himself centuries before (Knight 61). Yet, The Recognitions’s modernist artists inadvertently undercut the notion that paintings can embrace archetypes that, as Wyatt asserts, exist because they are "being looked at by God" (251). Both Wyatt and Stanley profess the suspicion that finishing an art work somehow extinguishes the transcendental conception that the work was meant to signify. Wyatt refuses to finish a painting of his mother
because as long as the work remains unfinished "perfection is still possible" (57). Likewise, Stanley unwittingly argues against his own modernist beliefs when he asserts that even though the so-called "perfection" is there "all the time," "finishing [an art work] strikes it dead..." (599). Stanley implies that any attempt to render a transcendental truth will merely result in a "dead" and thus inaccurate representation, because artistry is a time-constrained, imperfect activity that imposes its own constraints upon the artist, who thus creates something which is essentially different (no matter how apparent the similarity) from the reality the artist hopes to depict. A subtle example of this difference is given in a description of Wyatt's Flemish-style painting of Esme, which "projected her there in a form it imposed, in lines it dictated and colors it assumed, and the accidents of flesh which it disdained" (274, emphasis added). In an attempt to render Esme into an ideal form, the painting imposes or dictates its own form and colors upon an imperfect subject, and thus it "disdains" the subject's imperfections, or "accidents." Esme then highlights the difference between herself and her painted image: "How beautiful she is, no longer me,...for she is dead" (275).

Indeed, Esme's understanding of art's inevitable distortions parallels Baudrillard's conception of nascent simulacra. Baudrillard asserts that representations replace
what is "real" with a different "reality" resulting from both the limitations and embellishments inherent in depiction (253). In other words, representation eventually "kills" the "truth" that it is meant to depict, and replaces it with its own indestructible simulacra, images which are forever taken as real because they hide the fact that they are illusory (254). Representation thus creates and perpetuates its own enduring "reality," which is essentially unreal². This is most certainly the case of Wyatt's painting, which not only renders Esme's image in a form that is "emptied[...]of the transient violence of life" (275), but which is also described as "a perfect lie" (335, 480). As Craig Werner points out, Esme herself clearly articulates the notion that Wyatt's art creates its own reality"(177). In a letter to Wyatt she writes:

> It does not seem unreasonable that we invent colors, lines, shapes, capable of being, representative of existence, therefore it is not unreasonable that they, in turn, later, invent us, our ideas...

Paintings are metaphors for reality, but instead of being an aid to realization obscure the reality which is far more profound. The only way to circumvent painting is by absolute death. (473)

When Esme asserts that our artistic modes "invent...ideas" and thus "obscure...reality," she parallels Baudrillard's definition of the fully developed simulacra, which perpetuate their own, "unreal" version of reality.
Ultimately, the novel's metafictional treatment of Otto mirrors this highly philosophical critique of painting presented within the novel: the writing convention that Otto uses to create an artistic version of himself actually deflates him into "Gordon," who, like the "original" Otto, is merely the invention of an artistic practice that can only propagate other fictions. Just as Baudrillard claims that representation is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality...," Otto is referred to as a counterfeit in a "series of an original that never existed" (Tanner 395).

The notion that Otto counterfeits just another counterfeit further indicts Wyatt, who is Otto's "model." Just as Otto's character is derived from Wyatt, Wyatt is posited as another version of Joyce's simulation of himself (Werner 172). Consequently, Gaddis's novel implicates Stephen Dedalus, who provides primary artist-hero model mirrored within The Recognitions (Weisenburger 148-149). As Steven Weisenburger asserts, the novel's character development implies that "literary versions of experience are suspect," and that Gaddis's novel "registers at the most fundamental of writing a distrust of writing" (149). This wariness of fictional representation parallels a skepticism of general artistic representation which the novel subtly illuminates as it progresses.

More importantly, since The Recognitions implies that
artistry, including the novel convention, produces alternate realities precluding a single, "real" reality, it also refutes the modernist belief that art performs a spiritual function. If art perpetuates fabrications and fantasies, then it cannot function as the spiritual signifier that modernists hoped (Werner 170). Indeed, as Valentine asserts, religious paintings such as van der Goes’s actually conceal "a profound mistrust in God" (Knight 65). He alleges that the Flemish penchant for detail delineated a "terror of emptiness," an "absolute terror of space" that grew out of the underlying fear that "maybe God isn’t watching" (690). Valentine implies that by virtue of its very existence, religious art undercuts its own religious intent of signifying faith, and is thus itself inherently profane. Yet Valentine goes beyond the Platonic critique that art denigrates the ideal: he raises the possibility that religious art is the simulacra for something that does not exist in any sphere. Valentine’s critique mirrors Baudrillard’s appraisal of the iconoclastic attack upon religious representations. Baudrillard asserts that while the iconoclasts fear that art distorts spiritual truths, their "rage to destroy images" originates from the possibility that "there has never been any God, that only the simulacrum exists, indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum" (255). Thus, while Valentine’s sentiments are iconoclastic, he highlights a postmodern view
of art that counters Wyatt's modernist beliefs.

The Recognitions uses the alchemical motif to summarize its metafictional treatment of its characters. The novel subtly alludes to its characters as the "cinders" of the novelist's thwarted attempt at alchemy. While many of the characters are gathered together at Esther's party, they are likened to the ingredients in a cauldron where:

...the alchemist waited with a lifetime's patience, staring into his improbable complex of ingredients as dissimilar in nature as in proportion, commingling but refusing to fuse there under his hand, and as unaware of his hand as of their own purpose, so that some sank and others came entirely to the surface, all that as though nothing had changed since the hand sifted the scoria of the Middle Ages for what they have sought, and found as they find, that what they seek has itself been refined away, leaving only the cinders of necessity. (639)

Since characters themselves are the lifeless byproducts of a writing convention that produces mere illusions, they are, according to the modernists's own reasoning, fundamentally corrupt entities. Thus, the alchemist-writer who uses them as elements in his modernist artistic endeavor will fall short of the alchemical miracle of redeeming the flawed materials of his art work, which remains a base earthly fabrication. In this way, The Recognitions undermines its own ability to serve any spiritual purpose, since it is itself comprised of such irredeemable materials.

The Recognitions also questions art's ability to
depict transcendental truth when it examines its own intertextuality, a quality that prevents any art work from having a timeless, inherent meaning. Wyatt and Stanley attribute the quality of "separateness" or "self-sufficiency" to art works, qualities which allow such works to contain and preserve its inherent attributes (Salemi 49). For instance, the structure of flamenco music impresses Wyatt with its "self-sufficiency that's so delicate and tender without an instant of sentimentality...the tremendous tension of violence all enclosed in a framework..." (111-112). Likewise, Stanley attempts to create a work that has "within itself proof against time" because every "pattern" and "transition" is "finished to a thorough perfection" (322-323). Thus, for Wyatt and Stanley, art works are built and sustained upon their own peculiar aesthetic principles that are independent of time and place. In the end, however, The Recognitions's implicit recognition of its own intertextuality not only discredits the notion that it has an timeless, inherent meaning, it also rejects its own status as a modernist archetypal narrative.

As Elaine B. Safer suggests, The Recognitions draws attention to its own intertextual fabric when it establishes that it is based upon The Clementine Recognitions, a 3rd century Christian narrative about the life of a saint (117). The novel points to its own genesis when it catches Valentine in the middle of a phone conversation with an
acquaintance of "Willie," the novel's author:

...tell your friend Willie that salvation is hardly the practical study it was then. 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. Yes, it's really the beginning of the whole Faust legend. But one can hardly...eh? My, your friend is writing for a rather small audience, isn't he? (372-373).

As Safer points out, The Recognitions is itself not a self-sufficient narrative, since it derives meaning from the added context of a previous story (113). Because Valentine's interpretation is incomplete, it is also ironic: The Clementine Recognitions is about a youth who travels to Egypt to learn magic, but who eventually journeys to Palestine to acquire religious wisdom from St. Peter (Moore, Reader's Guide 170). Valentine's reading, however, provides the learned reader with a literary context in which to approach his reading of The Recognitions. Since the Faust legend centers around a magician who sells his soul for his art, this reader will add another dimension to her/his reading of the novel as s/he compares and contrasts Wyatt to the Faust protagonist (Safer 113). This "deeper" understanding will not result from the meanings inherent in the novel's text, but from its relationship to another narrative. Wyatt himself suggests a purely philosophical
form of intertextual understanding when he asks, "...do we only know things in terms of other things?" (379).

Consequently, The Recognitions self-consciously establishes itself as a "text" rather than a "work." As such, the novel is an obvious example of the post-structuralist precept that literature consists of texts dependant upon each other for their interpretations, rather than "works" which have inherent and invariable "core" meanings. In the terms of Roland Barthes, any novel is a "text, being itself the intertext of another text, [thus] belongs to the intertextual" and is entirely comprised of quotations that are "anonymous, irrecoverable, and yet already read: they are quotations without quotation marks" (From Work to Text 77). When Barthes claims that a text is "already read," he means that reading one text will in part determine the meaning of a subsequent one (77). An example of this influence is provided within The Recognitions when Esme demonstrates her understanding of a religious text based upon her reading of a fictional one: she claims that the only "historical parallel" of the "Assumption of the Virgin... that she knew" is the case of "Little Eva in Uncle Tom's Cabin" (826). When The Recognitions calls attention to its nexus with The Clementine Recognitions, Gaddis' novel is in effect alerting the reader that it is abstracted from one of many texts, and is thus an intertextual quote "without quotation marks." As such, The Recognitions can not
be said to have an inherent, autonomous meaning that Barthes very appropriately describes in theological terms:

A text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations, drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (The Death of the Author 146)

Barthes’s theological terminology fits perfectly with the case of Gaddis’s novel, since its dependence upon other narratives undercuts the self-sufficiency of its implied theological theme. As such, the intertextuality apparent with The Recognitions stands apart from Joyce’s conspicuous use of the same phenomenon within Ulysses. While Ulysses includes a variety of textual types, such as advertisements, in an attempt to unify a broad range of discourses into an aesthetic unity, Gaddis’s novel draws attention to the potential instability of its own language.

Furthermore, Gaddis’s novel reflects the notion that the "Author-God" no longer dictates and preserves a univocal meaning within "his/her" text. As Barthes asserts, the intertextual network subsumes both the author and his intended meaning, and an infinitude of possible readings replace a univocal denotation: Barthes claims that an author can only "'come back" into his text as a "guest, so to speak. If an author is a novelist, he inscribes himself into
his text as one of the characters, as another figure sewn into the rug...

(From Work to Text 78). Indeed, Gaddis seems to purposely illustrate the above notion when he portrays himself as a character sewn into the intertextual "rug" of his own book. Thus, The Recognitions implies that a particular reading of itself will not result from its author's religious or transcendental understanding, but from an interpretation determined by other texts. Since The Clementine Recognitions portrays a man's salvation and the Faust legend depicts a man's damnation, Valentine's comparison of the two not only demonstrates that the former text does not necessitate a univocal, affirmative reading, but also that his understanding of "the first Christian novel" is determined by his understanding of another, apparently antithetical text. In the end, The Recognitions implies that the intertextual existence of Gaddis's artistic creation undercuts his own artistic autonomy.

Moreover, The Recognitions not only repudiates an inherent meaning, it also repudiates its status as an a modernist, archetypal narrative (Werner 170). Basil Valentine's phone conversation with "Willie's" friend draws the reader's attention to the fact that The Recognitions is based on a third century epic often "referred to as the first Christian novel," a feature that initially gives Gaddis's novel a very modernist character (Werner 170). Gaddis's use of The Clementine Recognitions establishes the
expectation that *The Recognitions* will signify the prior work’s timeless religious truths in a modern context, just as Eliot attempted to create a parallel between *The Waste Land* persona and the Fisher King. However, this is an expectation that the novel’s plot only apparently reinforces. Just as the Clementine protagonist rejects the magical art in favor of a Christianity, Wyatt eventually rejects painting as a dead material lacking any redeeming qualities. This parallel, however, is not an endorsement of *The Clementine Recognitions* as a genuine paradigm for a salvation narrative; rather, Wyatt’s rejection of painting challenges the notion that any art, myths included, can signify any truth whatsoever. In the end, Wyatt’s repudiation of his own art’s transcendental significance mirrors the way in which the novels’ metafiction implicates its own ability to represent reality, or to possess an immutable meaning.

*The Recognitions*’s metafictional character not only calls attention to the novel’s production of simulacra and its entrapment within an intertextual net, but it also depicts the art within the story as caught within a web of money and power that perpetuates the production of simulacra. When Valentine claims that *The Clementine Recognitions* spawned the "Faust legend," he alerts the reader that the novel’s plot will not only parrot a salvation narrative, but that the novel will also entail an
outright condemnation of art. The Faust legend was first presented in literary form in 16th century Germany, in a work entitled *The Damnable Life, and Deserved Death of Dr. John Faustus*, a tale of a protagonist who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for magical secrets (Gill xiii). This legend has been represented several times, most notably in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, which depicts magician figure whose worldly ambitions for immortal fame and wealth foster their own damnation. When *The Recognitions* likens the artist to the Faustian magician figure, it suggests that like Faustus, artists employ their craft in earthly pursuits.

Within the art world of *The Recognitions*, greed is the primary source of art's "essential structure." Wyatt believes that when he recreates van der Goes paintings, he delves into a consciousness that goes "much deeper, much further back" than a mere awareness of style. Valentine confutes Wyatt's romantic notions when he alleges that guilds were nothing but businesses that catered to the vanity of wealthy patrons:

And your precious van Eyck, do you think he didn't live up to his neck in a loud vulgar court? In a world where everything was done for the same reasons everything is done now? for vanity and avarice and lust? and the boundless egoism of these [patrons]...Oh, the 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 their canvas? or is it vanity and fear, the same decadence that surrounds us now? (689-690)
Thus, according to Valentine, business concerns rather than divine impetui provide art with an essentially corrupt, earthly form. Such art derives its existence not from the eyes of God, but from the profit that it brings to the artist who flatters a patron with the latter's artificial and embellished image. Stanley, in his usual unwitting fashion, admits that religious art is ineluctably tied to money when he asserts that his religious requiem would have been finished if he had been writing it hundreds of years ago," "...because the Church..." would have financed its completion (617). Thus, within The Recognitions, art is more of a business than it is a religious "vocation."

Eventually, "the decadence that surrounds" Wyatt's heroic artistic quest precludes the fulfillment of his modernist hopes. Greed not only occasions art, but the capitalist system appropriates and thus subverts any artistic attempt to transcend earthly corruption. As such, the art world within The Recognitions mirrors the post-structural notion that art is nothing more than a side effect of a materialistic society(Jameson 56). As Terry Eagleton asserts, New Criticism elevated art in an attempt to escape economic realities:

[New Criticism] was the ideology of an uprooted, defensive, intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not find in reality. Poetry was the new religion, a nostalgic haven from the alienations of industrial capitalism. (Eagleton 47)
A perfect example of this "escape from reality" is Valentine's reference to a magazine published by the High Modernists, who use the periodical to criticize each others works "in terms of cosmic proportions, and then defend each other against the outside world" (353). The "outside world" of Gaddis's novel is a fundamentally materialistic one, where greedy and self-serving people such as Otto value gold not as an alchemical signifier of spiritual purity, but as a commodity in the form of "cuff links, cigarette cases, and other mass-produced artifacts of the world he lived in, mementos of this world, in which the things worth being were so easily exchanged for the things worth having" (131).

Since the modernist critics and artists Valentine describes react against their capitalistic society, their works and critical approaches are actually products of that society. More importantly, the novel's capitalist network ultimately consumes these modernist attempts to transcend it. Rectall Brown acquires their magazine, and hopes to increase its sales by making it less "intellectual": "I'm going to bring it around to where even a half-wit can feel intellectual reading it. The circulation will be twenty times what it is now" (353). Similarly, a network of greed entraps and exploits Wyatt's artistic talent. While Wyatt attributes his ability to recreate the detailed style of van der Goes paintings to a timeless religious understanding, his paintings have no value in his world unless they are
used as counterfeits. To a profiteer such as Brown, however, Wyatt’s (and van der Goes’s) style is not recognition of a higher truth, but a feature that turns a canvas into a highly salable commodity. According to Frederic Jameson, modernists viewed style as an inherent element of an art work; it was the "characteristic" manner in which the artist produced a work with a distinctive meaning (64). In the world of The Recognitions, however, style is merely a means of assigning an economic value to a work. As Valentine implies, style is so important that it overrides the necessity for authenticity within the art market: he asserts that if the public "'is willing to pay the price of a Raphael'" for any painting done in Raphael’s style, "...then it is a Raphael" (293 emphasis added). Thus, as Jameson contends, style itself becomes a "mass produced" commodity that is so widely circulated among society that the style becomes commonplace, and thus loses its original meaning as it is stripped of its original contexts (67). This is an apt description of Brown’s counterfeiting enterprise, which turns a profit by simulating the highly valued styles of famous painters. Thus, when Wyatt forges a signature on one of his reproductions, "the corruption enters," and the painting ceases to posses the potential to exist as transcendental signifier possessing an inherent style (251). Instead, the painting becomes a mere commodity, and the very qualities that supposedly elevate Wyatt’s paintings actually
Since Wyatt’s painting hinges upon Brown’s patronage, his artistic enterprise depends upon one of the earthly networks of corruption that he attempts to transcend. Not only does Wyatt need financial support to engage in such intricate and time-consuming painting, his work’s anonymity suggests that it will go unappreciated except as forgeries that fool the critics, and thus gain access to an art market that controls museums and galleries(144). Thus, the capitalistic network within The Recognitions precludes the realization of Wyatt’s modernist beliefs, simply because his paintings become commodities the moment they participate in the painting tradition.

When the novel reduces Wyatt’s art to a mere commodity, it also reduces his paintings to earthly constructs that merely simulate a connection to higher truths. While Wyatt claims to employ van der Goes style in recognition of the earlier painter’s higher understanding, van der Goes’s status as a master actually originates from his market value. Wyatt’s efforts to transcend the sordid present by studying his artistic tradition are ineffectual, since as Valentine points out, the economic interests of the earthly realm originate and dictate the form of that tradition. Wyatt’s paintings merely simulate a connection with something higher than the market, and pay an ironic deference that very network of corruption and greed.
More importantly, *The Recognitions* calls the reader’s attention to the fact that the novel is itself trapped within a capitalistic network that subsists from the production of simulacra. "Willie," the novel’s author, shows up in a New York bar, and is overheard discussing the novel with a friend:

-Scatological?
-Eschatological, the doctrine of last things...
-Good lord, Willie, you are drunk. Either that or your writing for a very small audience.
-So?...how many people were there in Plato’s Republic? (478)

In the world of this New York bar, Willie’s novel is appraised for its sales potential rather than its lofty content, a fact which the author tries to efface with the absurd notion that he is writing it for the fictitious people "in Plato’s Republic." In fact, Willie’s reply acknowledges the absurdity of a novel without "an audience," a term that is used to quantify a novel’s potential economic value. Moreover, as Valentine claims, a novel’s "audience" or market worth is, like any other commodity, a function of advertising: "A painting like this or a tube of toothpaste or a laxative which induces spastic colitis. You can’t sell any of them without publicity" (244). Indeed, the power of advertising within the novel reflects the notion that publicity overshadows an art work’s supposed inherent aesthetic (and thus religious) value. As one "Add Exec"
contends, a "product" does not exist because it is "being looked at by God," but because it is publicized: "A product would drop out of sight overnight without advertising... We've had the goddam Ages of Faith... This is the Age of Publicity" (736 emphasis added). Through advertising, then, capitalism produces its own version of reality, and presents this "reality" for sale in the form of merchandise, commodities which are themselves shaped by the capitalist system.

The Recognitions’s market culture perpetuates the production of counterfeits or simulacra for profit, and as such the novel establishes itself as a simulacrum within a post-structuralist conception of a capitalist society. As Baudrillard asserts, "it was capital which was the first to feed throughout its history on the destruction between true and false... in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the icon law of its power" (268). Within the novel, even religion is commodified and advertised. Anselm points out a magazine "ad" that reads, "'GOD Wants You... Poor health? Money troubles?... A remarkable New Way of prayer that is helping thousands to glorious New Happiness and Joys...'" (533). Ellery attempts to commission Wyatt to paint the Virgin Mary for an advertisement, and points out that religious advertising is very lucrative because "religion's getting popular again..." (370). Within The Recognitions, as long as there is a profit
motive, nothing escapes the distortion inherent in representation, which ultimately engulfs the entire cosmopolitan culture described within the novel. At one point New York is itself described as simulacra in which the "real [is] no longer opposed to factitiousness..." as when the "real filled out to embrace those opponents which made its definition possible and so, once defined, capable of resolving the paradox in the moment when the mask and the face become one..." (561).

When the novel acknowledges its existence as a commodity within this "mass-produced," artificial reality, it disclaims its own ability to signify anything beyond the capitalist system. The Recognitions does not, therefore, depict itself to be a timeless, self contained vessel of truth elevated above its culture's economic realities; rather, it portrays itself to be a product of its capitalist system signifying that culture's peculiar and "unreal" version of reality. Thus, the New York of Gaddis's novel can be viewed as one of The Waste Land's "unreal" cities, but the overall implication is that Eliot's masterpiece is itself an "unreal" product of Western Capitalist culture. As Steven Weisenburger points out, the novel implicates itself in the same manner when it includes its characters in its counterfeiting motif (150-152). Just as the novel asserts that the New York it describes is comprised of "eight million counterfeits," the novel itself is comprised
of characters such as Otto and Wyatt who are each described as copies and fakes: Wyatt is the seventh in a family line in which each generation copies the previous one, and Otto, who is described as a "counterfeit in a series without an original," is also described as "queer," which is a slang expression for fake money (Weisenburger 150-151). As such, the novel calls attention to itself as a fictional construct wrought from an facsimiles of an exchange society.

Finally, the novel's treatment of Wyatt summarizes it's multifaceted rejection of itself as a modernist signifier. Just as the novel portrays both itself and its artistic tradition as the products of earthly corruption, Wyatt's ultimate rejection of art not only mirrors the novel's underlying anti-modernist critique, but also tenders the faint, perhaps futile hope of a more fulfilling experience of a reality existing "beyond" art. While The Recognitions conspicuously afflicts most of its simulacrum (its characters) with disease, insanity or death, Wyatt departs from the novel seeking to "simplify," or to circumvent artistic versions of "truth" in order to experience "the real thing." In the end, however, the novel punctuates Wyatt's ambitions with ambiguity and doubt, leaving the reader to wonder if anyone can transcend the Post-modern "culture of the simulacrum."

Wyatt's rejection of art takes place within the literary context of his relationship to Stephen Dedalus, who
in turn symbolizes the modernist conventions that *The Recognitions* parodies. While Bernard Benstock maintains that both characters are involved in the "story of the development of the artist in an alien society" (180), *The Recognitions* ultimately creates an ironic relationship between the two characters. Wyatt's comment that he exists in a novel in which "the hero fails to appear" is eventually reproduced in Part V with an allusion to Joyce's *Ulysses*: Wyatt's travels in Spain are ascribed as a "whole Odyssey within [Spain's] boundaries, a whole Odyssey without Ulysses" (Benstock 182). Obviously, this allusion contrasts Stephen Dedalus's travels through Dublin, since the young artist eventually meets Bloom, the "Ulysses" of Joyce's novel. Bloom tries to save Stephen when he attempts to bring the young artist out of his solipsistic and idealistic obsession with art. Wyatt, on the other hand, meets Sinesterra, who encourages "Stephen" to use his artistic talents in the old man's counterfeiting schemes. As such, Sinisterra is only at best an ironic "Ulysses" or Leopold Bloom (Benstock 182).

More importantly, Wyatt's rejection of art creates an antagonistic relationship between *The Recognitions* and Joyce's masterpiece. While Stephen Dedalus remains an idealistic artist at the close of *Ulysses*, Wyatt completely rejects art as tainted with an "inherent vice" that precludes its transcendence. In his penultimate appearance
in the novel, Wyatt is found destroying works of art with a razor, holding the "blade before him as though it were a brush" (871). Wyatt has completely repudiated his old reverence of the detail that he previously believed to indicate a Divine presence in Flemish painting, and had instead come to associate these details with a "fear of space" that underlies a "fear there was no God" (875). For Wyatt, paintings are no longer sacred signifiers, but mere "layers and layers of colors and oils and varnish, and...dirt," which he hopes to "simplify" with his knife (874). Wyatt explicitly rejects the modernist belief that the material signifier can be anything other than an earthly construct, and further implies that all paintings appearing to signify cosmological truths are mere simulacra. As such, Wyatt is an ironic version of Stephen Dedalus, and he serves to undermine the modernist sentiments that Joyce embodied in his fictitious version of himself. While Wyatt points out the "inherent vice" in painting, his iconoclastic disillusionment with the religious capabilities of that medium can be seen as a commentary on all art works, including The Recognitions itself.

Moreover, when Wyatt rejects the modernist sentiments associated with Stephen Dedalus, he effectively rejects the romantic and unrealistic aspects of his own literary characterization, as well as the literary mode that entraps him. Thus, Wyatt escapes the confines of the literary
construct which entangles and distorts most of the other characters in a framework of insanity and death. At several junctures, The Recognitions subtly calls attention to its conspicuous, God-like manipulation of its own characters, and thus calls attention to the direction of its own plot. For instance, the reader is reminded that the events s/he reads about reflect "a willful instance of finality... so pervasive that, on those occasions which seemed to resist, an element which might too easily have been called fateful intruded, heavy handed..." (560). Similarly, Wyatt claims that his fate seems to have "its own design" (694). The novel’s final "design," or its plot, systematically destroys of its own characters. Accordingly, soon after Otto becomes "Gordon," he goes insane, while Rectall Brown is squashed by his own decorative suit of armor, and Esme contracts a mysterious disease not long after she signs a contract to portray the "Blessed Virgin Mary" in a movie (94). As each character is enclosed within their respective artistic medium, or "violence all enclosed within a framework," their enclosure results in a graphic demonstration of the notion that art distorts and thus "kills" whatever it depicts.

In accordance with this logic of character destruction, the novel stages a very enigmatic death for Wyatt as well. This implied "death," which include’s Wyatt’s sea-burial, suggests that Wyatt’s literary characterization is independent of truth or meaning. Soon after Wyatt becomes
"Stephen Asche" in Spain, the narrative switches to Stanley and Esme's sea voyage, which brings them on a religious pilgrimage to Rome. While under weigh, their vessel happens upon six men in a life boat, one of whom is dead. The corpse, which is never explicitly named, bears a conspicuous similarity to Wyatt. Soon after its recovery, the corpse is returned to the sea "that he had come out of" (845). The narrative description of his sea-grave includes a rebuttal of the sea's own literary characterization: no longer "romantic [as] in books," or a "symbol [as] in poetry," the ocean that receives Wyatt's corpse is described as a "heaving, senseless actuality" that is "Boundlessly neither yes nor no, good nor evil..." (845). The novel seems to suggest that Wyatt originates from a literary tradition that creates mystery and meaning where none originally exist. Thus, Wyatt is symbolically returned to a realm of "senseless actuality" which is his real origin, an origin with no inherent meaning or transcendental truth. More importantly, while the novel "kills" Wyatt at one point, and revives him again as "Wyatt-Stephen" at another, the novel further draws attention to his fictitiousness.

Ultimately, The Recognitions's destruction of its own characters ends in an explicit repudiation of its modernist tradition. While Wyatt (or one version of him) is the only character who departs from The Recognitions with any hopeful prospects, Stanley, the novel's other modernist
artist, clings to his modernist beliefs until the novel's very last scene, where he meets a remarkably unlikely death. Throughout the course of the novel, Stanley seeks to embody his modernist aesthetic beliefs within his baroque requiem, which he hopes to finish to "a thorough perfection... as a proof against time" (Salemi 53). While Wyatt's departure from the novel symbolizes his rejection of modernist practices and beliefs, Stanley decides to perform his requiem in an ancient Italian Cathedral, an action which symbolizes his belief in the essentially religious nature of his music. While Stanley plays his requiem on an organ donated by a wealthy American entrepreneur, the more powerful notes shake the Cathedral walls, and the entire edifice caves in on top of him. The reader is told that "everything moved, and even falling, soared in atonement" (956). Within the larger context of The Recognitions, this statement is undeniably ironic. While Stanley hopes that his work will signify his personal religious understanding, this work actually atones for its "inherent vice" when it occasions the destruction of the monolithic artistic construct that symbolizes its own materialistic artistic tradition. In the end, as Steven Weisenburger asserts, Stanley's death symbolizes "the collapse of that modernist desire to shore up an imagined ruin," as well as "a fierce satire against the modernist program and...it's hidden devotion to the Church of
Finally, Wyatt’s departure from the novel not only symbolizes his rejection of the modernist artistic "project," but it also questions whether or not a reality worth experiencing exists beyond the confines of Gaddis’s novel. Just as he proposes to "simplify" or destroy the deceit and confusion inherent in priceless works of art, he suggests that one can "live deliberately" when one repudiates art as an reliable representation of "reality." Wyatt suggests that rather than "locking yourself up" in or dwelling upon the perfection implied in an art work, one ought to experience the imperfect world directly, without the synthetic embellishments of artistry:

Look back, if once you’re started in living, you’re born into sin, then? And how do you atone?...By locking yourself up in remorse for what you might have done? Or by living it through?...By locking yourself up with your work, until it becomes a gessoed surface, all prepared, clean and smooth as ivory? Or by living it through? By drawing lines in your mind? Or by living it through? (896)

Wyatt asserts that art cannot, as the modernists hoped, redeem the imperfections and sin inherent in life, but will only create a lifeless "gessoed surface" that is itself trapped within the corrupt earthly realm.

Thus, Wyatt withdraws from the novel, providing the reader with the possibility that he may escape the plot’s
artificial and "willful insistence of finality," while the characters who remain are methodically killed, tortured and disfigured. However, Wyatt’s aspiration to "at last...live deliberately" remains dubious. Wyatt disappears into the Spanish landscape uttering Henry David Thoreau’s famous dictum to "simplify," hoping to connect with a reality untainted by artistic depiction (900). Just as Thoreau left Concord’s mercantile society in order to "live deliberately" (Thoreau 1683), Wyatt aspires to leave the capitalist version of reality inherent in Gaddis’s novel. However, within the novel’s context, this allusion becomes ironic. While Thoreau aspired to "publish the meanness" of the life that he found at Walden, The Recognitions’s metafiction implies that any reality—if indeed any can be found—cannot be written about at all. Ultimately, when Wyatt derives his hopes from another literary text, he throws his endeavor into doubt.
1. According to John Kuehl and Steven Moore, Gaddis claims that he never read any of Joyce’s works (See In Recognition of William Gaddis, p.202). It would not be unreasonable to assume, however, that as a Harvard graduate exposed to the New York literary circles of the 1950’s, Gaddis understood Joyce’s immense influence upon modern literature.

2. Consequently, Baudrillard radically differs with Plato, since he believes that nothing, not even philosophy, can revive what is real once it has been "killed" by depiction.
Works Cited


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