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“Painting the Post-Secular: the Sacred as the After in William Gaddis’ the Recognitions”

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“Painting the Post-Secular: The Sacred as the After in William Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*”

by

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B.A., University of Colorado Boulder, 2016

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This thesis entitled:
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“Painting the Post-Secular: The Sacred as the After in William Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*”

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Karen S. Jacobs

Abstract: Arguing that William Gaddis’ 1955 novel *The Recognitions* can be read as an early instance of a post-secular spirituality at work, I suggest that Gaddis uses the protagonist Wyatt Gwyon to show that the visual arts, specifically painting, provides a model for outlining a new location and mode of considering a form of the sacred emerging from collage and encyclopedic aesthetics. Beginning with an overview of post-secular theory, I then move to a consideration of Gaddis’ status within American literary history, and how this relates to his status as a post-secular novelist. I argue that the novel displays a particularly post-secular aesthetic, drawing on the forms of the collage and the encyclopedic novel to best display its conception of sacrality. I then provide readings of two counterpoint father figures in the novel, the protagonist’s father the Reverend Gwyon, who is an early example of a post-secular thinker, and Pastor Dick, his eventual replacement who Gaddis uses as a metaphor of the marketplace’s infection of the sacred. Highlighting the novel’s interest in forgery, I show how Gaddis uses forged paintings as metaphors of unstable signifiers and how this connects with Mark C. Taylor’s theorizations of the virtual in the economic and theological realms. A detour into the economic provides space for considering the role of Dale Carnegie as an example of what I deem a capitalist encyclopedic aesthetic, in contrast to the encyclopedic post-secularism of the novel itself. Central to my argument is a reading of Wyatt’s portrait of his dead mother which is a prime post-secular artwork in its metamorphic depiction of “the after.” I then draw on Richard Kearney’s theology of anatheism to show Wyatt as a particularly post-secular artist, and how this relates to Gaddis’ overall project. I then conclude by demonstrating how for Gaddis, artworks provide a concretization of the notion of the sacred as an emerging from a larger framework of “the after.”

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Introduction.

Painting *as* post-secular, painting *the* post-secular: these are twinned concepts in my reading of William Gaddis' 1955 debut novel *The Recognitions*. In this investigation I desire to ask questions about *value*, the value of a work of art, the value that culture places on original versus forged artworks, the value of economic signifiers in the wake of the gold standard, and most significantly, that realm of ultimate value: the sacred. What form does the sacred take in a post-secular age, and indeed, if we speak of the *post*-secular, what does it mean to speak of being *after* the secular, or *after* the modern? My reading of *The Recognitions* suggests that Gaddis uses the figure of the painter-protagonist Wyatt Gwyon to narrativize painting as a form of post-secular ritual, and painting as the mode for depicting and locating the sacred in a post-secular age. Furthermore, I suggest that Gaddis employs an aesthetic of encyclopedic collage to best capture the metamorphic entanglement of sacred-profane, forged-original, that Wyatt's paintings contain. Undergirding my reading of Gaddis' post-secular aesthetics are three main theoretical works that concern themselves with *The Recognitions'* premise of *the after*: Mark C. Taylor's *After God*, Richard Kearney's *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, and Arthur C. Danto's *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. The broader concept of *the after* is, in my reading, a way of contemplating the metamorphic, whether metamorphic spiritualities or metamorphic artworks, for an ethos of *the after* suggests something beyond an ending, and therefore things still taking form *after*, and therefore are continually being created. In order to ground the reader with several of the organizing principles of this investigation, I want to turn to

an especially resonant scene from Gaddis' novel that highlights the idea of painting *as* post-secular and painting *the* post-secular.

Wyatt Gwyon, the character connecting the encyclopedic threads of *The Recognitions*, engages in painting as an act that allows for *recognition*, the titular concept of the novel that I read as informing Gaddis' theological-aesthetics. Wyatt describes his experience of first seeing Pablo Picasso's *Night Fishing In Antibes* [the image provided above],

“—Yes but, when I saw it it was one of those moments of reality, of near-recognition of reality...When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see, you never see it. You don't see it in paintings because most of the time you can't see beyond a painting. Most paintings, the instant you see them they become familiar, and then it's too late.”ⁱ

To reveal the layers of Gaddis' prose in this passage, I want to first turn to a crucial moment in Mark C. Taylor's *After God*. He notes that, “when art displaces religion as the focus of spiritual striving, religious prophets become avant-garde artists whose mission is to realize the kingdom of God on earth by transforming the world into a work of art.”ⁱⁱ In *The Recognitions*, Wyatt takes up the prophetic impulse of his father, particularly the Rev. Gwyon's penchant for esoteric and forgotten spiritualities, and takes the additional step outlined by Taylor to become an artist questing after the sacred. Taylor expands on this transformative quality of art by stating, “if meaning and order are not intrinsic but are extrinsic, the significance and purpose of things and events can be established only by pointing beyond them.”ⁱⁱⁱ The “displacement” of religion by art is thus a shift from meaning as intrinsic to extrinsic, and I read *extrinsic* meaning-making here as the visual arts.

Taylor concludes, “for those with eyes to see, everything becomes a sign referring to a transcendent referent, which secures the foundation of knowledge and basis of action.”^{iv} Thus, Wyatt’s epiphanic moment before Picasso’s *Night Fishing in Antibes* is a “recognition” that employs the visual “signs” painted and smeared and drawn onto the canvas that subsequently take the beholder beyond the “intrinsic” qualities of color, line, shape, etc. For a painter like Wyatt, he witnesses how an “avant-garde” prophet-artist such as Picasso uses the canvas as a space, *and* as a time, for contemplating “a transcendent referent,” i.e. the sacred, in a way that is wholly divergent from didactic religious artworks, say, of the Renaissance masters like Raphael and Michelangelo. For Gaddis, painting, to apply Taylor’s schema, has displaced the mediating powers of religion and becomes a new form of mediating between individuals and the sacred, a new mode of “recognizing” the sacred.

Furthermore, Gaddis’ explicit engagement with his novel’s title (this concept of “recognition”) finds Wyatt articulating a sentiment similar to Taylor’s idea of “transforming the world into a work of art” via an “extrinsic” medium such as the Picasso painting. The notion of “recognition” in Wyatt’s telling is more than a re-cognition, since the artwork “frees” him to the “reality that we never see,” which takes us into the realm of the spiritual, and thereby the sacred. Wyatt’s brief but thoroughly revelatory ability to “see beyond” the Picasso painting outlines Gaddis’ notion that artworks can function as a locus for the sacred, and it is significant to briefly describe *Night Fishing in Antibes* to understand how this sort of recognition-revelation is post-secular. The nocturnal waterside scene of Picasso’s scene blends geometric cubism with beguiling grotesqueries of figures, whether the hunchbacked “fisherman” spearing a miniature whale with a trident or the woman in a purple dress holding a bicycle with a lip-shaped dress and a phallic head. Near the top of the canvas, an orange spiral is framed by yellow and black, and this spiral helps to

instill a sense of the world of this scene bending and whirling and spinning; in a word, the world of *Night Fishing in Antibes* is metamorphic. The purple, the green, the grey, the black: Picasso's palette evokes a moment neither sunlit nor in deepest darkness, a liminal, subtly carnivalesque world commingling the beautiful and the grotesque, the sacred and the profane. The capacity for such a painting to show Wyatt the reality-beyond-the-canvas is Gaddis' way of highlighting that artworks are not objects that unveil a sacred reality, functioning as a curtain of many colors, but are instead portals or gateways to sacrality. This is a tall order to ask of a painting, but it drives Wyatt's sense of himself as an artist. The composer Stanley, a kind of double for Wyatt, articulates a parallel sentiment when he says, "—Everybody has that feeling when they look at a work of art and it's right, that sudden familiarity, a sort of....recognition, as though they were creating it themselves, as though it were being created through them while they look at it or listen to it and, it shouldn't be sinful to want to have created beauty?"^v As an organizing principle, "recognition" is thus a conjoined theological-aesthetic, and Stanley's participatory experience of art and beauty aligns with Richard Kearney's concept of anatheism, essentially a creative act of spiritual reimagining, or "recognition." Crucially for Kearney, "anatheism does not say that the sacred *is* the secular; it says it is *in* the secular, *through* the secular, *toward* the secular...they are inextricably interconnected but never the *same* thing."^{vi} In this way, we can better appreciate how a spiritually inclined artist like Wyatt can look at a painting by Pablo Picasso which is ostensibly "secular" in its subject matter, but still "recognize" the sacred *in, through, and toward* the canvas of *Night Fishing in Antibes*. Wyatt's anatheistic disposition allows him the epiphanic viewing of the Picasso piece despite the surface level elements of the painting that seem overtly profane and provocative.

In *The Paris Review*'s Winter 1987 issue, Zoltán Abádi-Nagy interviewed Gaddis for the magazine's celebrated "Art of Fiction" series. When asked about the title of his debut novel,

Gaddis noted that he had consciously named it after “the original Clementine *Recognitions*, which has been called the first Christian novel (I remember thinking mine was going to be the last one).”^{vii} Elsewhere Gaddis echoed a similar response by saying that his *Recognitions* was more ambiguously “the last of something.”^{viii} I am drawn to this notion of “the last of something” as a way of introducing my investigation of *The Recognitions*’ sense of *the after*, and how it relates to Gaddis’ reimagining of the sacred dwelling in artworks via a distinctly post-secular aesthetic. *The Recognitions* is sometimes cited as one of the first postmodern novels, and I position it as one of the first post-secular novels. In its agency granted to non-human actors like currency and canvas paintings, *The Recognitions* can also be read as an early instance of a posthumanist ethos, if we define the posthuman as a definitive break from Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism. Whether or not Gaddis’ debut novel falls into these categories is a separate debate, as I want merely to call the reader’s attention to *The Recognitions*’ sense of *the after*. Indeed, what I argue is that Gaddis’ novel is preoccupied with a sense of *the after*. Three of the theoretical texts undergirding my investigation all feature this notion: Mark C. Taylor’s *After God*, Arthur C. Danto’s *After the End of Art*, and Richard Kearney’s *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*. These thinkers are all “post-secular” to the degree that they are engaged in a project of reimagining what the sacred will look like, especially its literary and artistic expression, *after* the ethos and historical time periods of secularization and institutional religions, *after* the ethos of linear genealogies in the arts and literature.

The post-secular is an ideal mode of thought for approaching an encyclopedic novel such as *The Recognitions*, as both are fundamentally opposed to “progressive” and objective narratives and modes of thinking, instead operating in the domain of the collage. After all, it is as pointless to read the encyclopedia cover to cover as it is to “read” the elements of a collage painting by

Robert Rauschenberg in the hope of gaining a cohesive narrative. Instead, the point is to contemplate the diffuse and divisive elements of the collage in a simultaneous state of wonder and frustration, giddy delight and confused consternation. Steven Moore outlines Gaddis' novel as "ranging across three continents and three decades, evoking 4,000 years of cultural history, speaking half a dozen languages, and drawing upon fields of reference as diverse as alchemy, witchcraft, art history, mummification, medical history, hagiography, mythology, anthropology, astronomy, and metaphysics."^{ix} An encyclopedic range, to be sure, and the capaciousness of Gaddis' narrative is fitting for the novel aims "to do no less than to excavate the very foundations of Western civilization."^x The very act of reading *The Recognitions*, with its ventures into Flemish landscape painting and Abstract Expressionism, the self-help books of Dale Carnegie and the occult manuals of forgotten alchemists, raises questions about the collage. The litany provided by Moore barely begins to touch upon all of the relevant "fields of reference" Gaddis uses to triangulate art, theology, and economics. Viewing these tectonic plates of cultural knowledge and memory in *The Recognitions* as an encyclopedic instance of post-secular collage, I offer a metaphorical image of the religious traditions and foundations of the West as a vast and multi-colored stained-glass window in a cathedral. Except it has been shattered and left on the street.¹ The shattering was done by modernity, whether one places the blame on Martin Luther, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, or the First World War (among a host of candidates). There is the reactionary temptation to attempt to glue all of the pieces back together again to perfectly recreate what it was before: this is the mission of religious fundamentalists in the present, though their success is often as lackluster as the attempts at reconstruction Humpty Dumpty received. Wyatt Gwyon describes his occupation of restoring paintings as "this...patching up the past I do," to

¹ Perhaps the same metaphorical "street" where James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus thinks of God as nothing more than a shout in it.

Reck tall Brown, the art dealer who will start his career in forgery, replies, “You don’t paint? You don’t paint pictures yourself?”^{xi} I read this exchange as Gaddis suggesting that the work of merely “patching up the past” is linked to the fundamentalist impulse, in that it denies creative approaches to a cultural heritage in need of reimagining more than restoration. The stained-glass, after all, was shattered for a host of legitimate reasons, and the fundamentalist stance, which amounts essentially to a kind of theological time-travel, is incompatible with the post-secular. Of course, there is always the option to stare at the shards of glass on the street outside of a ruined church and then simply walk away and go about your day. Many people do this today, if we read this activity as the secular project writ large.

In a late scene from *The Recognitions*, Gaddis has the exasperated character Ed Feasly tell Wyatt, “--I mean I feel like I’ve left little parts of me all over the place. Like I could spend the rest of my life trying to collect them and I never could. These pieces of me and pieces of other people all screwed up and spread all over the place.”^{xii} I read Ed Feasly’s “little parts” and “pieces” of himself and the world as speaking to this notion of the shards of stained-glass outside of the metaphorical ruined church of the West. Feasly’s vexation about how these “pieces” have become “all screwed up and spread all over the place” is an instance, I argue, of Gaddis speaking to a contemporary dissolution of belief, and returns us to the options I mentioned above, whether one looks at the “pieces” and becomes a fundamentalist or a disinterested secularist. But there is also the post-secular “option,” one which involves a high degree of the artistic process, making Gaddis an ideal writer for viewing through this lens. The post-secular approach to the “pieces...all screwed up and spread all over the place” is to say that these pieces can be reconceived, rearranged and reimagined into entirely new forms, still as sacred as before, but perhaps even more so given their formation from broken origins. The broken pieces can become a collage of something entirely

unforeseen. If, for example, the stained-glass originally depicted a traditional symbol, such as the cross, what would happen if the post-secular seeker rearranged the shattered remains of the cross into a circular or triangular shape? Fascinatingly, the art critic John Berger expressed a similar sentiment in a 1955 essay (coincidentally the year that *The Recognitions* was published) entitled “Pablo Picasso.” Berger writes that, “living through a period of colossal confusion in which so many values both human and cultural have disintegrated, Picasso has seized upon the bits, the fragments, the smithereens, and with magnificent defiance and vitality made something of them to amuse us, shock us, but primarily to demonstrate to us by the example of his spirit that within the confusion, out of the debris, new ideas, new values, new ways of looking at the world can and will develop.”^{xiii} I want to deploy Berger’s vocabulary of “debris,” “value” and “new ways of looking” as a bridge from my reading of Picasso’s *Night Fishing in Antibes* to Gaddis’ novelization of the post-secular work of art as emerging from the metaphorical shattered stained-glass I mentioned above. The aim of my investigation is ultimately to assert that this work of rearranging the “debris” left after the death of God is precisely what Gaddis does with the artist character of Wyatt in his navigation towards the sacred in a time of unstable signifiers, whether on the level of the artistic, the theological, or the economic. But in order to properly commence my reading of the multiple dimensions of Gaddis’ novel, I want to provide a brief overview of post-secular thought to provide the reader with a cartographic legend to better follow my mapping of *The Recognitions*.

The Post-Secular: Definitions and Trajectories

A prominent theorist of post-secular space, Justin Beaumont, recognized 2007 “as the year when discussion of the post-secular entered the social-scientific mainstream,” as it saw “the

publication of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, a collection of articles dealing with 'European postsecularism' in the online journal *Eurozine*, and a special report on religion and public life published in the *Economist*."^{xiv} 2007 is less important to my research as a specific date of birth for the post-secular, but it is a useful indicator for reading its status as a theological, artistic, and literary hermeneutic. I use "post-secular" knowing that it is an emergent field, and thus subject to quibbles over definition. The point is that we might use the year 2007 as an entry-point for considering the post-secular's theoretical overtures into literature, and where William Gaddis fits in this atlas of American writing. As a theoretical mode drawing together the main avenues of my investigation, the theological, the aesthetic, and the economic, the post-secular provides a robust, rhizomatic lens for reading *The Recognitions*, and as such requires a significant though not exhaustive accounting of its history and key thinkers before tackling Gaddis' encyclopedic novel directly.

Gregor McLennan charts an impressive spectrum of theorists in what he deems "the postsecular turn." Ranging from "Charles Taylor's monumental appeal to transcendence," "the recruitment of Michel de Certeau to the cause of radical-orthodox theology," even to "the secular-materialist end" where can be found "Slavoj Zizek, who defends the Judaeo-Christian heritage in a rather 'strategic' Leninist fashion, and theorists such as Roberto Unger and Alain Badiou."^{xv} These latter theorists "cleave firmly to atheistic and historicist tenets, but whose energized vocabularies are streaked with intimations of infinity, eternity, grace and sainthood."^{xvi} Furthermore, McLennan notes that, "somewhere in the middle of the range sit Rorty and Vattimo engaging convivially on the prospect of religion without any theists or atheists; Habermas developing grounds for dialogue between 'naturalism and religion'; and Derrida too, gesturing ever-enigmatically towards 'religion without/beyond religion.'"^{xvii} McLennan's invocation of a

“turn” is especially resonant for my reading of the post-secular, for *turn* calls to mind motion, thus a theology of becoming, of metamorphosis. A turn is a changing of direction, and McLennan’s litany of theorists illustrates just how many directions one can take in considering the post-secular, especially in reading literature *as* post-secular. One particularly resonant turn that post-secular studies may take in the present moment (2019) is outlined by the historian of gender, Joan Wallach Scott, in her most recent work *Sex and Secularism* (2018). By challenging the master narrative of Western secularism via a gender studies framework, Scott provocatively outlines how “*gender inequality was fundamental to the articulation of the separation of church and state that inaugurated Western modernity* [emphasis Scott’s].”^{xviii} In a reexamination of the “discourse of secularism” particularly conversant with the anthropologist of religion Saba Mahmood² and the gender theorist Judith Butler,³ Scott opens up a new avenue for the post-secular to more vigorously recognize its own sexual and gender dynamics alongside concerns over the political, public versus private belief, and so forth. The range of theorists in this paragraph alone shows the type of encyclopedic possibilities presented by the post-secular, making it an ideal hermeneutic for reading *The Recognitions*’ unique reimagining of the sacred via the visual arts.

Indeed, Gaddis’ entire novelistic enterprise may be read as a narrative of overlapping and interwoven dimensions of American life since World War II. In *The Recognitions*, the notion of *value*, especially that category of ultimate value, the sacred, is revealed to be located within an interdependent matrix of artworks, economics, and spiritual systems. Zhange Ni, writing in 2016’s *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Literature*, notes that a “better way to define the post-secular is to see that religion and the secular are not polar opposites but have always been

² See especially Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, 2015

³ See especially Judith Butler, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, with Charles Taylor, Jurgen Habermas, and Cornel West, 2011.

interdependent since their co-emergence in the modern West.”^{xix} Shifting away from binary ideologies and methodologies is a hallmark of the post-secular, and I view Ni’s reading of religion and secularity as “interdependent” as particularly helpful for considering *The Recognitions* as a post-secular novel. Her view presents a malleable definition by claiming that, “the post-secular, therefore, is not merely disenchantment with secularism, but rather an effort to reconsider and reconfigure symbolic assumptions, cultivated sensibilities, and power relations associated with religion and to question the secular’s claim to epistemic, affective, and moral-political supremacy.”^{xx} I want to highlight the way that Ni’s definition places more emphasis on Richard Kearney’s larger project of *reimagining* the sacred by mentioning actions like “reconsider” and “reconfigure,” than the more negative connotation of “disenchantment” as a reaction against secularism. The prefix “re-“ implies a return, a trying again, and I read Gaddis’ novel as one reconsidering nothing less than the history of Western religion and art, even reconsidering the history of value itself, for the purpose of reconfiguring the fragments and shards of this long narrative into a new conception of sacrality rooted in artworks that is somehow more meaningful for emerging from unstable foundations of signification. But what exactly is the *secular*, and what does it mean to be *after* the secular?

Mark C. Taylor locates the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) as a crucial document “in which *secularity* was used to designate ‘the conversion of an ecclesiastical or religious institution or its property to sovereigns, princes or lay people.’ By extension, *secular* came to mean ‘belonging to this world or its affairs as distinguished from the church and religion; civil, with the meaning of non-ecclesiastical, non-religious or non-sacred.’”^{xxi} Note that in this understanding, secular is more than the power and authority of religious institutions lessening, for it also comes to be synonymous with “non-sacred” as well. In 1966, the sociologist Bryan Wilson defined “secularization” as “the

process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose social significance.”^{xxii} A more nuanced definition than the master-narratives proffered by Max Weber or Emile Durkheim, but one that the scholar of religion Ingolf Dalferth has questioned, pointing out that, “it remains unclear whether religious phenomena are meant to disappear in society (religion has no future in society) or are transformed into religious phenomena that are socially not very significant (religion will stay, but not be very important in society) or are seen as changing from being religious to becoming non-religious phenomena (religions will be replaced by non-religious functional equivalents in society).”^{xxiii} This line of questioning may appear overwhelming in its unearthing of the interdependent tiers of secularism, but it forces post-secular thinkers to consider more acutely that which they are *writing against*.

The sweep of *The Recognitions* has caused many critics to read it as a critique of Western master narratives, thus making its relation to post-secularism more than comfortable. While his landmark study is titled, *A Secular Age*, the philosopher of religion Charles Taylor is frequently cited as a prominent theoretician of the post-secular. Taylor does not use “post-secular” regularly in that work, but on the rare occasion when he does the definition provided is striking. He says of the post-secular, “I use this term not as designating an age in which the declines in belief and practice of the last century would have been reversed, because this doesn’t seem likely, at least for the moment; I rather mean a time in which the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged. This I think is now happening.”^{xxiv} The post-secular, for Taylor, is not a historical movement attempting to undo the ravages incurred by institutional religions in the twentieth century but is instead a “challenge” to the “master narrative of secularization.” Viewed from a particular angle, postmodernism appears to be solely focused on the undoing and upending of master narratives, thus making Charles Taylor’s understanding of

post-secularism seem justifiably the theological wing of postmodernism, as well as showing a pathway to an analogous skepticism in contemporary art theory.

I read Gaddis' use of artworks-after-the-end-of-art, to turn to Arthur C. Danto, as a metaphor for a pluralism that allows for a more nuanced shift in theological consciousness, away from the religious institutions associated with Western master narratives and towards a more splintered, fragmented, but ultimately freer and potentially more authentic form of the sacred. As Danto explained, his claim of "art after the end of art" simply implied that, "a story was over. It was not my view that there would be no more art, which 'death' certainly implies, but that whatever art there was to be would be made without benefit of a reassuring sort of narrative in which it was seen as the appropriate next stage in the story."^{xxv} I read Gaddis' novel as a confrontation of "the mainstream master narrative of secularization" that Charles Taylor seeks to undo, and Danto provides a way for better understanding how its novelistic discourse on visual arts fits into a larger conversation. Indeed, Danto states that, "what had come to an end was that narrative⁴ but not the subject of the narrative." By bringing the "narrative" of art to an end, Danto sees a possibility for the "subject", i.e. the artworks themselves, to be liberated and more at ease with plurality. The notion of plurality also figures prominently in one of the most prominent European post-secular theorists, Jürgen Habermas. In his vastly influential, "Notes on a Post-Secular Society," Habermas subtly defines the post-secular as "*a change in consciousness.*"^{xxvi} Where Taylor notes the importance of *narrative*, especially challenges and shifts to master narratives, Habermas argues from a similar angle by invoking "consciousness" instead of a historical moment. Arguing from the societal level, Habermas views the persistence of religion in world affairs as a factor that, "undermines the secularistic belief in the *foreseeable disappearance* of religion and robs the

⁴ The "narrative" of linear art history wherein each successive movement or period in the arts is progressively finding its truest expression.

secular understanding of the world of any triumphal zest.”^{xxvii} Furthermore, Habermas foresaw many of the socio-religious crises facing Europe in the wake of the Syrian Civil War by highlighting that a post-secular society is defined by a “*pluralism of ways of life*.”^{xxviii} Reading Gaddis via Habermas’ definitions, the notion of “plurality” must be read in concert with the “change in consciousness.” What binds Habermas and Taylor’s approaches is a sense of motion, the changes inherent to motion, and the creativity that emerges from what has been called the “post-secular turn.”

Ingolf Dalferth outlines the notion of a turn by speaking of a “transition” in the post-secular which, “assumes a change or transition of (the significance of) things, goods, practices, institutions, times, or ideas from religious to non-religious spheres or usages. What originated, or played a particular role, in a religious context is now (also and differently) used in non-religious ones.”^{xxix} The broader cultural project of reimagining the sacred, of which I argue that Gaddis is certainly a part, involves the capacity to conceive of sacrality-in-transition, and Dalferth’s definition can be applied to the way Gaddis uses paintings as sites where the sacred has *transitioned to*. Dalferth outlines how “meditative prayer practices become a popular feature of contemporary lifestyles and the wellness industry; sacred music written for Passion Week is performed in concert halls throughout the year; a theological idea like creation is used in legal texts like the Swiss constitution as a non-religious general term for the world at large; and instead of attending Sunday morning services many prefer to spend their time visiting museums, going to concerts, or relaxing at the beach.”^{xxx} Reading this with binary glasses might lead to an assumption that, for instance, if the Passion Week liturgy is performed any time of the year that it is somehow no longer sacred and has been effectively secularized. But this is not the case. The purpose of reimagining sacrality is to understand that it can transition to different locations and temporalities

without losing *all* of its sacrality, and in certain contexts, the *value* of the sacred can actually be heightened in ways where it had been tempered before.

Central to *The Recognitions* is the weight that Gaddis places on the figure of the *individual* artist who functions as a kind of post-secular prophet and mystic. Turning once more to Dalferth, we can see how post-secular belief has shifted from the communal to the individual. Dalferth notes that “post-secular societies are not those in which everyone is free to inquire into religious or spiritual questions or refrain from it (for precisely this is a defining feature of secular societies) or in which religion plays an important role in the public sphere (for this is also characteristic of pre-secular societies), but rather those which define themselves no longer, not even implicitly, by reference to questions of religion or spirituality in whatever sense.”^{xxxix} On the level of the individual, post-secularism encourages questioning and experiencing the sacred while maintaining that this is distinct from a society at large that either forces or denies religion to exist.

Although this survey of post-secular thought is doubtless incomplete, my intention is merely to outline the field as an entryway for considering *The Recognitions* as putting forth a plurality of ideas concerning artworks and the sacred that align with the post-secular. Mark C. Taylor claims that “religion and secularity are not opposites; to the contrary, Western secularity is a *religious* phenomenon.”^{xxxix} This suggests that religion and secularism are not involved in a dialectical agon that synthesizes into the post-secular but instead that the two are *already synthesized* before a dialectical tension would be possible. As a way of pivoting more directly to the novel, I wish to conclude this defining of terms by turning to a crucial statement he makes in *The Recognitions*. Gaddis evocatively writes, “As it has been, and apparently ever shall be, gods, superseded, become the devils in the system which supplants their reign, and stay on to make trouble for their successors, available, as they are, to a few for whom magic has not despaired, and

been superseded by religion.”^{xxxiii} For Gaddis, the “superseded” deities of the religious heritage of the West have “become the devil in the system which supplants their reign,” i.e. secular modernity. Where I read this passage as Gaddis presenting an early literary formulation of the post-secular is in the idea that these secularized deities “stay on to make trouble for their successors,” another way of phrasing the “return of the religious” spoken of, often begrudgingly, by post-secular theorists. Gaddis outlines a process far closer to Taylor’s, for the “trouble” that the secularized devils make is nothing so simplistic as an evangelical return of the religious, no, what Gaddis is suggesting is that to a select group “for whom magic has not despaired” and become corrupted by religion, there lurks an originary spirituality (i.e. the sacred) that can still be accessed despite the processes of religion being codified as well as secularism attempting to snuff it out. Indeed, Gaddis’ “magic that has not despaired” can be illuminated by Taylor’s claim that “a religion without God issues in ethics without absolutes to promote and preserve the creative emergence of life across the globe.”^{xxxiv} Framed in this way, “gods” cannot “become the devils in the system which supplants their reign,” for Taylor’s post-secular religion is one without a grounding deity (or deities) and without this organizing principle, ethics cannot be absolutized, thus preventing them from “becoming devils,” if we read Gaddis’ remark as the absolutes of religion becoming the absolutes of secularism. Furthermore, we can see a resonance between Gaddis and Richard Kearney’s “anatheism” which the latter claims is, “misread as a dialectical third term that supersedes theism and atheism.”^{xxxv} Rather, for Kearney, “anatheism contains a moment of atheism within itself—as it contains a moment of theism...[it] pre-contains both, for it operates from a space and time *before* the dichotomy of atheism and theism, as well as *after*.”^{xxxvi} This layering of atheism within theism, and vice versa, is crucial for understanding how the post-secular is disinterested in dialectical resolutions, and Kearney’s “moments” of faith within unbelief and

unbelief within faith are an essential pathway for reading Gaddis. As Mark C. Taylor notes directly about *The Recognitions*, “Gaddis’ consistent purpose throughout [the novel] is to subvert such simple oppositions by showing how each term folds into the other to create a nonsynthetic third that joins without precisely uniting differences.”^{xxxvii} My reading of Gaddis is that he uses the metaphor of paintings that layer forgeries and originals on a single canvas to gesture towards a new location of the sacred, this new locus being “a nonsynthetic” conjoining of difference and opposition.

Gaddis, American Literature, and the Post-Secular

Post-1945 American literature finds its most eloquent theorists of the post-secular in Amy Hungerford and John McClure. Indeed, as Zhange Ni helpfully maps, “in the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholars such as John McClure and Amy Hungerford began to read contemporary American literature as a terrain for tentative, open-ended ‘partial faith’ or ‘belief in belief’ rather than in God.”^{xxxviii} In many ways, the path blazed by McClure and Hungerford has been as foundational for literary studies of the post-secular as the theoretical interventions of Charles Taylor or Jurgen Habermas. For Amy Hungerford, “our ways of speaking both about religion and about literature have become elliptical—have come continually to orbit the dual foci of belief and meaninglessness.”^{xxxix} These modes of “speaking” are, for Hungerford, united through “the line of that orbit” she deems “belief in literature.”^{xl} In this way, Hungerford’s conceptualizing of the post-secular is less that literature evidences new ideas about the religious, or that these new configurations of the religious tell us something new about literature, but instead that the two are one in the same. For my own purposes, I am less interested in arguing that Gaddis

evidences a “belief in literature,” but it is worth contemplating this assertion as the post-secular continues to grow as a vibrant mode of literary scholarship. Turning once again to Zhange Ni, she attentively charts how in the 2010’s “a new wave of scholarship further broadened the scope to read world literature, postcolonial literature, popular literature, and various non-Western national literatures in relation to diverse projects of religion-making and secularism.”^{xli} This is to say that post-secular studies can provide as rich and varied a canon of critical inquiry as enjoyed by Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and so on. Scholarship on Gaddis in the coming decades can surely draw from the multitude of cross-disciplinary approaches that the post-secular has opened up, as novels like *The Recognitions* and *J R* are only just now⁵ coming to be reckoned with by casual readers and critics of American literature alike.

In 1995, McClure published “Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality,” one of the earliest attempts⁶ to locate a broad pattern of the sacred re-emerging in American literature. McClure centered his inquiry around “the many-sided scandal of contemporary American spirituality: that it remains so vigorous, that it is so often political engaged, and so often entangled with consumerism and sensationalism, and that it is increasingly culturally eccentric in its inspiration and practices.”^{xlii} The “scandal” of which McClure outlines is in many ways the theological dilemma of Gaddis’ novel, for his characters engage in “vigorous” debates over the status of the sacred, and what is ultimately of value, in postwar America. Economics inform Gaddis’ spiritual questions, and the role of the marketplace in reshaping religion is a preoccupation of *The Recognitions*, teeing up the full-fledged investigation of money

⁵ For over a decade, the two novels were out of print, but in 2012 the Dalkey Archive Press reissued new editions of *The Recognitions* and *JR*, helping to instigate what I like to think of as a “Gaddis renaissance,” bringing his novels to a broader and newer readership for the 21st century.

⁶ Here McClure identified novelists like Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Leslie Marmon Silko, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, and Louise Erdrich as emblematic of a trend within contemporary American writing that showcased an attentiveness to spiritual quests and questions, broadly defined.

and value in *JR* (1975). Eccentricity is also key for grasping Gaddis' interest in spirituality, as the Reverend Gwyon metamorphoses over the course of the novel into a truly post-secular clergyman, fusing New England Protestantism with "inspiration and practices" from sources as varied as the Maori of New Zealand to pre-Christian Mithraism. However critics choose to view Gaddis' attitudes towards religion, it is difficult to suggest that his knowledge of the topic, and dedication to narrativizing it, was anything but encyclopedic and wide-reaching. As John Soutter succinctly states, "Gaddis' works are all imbued with a religious impulse."^{xliii} I would go further than Soutter in arguing that the works are driven by far more than an "impulse," for the religious emerges as one of *the* primary gravitational forces in Gaddis' thematic and aesthetic lexicon.⁷

Everett Hamner argues that, "post-secular thinking—and by extension, post-secular fiction enables interpretive agility about traditional religions and spiritualities by complicating fixed meanings, embracing ambiguities and diverse subcategories."^{xliv} With Gaddis in mind, I am particularly drawn to Hamner's phrase of "interpretive agility," for the expanse of spiritual systems across the novel are engaged with a high degree of dexterity. Furthermore, *The Recognitions*, in its encyclopedic aesthetic and thematic sweep shows Gaddis' willingness to "complicate fixed meanings," "embrace ambiguities" and examine a multitude of "diverse subcategories" of belief. And in direct relation to literary studies, Lori Branch and Mark Knight argue that, "the 'post' in post-secular does not mean that the secular is somehow finished or that a premodern religiosity lurks in the wings, but that our humanistic and social science inquiries have passed through an unreflective assumption of secularization to a critical awareness of its dependency on a specific production of the categories of the religious and the secular in modernity."^{xlv} Once again, this

⁷ Moore has charted Gaddis' relation to a longer tradition of American letters, from "the criticisms of puritan/fundamentalist religion in his first and third novels looks back to Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and Melville's harsh critiques of Christianity, but also to Mark Twain (Christian Science as well as mainstream Christianity) and to such works as Harold Frederic's *Damnation of Theron Ware* and Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*."⁷

understanding fits well with Gaddis for he is not advocating for a return to “premodern religiosity” or even viewing the process of secularization as “somehow finished.” Instead, *The Recognitions* is post-secular to the degree that it is a *reflective* narrativization of the “specific production of the categories of the religious and the secular in modernity,” presenting a subtle formulation of the sacred via artworks, notably Wyatt’s discovery of painting *as* post-secular praxis. Branch and Knight view “the great promise of post-secular studies” as having “new eyes to see modern manifestations of faith and secularism that previous paradigms had rendered invisible, and it is developing new vocabularies and frameworks for raising previously unasked questions about the complex connections between religion and secularism in modernity.”^{xlvi} If we read the post-secular as having “new eyes to see” contemporary spirituality, it allows for a certain distance to be maintained between the ideas floated in a novel and viewing these novels as a kind of dogmatic pamphlet. Thus, William Gaddis may not be a personal advocate of any religious practice, but to deny that the novel *The Recognitions* is disinterested in having “new eyes to see” sacrality would be a tremendous disservice to his artistic achievement. For as Steven Moore highlights by channeling William James, “at its widest perimeters the novel is an encyclopedic survey of the varieties of religious experience,”^{xlvii} which certainly raises questions as to why the current critical discourse has yet to firmly align Gaddis with the post-secular. Additionally, Mark C. Taylor claims that, “*The Recognitions* is, in my judgment, one of the two most important theological novels ever written (the other is *Moby-Dick*).”^{xlviii} A novel of theological import on par with Melville’s exegetical fiction is certainly worth contemplating as a cornerstone of American religious writing.

A preacher named John at a bar in Gaddis’ novel says, “—I do a good deal of traveling, among out of the way parishes where enrollment has fallen down, it’s part of the revival in the religious...interest going on all over the country, a lot of it is inter-denominational...”^{xlix} The

itinerant preacher flourished in the 19th century's Great Awakenings, and it is significant that *The Recognitions* subtly weaves itself into this larger history and tradition, with Gaddis pivoting to phenomena that would only multiply after 1955. Another way of framing the literary time-scale of post-secularism is Mark C. Taylor's claim that "since the early 1970s, we have been in the midst of what might be called the Fourth Great Awakening, which was unanticipated by virtually all of the most sophisticated cultural critics."¹ To speak of a Fourth Great Awakening is a way of conjoining Gaddis' novel with theological metamorphoses, for, "according to traditional accounts of American religious history, the first three Great Awakenings ran from the 1730s to the 1740s, from the 1820s to the 1830s, and from the 1880s to the 1900s."^{li} *The Recognitions* publication date of 1955 has caused much spirited debate over whether or not it is chronologically postmodern, and Taylor's charting that the Fourth Great Awakening began around the early 1970's furthers its unusual place within American literature, post-secular literature, and postmodern literature. I find the notion of *the after* especially useful for reading *The Recognitions* as post-secular, in that its date of publication⁸ does not neatly correspond to later, admittedly constructed, categories such as the Fourth Great Awakening or the postmodern. In its anticipatory belatedness, the novel shows affinities with a cultural atmosphere of *the after*, affording particular resonance with ideas of *the after* put forth by Mark C. Taylor (*After God*), Richard Kearney ("returning to God after God"), and Arthur C. Danto (*Art After the End of Art*). These theorists, and Gaddis himself, attest to a sense of fluid and fragmentary temporalities, not to mention spiritualities and aesthetics, that simultaneously "return to the after." Having briefly situated Gaddis within a broader nexus of

⁸ Indeed, this is the root cause for Kevin Attell's rather dogmatic interpretation of McClure's *Partial Faiths*, particularly how *The Recognitions*' publication date of 1955 means that "postsecular the novel is not," and I find such a historically-bound chronology of post-secular fiction (*only* after the 1970's writers that McClure writes on) to be incredibly narrowing in relation to a mode of thinking and writing that allows for historically flattened collage of artistic and theological styles a la Arthur C. Danto. (Kevin Attell, "The Last Christian Novel: William Gaddis' *The Recognitions*," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol.53, No.2, Summer 2012, page 20, 29)

American literature, and a more specific vein of post-secular writing, I will shift to an outline of what I deem a “post-secular aesthetic” operating in *The Recognitions*.

A Post-Secular Aesthetic in *The Recognitions*

If my working definition of the post-secular appears consonant with that of avant-garde art, it is no accident. On the level of theological-aesthetics, that is, the way in which post-secular spirituality is represented versus the “mass religion” of fundamentalism and megachurches, Noel Carroll is beneficial for definitions. He states that, “avant-garde art is esoteric; mass art is exoteric.”^{lii} The post-secular thrives on being “esoteric” in its determined indeterminacy, and its general preference for “alternative” figures and movements within established religions. Hence why post-secular thinkers and artists tend to prefer the Kabbalah over rabbinical Judaism, the mystical lineage of St. Teresa of Avila and St. Francis of Assisi over the Thomistic logicians, esoteric Sufism over Saudi Arabian-Wahhabism, and so on. Carroll notes that, “mass art is meant to command a mass audience...designed to be user friendly...structured in such a way that large numbers of people will be able to understand and appreciate it, virtually without effort.”^{liii} It is not too much of a leap to suggest that mass art can be synonymous with mass religion, as the spaces of worship for them have colloquially been deemed “mega-churches.” When Carroll writes that mass art can be consumed “virtually without effort,” it is worth pausing on that in consideration of Gaddis’ novel. *The Recognitions* is a mammoth of a book, however way you divide it up, on par with Gertrude Stein’s equally herculean effort, *The Making of Americans*. The reader is presented with a tremendous task, and as Carroll rightly states, “avant-garde art is made to be effortful and to rebuff easy assimilation by large audiences.”^{liv} A question inevitably arises, and it

is one that has plagued the avant-garde since artists began making avant-garde art: is it trying to trick me? is it just trying to confuse me and make me feel stupid? Practitioners of the avant-garde are frequently accused of elitism, and certainly the criticism could be extended to the post-secular, but I find that too reductive and dismissive. Nuances are essential, and for my reading of Gaddis, to mistake “effortful” with elitist drains the work of its potentialities. Mass religion, just like mass art, is “easy” (to use Carroll’s terminology). To say that a work of art or religious praxis is easy is not a value judgement per se, just a definition of the process of consuming it. The post-secular is a difficult spiritual stance, avant-garde and esoteric, and fundamentally *effortful* in its impetus to place a potential, skeptical believer in a realm of theological ambiguity and dwell in that space.

What exactly constitutes a post-secular novel, if we are defining post-secular fiction as an interweaving of the aesthetic and the thematic? Returning to John McClure’s earlier definition, he claims that “they make room in the worlds they project for magic, miracle, [and] metaphysical systems of retribution and restoration.”^{lv} While *The Recognitions* may be a novel devoid of supernatural occurrences, it is important to remember that alchemy is as central to its concerns as the “secular” money driving Wyatt to produce forgeries. Additionally, as Mark C. Taylor charts, “this often-unmanageable novel is also filled with death. Amid the overwhelming plethora of details and digressions, it is possible to discern a structure organized around three deaths: Camilla, Wyatt’s mother; Gwyon, Wyatt’s father; and Stanley, Wyatt’s friend.”^{lvi} Gaddis uses these deaths as a way of unifying *The Recognitions* towards its theme of the sacred, as death is one of the most powerful vehicles for opening a space for *the after* to be contemplated. Taylor charts how “each of these deaths is associated with a pagan festival that has been displaced by a Christian holiday: Samhain—All Saint’s Day, the Feast of Sol Invictus—Christmas, and Eostur—Easter. What unites these religious rituals is their common participation in the season cycles of death and renewal.”^{lvii}

What is post-secular about this structure is that instead of simply retrieving earlier pagan festivals in favor of their later Christian iterations, Gaddis blends them into a new “ritual,” neither Eostur nor Easter, but wholly directed towards what is *after*. This aesthetic of ritualized death is posited by Gaddis as a corrective against the attempt to depict “life as it is”: realism.

In *The Recognitions*, Gaddis attacks realism as an aesthetic and hermeneutic by saying of realist fiction that it “never takes your breath away, telling you things you already know, laying everything out flat, as though the terms and the time, and the nature and the movement of everything were secrets of the same magnitude.”^{lviii} In defining post-secular fiction, McClure asserts that “their assaults on realism, their ontological playfulness, and their experiments in the sublime represent a complex and variously inflected reaffirmation of premodern ontologies⁹— constructions of reality that portray the quotidian world as but one dimension of a multidimensional cosmos.”^{lix} These “assaults on realism” are found explicitly in *The Recognitions*, and Gaddis’ anti-realist invective also aligns with an aspect of Zhange Ni’s definition of the post-secular. She writes that it “is not merely disenchantment with secularism, but rather an effort to reconsider and reconfigure symbolic assumptions, cultivated sensibilities, and power relations associated with religion and to question the secular’s claim to epistemic, affective, and moral-political supremacy.”^{lx} Indeed, one of the hallmarks of realist fiction is its claims, strikingly parallel to the secular’s, to providing reality-as-it-is, thus suggesting a privileged sense of narrative epistemology. Joseph Conway points to Gaddis’ “suspicions of Hemingway,” as speaking to “a distrust of a certain kind of realism...such mimesis embeds itself within a classical empiricist tradition that mistakes what is visible for what is valuable.”^{lxi} It is crucial for my purposes to

⁹ It is not an exaggeration to suggest that a “reaffirmation of premodern ontologies” is the project of Reverend Gwyon as he seeks to convert his flock to Mithraism and other pre-Christian religions as a source code for apprehending the true sacred.

highlight Conway's connection of realism-empiricism with a mistaken discourse on *value*, tying the novel's larger questions of value in with the fragmented-yet-encyclopedic aesthetics of Gaddis' prose. Ironically, if we read Gaddis, McClure and Ni in concert, what emerges is that the post-secular broadens narrative and spiritual possibility, while realism accomplishes the task of flattening the world that the post-secular (and by extension, postmodernism) is accused of when labeled as "relativist." Post-secular literature does not mandate that the sacred is always accessible, that miracles are always occurring, but it does seek to present its characters with moments or settings where they are indeed of a different "magnitude" than the quotidian accoutrements of secular reality. I argue that *The Recognitions* affords such moments in Wyatt's contemplation and creation of paintings, forming a compendium of fragmentary but sacred instants.

The Recognitions is frequently described as an encyclopedic novel¹⁰, and Steven Moore helpfully shows how it is "many novels in one: a social satire, a pilgrim's progress, an anatomy of forgery, both a bildungsroman and Künstler-roman...a philosophical romance, even a mystery story."¹¹ The encyclopedic DNA of *The Recognitions* aligns it with other novels of similar ambition, a constellation of mega-novels such as Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, Roberto Bolano's *2666*, Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra*, William H. Gass' *The Tunnel*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. But beyond the literature that influenced, and was influenced by, *The Recognitions*, it is helpful to consult Lisa Siraganian's litany of artistic hallmarks informing it as well. Siraganian shows that

¹⁰ Moore himself provides an encyclopedic description of the novel, stating, "none of Gaddis' reviewers described [the novel] as *The Waste Land* rewritten by Dostoevsky (with additional dialogue by Ronald Firbank), but that would be a more accurate description than the *Ulysses* parallel so many of them harped upon," *William Gaddis: Expanded Edition*, page 9

“not only was Gaddis attentive to major twentieth-century trends in art, such as Post-Impressionism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, he also understood the particular directions and possibilities that were being negotiated at mid-century by artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol.”^{lxiii} Those artistic movements and key figures within them show Gaddis to be well-versed in the visual arts of his time, and I see in *The Recognitions* traces of the primordial energy unleashed by Pollock in Gaddis’ encyclopedic scale and the furious dialogue of its heteroglossia; the collage aesthetics of Rauschenberg certainly parallel the densely allusive character of the novel, most notably in the Rev. Gwyon’s collages of mystical traditions across time and space; and from Warhol, Gaddis found a probing visualization of commercial culture, as well as a trickster/court jester figure who blurred traditional ideas about the *value* of images. Paramount for understanding Gaddis’ aesthetic of the encyclopedic is Arthur C. Danto’s definition of the collage in contemporary art. Danto notes that, “the paradigm of the contemporary is that of the collage as defined by Max Ernst, with one difference. Ernst said that collage is ‘the meeting of two distant realities on a plane foreign to them both.’ The difference is that there is no longer a plane foreign to distinct artistic realities, nor are those realities all that distant from one another.”^{lxiv} Extended to *The Recognitions*, the “meeting of two distant realities,” if we ascribe to Danto’s definition, is more akin to a carnivalesque interaction of multiple realities so that, for instance, patristic theology can co-exist with Dale Carnegie, and metro bus advertisements warning about syphilis can interact alongside studied considerations of 17th century Flemish painting. Furthermore, Danto argues that “the basic perception of the contemporary spirit was formed on the principle of a museum in which all art has a rightful place...no a priori criterion as to what that art must look like, and where there is no narrative into which the museum’s contents must all fit.”^{lxv} A contemporary art museum is a fine metaphor for thinking about Gaddis’ novel-

as-encyclopedia, for on the level of its structure, it can truly be entered at multiple points without losing much of the fundamental plot points. Danto concludes his outlining of the collage by stating that, “artists today treat museums as filled not with dead art, but with living artistic options.”^{lxvi} The notion of “living artistic options” informs my reading of how Gaddis’ encyclopedic aesthetic deals with the multiplicity of religious systems and artistic traditions in *The Recognitions*. From a distance, the novel may appear to be a fragmented jumble of theology and artwork, but if we read them as “living options” for a post-secular painter such as Wyatt, the encyclopedic-collage comes to seem the ideal novelistic mode for Gaddis to narrativize many of the ideas Danto raises about contemporary art.

In *The Recognitions*, Gaddis has the composer-character Stanley state that, “we get time given to us in fragments, that’s the only way we know it. Finally we can’t even conceive of a continuum of time.”^{lxvii} The absence of a stable, linear continuum creates a reality in which, “every fragment exists by itself, and that’s why we live among palimpsests, because finally all the work should fit into one whole, and express an entire perfect action, as Aristotle says, and it’s impossible now, it’s impossible, because of the breakage, there are pieces everywhere.”^{lxviii} When Stanley speaks here of “the breakage” I read the phrase as referring to the symbolic moment of that stained-glass window shattering, the cultural “death of God.” Stanley claims that it is “impossible” to create a “grand theory of everything” style work in the time of “the breakage,” because of the “pieces everywhere,” and his sentiment aligns with Danto’s note that, “the contemporary is, from one perspective, a period of information disorder, a condition of perfect aesthetic entropy.”^{lxix} Gaddis would explore such an entropic, information overloaded world in 1976’s *J R*, but *The Recognitions* does not wholly subscribe to Stanley’s ideas of the contemporary. Importantly, Danto distinguishes that the contemporary “is equally a period of quite perfect freedom. Today there is

no longer any pale of history. Everything is permitted.”^{lxx} Cheekily repurposing Dostoevsky’s (in)famous claim about everything being permitted in a world without God, Danto shows how the heads-side of the coin of the contemporary is not only entropic but one of freedom. Elsewhere, Danto notes that, “Clement Greenberg is right: nothing has happened for thirty years. That is perhaps the most important thing to be said about the art of the past thirty years. But the situation is far from bleak, as Greenberg’s cry of ‘Decadence!’ implies.”^{lxxi} Greenberg, one of the most influential art critics of the Modernist heyday, was deeply disturbed by the developments of postwar American art and parallels literary critics who were suspicious of the postmodern aesthetics of writers like Gaddis. But for Danto, the idea that “nothing has happened for thirty years” is jubilant for “it inaugurates the greatest era of freedom that art has ever known.”^{lxxii} Wyatt’s encyclopedic range as a painter and spiritual seeker comes to mirror the freewheeling structure of Gaddis’ novel itself. A theoretical model that I argue shows Danto’s sense of the contemporary-as-artistic-freedom is Mark C. Taylor’s work on “the virtual,” a notion which helps to further unfold Gaddis’ encyclopedic aesthetics.

Returning to my earlier image of the post-secular as the work being done with the shattered pieces of a stained-glass window representing Western religious heritage, I propose that such “work” can be done by turning to Mark C. Taylor’s definition of “the virtual.” I argue that Taylor’s understanding of the virtual is a lens for reading the novel as exemplifying a post-secular, encyclopedic aesthetic. Taylor is concerned with a broader definition of the virtual than something narrowly confined to electronic writing or currency, for example. For him, the virtual “is neither immanent nor transcendent—neither here and now nor elsewhere and beyond.”^{lxxiii} Once again, we are back in the paradoxical temporality of *the after*, as Taylor continues, “the virtual is something like an immanent transcendence, which is inside as an outside that cannot be

incorporated.”^{lxxiv} Within the paradigm of the virtual, “nothing remains stable, secure, or certain,” but Taylor views this positively, an especially ripe territory for the artist, as in the virtual “the aim of life is to embrace the infinitely creative process whose purpose is nothing other than itself.”^{lxxv} Stanley’s worried pronouncement that, “—this self-sufficiency of fragments, that’s where the curse is, fragments that don’t belong to anything. Separately they don’t mean anything, but it’s almost impossible to pull them together into a whole,”^{lxxvi} can be reinterpreted positively via Taylor. For, recalling his definition of the virtual as an “inside as an outside that cannot be incorporated,” we can view Stanley’s fragments that defy “incorporation” as part of Gaddis’ encyclopedic reimagining and rearranging of the shards of religious heritage into new post-secular configurations. Gaddis uses the pieces of “the breakage” and rearranges them from the shape of the sacred as it existed in prior epochs of religious life into new shapes of the sacred that exist in artworks rather than solely in cathedral windows or the minarets of mosques.

Transitional Interlude: Mapping the Argument

Turning from an overview of *The Recognitions*’ post-secular aesthetics to its central protagonist, the painter Wyatt Gwyon, I will now illustrate how Gaddis unfurls twinned discourses on institutional religion and the marketplace as it diverges from Wyatt’s pursuit of the sacred, and its expression in his art. First, I present the figure of Wyatt’s father, the Reverend Gwyon, as an early example of a post-secular thinker, someone who presses against the constraints of the conservative religion he was ordained in. The Rev.’s eccentric theology provides Gaddis with an embodiment of post-secular fluidity and is sharply contrasted with the man who succeeds him at his parish, Pastor Dick, who encapsulates what Mark C. Taylor terms “neofoundationalism.”

Rather than embracing complexity and ambiguity as the Rev. Gwyon does, Pastor Dick is a symbol for contemporary institutional religion that is thoroughly despoiled by the marketplace, and thus is a theological equivalent of the forgery that Wyatt produces for the art market. Following my consideration of these warring spiritual fathers, I turn directly to Wyatt's engagement with the art world and its economic impulses. The two central figures in this section are Reck tall Brown, the dealer who employs Wyatt as a forger of supposedly lost masterpieces, and Mr. Pivner, a customer of Brown's who mirrors Pastor Dick in representing a thoroughly commoditized worldview. In the case of Mr. Pivner, I argue that Gaddis presents him as an embodiment of a kind of "encyclopedic capitalism" used in contrast to the novel's own post-secular encyclopedic aesthetics. What unites these threads is the centerpiece of my investigation, Wyatt's unfinished portrait of his dead mother Camilla. As an artwork begun while he is a young man in the house of his father, the Rev. Gwyon, and literally carries with him through his years as a forger in Manhattan, the portrait of Camilla undergoes both a steeping in post-secular sacrality and contagion by the marketplace. I argue that this portrait is the novel's central motif detailing the dwelling of the sacred in post-secular artworks. This portrait opens up a space for a discourse on the sacred, and its relation to a post-secular conception of *the after*. In turn, this discussion of the sacred informs my reading of Wyatt as an artist who paints *the* post-secular, and does so *as* a post-secular praxis.

Reverend Gwyon, "Church Father" of the Reimagined Sacred

As a seminary student, Gaddis writes of the young Gwyon that, "evenings [he] spent closeted with Thomas Aquinas, or constructing, with Roger Bacon, formidable geometrical proofs of God."^{lxxvii} Gaddis shows the reverend-in-training to be "closeted," enclosed darkly with

luminaries of the Aristotelian tradition in Christianity, which relies upon empirical logic to classify the sacred. The novel spares little time in fleshing out the formative theologies of Rev. Gwyon, signaling Gaddis' impatience with such institutional religions that would turn the sacred into no less than a math problem.¹¹ After the disastrous death of his wife Camilla on an Atlantic voyage, the Rev. Gwyon "entered a Franciscan monastery as a guest, in a cathartic measure which almost purged him of his life. The Real Monasterio de Nuestra Senora de la Otra Vez had been finished in the fourteenth century by an order since extinguished."^{lxxviii} Gwyon feels how "its sense of guilt was so great, and measures of atonement so stringent,"^{lxxix} that the historical excesses of this religious building affect him on a bodily level. Yet, Gaddis also informs us that the monks "would have none of [Gwyon's] ephemeral, guilt-ridden prospects, and continued to beatify trees, tempests, and other natural prodigies."^{lxxx} Guilt may be built into the stone foundation of the Monasterio, as well as within the orthodox-body of the Rev. Gwyon, but Gaddis suggests that the living caretakers of the space practice a far different Christianity, a kind of Franciscan ecology unconcerned with sin. Another instance of the Monasterio being a decidedly post-secular space is Gaddis' narration that, "and there, in the granary was the place where an abbot, a bishop, and a bumblebee...but there are miracles of such wondrous proportions that they must be kept, guarded from ears so wanting in grace that disbelief blooms into ridicule."^{lxxxii} Read in one manner, this has the tonal ring of a limerick, a Tijuana Bible joke about clerics. And yet, what exactly is contained within that ellipsis, not to mention those "miracles of such wondrous proportions" which must be "guarded" from disbelievers? Gaddis leaves this bumblebee anecdote as an aside on the long traverse of *The Recognitions*, but it is one the novel's first instances of a post-secular collage and

¹¹ Steven Moore argues that, "Gaddis feels the church has lost sight of its original purpose and has degenerated into little more than a disciplined superstition. Thus Christianity is to the religious spirit what chemistry is to alchemy: a modern development devoid of true spiritual value," *William Gaddis: Expanded Edition*, page 48

intermingling of the sacred and the profane. The miracle that is said to have occurred in the granary is neither confirmed nor disproved, and Gaddis' attitude towards such an event is (in)sincere, an ambiguous stance which grants the possibility of the miraculous while steering clear of defining any of its details too closely. Once the Rev.'s period of penitential grief in the Monasterio comes to a close, we encounter a radically transformed preacher open to a newfound spiritual vibrancy and eclecticism upon his return to America.

As a twelve-year old, Wyatt was "deeply impressed by the funeral sermon his father spoke over that anonymous box"^{lxxxii} containing the soon-to-be-buried Aunt May. This "anonymous box" is in effect the novel's symbolic container of the type of religious rigidity and conformity Gaddis is working so stridently to undo over the course of *The Recognitions*. The death of Aunt May narratively re-enacts the Nietzschean death of God that post-secularism sees as occurring roughly from the mid-19th century through the Second World War. It is fitting, then, that Wyatt was "deeply impressed" by his father's sermon that day for it is was seen by many in their community as "the last truly Christian sermon he had ever read."^{lxxxiii} A sermon, by the way, that Gaddis informs us "had progressed from vivisection to the Mojave Indians,"^{lxxxiv} an appropriate series of topics to horrify his Sleepy Hollow-esque congregation. Echoing Gaddis' later comments about *The Recognitions* being "the last Christian novel" as well as his own cryptic phrase about himself being "the last of something," the recurrence of last-ness is seen in this passage as *turning* towards Wyatt from his father. I read the funeral of Aunt May as nothing less than Gaddis staging a *mise-en-scene* of institutionalized religion dying off, while the elegiac sermon of the Rev. Gwyon *impresses* itself, like the woodblock prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige, upon the young Wyatt who emerges as a more fully post-secular visionary than his father could become, for Wyatt represents the full motion of *turning away* from religion to art that Gaddis sees as necessary for a reimagining of the sacred.

In *The Recognitions*, Gaddis unfolds how, “when modern devices fail, it is our nature to reach back among the cures of our fathers. If those fail, there were fathers before them. We can reach back for centuries.”^{lxxxv} But this claim, which at first glance seems like optimistic patrilineal folk wisdom, is severely complicated when we remember the novel’s very title. The aforementioned quote appears to suggest that the “failure” of “modern devices” can be “cured” by calling upon a lineage of forefathers that “reach[es] back for centuries.” Yet *The Recognitions*’ titular forefather, *The Clementine Recognitions*, sometimes labelled the “first Christian novel,” is itself of dubious origins. Scholars once attributed it to Clement of Rome¹², but subsequent findings have made efforts to accurately assign authorship to it very problematic. *The Clementine Recognitions* becomes a symbol for Gaddis of a long tradition of forgery in the West, thus undoing the seeming optimism in confidently saying, “we can reach back for centuries.” Instead, Gaddis’ project is not to search for the patriarchal turtles all the way down, but to imaginatively conceive what “spiritual leaders” look like when we return to God, or to fathers like Rev. Gwyon, after the death of God, as Richard Kearney as written.

At *The Recognitions*’ outset the ship carrying the Rev. Gwyon and his wife Camilla passes under the Pleiades, “a constellation whose setting has inaugurated celebrations for those lying in graves from Aztec America to Japan, encouraging the Druids to their most solemn mystery of the reconstruction of the world, bringing to Persia the month of Mordad, and the angel of death.”^{lxxxvi} Zhange Ni writes that, “the post-secular is particularly attentive to the fluidity of religion as a constructed category, to the varieties of nonmodern, non-Western religious traditions, and to the flourishing of new types of ‘spiritual’ (although almost invariably embodied) practices.”^{lxxxvii} The

¹² In the novel, Gaddis has the alchemical forger Basil Valentine say, “*The Recognitions*? No, it’s Clement of Rome. Mostly talk, talk, talk. The young man’s deepest concern is for the immortality of his soul, he goes to Egypt to find the magicians and learn their secrets. It’s been referred to as the first Christian novel. What? Yes, it’s really the beginning of the whole Faust legend,” page 373.

passage about the Pleiades is thus a clear instance of the religious fluidity that Ni speaks of, for Gaddis sees the myriad ways that a locus of the sacred, the Pleiades, is reimagined by each spirituality assigning it meaning. Indeed, the Rev. Gwyon functions in the novel as literally embodying the idea of post-secular “fluidity,” particularly in the construction of his theological identity courtesy of his cyclonic accumulation of fragments from religions the world over. After his restorative, cathartic stay in the Real Monasterio¹³, the Rev. wanders Spain, with Gaddis informing us that, “he collected things, each of a holy intention in isolation, but pagan in the variety of his choice.”^{lxxxviii} The “collection” that he brings back to New England from his Iberian rambles amounts to a sort of post-secular hoarding, as his sister Aunt May is increasingly unnerved by the strange objects from Catholic Europe, though in fact they are of an older, more premodern spiritual epoch.

Amidst Rev. Gwyon’s period of mourning, Gaddis writes that “his sermons took up a lively course. In his loneliness, [he] found himself studying again.”^{lxxxix} We learn that “with the loss of Camilla he returned to the times before he had known her, among the Zuni and Mojave, the Plains Indians and the Kwakiutl. He strayed far from his continent, and spent late hours of the night participating in dark practices from Borneo to Assam.”^{xc} The nocturnal setting of the Rev.’s studying is patterned after the “dark night of the soul,” except for Gwyon he is not in a state of despair as he opts for an immersion in spiritualities other than his latter-day Puritanism in an expansive sweep that takes him from the desert and plains to the Canadian coast of North American

¹³ Crystal Alberts has shown that “Gaddis, traveling through much of the Western European and North African military arenas, witnessed some of the aftermath of the war; however, his novel is conspicuously void of such descriptions. Rather, his text focuses on structures left standing, particularly Spanish monasteries,” perhaps one reason why the Real Monasterio occupies such a central position in the novel. (“Mapping William Gaddis: The Man, *The Recognitions*, and His Time,” page 19 from *William Gaddis, ‘The Last of Something’: Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts, Christopher Leise, and Birger Vanwesenbeeck, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010

indigeneity all the way to the Himalayas of Assam and the South Pacific island of Borneo. Such a post-secular fluidity is indicative of how Gaddis uses the Rev. to reimagine sacrality. One of Gwyon's Christmas sermons exemplifies this, as Gaddis writes of his congregants, "they had never been treated this way from the pulpit. True, many stirred with indignant discomfort after listening to the familiar story of virgin birth on December twenty-fifth, mutilation and resurrection, to find they had been attending, not Christ, but Bacchus, Osiris, Krishna, Buddha, Adonis, Marduk, Balder, Attis, Amphion, or Quetzalcoatl."^{xc} Contextualizing oneself in the novel's setting of the early 1950's, it is striking to consider just how peculiar the Rev. Gwyon must have seemed to his congregants, an embodiment of religious fluidity and plurality, with special emphasis devoted to the "varieties of nonmodern, non-Western religious traditions" that Zhange Ni views as essential to the post-secular. Indeed, Gaddis comically writes of how these same parishioners "hurried home to closet themselves with their Bibles after the sermon on the Trinity, which proved to be Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva; as they did after the recital of the Immaculate Conception, where the seed entered in spiritual form, bringing forth, in virginal modesty, Romulus and Remus."^{xcii} Rev. Gwyon's sermons are post-secular in their theological fluidity, as they go beyond embracing all traditions on an equal footing and instead infuse tenets of one religion, Christianity, with deities from Hinduism and ancient Roman paganism, to become entirely reimagined doctrines and fables. For Gaddis, the Rev. Gwyon is an incarnation of the post-secular's drive towards paradox and ambiguity. A different novelist might have had Gwyon simply renounce Christianity and adopt Mithraism, the ancient religion that he believes Christianity is a "forgery" of, with full force. But Gaddis wants to experiment with what happens when a religious leader convinces themselves that their creed is "a forgery" but still preaches from a Christian pulpit. In this way, Gwyon prefigures Wyatt who explicitly paints forgeries of more famous artists, although his forgeries are of a curious

variety. He is not merely copying the old masters pigment for pigment, and his forgeries are better categorized as “false originals,” as they are at a fundamental wholly authentic creations of Wyatt Gwyon. Such a paradox is at the heart of the sacred in a post-secular understanding, and shows how Wyatt absorbs such ambiguities from the fluid collage of theologies that his father embodied. While the Rev. Gwyon is an affirmative personification for Wyatt’s growth as a post-secular painter, Gaddis reserves a special register of invective for the institutional religions that he sees as cousins of forged artworks, both contaminated by the marketplace.

Pastor Dick and the Breakdown of Institutional Religion

When Otto, the aspiring writer in Gaddis’ novel, visits South America, he comes across a cathedral in the town square: “the broken face of that old building was covered with the sun. It was difficult to believe that it had ever been new.”^{xciii} For Otto, the cultural death of God is spatialized in this building that doesn’t seem to have “ever been new,” so that whatever spiritual life-force it might have contained seems an impossibility. A closer inspection reveals, “the saints, some armless and headless, waiting in still niches smoothed and quietened by the rain. The towers hung heavy with silent bells. But in places the plaster had come away.”^{xciv} The decay of institutional Christianity is evidenced by decapitated and limbless statues of saints, and an atmosphere of quietude pervades the space, whether the “silent bells” of the steeples or the statues being “quietened by the rain.” Gaddis concludes Otto’s experience of the cathedral by blithely stating, “The birds, forgetting nothing and remembering nothing, dashed the benches with spots of white.”^{xcv} Any “memory” of the church as a place where the sacred dwelt appears long gone for Otto as much as for the birds, with Gaddis hinting that one of the dangers of secularism’s “sound

and fury” is that it produces a condition of “forgetting nothing and remembering nothing.” In the Gospels, when Jesus institutes the eucharist at the Last Supper, he tells his disciples, “Do this in memory of me,” and I suggest the notion of the birds indiscriminately shitting on the church, “forgetting nothing and remembering nothing,” is a subtle way for Gaddis to narrate the death of a proscriptive, institutional rituality. In concert with Otto’s idea of forgotten memories of sacred spaces, Basil Valentine, one of Reckfall Brown’s associates in the forgery business says, “—if Saint Peter could come out today upon these streets below he would find all he could wish, voices from nowhere, music from unpopulated boxes, men ascending divine distances in gas balloons, and traveling at the speed of sound, apparitions from nowhere appear on the screen.”^{xcvi} The suggestion being that the revelations of the ancients were no more profound than someone mistaking coincidental messages from modern media to be prophetic. It’s an intriguing speculation, but more importantly shows the impact of the commercialization of technology and media upon institutional religion in Eisenhower America and provides a bridge to Gaddis’ powerful description of the changes wrought upon the Rev. Gwyon’s parish church by his successor.

After the death of Rev. Gwyon, Pastor “Dick” is brought to the parish to steer it back to orthodoxy. Gaddis writes that, “the refurbishing job which ‘Dick’ had brought about in the church had been an extensive one. To begin with, the bell had been replaced with an electrically driven sound system...playing familiar hymns especially recorded for the purpose...The gilded organ pipes had disappeared...The oaken boards, where hymn and verse had been posted during services, were no longer necessary for programs were now printed.”^{xcvii} He comes to represent what Mark C. Taylor calls “neofoundationalism,” or, colloquially, religious fundamentalism. Writing of postmodernity, Taylor notes that “deregulated, decentralized, and distributed networks effectively

collapse distance and compress time to create a world in which to be is to be connected.”^{xcviii} In many ways, the collapse and compression of space-time is exemplified by Rev. Gwyon, whose pluralistic spirituality sees theological temporalities and geographies blurring into a collage of sacred connectivity. Yet, Taylor reminds that “as connectivity spreads, complexity increases, and correlatively, instability and uncertainty grow.”^{xcix} Gwyon’s parish is thrown into an unstable and uncertain mood as its reverend fully plunges into the post-secular, and consequently leads to “a longing for simplicity, certainty, and security,”^c which Taylor sees as neofoundationalism’s mission to satisfy, and is symbolized in the novel by Pastor Dick. The project of “refurbishing” witnesses Gwyon’s church turning from a place of organic, solid signifiers to a more “virtual” space, albeit virtual in a negative and non-encyclopedic sense. Replacing the organ of the church with “an electrically driven sound system” and the handwritten hymn notice with printed programs shows Pastor Dick seeking to provide certainty (the sense of items being more official when printed or processed electronically) and security (the shift to electronic and pre-programmed music, for instance, takes away the chances for human error in a service), i.e. the hallmarks of neofoundationalism. Additionally, Taylor notes that “the propensity of print to cultivate individuality should not obscure the ways in which it standardizes language as well as personal habits and social customs. The standardization of language leads to the gradual eclipse of local dialects as well as the regulation of idiosyncratic usages.”^{ci} Reading Pastor Dick’s implementing of printed¹⁴ church programs as an instance of neofoundationalism shows how his is a project of theological standardization, whereas Rev. Gwyon was a powerful manifestation of “idiosyncratic” praxis with a “local dialect” of theology all his own.

¹⁴ Early in the novel, Gaddis’ narrator provides us with the aside, “(a discussion: did the coming of the printing press corrupt? Putting a price on authorship, originality),” page 92. For Gaddis, as for Mark C. Taylor, the printing press embodies the dilemmas of commodity culture, individualism, and originality that they both see as originating from the Reformation.

Mark C. Taylor plots a moment in American religious history, “since the early 1970’s,”^{cii} wherein “the principles of the market are extended to religious systems; religious leaders become spiritual entrepreneurs who must compete in the open market...while Warhol and his fellow artists were commodifying art, Billy Graham and his fellow preachers were commodifying religion.”^{ciii} Warhol being the (in)famous champion of mass-reproduced artworks, it is worth substituting Billy Graham for Pastor Dick in thinking of the novel, and the way that the parish goes from a “religious leader” of flamboyant eccentricity in Rev. Gwyon to a “spiritual entrepreneur” in the market-savvy Pastor Dick. Elsewhere, Taylor has written that, “well-schooled in Christianity Lite, Pastor Dick is as superficial and lighthearted as Gwyon is serious and troubled. Instead of hefty tomes of mythology and theology, Dick restricts his intellectual inquiry to *Reader’s Digest*. Anticipating the new age Gaddis sees emerging around him, Dick is at ease in the world of televangelism and reality TV.”^{civ} What is especially striking is that the character of Pastor Dick is (ironically) prophetic of the Billy Graham school of televangelists that would only surface some decades after *The Recognitions* was published in 1955. For Gaddis, Pastor Dick is a performative instance of the marketplace’s infection of the sacred in institutional religion, and Wyatt’s years as a forger in the Manhattan art world is a diagonal experience of the sacred becoming cancerous as a result of the marketplace.

Forgery: Unstable Signifiers and the Shattering of Value

The scandal of Wyatt Gwyon’s paintings is that they purport to be lost masterpieces by Dutch landscape painters such as Jan Van Eyck, when in fact that are his own originals. A scandal because the viewer or, indeed, the buyer of said forgery believed it was by an esteemed artist of

centuries' past when in fact it was created in the same Manhattan of the 1950s that they themselves live in. Dennis Dutton provides a provocative reading of artistic forgeries when he writes that "what is wrong with forgeries...is that they not only misattribute origin: because they misattribute origin, they *misrepresent achievement*."^{cv} Relating this notion directly to Gaddis, Steven Moore writes that his "first two novels can be read, in one sense at least, as crusades: in *The Recognitions* against fraudulence and fakery at all levels (artistic, religious, intellectual, moral, etc.)."^{cvi} Fraudulence informs the novel's discourse on the instability of signifiers, whether in forged currency that gestures towards the end of the gold standard¹⁵ in American economics and thus a paradigm of money without roots in physical objects of value (gold bricks), or in artworks duplicitously posing as 17th century Flemish masterpieces when in fact they were created in the novel's present, thus questioning the true value of any work of art. As Moore continues, "we find a country in the first novel so immersed in counterfeit it can no longer tell the difference between the genuine and the phony, except to prefer the latter."^{cvi} Interestingly, in Walter Benn Michaels' influential work on the impact of the gold standard on American literature,¹⁶ he provides a similar idea to Gaddis' statements on the counterfeit. Michaels, writing of the naturalist, claims, "we don't want things in themselves, but we can't begin by wanting representations of things in themselves either; we want things in themselves that look like representations."^{cvi} Any discussion of the counterfeit, the forged, the reproducible, inevitably calls to mind the looming shadow of Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." While I

¹⁵ Christopher Leise contends that, "In working to rethink America's reliance on a kind of 'gold standard' that tends to reduce all meaning to a pragmatist's cash value, Gaddis' novels invite their reader to play an ancient game: the Greek parlor game of 'aporia,' wherein the point is to ask questions for which there are no answers," but I read *The Recognitions* as more than a novel-length game of Zen koans, as I argue that Gaddis is indeed gesturing towards a stance on the sacred, more than simply bandying about questions. Christopher Leise, "The Power of Babel: Art, Entropy, and Aporia in the Novels," page 36-37, from *William Gaddis, 'The Last of Something': Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts, Christopher Leise, and Birger Vanwesenbeeck, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010

¹⁶ A book which does not reference Gaddis once, despite being published in 1987; *JR* won the National Book Award in 1976, so he was far from an obscure, undiscovered author at that point.

acknowledge the still-echoing impact of Benjamin's argument, I am also deliberately choosing to sidestep drawing from this essay itself, as well as the multitudes of scholarly opinions generated by it. I am in agreement with Hillel Schwartz,¹⁷ when writes that Benjamin "did not say it best when he said that through replication the Original has lost its aura. He was wrong to claim that the ritual distance which we keep, or by which we are kept, from unique works of art had been diminished by modern industrial processes."^{cix} For Schwartz, "what withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is not the aura, the Happen-Stance, of works of art but the assurance of our own liveliness...Benjamin confused misdirection with deformity."^{cx} Thus, one way of reading Wyatt's forgeries is less that they evidence the paltriness of "modern industrial processes," but rather that they induce deep insecurity about the self of the viewer. This affective uncanniness will become even clearer in my reading of a self-portrait commissioned by the forgery-dealer Recktall Brown, but first I want to turn to an essential discussion concerning unstable signifiers to firmly ground the reader in the stakes of forgery on the aesthetic and theological levels.

With an income largely derived from forged paintings for much of the novel, Wyatt must contend with the fact that his ritualized-painting is vulnerable to the same erosion wrought upon its sacrality that his father's church experienced in its exposure to the whims of the marketplace. Forgery in *The Recognitions* cannot be reduced to a simplistic argument over "real versus fake," for Gaddis is weaving together a more complex discourse on the sacred and its umbilical connection to the visual arts and economic modes, and how this plays out in the person of Wyatt. In a passage worth quoting in its entirety, Mark C. Taylor outlines how, ironically enough, the Protestant Reformation made way for the dilemmas of Wyatt's forgery:

¹⁷ Who, by the way, uses a quote from *The Recognitions* a Schwartz as the epigraph to her book, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*, on page 11

“According to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the signifier (bread and wine) and the signified (body and blood of Christ) are one and, thus, are indistinguishable. Luther denied the complete identity between signifier and signified but affirmed the real presence of Christ in the ritual. The signified, therefore, is still rendered present through the signifier. Calvin radicalized Luther’s position by decisively breaking the bond between the signifier and signified.”^{cxix}

The implications of Luther’s, and then Calvin’s, shifts extend to the dialogues on art, religion and economics in Gaddis’ novel. Take the example of the Jan Van Eyck paintings in *The Recognitions*. In a pre-Reformation understanding, the signifier is the landscape painting and the signified is the artist who painted it, Jan Van Eyck. They are bonded. You can look at the painting and also at the same time know (or at least think you know) with a degree of certainty who it was painted by, in the way that looking at the eucharist allows you to simultaneously experience matter (bread and wine) and divinity (believing that it is Christ). But what happens when the signifiers are identical to Jan Van Eyck but the signified is Wyatt Gwyon? Gaddis engages the same questions of signification as Taylor presents with his example of Luther and Calvin when Esme recollects on her estranged husband Wyatt, “—He even said once, that the saints were counterfeits of Christ, and that Christ was a counterfeit of God.”^{cxii} In medieval Catholicism, the saints functioned as signifiers of Christ, physical “representations” meant to inspire you through their actions to a deeper faith in Christ, but Wyatt’s provocation can be read as a conclusion of the dissolve between sign/signifier that Taylor sees initiated during the Reformation. When the saint is no longer understood as a physical object pointing towards the signified, Jesus Christ, but become themselves mistaken for Christ, the question of Christ’s relation to God is even further convoluted.

A “counterfeited saint” stops the movement from signifier to signified because the saint appears to be Christ, and in the same way, Wyatt’s comment is a wonderful crystallization of the myriad debates over trinitarian theology that the Reformation incited (and indeed was caused by). Was Jesus really fully human *and* fully divine, as the Catholic Church suggested, or was he someone who became divine after the resurrection, or was he just a gifted prophet, and so on. As Hillel Schwartz reminds, “only in a culture of the copy do we assign such motive force to the Original. What we intend by ‘Original’ these days is that which speaks to us in an unmediated way, an experience we seem to believe we have lost between ourselves, human to human.”^{cxiii} This speaks powerfully to Gaddis’ question about counterfeits of God, in that *The Recognitions*’ search for “the Original,” whether in artistic creation or religious experience, is caused by the loss of “unmediated” relationships between the human characters, such as between Wyatt and Esther, Wyatt and Camilla, and so on.

Mark C. Taylor’s discourse on signs and signifiers is particularly revealing when unpacking Gaddis’ description of a self-portrait that the forgery-dealer Recktall Brown commissioned for himself. Gaddis says that “it had been painted from a photograph...in which his hands, found in the foreground by the indiscriminating lens, were marvelously enlarged. The portrait painter, directed to copy that photograph faithfully and neither talented, nor paid enough, to do otherwise, had with attentive care copied the hands as they were in the picture.”^{cxiv} In Taylor’s schema, an artistic model of transubstantiated portraiture would view the signifier as the person of flesh and blood, Recktall Brown, and the signified as the painting on canvas that traditionally came as a result of the signifier modelling for the artist. But in this instance, the signifier is no longer “real” in the sense of a bodily-model and is instead a virtual stand-in for this person. The portrait of Brown is thus a Calvinist painting in its evidence of the “decisive break” (Taylor’s phrase)

between the signifier and the signified, especially in the painter's dutiful copying of the hands of Brown that have been "marvelously enlarged" by the "undiscriminating lens" of the camera. Basing a portrait off of a photograph creates a funhouse mirror effect, where the virtual body of Brown reproduced onto the canvas is a cartoonish grotesquerie. Gaddis notes of Recktall Brown: "and pausing, passing it hundreds of times in the years since, often catching up one hand in the other before him, his hands came to resemble these in the portrait,"^{cxv} powerfully illustrating Mark C. Taylor's "eclipse of the real" in a virtual paradigm. For, not only does the portrait distend reality by faithfully reproducing a photograph that is itself a distortion of the real, but this virtual-portraiture in turn distends the reality of the portrait's subject himself, as Brown comes to model his physical body based on the distorted painting. To recall my discussion from Hillel Schwartz at the opening of this section, "what withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is not the aura, the Happen-Stance, of works of art but the assurance of our own liveliness."^{cxvi} Gaddis powerfully describes this very dilemma wherein a photograph (a product of "the age of mechanical reproduction") instigates a distortion in one's "assurance" of their "liveliness," in the performative act of Recktall Brown morphing his bodily movements and shape to resemble the portraiture of unstable signifiers.

I do not find it accidental that Gaddis presents this quandary of artistic signification with the character of Recktall Brown, someone who makes a living out of manipulating the art market with forgeries and thus profits from the blurring of signifier-signified. Indeed, as Mark C. Taylor highlights, "one of the most important developments of the latter half of the twentieth century was the end of the gold standard. Going off the gold standard was the economic equivalent of the death of God."^{cxvii} This provocative statement is furthered when Taylor writes, "Gold functions in the economic system just as God functions in the religious schemata: gold is a sign constructed to

deny its status as sign and thereby ground the value of other monetary signs.”^{cxviii} In a symbolic sense, then, Brown is both the Mephistopheles in the Faustian pact that Wyatt makes to become a lucrative forger, and a personification of the death of God. Brown is a figure who amasses a sizeable fortune from the sale of forgeries during the Eisenhower years, a decade of postwar prosperity that would quickly be upended by the end of the gold standard in the early 1970’s. But it is precisely because Brown is wealthy during the height of the postwar gold standard that Gaddis is able to reveal the charade of its stability, as Taylor writes of gold being “a sign constructed to deny its status as sign.” As a dealer in forgeries, Brown knows very well that the gold grounding the purchases of Wyatt’s forged paintings is just a well-crafted illusion, and is in reality a complex entanglement of signifier and signified, mirroring the way that his own self-portrait is a jumbling of signification to the point that his real physique tries to resemble the skewed representation of his body via the photograph it is based on. As the economic historian Thomas Piketty notes of references to money in the novels of Jane Austen and Honoré de Balzac, “these monetary markers were...stable reference points,”^{cxix} so that sign and signifier were in a degree of constancy. Piketty concludes this argument by bluntly stating, “until World War I, money had meaning.”^{cxx} As a way of better understanding Taylor’s provocation that “going off the gold standard was the economic equivalent of the death of God,” I want to turn to another striking passage from Piketty that furthers the notion of *The Recognitions* as a novel centrally concerned with unstable signifiers and new, often bewildering conceptions of value. Piketty outlines how “the loss of stable monetary reference points in the twentieth century marks a significant rupture with previous centuries, not only in the realms of economics and politics, but also in regard to social, cultural, and literary matters.”^{cxxi} This “rupture” of stable signifiers recalls my earlier discussion of the character Stanley speaking of “the breakage” of postwar life, and speaks powerfully to Gaddis’ sense of *the after*, specifically

what it means to write of the sacred in the wake of a “rupture,” whether the death of God, Danto’s end of art, or capitalism after the end of the gold standard. Unifying these large theoretical tributaries is Gaddis’ character of Recktall Brown, who I read as the dark manifestation of such meaning-less money, of what happens to value when economic signs and signifiers dissolve from each other. Piketty’s discussion of World War I as instigating the end of money-as-meaningful bridges Taylor’s discussion of the end of the gold standard paralleling the death of God, providing a compelling entryway to the novel’s interest in alchemy, and its relation to gold.

Gaddis weaves the discourse of alchemy into that of art forgery, as the idea that base metals could be manipulated into gold provides a useful metaphor for Wyatt’s own manipulation of the techniques of Flemish masters into gold of two varieties: the literal gold of currency that Wyatt is paid by Recktall Brown when the forgeries are sold, and the gold of artistic “value” that the hoodwinked customers think they are attaining by purchasing a lost Jan Van Eyck. Writing of the fledgling novelist Otto, Gaddis notes that, “like everyone else, he had never seen a copy of the *Chema*, that book in which the fallen angels wrote out the secrets of their arts which they had taught to the women they married.”^{cxviii} Rather than let the book of alchemical “scriptures”¹⁸ occupy a solely occult, hermetic status in the novel, Gaddis weaves it into a larger debate over the economic gold standard. We learn that Otto is “as embarrassed by the mention of Christ as he was charmed by the image of gold, the only thing which kept him from dismissing alchemy as the blundering parent of modern chemistry...was this very image of gold...to be fashioned...into 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.”^{cxviii}

¹⁸ Steven Moore outlines, “in his studies of the alchemical texts, Jung showed that alchemy was actually a kind of (heretical) Christian mysticism; like the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola (which Basil Valentine is reading on page 330), the alchemical steps toward the philosopher’s stone were not lab procedures but meditative exercises broadening the scope of Catholic dogma, and thus heretical,” *William Gaddis: Expanded Edition*, page 42

For Otto, the alchemical quest for gold is bound up inextricably with “mass-production” and thereby the dominant economic model of Eisenhower America: the gold standard. This passage highlights one of the ways that the marketplace corrupts the eccentric spiritualities of the post-secular in that an obscure, alternative scripture (the *Chema*) is no longer an instrument for theological experimentation but instead is linked with the mass-production of consumer goods. And, as Devin Singh has pointed out, money, particularly hard currency such as gold “brings to the fore questions about the materialization of transcendent value and the role of representation, issues central to debates about God’s relation to the world.”^{cxxiv} The novel’s attentiveness to alchemy and its links to the art market and the gold standard point towards Gaddis’ own worries about the “materialization of transcendent value,” and if such an occurrence is possible in the postwar America of *The Recognitions*.

Mr. Pivner’s Bookshelf: Dale Carnegie and the Capitalist Encyclopedia

If there is one character in *The Recognitions* who mostly fully encapsulates Gaddis’ fears about transcendent value being reduced to the flattening of the sacred by the marketplace, it is Mr. Pivner, who purchases some of Wyatt’s forgeries and whose patron saint is Dale Carnegie. Before introducing Mr. Pivner in full, I want to turn to one of the novel’s Manhattan dinner party scenes, where one of Gaddis’ many anonymous voices declares, “—The whole goddamn American economy depends on mass production. To sustain mass production you got to have a mass market. To sustain a goddam mass market you got to have advertising... We’ve had the goddam Ages of Faith, we’ve had the goddam Age of Reason. This is the Age of Publicity.”^{cxxv} As a way of framing the art world that Wyatt is dealing with, the connection of mass production with “the Age of

Publicity” provides a dialogue with Noel Carroll’s idea of “mass art.” He defines “mass art” as a phenomenon “involved in production and distribution of a mass scale; and, second, because the alternative way of naming it—calling it ‘popular art’—fails to acknowledge the way in which *scale* is utterly relevant to its nature, and, in consequence, fails to acknowledge its historical specificity as a product of industrial *urban* mass society.”^{cxv} The setting of Gaddis’ novel largely in an affluent Manhattan of the 1950’s is an “industrial urban mass societies” par excellence, and Gaddis is particularly attuned to the question of “scale” raised by Carroll. *The Recognitions* derives a great deal of narrative energy from its deployment of a Bahktinian heteroglossia of voices, especially the multitude of voices at Manhattan dinner-parties; *JR* will see Gaddis reach the apex of novelistic heteroglossia, using speech in a way that has never been quite replicated. Such scenes help to illuminate Mark C. Taylor’s contention that “the Reformation was an information and communications revolution that effectively prepared the way for the information, communications, and media revolution at the end of the twentieth century.”^{cxvii} Perhaps the best instance of mass art in *The Recognitions* is Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), which, while not a visual object, is indicative of the scale involved in the production and distribution of such art. Carnegie’s book very much fits in with the “Age of Publicity,” i.e. an age of advertising and commercial cults of personality, and Gaddis’ chronology of the “goddam Ages of Faith” through the Enlightenment to postwar consumerism certainly finds its end-point in Mr. Pivner.

Among *The Recognitions*’ most compelling fictional creations, Mr. Pivner is striking in his embodiment of the triangulated “infection” Gaddis sees pervading art, religion, and economics. Mr. Pivner’s bookshelf contains an “assortment of books published by the hundred-thousand, treatises on the cultivation of the individual *self*, prescriptions of superficial alterations in vulgarity

read with excruciating eagerness by men alone in big chairs.”^{cxxviii} A collection, in other words, of self-help books, none more prized by Mr. Pivner than Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Pointedly, Gaddis interjects after listing the chapters of Carnegie’s book that these “treatises” are obsessed by “the Self which had ceased to exist the day they stopped seeking it alone.”^{cxxix} This is “the Self” birthed by the Protestant Reformation, according to Mark C. Taylor’s mapping, and Gaddis aligns with Taylor in finding Martin Luther’s emphasis on the construction of the individual reaching a logical conclusion in late stage capitalism’s privileging of self-actualization as the highest good. The self, as espoused by Carnegie and his peers on Mr. Pivner’s bookshelf, is put forth by Gaddis as the obverse reflection of the post-secular’s championing of individualized configurations of (dis)belief and expression in the arts. Indeed, Taylor writes of “Luther’s turn to the subject” that “by privatizing, deregulating, and decentering the relation between the believer and God, [he] initiated a revolution that was not confined to religion but extended to politics and economics.”^{cxxx} I read Mr. Pivner as the product of this Lutheran “revolution” for his relation to revelation has become so “decentered” that the self-help capitalistic jingoism of Dale Carnegie has superseded even a Protestant, personalized relationship with God.

Fascinatingly, Gaddis also shows this linkage of the Lutheran subject to the “revolution” in mass-communication and media as outlined by Mark C. Taylor, as he expands Mr. Pivner’s ingestion of Dale Carnegie to a broader consumption of 1950’s mass-media. Gaddis writes, “in the background, unattended, the radio poured out, subdued, the Reformation Symphony...[it] made him nervous, as all such music did.”^{cxxxi} The “nervousness” of hearing the radio playing Mendelssohn’s Reformation Symphony (1830) is explained by Gaddis, for Mr. Pivner “preferred that music to which he did not have to listen. It was only the human voice on the radio that stopped

him, that raised his head in expectation, as though it were about to impart something of great personal significance to *him*.”^{cxxxii} The revolution in mass-media that Taylor connects to the period between the Reformation and postmodernity is indeed a disquieting one, and leads Mr. Pivner to a solipsistic longing for the possibility that through the radio “something of great personal significance” should be revealed. Here, Martin Luther’s desire for a privatized, deregulated relation of God and the individual believer is shown to be perverted into a self-help junkie rejecting aesthetic beauty (Pivner’s preference to not listen to music) in favor of a revelation dispensed across the radio waves especially “to *him*.” Gaddis powerfully describes this “revolutionary” solipsism in the following passage:

And though he was surprised when he realized it, was it really any wonder at all that Mr. Pivner, whose world was a series of disconnected images, his life a procession of faces reflecting his own anonymity in the street, and faces sharing moments of severe intimacy in the press, any wonder that before he knew it, he had beseeched familiarity.^{cxxxiii}

Mr. Pivner’s world of “disconnected images,” where passersby on the street only “reflect his own anonymity,” is thus Gaddis’ way of narrating what Taylor outlines as Luther’s project of “privatizing, deregulating, and decentering the relation between the believer and God.”^{cxxxiv} In this reading, the “revolution” of the Reformation resulted not in an enriched experience of God by the faithful but concludes by leaving a man so desperate to connect the disparate shards of his reality that an advertisement on the radio (“Are you _____?”) lands with the thud of a prophet receiving divine revelations.

What Mr. Pivner values about Carnegie's book is that "it was written with a reassuring felicity. There were no abstrusely long sentences, no confounding long words, no bewildering metaphors in an obfuscated system such as he feared finding in simply bound books of thoughts and ideas."^{cxxxv} The style of Carnegie is in many ways synonymous with Gaddis' definition of realism, an aesthetic mode he attacks throughout the novel. Furthermore, Carnegie's book is valued because "no dictionary was necessary to understand its message; no reason to know what Kapila saw when he looked heavenward, and of what the Athenians accused Anaxagoras, or to know the secret name of Jahveh, or who cleft the Gordian Knot, the meaning of 666. There was, finally, very little need to know anything at all, except how to 'deal with people.'"^{cxxxvi} The realist project of Carnegie's book is thus identified as contrary not just to the kind of postmodern heteroglossia of Gaddis' own novel but extended to sacred and profane texts. Carnegie is seen as outlining a version of the self that runs contrary to mysticism, a branch of religious writing often accused of being too individualized, too subjective and exclusionary of orthodox praxis.

The Recognitions employs an encyclopedic aesthetic that I read as exemplary of post-secular collage, and Gaddis uses Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* as a directly identifiable rival to his own novel. To produce his work, Carnegie "hired a man to go to libraries and read everything he himself had missed. They spared 'no time, no expense, to discover every practical idea that anyone had ever used throughout the ages to win friends and influence people.'"^{cxxxvii} Gaddis' narration continues: "No wonder, thought Mr. Pivner, reading through these pertinently misunderstood half-truths, that it had succeeded."^{cxxxviii} The success of Carnegie's book is due to its scope, for "here were Barnum and the Bible, Charles Schwab, Dutch Schultz, and Shakespeare, two Napoleons, Pola Negri, and the National Credit Men's Association, Capone, Chrysler, Two-Gun Crowley, and Jesus Christ, each in his own easily posting the way to the market

place.”^{cxxxix} Where Gaddis’ *The Recognitions* can be read as an encyclopedic collage of difficult post-secular sources ultimately guided towards a new sacredness, Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is an encyclopedia of “misunderstood half-truths” from circus-ring leaders (P.T. Barnum), Elizabethan playwrights (William Shakespeare), organized crime figures (Al Capone) and messiahs (Jesus Christ) who in Carnegie’s scheme all “easily” point out “the way to the market place.” And no artwork in *The Recognitions* more clearly evidences a reimagined aesthetic of the sacred *after* the death of God than Wyatt’s unfinished portrait of his dead mother Camilla.

Painting *After* Death: Wyatt’s Metamorphic Portrait of His Mother

A spectral presence in the novel is the perpetually incomplete portrait that Wyatt is painting of his dead mother. Gaddis opens the novel with the Reverend Gwyon and Camilla sailing to Spain, where she dies aboard a vessel on the Atlantic, victim of the malpractice caused by Richard Sinisterra, a currency forger pretending to be a doctor. The portrait of Wyatt’s dead mother is the one original work of his that he does not attempt to destroy, and its lingering presence amidst his extensive body of forgeries opens up a dichotomy between the real (albeit dead) and the forged. Richard Kearney outlines that the prefix (“ana-“) of his theological position, anatheism, “is not just a question of returning in time but also of returning in space. It involves a *topos* as well as a *Kairos*. It needs images.”^{cxl} And what exactly are the images “needed” in returning to a spatial view of the sacred? I argue that for Gaddis’ novel it is Wyatt’s portrait of his dead mother Camilla, an artwork that involves such an imagistic returning to the sacred, *after* its subject has disappeared.

First, I would like to recall my earlier explication of Gaddis' quote, "as it has been, and apparently ever shall be, gods, superseded, become the devils in the system which supplants their reign, and stay on to make trouble for their successors, available, as they are, to a few for whom magic has not despaired, and been superseded by religion."^{cxli} What makes this passage especially resonant is that a similar construction appears at start of the novel as the Rev. Gwyon mourns his recently departed wife Camilla at the Real Monasterio in Spain. Gaddis writes, "he stood there unsteady in the cold, mumbling syllables which almost resolved into her name, as though he could recall, and summon back, a time before death entered the world, before accident, before magic, and before magic despaired, to become religion."^{cxlii} Thus, the "magic before magic despaired," i.e. the sacred, is linked to an act of mourning for something, or someone, "before death." Wyatt himself declares, "religion is the despair of magic...religion is the mother of sin."^{cxliii} The painting of Camilla that Wyatt is constantly working on but never completes is tangled with Gaddis' larger notion of sacrality existing as a "magic before magic," the sacred that exists before religion that is the vibrant core from which the post-secular derives its energy.

Wyatt's painting becomes, to borrow a phrase from Jacques Derrida, a "work of mourning," an artwork that is paradoxical for while it is looking backwards to the Camilla he will never know, it is also an artwork of futurity in that its state of constant-becoming extends it into an unfolding present. As Hillel Schwartz explicates in *The Culture of the Copy*, "through portraiture we mean to anchor and extend ourselves—for remembrance or reconnaissance, identification or indemnification, glory or vainglory."^{cxliv} Thinking of the *stance* implied by Schwartz, portraiture, especially Wyatt's portrait of Camilla, becomes a way for an artwork to "extend" into futurity while also "anchoring" the present, thus enriching it. In the manner of a painter who inserts a sly detail into a massive canvas that may be overlooked on first viewing but

subsequently explains the work in an entirely new light, Gaddis presents the reader with a whirling series of Wyatt's thoughts during his brief stay in Paris as an apprentice, one of which, I argue, is a hermeneutic key to the post-secular project of the entire novel. As Wyatt stares at mass-produced paintings along tourist-heavy Parisian streets, while himself trying to produce original works of a Romanticist bent, Gaddis gives us several rapid impressions from his mind, including this musing: "a melancholia of things completed."^{exlv} Wyatt's thought is a reworking of Friedrich Nietzsche's "the melancholy of everything completed" from *Beyond Good and Evil* (a moral stance that seems especially post-secular), but I find Gaddis' subtle adjustments to the aphorism more compelling in the context of the novel. By lessening the Nietzschean bombast of "everything" to "things" Gaddis allows the notion to apply directly to a painter-character. But the important aspect to keep in mind is that Gaddis aligns the completion (in Wyatt's case) of artworks, with a melancholy, and thus the state of mourning aligned with Camilla cited above. As an organizing principle then, the "melancholia of things completed" is a kind of post-secular artist statement about the need to remain in a motion of metamorphosis, whether in one's private contemplation of the sacred or on one's canvas.

An early episode in Gaddis' narration of Wyatt as a young artist sees him beginning two paintings simultaneously, "a portrait of his mother, and a copy of Bosch's *Seven Deadly Sins*. The first is an attempt to redeem his mother's memory and her rich symbolic heritage, the second a grim emblem of the Calvinist worldview Aunt May tried to impose on him (and eventually the painting that will initiate him into the world of forgery)."^{exlvi} The two paintings speak to memory, the former in the realm of personal, traumatic memory, with the latter functioning as an artistic memory of Christian art. The portrait of Wyatt's mother is based upon a photograph, and the Hieronymus Bosch that Wyatt is copying is likely a forgery of its own. The Bosch piece opens the

gateway to his career as a forger, and I read Wyatt's copy of *The Seven Deadly Sins* as suggesting a flaw in the "Calvinist worldview" of his Aunt May, whereas Gaddis has the portrait of Wyatt's mother function as a never-completed but ultimately salvific artwork that guides him away from the world of forgery. That his mother's portrait is based on a photograph is no accident, for Gaddis is showing how the two trajectories of Wyatt's vocation diverge where notions of artistic purity are concerned. The work of copying the masters of the past, specifically the past of Christian dominance over culture, leads Wyatt away from "grace" into the economy of the seven deadly sins, secularized into the marketplace of art forgery. But the painful work of translating a photograph of the mother he never knew into a painting that is unfinished but not discarded is the work, as I read Gaddis suggesting, of the post-secular artist. Wyatt begins from a source that is an emblem of modernity, particularly the sort of mass-produced art that Walter Benjamin was so reticent to embrace, the photograph, and yet from this source that aesthetes of older generations would have deemed impure, profane, ends up becoming a nourishing dwelling-place of the sacred. Indeed, the transition from a completed photograph, a signpost of mass-produced and therefore "profane" art, to an unfinished painting that becomes a spectral presence shows that from a supposedly corrupted origin emerges a reimagined space for the sacred, one that is post-secular in that the painting is never completed, and therefore a metamorphic canvas of becoming.

Steven Moore notes of the photograph of Wyatt's mother that, "it is important to remember that this photograph was made *before* Camilla was married...for Wyatt, Camilla remains 'his virgin mother' and thus is not the impulsive New England girl who married his father, but rather the idealized figure Graves calls the White Goddess: at once girl, mother, and crone, and patroness of the white magic of art."^{cxlvii} Wyatt invests a great deal of idealism into this vision of Camilla as a Marian "virgin mother," and it provides an intriguing counterpoint to Gaddis' patrilineal maxim

elsewhere in the novel, “it is our nature to reach back among the cures of our fathers. If those fail, there were fathers before them.”^{cxlviii} Wyatt’s attempt to “reach back” to his mother before she met his father, to a virginal state and therefore to a discourse of purity, fails on some level. He cannot complete the painting, which I read as Gaddis subtly noting that whether Wyatt chooses to seek “the cures” in the great chain of patrilineal or matrilineal lines, he will fail as an artist because it presumes an originary purity will eventually be discovered. Instead, what Wyatt realizes over the course of the novel, a timeline that sees the portrait of Camilla linger in the background of the novelistic canvas, is that it is precisely because Camilla’s portrait is unfinished that will allow him to move forward in his vocation, not needing to “reach back” but to *reimagine* art, reimagine sacrality.

Crucial for considering this reimagining as an aesthetic-theological act not of regression but of metamorphosis is the notion of *the after* animating my investigation. Andy Warhol figures prominently in Arthur C. Danto’s theory of “art after the end of art,” and intriguingly occupies a similar position in Mark C. Taylor’s notion of thinking of God after God. He notes, “Warhol was among the first to understand that the collapse of the distinction between high and low culture was symptomatic of a transformation of the way in which the real—however it is conceived—had been figured for centuries. The eclipse of the real enacts the death of God in social, economic, political and technological processes.”^{cxlix} Just as Rev. Gwyon goes through a period of mourning for Camilla and becomes increasingly withdrawn, Wyatt undergoes a similar experience. Gaddis notes that, “Wyatt could not distinguish reality in these days and the nights,”^{cl} which I read as a suggestion of “the eclipse of the real” Taylor theorizes. With Rev. Gwyon as a symbol of the father *and* the Father (in his role as a reverend and thereby representative of God on earth), Gaddis uses the instability of his life following Camilla’s death to jumpstart Wyatt’s spiritual journey, one that

sees him return to God after the death of God. As Taylor writes, “instead of present or deferred, the end is always emerging by forever withdrawing.”^{cli} Another iteration of post-secular spirituality as one of *the after* is articulated by Bruno Latour, when he reminds that, “to confuse belief (or non-belief) in ‘God’ with the demands of religion means taking the décor for the room, the overture for the opera. It doesn’t matter what is in the beginning: the only thing that counts is what comes just after.”^{clii} As Gaddis’ novel demonstrates, the search for pure beginnings is futile, for Wyatt ultimately abandons his own search for artistic originality in favor of the uncharted spiritual terrain *after* his career in forgery, all the while engaging in the ritualistic painting of Camilla’s portrait. Richard Kearney’s notion of *anatheism*¹⁹ is one possible “theology” for describing Wyatt *as* a post-secular painter, and painting as a post-secular ritual or praxis. He writes that, “in the prefix *ana-* we find the idea of retrieving, revisiting, reiterating, repeating. But repeating *forward*, not *backward*. It is not about regressing nostalgically to some prelapsarian past. It is a question, rather, of coming back ‘afterwards’ in order to move forward again.”^{cliii} Thinking of Wyatt’s portrait of Camilla as an artwork that *repeats forward* helps to outline how it metamorphically retrieves and revisits the past in order to create a bridge, via paint on canvas, “to move forward again,” in orders, what it looks like *to paint the after*.

When Wyatt’s wife Esther comes across the portrait of his mother, Gaddis writes that she “admired the drawing begun on that large soiled cracked surface, the fine-boned face (so unlike her own) whose fleshless quality of hollows was elevated by heavy earrings, archaic hoops of gold she had seen in a leather box where her husband kept odds and ends.”^{cliv} The canvas’ “soiled

¹⁹ Kearney’s book hinges on “three pioneers of modernist fiction who bore witness to the return of the sacred—Joyce, Proust, and Woolf. No one of these was a believer in any orthodox confessional sense...none of them advanced an overtly theological position. Conventional wisdom might even suggest the contrary: that Joyce was a rebel apostate, Proust a secular sensualist, and Woolf a humanist aesthete,” *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, Richard Kearney, Columbia University Press, 2010, page 101. It would be worthwhile to add William Gaddis to this triumvirate, given that he was also not an open adherent to any one religion.

cracked surface” aligns with the symbolic image I offered in the Introduction of Western religious heritage as a shattered stained-glass window, and it is significant that the portrait of Camilla emerges from a foundation that is literally broken. Additionally, Esther is drawn to Camilla’s “fleshless” face and the “archaic hoops of gold” earrings she is wearing, which I read as speaking to twinned discourses in the novel: on the one hand, Camilla is painted in the style of a Byzantine icon of a saint, or perhaps more likely, Mother Mary, for to be seen as “fleshless” and golden can be read as a being elevated about the level of fleshly, broken humans, while the “archaic” gold earrings signal, in my reading, the gold standard, which is “archaic” to the extent that, for Gaddis, the idea of a stable signifier, whether of an icon in a church or a brick of gold, is archaic. Significantly, Gaddis notes that Esther “admired the drawing not for what it was but, as she said, for what it could be.”^{clv} A clear example of an artwork under the sign of “a melancholia of things completed,” Esther intuits that the portrait’s *value* is its potentiality. If an older discourse of value aligns it with completion, in the arts in a completed painting or in religion as the “fulfillment” or completion of a prophecy, both of which are stable signifiers of a sort, then Gaddis suggests a new discourse of post-secular value wherein the process of becoming, of metamorphic, continual reimagining is elevated as a new “standard.”

Intriguingly, Gaddis contrasts Esther’s affirmation of the potentiality of the portrait of Camilla with the Rev. Gwyon’s unease about his son’s artwork. During an exchange, we hear the Rev. say, “—Why won’t you finish it? He burst out finally,” to which Wyatt responds in characteristically opaque language, “--There’s something about a...an unfinished piece of work...Where perfection is still possible?”^{clvi} The dialogue occurs within the first sixty-odd pages of the novel, so it is important to note that *The Recognitions* presents the reader very early on with Gaddis’ notion of the “melancholy of things completed” and the metamorphic perfection of

potentiality. As the strained dialogue between father and son continues, the Rev. asks Wyatt, “--Do you have that painting?...--The...her picture, the picture of your mother that you...that you won’t finish.”^{clvii} Gaddis concludes their repartee with the Rev.’s admonition, “--You must finish it, you must try to finish it, Gwyon told him, --finish it, or she will be with you...Or she will be with you always.”^{clviii} The slippage into biblical rhetoric, the echo of Jesus’ words in Matthew 28:20 “I am with you always, unto the end of the age,” are subtle yet explicit ways for Gaddis to render Camilla’s portrait as a sacred painting. For Wyatt, his “work of mourning” is *not* to finish the work, and thereby ensure that the mother he never had will remain with him, *after* she has left this realm, a post-secular instance of art triumphing over death in the way that the resurrection narrative promises a similar victory through adherence to a Christian praxis.

Wyatt and Anatheism: The Artist and the Sacred in a Post-Secular Age

The Recognitions places special emphasis on individual artists like Wyatt Gwyon, because it is important to note that one of the earliest critical appraisals of *The Recognitions* by John Stark (in 1977) argued that Gaddis’ novel, in concert with the *Clementine Recognitions* of its namesake, champions “a personal religious experience unencumbered by the theology of Paul, the fathers of the church and later thinkers.”^{clix} I wish to reframe Stark’s argument by suggesting that what the novel is really putting forth is an appeal to the persistence of the sacred that can be experienced by individuals of a post-secular mindset, particularly through the medium of painting and visual art. The experience of the individual is, for Gaddis’ novel, part of a paradigmatic shift in *value*: from collective, institutional religions to fractured albeit lingering spiritualities coagulating into new formulations, from stable markers of economic hegemony such as gold bricks to currencies both

forged and careening towards the virtual, and from supposedly reified cultural codes of valuable artistic styles and subjects to an art world that prizes the cryptic splatters of Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock one season to the bewitchingly sincere American iconography of Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol the next. What defines Wyatt as an exemplar of the post-secular seeker is his ability to undergo some degree of “personal integration” amidst the ravages to collective stability. Additionally, this shows that Wyatt may become representative of the imaginative artist that Richard Kearney advocates for articulating a theology of anatheism. Kearney outlines that “we have countless painters, from Botticelli and da Messina to Rembrandt, Rouault, and Sheila Gallagher,” who are “inviting us back to the inaugural moments of faith so that we may live them ‘again, anew’—in time (language) and in space (painting). Without such anatheistic imaginings, all we have is dry dogma and abstract doctrine.”^{clx} I place Wyatt Gwyon in such a painterly lineage, especially since one of his central artistic projects is the metamorphic portrait of his dead mother Camilla. In a sense, her death at the novel’s opening is such an “inaugural moment,” that continually returns Wyatt to an originary trauma that is also an instance for him to project an anatheistic vision into the future.

Coming of age as a teenager, we learn that, “Wyatt was, in fact, finding the Christian system suspect.”^{clxi} Wyatt’s suspicion is not grounded in a teenager’s revolt against his father (who is, after all, a minister), who in many ways forges an example of eccentric theology. It is Wyatt’s Aunt May who incites his suspicion of “the Christian system,” due to her excessively constricting interpretation and praxis of New England Puritanism. Her “medieval posture” clues the reader in to her alignment in Gaddis’ mind with a historical epoch in which Christianity became a “system” elaborately codified by Thomas Aquinas and others of an Aristotelian bent. Systemic theology, such as the system of questions and answers developed by Aquinas, is fueled by a sense of

authority and does not allow for individual interpretation, and certainly not for creative engagement with the sacred. So, when Gaddis writes that for Aunt May's God "among provinces where He retained sway was that of creativity; and mortal creative work was definitively one of His damndest things,"^{clxii} we are privy to Wyatt's suspicions. Robert Henri titled his manifesto for American artists *The Art Life*, and the life of painting is the vocation Wyatt has chosen for himself. Thus, to come of age in a household with Aunt May believing that "mortal creative work," i.e. the work of painting, sculpture, drawing, and so on, is labor worthy of damnation, helps to explain Wyatt's reticence towards "the Christian system." Indeed, Gaddis writes that Wyatt's first completed drawing "of a robin, which looked like the letter E tipped to one side," was not excitedly shared with Aunt May but "brought for her approval," only to be dismissed by May's best impression of Jonathan Edwards, "Our Lord is the only true creator, and only sinful people try to emulate Him."^{clxiii} These formative experiences instilled in Wyatt a desire for a more individualized approach to spirituality, informed less by a Lutheran drive for personal connection with the divine and more by art itself, viewing *the art life* and its works as a vehicle to the sacred.

Steven Moore writes of how "Wyatt finds in myth, magic, and mysticism a more authentic religious tradition,"^{clxiv} and these outsider, outcast, discarded, occult spiritualities reveal a young painter who is post-secular in his willingness to wrestle with all manner of the oddities of religious experience, to rephrase William James. Indeed, Moore charts how his "Wyatt's career adapts several models: he is an adept of hermetic alchemy, a Faust figure, a modern saint, the priest in the ancient cult-ritual of the White Goddess and her Son, the Wandering Jew/Flying Dutchman archetype, a near-victim in the sacrificial killing of the royal son, a Christ figure, Dante and Orpheus in the underworld."^{clxv} What distinguishes Wyatt as a post-secular visionary artist is that he is never one of these "models" exclusively, and yet retains fragments of all of them, choosing

not to cast each model off in a linear fashion of an artist finding his own form. In a 1963 interview Andy Warhol asked, “How can you say any style is better than another? You ought to be able to be an Abstract Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling that you have given up something.”^{clxvi} The stylistic dexterity advocated by Warhol helps to frame Wyatt’s identity as a post-secular painter, for as Arthur C. Danto notes in unpacking Warhol’s statement, “all styles are of equal merit, none ‘better’ than another...It just means that goodness and badness are not matters of belonging to the right style, or falling under the right manifesto.”^{clxvii} The models that inform Wyatt’s painting *of* the post-secular, and journey *as* post-secular painter, are more than relativistic nodes on a flattened plane, and instead are closer to an assemblage of various pieces, whether theological or aesthetic, that Wyatt considers and contemplates and repurposes and reimagines. In this way, the collage of Wyatt’s vocational life is one where binaries collapse into a metamorphic process wherein the alchemical becomes the saintly, the secular becomes the sacred, the Faustian becomes the Messianic, and all those in reverse as well. To conclude with another salient idea from Danto, “somehow, the idea of pure art went with the idea of the pure painter—the painter who paints and does nothing else. Today that is an option, but not an imperative. The pluralism of the present art world defines the ideal artist as a pluralist.”^{clxviii} In this way, Wyatt comes to stand for the “plurality” so central to post-secular thinkers like Habermas and Charles Taylor while also aligning with Richard Kearney’s idea of atheism as a pluralistic blend of the theologian and the imaginative artist.

In a moving dialogue with his son, the Rev. Gwyon says to Wyatt, “—It didn’t fail because it was bad. Mithraism almost triumphed over Christianity. It failed because it was so near good.”^{clxix} The Mithraism championed so assiduously by Gwyon throughout the novel is an alternative to the narrative of triumphal Christianity, oftentimes spoken of as being a culmination

or synthesis of all religions prior to it. What draws Gwyon to Mithraism is that “it was so near good,” which I read as Gaddis gesturing towards the sacred. The exchange concludes, “he [Gwyon] mumbled something, and then added,--That’s the trouble today. No mystery. Everything secularized. No mystery, no weight to anything at all.”^{clxx} Aside from being one of the only explicit mentions of secularism in *The Recognitions*, the Rev’s remark succinctly outlines Gaddis’ understanding of sacrality: it is possessed of mystery *and* weight. The quality of mystery frequently characterizes the sacred, but it is the notion of the sacred as having *weight* that I am interested in here. Weight implies mass, and mass implies materiality at some level, and I read this mention of the secular as weightless as related to Wyatt’s vocation as a painter, a material object that comes to have weight for him on the level of oil on canvas as well as the weight of sacrality that Charles Taylor has outlined in *A Secular Age* in reference to material objects as “enchanted.”

I use Richard Kearney’s definition of the sacred as a working definition for contemplating sacrality in a more post-secular vein than traditional theologians might read the term. For him, “the sacred is somewhere between the spiritual and the religious.”^{clxxi} I’m drawn to Kearney’s ambiguous, highly post-secular “somewhere” of the sacred, and for the purposes of my reading of Gaddis, read this “somewhere” as a location that in *The Recognitions* is the canvas of Wyatt’s paintings. Kearney continues that sacrality “is something you find rather than something you seek. It is ‘out there’, somewhere, rather than ‘in here’...before self-awareness, before consciousness, before epistemology.”^{clxxii} Again, the mention of “somewhere” leads me to read his definition as stating that the sacred has a material location, “out there” in the paint of Wyatt’s canvases. Indeed, in thinking through the multi-layered paintings that Gaddis describes containing forgeries and originals within a single canvas, it is worth considering Kearney’s provocation that, “the sacred can be experienced in and through the secular...anatheism is an attempt to sacralize the secular

and secularize the sacred. It is reimagining the sacred after the secular and through the secular.”^{clxxiii} *The Recognitions* is perhaps most confounding in its rejection of binaries, as the effect of reading Gaddis’ encyclopedic prose is to be left with more than an equitable distaste for the secular and championing of the sacred. Instead, Gaddis presents the reader with sacralized secularity and secularized sacrality, or, to place it in the aesthetic language of the novel, he presents us with forged originals and original forgeries. Fascinatingly for my reading of Gaddis’ reimagining of the sacred is Kearney’s remark that “we do not cognize the sacred, we re-cognize it.”^{clxxiv} Recalling my opening discussion of Gaddis’ articulation of an aesthetic-theology of “recognition” that Wyatt first experiences via Picasso’s *Night Fishing in Antibes*, I am interested in the thread that (seemingly unknowingly) connects Gaddis’ novel to Kearney’s theology. If the sacred is re-cognized, it returns us to the larger question of returning to the after, and by locating it “somewhere...out there,” I read *The Recognitions* as a novel interested in subtly pointing to artworks as the place where, in a post-secular age, we might re-turn to, re-imagine and re-cognize the sacred.

Painting as Post-Secular // Painting *the* Post-Secular

Richard Kearney’s theology of anatheism is a highly malleable position for considering what it means for Wyatt to paint *as* a post-secular ritual, and to paint *the* post-secular, in *The Recognitions*. For Kearney, what is needed in a post-secular age is not an entrenchment of orthodoxy and institutional authority but rather a “relationship between imagination and faith—faith as wafer, freedom, narrative, empathy.”^{clxxv} Wyatt Gwyon is a personification of the “relationship” between the creative act of painting and the (dis)belief of his spiritual journeying.

Kearney desires a theology wherein, “the play of sacramental language in certain artists and writers opens up a sacramental space of experience: a textual world of epiphany.”^{clxxvi} I would only extend Kearney’s “textual” to the painterly “world of epiphany” to better capture the type of sacrality that Gaddis engrosses himself in portraying in manifold ways throughout the novel.

Art, especially painting, becomes, for Gaddis the locus where the sacred is encountered and doubted, where sacrality is restorative while also being elusive. Painting is both sacred ritual and sacred “text” for Gaddis. Steven Moore claims that, “the secularization of salvation in [the novel] most successful takes the form of the redemptive power of art.”^{clxxvii} However, I argue that it is Gaddis’ *post-secularization* of salvation in *The Recognitions* that finds its most vital expression in painting, not necessarily an art with didactic “redemptive power” but an art that embraces sacrality and unbelief in equal measures. I want to return to a passage from my opening exegesis of Wyatt’s remark on Picasso’s *Night Fishing in Antibes*. I showed how Mark C. Taylor notes that, “when art displaces religion as the focus of spiritual striving, religious prophets become avant-garde artists whose mission is to realize the kingdom of God on earth by transforming the world into a work of art.”^{clxxviii} Considering this within the larger view of the post-secular in Gaddis’ novel, I suggest that Wyatt takes up the prophetic impulses of his father, particularly Rev. Gwyon’s penchant for esoteric and forgotten spiritualities, while taking the additional step outlined by Taylor to become an artist in conversation with the sacred.²⁰ What is post-secular about Wyatt is that he is not merely depicting “the kingdom of God on earth” as so many religious artists before him did, but by “transforming the world into a work of art,” especially by transforming the “world”

²⁰ David Koenig notes that, “Gaddis left Harvard in 1945 a young man of intense spiritual concerns. He was preoccupied with redeeming American reality from its banal, materialistic ambience at the end of World War II,” a biographical instance more intriguing for its historical moment, 1945, in considering Gaddis as an early instance of the post-secular emerging from the postwar moment. (David Koenig, “The Writing of *The Recognitions*,” page 20, from *In Recognition of William Gaddis*)

of his traumatic origins into the unfinished portrait of his mother, Wyatt becomes a new kind of artist-prophet.²¹

Yet, I want to stress that to consider Wyatt as an anatheistic painter does not mean that the works he produces are didactic, easily translatable to dogma, and certainly are the opposite of the neofoundationalist “works” of Pastor Dick. For Bruno Latour, “art is too mysterious, too spiritual, too haunted by the beyond, too enigmatic, too innovative, too perverse as well to accompany religion for long in its meandering.”^{clxxxix} However, this is precisely the sort of definition of “art as religion” that Gaddis unfolds across *The Recognitions*, and that I argue describes the capacity of the post-secular to speak to contemporary aesthetic theory. Basil Valentine, an associate of the dealer in forgeries, Recktall Brown, tells Wyatt, “—My dear fellow, the priest is the guardian of mysteries. The artist is driven to expose them.”^{clxxx} It is worth remembering that Gaddis’ polyphonic novel is also a cacophonous one, with conflicting and contrasting ideas being voiced; for Wyatt, he finds it essential as an artist to preserve a sense of mystery, to dwell in the enigmatic. Indeed, in a scene late in the novel set at the Spanish art museum The Prado, Gaddis has Wyatt outline a theological-aesthetic that is precisely “too enigmatic” (in Latour’s words) but is central to his artistic vision. He talks about The Prado’s Flemish art gallery where the painters therein are “hung together...because they’re all separate...the compositions are separate, and the...the Bosch and Breughel and Patinii and even Durer, they don’t disturb each other because the...because every composition is made up of separations, or rather...I mean...do you see what I mean?”^{clxxxii} Perhaps Wyatt’s stumbling, faltering musing reflects Latour’s caution about the inability to art “to

²¹ Or, in Grace Eckley’s construction, Wyatt is “part alchemist, part priest,” but I suggest that Wyatt’s fundamental identity is as a *painter*, grounding his sense of self through the entire novel, whereas his diagonal relation to the alchemical world of Basil Valentine and co. is merely one episode of *The Recognitions*. (Grace Eckley, “Exorcising the Demon Forgery, Or the Forging of Pure Gold in Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*,” *Literature and the Occult: Essays in Comparative Literature*, Jan. 1977, page 131)

accompany religion” but I read Wyatt’s ellipses-ridden statement as interwoven with his identity as a painter-prophet of a metamorphic variety. Richard Kearney writes of how “we find in atheism various moments of creative ‘not knowing’ that mark a break with ingrained habits of thought and open up novel possibilities of meaning,”^{clxxxii} and Wyatt’s oration of inarticulation²² is one such instance of “creative not knowing.” The paradox that “every composition is made up of separations” shows Gaddis writing an artist character in Wyatt adept at “opening up novel possibilities of meaning,” thus placing literary-aesthetic scaffolding around his ethos of “the melancholy of things completed.” A composition implies some degree of wholeness, so a composition of separations is paradoxical. And yet this is precisely the project, and process, of someone like Wyatt who paints *as* a post-secular ritual, who paints *the* post-secular: a composition of separations is another way of phrasing a metamorphic artwork that is never finished but is simultaneously *not* incomplete.

If a “composition of separations” is the work of post-secular art that aesthetically drives Wyatt, it is also worth considering the work of (dis)belief in *The Recognitions*, and the value of redemption in Gaddis’ framework. He offers a conversational instance wherein artistic *recognition* shows the “displacement” of religion by art that Mark C. Taylor writes of, and explicitly raises the question of what redemption might be in a post-secular context. Wyatt says, “—You know... Saint Paul tells us to redeem time. /--Does he? Recktall Brown’s tone was gentle, encouraging. /--A work of art redeems time. /--And buying it redeems money, Recktall Brown said.”^{clxxxiii} Wyatt answers the Pauline missive by conceiving of the act of painting as “redeeming time,” which one

²² Kearney’s work helps to situate Wyatt as an atheistic painter, something which conflicts sharply with prior readings of his character, such as Joseph Salemi’s claim that “Wyatt is not only an individual artist, but an Everyman whose concerns are universal,” (Joseph Salemi, “To Soar In Atonement: Art as Expiation in Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*, page 127, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol.10, No.2, Winter 1977). Far from being an “Everyman” with universalizing tendencies a la Renaissance-to-Enlightenment humanism, I read Wyatt as a far more *specific* character, “one option among many” figures of post-secular express (to nod to Charles Taylor’s language of faith as an option).

I connect to his desire to see beyond reality (in the scene describing Picasso's *Night Fishing at Antibes*). As Joseph Salemi has written of *The Recognitions*, Gaddis illustrates a theology wherein "art is the ultimate expiation, for through it not only suffering, but the falsehood that lies at the core of existence is transfigured beyond the pettiness and sordidness of its context and origins."^{clxxxiv} Such an artistic expiation is at the heart of Wyatt's remark about how "a work of art redeems time," and points towards a reflective "transfiguration" of the world through painting. But Gaddis also shows the fragility of the "displacement" of religion, and its stability of signification and value, for on the one hand it can be reimagined into the post-secular notion of painting-as-ritual, while it can also result in Reck tall Brown's market-driven idea of purchasing art as "redeeming money." In light of the art market in 2019 where \$20 million for a painting is often a paltry auction price, Brown's notion that "buying it redeems money" shows Gaddis' post-secular artworks to be far from idealistic or naïve. If you want *Night Fishing in Antibes* to be a reimagined palette of the sacred, as a post-secular altarpiece at the MoMA instead of an altar in a cathedral, something capable of time's very redemption, Gaddis suggests that this is possible. However, if you are someone with a guilty conscience like Reck tall Brown and need the stain inherent in your bank accounts to be "redeemed" by purchasing, say, a Soutine, Gaddis suggests that this is another pathway. My reading would align Wyatt's option as closer to Gaddis' own, but the importance is recognizing that Gaddis is not so simplistic as to believe that a post-secular artwork is a window into the sacred through and through. Art, and the art life, is as susceptible to the corruptions and degradations of institutional religions of the past, as well as the virtual marketplace in late capitalism. However, the imperative of the post-secular is to *recognize* this potential for corruption, for profanations, (whether in theology, in art, or in economics) from the very beginning and be conscious of the choice being made between sacrality and forgery.

Conclusion: The Sacred as The After

I want to conclude my reading of *The Recognitions* with a seminal episode in the novel that draws together the various strands of my investigation, uniting the metamorphic post-secular artwork with Gaddis' notion of the sacred as *the after*.

Early in the novel, Gaddis writes of the teenage Wyatt that, "every week or so he would begin something original. It would last for a few days, but before any lines of completion had been drawn he abandoned it. Still the copies continued to perfection, that perfection to which only counterfeit can attain, reproducing every aspect of inadequacy, every blemish on Perfection in the original."^{clxxxv} Wyatt's inability to finish original paintings but to "perfectly" complete copies is extended past the phase of artistic apprenticeship, as Gaddis presents the enigmatic phrase "that perfection to which only counterfeit can attain." To read *The Recognitions* as a dialectical agon between "original" and counterfeit, forged art is to miss the point of Gaddis' project entirely. He is suggesting an approach to art, to *value* itself, that is a collage of counterfeit and original, profane and sacred. I mention this early scene in the novel as a way of anchoring an exegesis of an artwork in the middle of *The Recognitions* that I read as descriptive of Gaddis' post-secular conception of the sacred. In a monologue to Esme, Wyatt's wife, the aspiring writer Otto says of a painting:

"—It was a forged Titian that somebody had painted over another old painting, when they scraped the forged Titian away they found some worthless old painting underneath it, the forger had used it because it was an old canvas. But then there was something under that worthless painting, and they scraped it off and underneath that they found a Titian, a real

Titian that had been there all the time. It was as though when the forger was working, and he didn't know the original was underneath, I mean he didn't know he knew it, but it knew, I mean something knew. I mean, do you see what I mean? That underneath that the original is there, that the real...thing is there, and on the surface you...if you can only...see what I mean?"^{clxxxvi}

Otto's description can be read as Gaddis anticipating, by several decades, Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, and certainly that theoretical conversation is finely suited for reflecting on *The Recognitions* as a singular novelization of the simulacra/simulacrum. Indeed, it would seem that Baudrillard's formulation about "a copy of a copy for which there is no original," is eerily similar to a pronouncement from a dinner-party character named Max who declares, "—Otto's part of a series of an original that never existed."^{clxxxvii} Except in Gaddis' formulation, the concern is with a lost original, with Otto merely forming "part of a series" rather than being a copy of a nonexistent original. Returning to Otto's own description of the Titian painting(s), I want to track the chronology of the canvas to illumine the multifaceted dimension of this signal post-secular artwork. We can map the canvas as thus: (1) a painter finds "some worthless old painting," which seems an ideal canvas for forging a Titian upon because of apparent antiquity, (2) someone new scrapes away the Titian, which was presumably discovered to be a forgery, and reveals that the forgery was painted over a painting that was of an age comparable to Titian's lifetime but was nothing but a discarded, worthless artwork. But then, (3) whoever came into possession of the seemingly insignificant canvas proceeded to scrape away that layer of paint which unveils that an actual Titian painting was dwelling beneath the other layers the entire time. I read this intricate genealogy of the Titian canvas as one of Gaddis' principal metaphors for the sacred in the post-

secular as emerging *after* the forged and the profane. Rather than a dialectic merely between the original and the forged, Gaddis recapitulates the question in the form of this painterly image of the various geologic strata of the sacred.

The figure of Wyatt Gwyon becomes, over the course of *The Recognitions*, a kind of post-secular patron saint of the arts, certainly not a model citizen of moral or ethical behavior but undoubtedly one who functions iconographically as an anatheistic painter. I have shown how Wyatt embraces the eccentricities of his father to conceive of spirituality-as-collage, as well as learning how to dwell in the seeming paradoxes of the virtual after his sojourn through the unstable signifiers of the forged-art market. Gaddis highlights painting *as* a post-secular ritual for Wyatt, in addition to suggesting that painting *the* post-secular is perhaps one of the most vital modes for reimagining the sacred. I read Otto's description of the multi-layered Titian canvas as conversant with the three theoretical frameworks of this investigation, all of which are grounded in notions of *the after*. Recalling Mark C. Taylor's notion from his work *After God*, where he claims that, "the virtual is something like an immanent transcendence, which is inside as an outside that cannot be incorporated,"^{clxxxviii} I read the scraped-away layers of paintings in the Titian description to be just such a paradoxical, metamorphic work of art. The "original" Titian is both "inside" of the forgery and forgotten painting yet is also "outside" of it to the extent that it is its own artwork, not a forgery and not the discarded painting. The enigmatic qualities of this virtual painting also align it with Arthur C. Danto's *After the End of Art*, wherein a panoply of aesthetic periods and stylistic choices co-exist on a flattened plane, for the canvas that Otto describes is a powerful compression of painterly space-time. Not only does it represent the aesthetics of collage that I have identified with the post-secular, but the Titian shows Gaddis pressing beyond the conception of a painter being able to draw upon various time periods and styles in the creation of a single canvas, for this artwork

itself has various time periods and styles *within* itself. Which, in turn, allows for a reading of the Titian painting(s) as Gaddis establishing a thread which Richard Kearney takes up many decades later in *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*. Kearney emphasizes that, “anatheism is not about evacuating the sacred from the secular but retrieving the sacred in the secular.”^{clxxxix} The *work* of art, the activity of art, in Gaddis’ episode of the Titian is not that it locates a pure, original piece beneath the forged, and thus invalidates the forged and the discarded. Rather, using Kearney’s language, Gaddis shows how a “retrieval” of the sacred from the secular (i.e. the forged Titian) is not just possible but indeed necessary for a reimagining of the sacred. For Gaddis in *The Recognitions*, the sacred is what happens and what is beheld *after* scraping one’s way through the unstable signifiers of the contemporary world. The post-secular sacred is that which is reconceived and reconfigured after a reckoning with the forged (and thereby the contamination of art and religion by the marketplace) and the discarded (the secularist judgment of the “worthless” nature of the sacred as the worthless layer of the Titian canvas). What emerges is the sacred *as* the after.

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