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April 11, 2013

Horror of Intimacy / Intimacy of Horror

-William Gaddis, *The Recognitions* 725 / 919

Counterfeit, Simulation, and the Uncanny in William Gaddis' The Recognitions

William Gaddis' 1955 masterwork, *The Recognitions*, concerns the trials of Wyatt Gwyon, a young man who forsakes the priesthood and his father's New England for life as a painter in New York City. He is a confounded man living in a confounded time, surrounded on all sides by a host of confounded characters, all attempting to come to terms with life in the modern city. Everyone is seen to posture, pose, and peacock their way through the endless cocktail party that is Gaddis' New York. Insofar as they are continually morphing identities in quests for status, they are bound to a perpetual cycle of *misrecognition*; they miss each other and are missed in return; thus the universe of *The Recognitions*, alongside Gaddis' text, is plagued by a persistent but untraceable sense of loss and anxiety. This untraceable sense of loss is underscored and multiplied by the motif of the counterfeit. Through the work of counterfeiting, which, by design, leads its patrons to believe in a false truth, Gaddis brokers a reality wherein recognition becomes a work of violence, an insidious enterprise that serves to render the strange familiar, and the familiar, infinitely strange. Insofar as the familiar is made foreign and vice versa, the universe of the novel becomes a site of uncanny encounters with an ungraspable past that at once lords over and abandons the reality of Gaddis' characters, initiating a palindromic oscillation between the "horror of intimacy" (Gaddis 725) and the "intimacy of horror" (Gaddis

919). Wyatt's travel through this undulatory dynamic comes at the cost of the father, any hope for a standard of value, and the reading public's conception of the novelistic text as understood pre-1955.

In his attempt to navigate New York's dense web of deception and disappearance, Wyatt is seen to participate in the economy of the almighty image: in order to support himself, he becomes involved with the crooked art historian Basil Valentine and the blunderingly ruthless investor Recktall Brown in a counterfeiting ring. Wyatt's skill as a painter is put to work reproducing, or, as will be seen, simply *producing*, fifteenth century Flemish and German masterpieces by the likes of Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling, and Hugo van der Goes. Wyatt's work is consistently met with praise, awe, and what John Johnston deems a "recognition-effect" (Johnston 26) wherein the viewer understands himself to be looking at a van Eyck and subconsciously induces a history that he can then "recognize," therefore completing the forgery (I will return to this dynamic wherein the viewer takes part in the forgery's completion later in my essay). A feeling of comfort is associated with the recognition-effect, which functions as a kind of affirmation of order and value insofar as it participates in the rehearsal, indeed the production, of the known tradition and hierarchy of "art." This comfort precipitates a desire for recognition, or its chimeric twin, the recognition-effect, and this desire in turn facilitates the effect by opening the viewer to the possibility of the painting. The viewer thus implicates himself in his own deception.

This devious dynamic, by the time it is co-opted by Valentine and Brown, is not unfamiliar to Wyatt. Wyatt's entry into the (financial and metaphysical) economy of counterfeiting can be located in the opening chapter of Book I. After deciding to eschew the priesthood to pursue art, Wyatt makes preparations to study in Munich. In order to achieve the

necessary capital, he replaces his father's Hieronymous Bosch painting, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, which served as the dining table in the parsonage, Wyatt's childhood home, with a copy he creates and then sells what he believes to be the original. The dubious origins of the painting are hinted at when Reverend Gwyon, Wyatt's father, recounts its purchase from the Conte di Brescia (Gaddis 59), whose name, as noted by Stephen Moore in his book of annotations, *A Reader's Guide to William Gaddis's The Recognitions*, echoes that of Adamo da Brescia, a notorious counterfeiter scourged and set aflame by Satan in Dante's *Inferno* (Moore 5.30, 59.36). When Wyatt is made to re-encounter the Bosch painting in the personal collection of Recktall Brown, he "realizes that it was only a copy after all that his father had bought and that he had copied" (Johnston 10). Wyatt laments,

Invidia, I was brought up eating my meals off envy, until today. And it was false all the time! He spoke with more effort than he had yet made to control his voice. -Copying a copy? is that where I started? All my life I've sworn it was real, year after year, that damned table top floating in the bottom of the tank, I've sworn it was real, and today? A child could tell it's a copy, he broke off, wrenching at the folds of flesh and veins on his hand, and he dared look up [...] ¹ And if what I've been forging, does not exist? (Gaddis 381)

This scene foregrounds the disorienting effects of any subject's encounter with an exposed counterfeit. A familiar truth, which once served as a foundational element in Wyatt's personal narrative, is overturned - Wyatt only copied a copy and thus he was deceived in his deception. The exposed status of the table first precipitates anger and an almost childish disorientation - Wyatt begs, "is that where I started?" as if he has been lied to by a conniving parent. The

¹ In order to distinguish between Gaddis' ellipses (of which there are many) and my own, I have bracketed mine here and throughout the remainder of this paper.

sensation develops into a broader existential grief and disorientation as Wyatt contemplates the implications of forging something which "does not exist" (Gaddis 381). These sensations are hallmarks of Freud's notion of the *uncanny* which, as he writes in "Das Unheimliche," "is the name for everything that ought to have remained [...] hidden and secret and has become visible" (Freud 4). Before its exposure, the table stood as the very definition of *heimlichkeiten*, of homeliness - it was the site of family meals and conversations with Reverend Gwyon. This renders its exposure all the more violent and addling. Basil's revelation provokes suspicion and doubt about his father, his childhood home, his upbringing at large - in this way, the final line, Wyatt's trailing, desperate query, "And if what I've been forging, does not exist?" (Gaddis 381), adumbrates his struggle at large with his relationship to his origins; it figures as a harbinger of the forthcoming deconstruction of the father figure in the text. The suspicion Wyatt feels transmits across the text into the experience of the reader, who is only now made aware of the possible depth of Gaddis' transmuting reality. Every act of reading from here through the close of the novel must be met with a keen skepticism.

Furthermore, the scene at Reckfall Brown's apartment is the first of many re-encounters with the Bosch table. It initiates a cycle of what Freud deems the "involuntary return" (Freud 11), wherein the subject finds himself on vaguely familiar ground only to realize that he has been in that exact location before, only under different conditions, and having arrived by a different path. Wyatt is made to return continually to the Bosch painting, each encounter slightly stranger than the last, resulting "in the same feeling of helplessness and of something uncanny" (Freud 11). The uncanniness has less to do with the fact that the painting keeps returning to the fore of his life than with the fact that each time it returns it has changed or morphed; the details are off. It is a site of slippage, of infinite shift.

Wyatt is cast into indomitable disillusion and despair by the revelation of the table as a copy. It is the falsehood of all falsehoods for Wyatt, and it proves too much for him to bear. His financial tryst with art expert Basil Valentine and the investor Recktall Brown forging Flemish masters is made to stand in the light of fatal doubt. Wyatt's disenchantment and heartbreak deliver him to the only conceivable option: in order to escape the city, which "was getting so unreal," and pick up "where reality left off" (Gaddis 427), he decides to return to the parsonage in New England to assume his former identity as a Christian priest in training and, most importantly, a son. Wyatt does not send warning of his return; he simply packs his things and boards the train.

The situation at the parsonage preceding Wyatt's return proves to be as strange as Wyatt's Bosch encounter at Brown's apartment. The house and its host of objects is marked by an eerie sense of expectation - Reverend Gwyon, indeed the parsonage itself, is in a state of uncanny anticipation for what it cannot know is coming. As he reclines at table (again, the Bosch copy made years ago by Wyatt) to take his dinner and nightly bottle of sherry oloroso, "the faded figure in the table's center shivered for an instant, underclothed, and remained still as he passed, shoulders drawn, listening, under surveillance..." (Gaddis 398). The painted figure in the Bosch table is endowed with the human qualities of feeling, thought, and self-awareness. He is cold and "underclothed," and aware of Gwyon's presence as the Reverend paces by the table. Furthermore, the figure is seen to be "surveilling" the Reverend (Gaddis 398), keeping some unknown vigil, perhaps in anticipation of Wyatt's imminent return. Freud, quoting the psychoanalyst E. Jentsch, notes that the uncanny is occasioned when the subject is made to have "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" (Freud 5). In this instance, Gwyon is not experiencing an uncanny sensation, but

the reader is made to feel it. The moving figure returns the reader to the suspicion and confusion initiated by Wyatt's encounter with Brown's version of the table. He is made to scale back once more and question the scope of Gaddis' reality. Am I dealing with a text more mystical and fantastic than I initially gave it credit for? The reader's inquiry is affirmed when Reverend Gwyon finally settles to table:

A sharp unfriendly sound from the kitchen confirmed the silence and the vigilant conspiracy of inanimate things, watching for any break in the pattern. A movement broke it, his hand reaching forth to put his glass at his place at the table; and he stood in suspense sustaining the trust thrust upon his frame by the static details of dark woodwork. (Gaddis 398)

Inanimate objects are conspiring, surveilling, and, in effect, imposing themselves on Gwyon's reality. The uncanny begins to penetrate Gwyon's consciousness as he is moved to distrust, for some untraceable reason, the "static details of dark woodwork" (Gaddis 398). There is a surreptitious and damning force at work in the solid, external, familiar universe of the home. Furthermore, this force seems to wield power over the individual will. Syntactically, Gwyon is passive throughout the passage. The "trust" imposed by static reality is "thrust upon" him (Gaddis 398). This points to a lack of control that contributes to the anxiety pervading the goings-on at the parsonage.

This anxiety precipitated by the uncanny "conspiracy of inanimate things" is moved to crescendo just a page later when the Reverend is made to encounter,

an unfamiliar floor lamp standing beside him with the cold intentness of an unknown sentinel, watching, patient at all events with his prolix presence now the years of waiting were done, rewarded to find him twice-size, twice as difficult of

concealment. No part of the room he could not see now, points and attentive angles he had never seen from his chair, saw him now. (Gaddis 399)

The motif of surveillance and lack of control are rehearsed as the Reverend is not seeing the room around him, but is *being seen* by the anthropomorphized floor lamp-come-guard. This vexed dynamic between Gwyon and the objects in his home begin to render his familiar setting *infinitely strange*. This is the destination of the uncanny, wherein everything "not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, comfortable, homely" (Freud 2) is made utterly alien, "uneasy, eerie, bloodcurdling" (Freud 3). Where the nature of reality was once "concealed beneath [its] ordinary appearance" (Freud 5) it is now laid bare, naked and writhing, intimately horrifying there on the dining room floor.

In his discomfort, Reverend Gwyon considers the dinner table, commenting to himself that it "looked to be faded, a parody of perfection more Bosch than Hieronymus" (Gaddis 399). It is as if he were suddenly able to see the painting for its actual nature as a copy. Indeed, the notion of perfection is alluded to at the moment of the copy's creation. The narrator comments that Wyatt's painting aspired to "that perfection to which only counterfeit can attain, reproducing every aspect of inadequacy, every blemish on Perfection in the original" (Gaddis 55). Through this quietly eerie allusion to an earlier moment in the text (which is never explicitly marked), the uncanny is seen to once again seep through the text into the experience of the reader as he is made to (re)enact an "involuntary return" or "repetition" (Freud 11) to the Bosch table as well as to the site of its creation. The uncanny is enabled and amplified by the amount of textual space between the two utterances of "perfection" in the context of the table. Nearly 350 pages pass before the textual linkage can be made, and by that point the repeated utterance is merely a spectral echo. Furthermore, the distance contributes to the feeling "of something fateful and

unescapable" (Freud 11), which represents another loss of control, of textual bearings, and thus a sensation of the uncanny. This readerly return, occasioned by textual repetition, is a device Gaddis employs throughout *The Recognitions*. "The result," in Johnston's phrasing, "is an elaborate network of associations leading back and forth - in synchronic reticulation, so to speak - which thereby produces a haunting aura of familiarity without any precisely definable "objective correlative" that would explain it" (Johnston 25).

By the time Wyatt finally makes his approach to the parsonage, accompanied by his grandfather, the Town Carpenter, the conspiracy of the inanimate and the Reverend's ensuing anxiety have done their work. The narrator describes the parsonage thus:

This house has a sense of bereavement about it; though no one had come or gone in a long time. The corridors rang with oppressive familiarity and, perhaps it was the distance that each step covered, the sense of diffusion persisted, diffusion from essential childhood, moving too fast too slowly, rested physically, arriving too soon without expenditure or the pulsations of effort, filling too much the space and thus less instead of more powerful, less capable of hiding. (Gaddis 405)

The house, left to the re-inscribing work of time, is seen to exhibit a bizarre dynamic of spatial collapse and expansion. The corridors afford space enough for moving bodies to arrive "too soon" as well as "too fast too slowly," moving with, as the narrator describes elsewhere, "the steps of one in a familiar medium, disdaining claims of time past and future, both contained in this limicolous present" (Gaddis 626). The "familiarity" of the parsonage is thus rendered "oppressive" as it calls Wyatt to engage the space as he once did with his childhood body. In order to fully realize the intimacy Wyatt has with the parsonage he must return to his past self, his former body, from which he first measured and mapped the space of the house. The body of

his boyhood is the only entity capable of achieving the correct "expenditure or the pulsations of effort" that memory has assigned to movement within the halls. This gap between bodies, which is forever impossible to bridge, marks the house and Wyatt's body with the "sense of bereavement" expressed by the narrator. This vague sense of depravity, this subtle hint of death, is another symptom of the uncanny that plagues the universe of *The Recognitions*. Every character is made to know the feeling of unaccountable loss, wherein a known object presents itself in its familiar form but reveals itself to be slightly out of harmony with its location in memory. Characters spend much of their time in the novel searching for the old content of some familiar form, some old foundation of reality that they can rest against.

The bizarre spatial dynamic as described in the parsonage as well as the sense of estrangement it engenders is foreshadowed by a dream Wyatt has earlier in the novel. Waking and turning to Esther, his estranged wife, Wyatt recounts,

At home, in bed, that parsonage was a big empty house and I know every step in it, I woke up and I could hear footsteps. I woke up there hearing very heavy footsteps in an even tread and I knew where they were going, I heard them down the stairs and through the front hallway and into the living room toward the kitchen... But listen, what was terrible was that I know every step in that house, I know how many steps it takes to come down the stairs or to cross the living room, I can't tell you the number but I know, but these steps I heard in the darkness, they were regular and even, not in a hurry but what was terrible, they kept reaching places too soon. I know the sound, I know how the sounds change when you step from the front hall into the living room, or passing the dining room or off the last stair... (Gaddis 86)

The nightmare presages the spatial oddities Wyatt later encounters at the home, but more than this, it sets in motion another cycle of repetition and thus a bizarre temporal dynamic to complement that of the spatial. Through the medium of space here at the parsonage, and through the spatial dynamic's rehearsal later in the text, Gaddis collapses the time of his narrative. Wyatt's return home is always already marked by the *unheimlich*, is always already a disappointment, is always already impossible. Like a dream, it is a function of both anticipation and recollection - all dreams must be rooted in some unconscious memory, some known shape, and all nightmares must look forward to a terrifying possibility yet to be realized. Thus the return is held in infinite temporal tension wherein the past, present, and future are seen to be in infinite dialogue and movement, each perpetually reshaping the other. Here Johnston's "haunting aura of familiarity" (Johnston 25) marks not only the moments of encounter with the house, but time itself. Furthermore, the text becomes as *unheimlich* to the reader as the parsonage does to Wyatt: the reader's familiar novelistic form will not adhere to his expectations and standards of the chronology of narrative.

Upon approaching his father, Wyatt remains hopeful, but skeptical. He comments to Janet, the housekeeper,

-The ... reassuring feeling ... he went on, figuring his hand in the air between them, -being home again ... though the scraping of the door obscured his words for her, -here, to feel myself again, here ... (Gaddis 407)

John Leverence, in his essay "Gaddis Anagnorisis," describes Wyatt's speech here and throughout the novel as a kind of "loose baroque prose." Loose baroque is marked by "a mind discovering truth as it goes, thinking while it writes" (Leverence 33), or, in this instance, speaks. Leverence argues that the loose baroque "gives the novel a sense of unfolding possibilities, but it

is less well understood as a progressive, sequential narrative that lays out one plot ingredient after another than as an inventional clustering of linear narrative segments that are properly perceived in patterns" (35). Its function here, however, is to perform the uncertainty and fear provoked by Wyatt's initial uncanny engagements with the parsonage. The heavy use of ellipses and the repetition of words, self-reflexive pronouns in particular, serve to fragment the text and obscure the narrative. The loose baroque prose renders Wyatt's speech a drawn out attempt to affirm and re-affirm his own thoughts and actions, indeed his existence in this familiar setting rendered strange. His speech furthers the sense of anxiety surrounding his hopeful return.

It becomes apparent during Wyatt's brief visit that his father, Reverend Gwyon, is not at all what he appears anymore. He has converted to Mithraism, an "ancient Persian religion" (Moore 57.36) similar to and eventually eclipsed by Christianity, and now worships a "deity of sun and light" (Moore 57.36). It also becomes clear that he has lost his mind as he is speaking to ghosts and boarding the stained glass windows of his parish church. This furthers Wyatt's deep anxiety, which comes to a head the morning after his arrival at the parsonage. Stirring in his bed, he,

waked staring straight ahead to the full consciousness which only sheer horror attains: his blood stopped. For a prolonged instant everything stopped and the blood, without motion, was cast as a solid of unbearable weight and impenetrable density. *-No one knows who I am [...]* He began looking wildly around the room, where shapes refused to identify themselves, and endured only in terms of the others, each a presence made possible by what everything else was not, each suffering the space it filled to bear it only as a part of a whole which, with a part standing forth to identify itself, would perish. (Gaddis 439)

The loss of Wyatt's father, his (personal) origin, to insanity renders him unable to recognize himself. The world around him dissolves into totally unfamiliar shapes and he is, at once, isolated in the place he should feel most secure: his childhood bedroom; he evaporates into the external world as a nameless, identity-less object. Freud notes that when scenes or events occasion the sensation of the uncanny it is because "they are harking back to particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding feeling, a regression to a time when the ego was not yet sharply differentiated from the external world and from other persons" (Freud 10). Returning to his bedroom, Wyatt moves beyond the *feeling* of his "diffusion from essential childhood" (Gaddis 405) and begins to *know* his distance from the past.

Through the psychological violence acting on Wyatt during his return, this diffusion begins to look more like a *severance* from his past, from his "essential childhood" self. Even Wyatt's body is rendered strange in this moment. Attempting to break the paralysis of his recognition and articulate his terror, Wyatt tries to speak, to impose some sort of resuscitative narrative on the rupture. His mouth, however, is too dry to coax his fear into an utterance and he is left "sucking the inside of his mouth in upon itself, plying the barren, abruptly unfamiliar hollow with his insensible tongue until its features dissolved" (Gaddis 439). Wyatt experiences *his own body* as uncanny. He is detached from his corporeality as it becomes a site of encounter with the *unheimlich*. Insofar as Wyatt is not at home in his body, it is seen to recapitulate the parsonage as a haunted space which offers no respite from the transmogrifying real proffered by the city. Just as the specter of Wyatt's childhood body roams the corridors of the parsonage, unsettling every quantum of space and time, so too does it inhabit and disrupt his more current self.

The Uncanny, the Loss of Origin, and the Engine of Simulation

"...part of a series of an original that never existed" (Gaddis 534)

So, what of this dread? This creeping terror? This vague horror of the familiar and this pervasive and seemingly infinite sense of loss? Structurally speaking, where can we say the uncanny originates in the novel and what is its function? It would seem that the mere mention of "apparitions" (Gaddis 399) or a "ghostly emanation" (Gaddis 753) would suffice to unsettle and defamiliarize a novel that purports, at least superficially, to deal in the currency of realism. Or perhaps the uncanny is rooted in the novel's interest in mysticism and the occult as represented by Reverend Gwyon's constant references to ancient pagan treatises and medieval books of magic, by the servant Fuller's attempts to kill his employer by gathering Recktail Brown's hair "which Elsie will proceed to treat the secret way, and return to me to burn sayin over it certain words from the mysteries she resides party to" (Gaddis 344). However, while these examples articulate instances of the eerie sensation that canvases the entirety of the novel, they do not address the initial condition that necessarily precedes every instance of the uncanny in the text. Let us briefly return to our discussion of Wyatt's trip to the parsonage.

We have observed that the uncanny is felt in myriad scenarios at Wyatt's childhood home. To recapitulate, it is expressed in terms of the revelation of an object's true nature (the exposure of the Bosch table) once "concealed beneath [its] ordinary appearance" (Freud 5), the anthropomorphized "conspiracy of inanimate things" (Gaddis 398), textual repetition and "involuntary return" (Freud 11), the melding of dreams and reality, the obscuration of space and time in a familiar setting, and the dissolution and subsequent misrecognition of the self during moments of "regression to a time when the ego was not yet sharply differentiated from the external world" (Freud 10). The question now is what links these uncanny vignettes? What is the structural common denominator here enabling the estrangement of the familiar? We need only to

return to the level of narrative for the answer.

The overwhelming conclusion of Wyatt's trip home is that his desire to resume "where reality left off" (Gaddis 427) is entirely unrealizable. He no longer fits, quite literally, into life at the parsonage. Furthermore, his reunion with his father, Reverend Gwyon, is seen to be impossible and doubly as devastating. In the final moments of Wyatt's time back at the parsonage, the reader is witness to the strangest and most unaccountably supernatural scene that *The Recognitions* has to offer. After his realization upon waking that "nobody knows" him, Wyatt follows the Reverend out to the barn "precipitously, sliding and slipping on the soaked pores of the snow as though it were the headlong incline of twenty-five years past" (Gaddis 440). Already the scene is marked with difficulty and disconnection. Gwyon arrives at the barn to check on the bull (which figures in Mithraism as a highly significant symbol of sacrifice, according to Steven Moore's annotations, and which Gwyon treats as such) and just as he turns on the lights,

Lightning followed so fast on the words that followed, that both were gone, and the transformation was complete, when Gwyon heard,

-Father... *Am I the man for whom Christ died?*

Louder than laughter, the crash raised and sundered them in a blinding agony of light in which nothing existed until it was done. [...] Then it seemed full minutes before the cry, pursuing them with its lashing end, flailed through darkness and stung them to earth. [...] Then the shadows round the walls were set dancing in duplication, each steady dark shape mocked by a distorted image leaping round it... (Gaddis 440)

The lightning and thunder, which are wholly out of place in the context of a snow-covered New

England evening, figure as bizarre mythical forces that first eviscerate, then reconstitute, and finally "sunder" Gwyon and Wyatt, completing the "transformation" of the Reverend from familiar father to estranged, uncanny other. His image as it figures in Wyatt's mind is banished to the status of inaccessible memory or, worse, a fiction that never could claim a basis in reality; "when Wyatt attempts to return to the father," notes Johnston, "he discovers that no such return is possible" (Johnston 15). Furthermore, "Wyatt also discovers that there is no possible escape from this world of proliferating counterfeits, which increasingly takes on the appearance of a mad carnival" (Johnston 15); he is immediately restored to the world of "duplication." There is a cruelty here, what with the thunderous "laughter" preceding the "agony" and the apish "dancing" of the shadows as they mock "each steady dark shape" and Wyatt in turn. Upon returning to the house, Janet, the housekeeper, hears wood splinter and runs to the dining room where she finds "him alone there. He had just split the top of the low table under the window down the middle. - What is it? Janet asked calmly, coming closer. -Damnation, he answered, backing round the table" (Gaddis 442). Wyatt splits the copy he made of the Bosch table and packs his bags once more, understanding himself to be eternally damned to the world of counterfeit and misrecognition, New York City.

Insofar as a father can be understood as a point of origin (and for Wyatt, the Reverend absolutely figured as such for the first part of the novel), Wyatt's estrangement from Reverend Gwyon and the house of his youth represent his loss of origin, which is to say, the very foundation upon which his reality was based. This is the condition for the uncanny, the condition of which the uncanny is but a symptom, the common denominator alluded to above: every instance of "dreadful familiarity" (Gaddis 843) points to the loss of origin and thus the loss of a standard of value. When "the fragmentation and loss of some primal authoritative center or

agency" (Johnston 21) is experienced, the foundational structure of thought and the corresponding conception of truth built upon it are rendered "abruptly unfamiliar" (Gaddis 439). When this origin, like Reverend Gwyon, appears consistent and reliable, its estrangement is all the more desolating and terrifying. While the loss of Wyatt's father constitutes a major personal struggle, however, the loss of origin experienced by the universe of the novel at large is far more harrowing, its methods much more perfidious and penetrating, and its effects more deleterious.

When Wyatt returns to New York, he rushes immediately to Basil Valentine to announce the end of his work with the counterfeiting ring. The two meet in the polar bear and lion cages of the Central Park Zoo. There, Wyatt announces, in glossolalic delirium, that he intends to expose his counterfeits at the home of the investor Recktall Brown during a planned showing of a forged Memling. Valentine warns that this "putting off the old man," referring to Brown (who functions in the counterfeiting ring as a kind of proxy-father), "mayn't be so simple" (Gaddis 546). His rebuke is swift and perceptive:

...this sudden attempt to set the whole world right, by recalling your own falsifications in it? [...] this lost innocence you're so frantic to recover, it goes a good deal farther back, you know. And this idea that you can set everything to rights at once is... is childish. (Gaddis 551)

Valentine takes Wyatt back to his experience of impossible return at the parsonage – just as he cannot resume his past life in New England, he cannot right his counterfeited paintings. No matter "how fragile situations are" in Wyatt's mind, with "every moment reshaping the past," they are not fragile or malleable enough to accommodate a full return and correction (Gaddis 547). Here the loss of control associated with the uncanny is rehearsed yet again. Wyatt's past, at once his own and no longer his, is rendered strange though he is still caught in its net of

implication. The work of his counterfeiting has already so finely embedded itself into the fabric of the novel's reality that its effects are seen to be irreversible and inescapable.

Why, if in the novel the past is seen to be subject to the infinite slippage of memory and the perpetual re-inscription imposed by the present, can Wyatt not access his past forays into forgery and right them? What is it about the work of counterfeiting that is so deleterious that it blocks any and all attempts at return? What father has reality lost? The answer lies in the structural principle of the counterfeit, which, as Johnston states, is "predicated on Platonic distinctions" (Johnston 21). As noted, Gaddis purports to deal in the currency of realism, and this realism carries Platonism with it as a kind of conceptual baggage. This baggage figures as Gaddis' novelistic inheritance. **The notion that fundamental truth lies behind the economy of images that guide the novel is very much alive in the works of Gaddis' forebears, namely the modernist epics of Joyce and Eliot, and the works of Romanticism and 19th century realism that came before them.** So too it is alive in the minds of Gaddis' characters, who are constantly "musing on the "origins of design"" (Johnston 20). The devout Christian composer Stanley, the lost and fumbling playwright Otto, the insecure bridge-drafter Benny – all are searching for some kernel of tangible, objective reality they understand to be lying behind art and other people. They all believe in image-making as a means of deliverance from the sensation of loss – if they make a strong enough image within their art or of themselves, they will touch "the origins of design with recognition" (Gaddis 322). However, "Gaddis' novel is actually haunted by a strong sense that those Platonic assumptions are now exhausted" (Johnston 20). Just as the parsonage is haunted by old foundations of reality represented by Wyatt's lost father, New York and the world at large are haunted by the loss of origin, of the old value standard and basis of reality that Platonism afforded, and Gaddis' text as a whole is seen to have lost its center, its

“authoritative agency.”

The work of counterfeiting and art forgery is so devastating by virtue of its frustrating the relationship between an object and its representation as an image or copy, or, the Platonic model and its corresponding image. The most potent example of this frustration occurs when Wyatt creates a painting “in the manner of Memling” (Gaddis 71) under the guidance of his art teacher, Herr Koppel, during his time in Munich. Koppel then turns around and sells the work as “an original painting by Hans Memling” (Gaddis 74) gone undiscovered. Eventually, the painting lands in the private collection of Reck tall Brown, who believes it to be an authentic Memling. Basil Valentine then has the painting copied again and returns what he believes to be the original to its rightful place in Europe. Johnston notes that this “reveals the loss of distinction between a “genuine” imitation and a counterfeit” (Johnston 11). Not only are we dealing with a situation in which the difference between the model and the copy cannot be distinguished, we cannot even determine which kind of copy we are dealing with – an imitation of an original or a forged *simulation*.

Wyatt, in creating a painting that masquerades as a Memling without being anchored to any discoverable original, essentially *manufactures* the original, and the very notion of “originality” with it, through his simulation. The Platonic model, as Johnston states,

must now be understood as having been established in an act of belated induction from the copy that is purportedly true to it, produced as an aftereffect so to speak, and then hypostatized as the origin. As a fabricator of paintings that are actually simulacra, Wyatt creates or invents "models" which are based on the copies he is trying to emulate. In other words, the model comes into being as the absent origin

to which the copy refers, with this act of reference really the consequence of an originary difference opened up by the notion of the copy itself. (Johnston 21)

Thus the logic of Platonism is reversed and its distinctions are released into "an emergent multiplicity brought about through the resurfacing and proliferation of simulacra" (Johnston 21). Here we see not simply an instance of the Uncanny as an encounter with a phenomenon formerly familiar and now estranged; rather, we see the *mechanical production of familiarity itself* upon which repression and subsequent fear will only later act. The temporality of the Uncanny, a linear movement across which that which is "*heimlich*" thus comes to be *unheimlich*" (Freud 4), is corrupted, indeed imploded, by the process of simulation. *Heimlichkeiten* is seen to be created retroactively - the original or familiar, indeed the very notion of "Origin" or the "authentic original," is *produced* by the copy. This marks the literalization of the reversal of Platonism as noted by Johnston and articulated by Baudrillard, who states that "the "real" is simply what can be constructed in order to guarantee the authenticity of our representations, or rather our "simulations"" (Baudrillard as qtd. by Johnston 194). In this way, the work of simulation wreaks havoc on and finally dismantles the foundation of Gaddis' reality, rendering every intimately known object suddenly unfamiliar by decimating the inherited father-logic of Platonism.

This dynamic bears an analogical relationship to Freud's conception of the double. In his discussion of Hoffman's story "The Devil's Elixir," he explicates the relationship between a man and his doppelgänger, "considered identical by reason of looking alike" (Freud 9). The original man, upon recognizing the existence of the mirrored other, internalizes the likeness and subsequently "identifies himself with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own - in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self" (Freud 9). By virtue of the very presence of the other, the copy, the original man

becomes indistinguishable as such. The double is seen to take part in the production of the first man's identity by "dividing and interchanging the self" (Freud 9). The original man is, at once, created and destroyed by the introduction of his doppelganger. An uncanny effect is thus "easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality [...] when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes, and so on" (Freud 15). Just as the doppelganger takes over the first man, the copied or simulated painting assumes "the full functions and significance" of the original work.

Beyond the forged art of *The Recognitions*, even the hierarchical structures that are meant to produce and uphold the standards of value in place to endow objects and interactions with meaning and worth are seen to be themselves manufactured, stilted simulations of dead structures. Reck tall Brown's capitalism, for example, perpetuates the reversal of Platonism as it enacts and reiterates the *appearance* of Platonism proper, right-side-up, in all its health by claiming the authenticity of an art object that was forged and by using price to signify a spurious worth. The concept of "Authenticity" must exist in order to be subverted and cheated. Brown's insidious undertaking not only cheats the buyer out of whatever money they spend on the significantly less valuable and false painting, it cheats the world of the novel out of the possibility of value and objective reality at all by proffering only *simulations* of the two entities. It also sets in motion the infinite feedback loop of deconstruction, wherein the copy creates the original in order to destroy it, only to recreate it or re-simulate it at the auction house and begin the cycle of presentation and effacement all over again.

This endless, self-sustaining loop of deconstruction is figured by Johnston as a kind of Bahktian "dialogic" which "allows both [logics, Platonism and its reversal] to operate simultaneously" (Johnston 21). "More precisely," Johnston notes, "*The Recognitions* is

constituted according to a dialogic founded on the Platonic model-copy paradigm and its simultaneous subversion or overturning" (21). This dialogic is the engine of the novel's major conflict and the focus of the critical struggle holding everything in the "perfect delicate tension of movement in stillness" (Gaddis 606). While the primary "*event*" of the novel, as theorized by Johnston via Deleuze, is the "reversal from the Platonic paradigm of model and copy (or original and imitation) to the Deleuzian (or Nietzschean) one of simulacrum and phantasm" (Johnston 20), the *work* of the novel, that which drives the uncanny throughout and motivates the narrative, is a function of the stilted maintenance of the paradigm in the face of its destruction. Even as the Platonic schematic is demonstrated to be insufficient to the task laid out by Gaddis' shifting reality, that shifting reality necessitates it. Just as the counterfeit needs the original, or the notion of the "Authentic Original," in order to sell, so too does it require the total effacement of the original, of the notion of the "Authentic Original," so that it can properly stand and be sold in its place. Keeping the notion of the "Authentic Original" in circulation is what charges every person, object, or phenomenon with the valence reserved for suspicious and potentially harmful entities, and thus the terror of the uncanny.

Indeed, even Wyatt is responsible for perpetuating this violent dialogic that tears at the seams of his reality. His rhetoric, marked by high speech and decidedly Catholic spiritual aspiration, rehearses and reproduces the Platonic schematic as it is articulated in Romanticism. When challenged about whether or not his forgeries constitute acts of calumny, he argues,

...Do you think I do these the way all other forging has been done? Pulling the fragments of ten paintings together and making one, or taking a ... a Durer and reversing the composition so that the man looks to the right instead of left, putting a beard on him from another portrait, and a hat, a different hat from another, so

that they look at it and recognize Durer there? No, it's... the recognitions go much deeper, much further back, and I... this... the X-ray tests, and ultra-violet and infra-red, the experts with their photomicrography and... macrophotography, do you think that's all there is to it? Some of them aren't fools, they don't just look for a hat or a beard, or a style they can recognize, they look with memories that... go beyond themselves, that go back to... where mine goes. (Gaddis 250)

Wyatt rejects the contemporary understanding of science as purveyor of truth, anchoring his rhetoric instead to an older system of thought based on recognition in an appeal to the “origins of design.” He thus invokes and imposes the Platonic concept of anamnesis, which states that all knowledge is recollection and that invention is not creation but a remembrance of eternal forms, on his *forgeries*². He re-inscribes the already double-mirrored mess of the economy of simulation with the accepted and understood speech of the old order. Johnston argues that this is "what makes Wyatt's forgeries so convincing" (Johnston 56). It is also what makes his coming-to-terms with life in New York so incredibly strenuous and agonizing. By trying to address (or redress) his past in the language of Platonism, he renders his own work unfamiliar. In the same way that he becomes estranged from his own body during his time at the parsonage, he becomes estranged from his own art by way of his narrating the work of simulation in the languages of Platonism

² The Gaddis scholars Joseph Salemi and Christopher Knight, in their respective essays “Art as Expiation in *The Recognitions*” and “Flemish Art and Wyatt's Quest for Redemption in William Gaddis' *The Recognitions*,” arrive here at Wyatt’s Platonic predilections and go no further. For both, art is still a viable venue for redemption and transcendence. They do not account for the dastardly infiltration of simulation and thus *misrecognize* Gaddis’ efforts and accomplishments in the novel. Insofar as their criticism can be understood to be part and parcel with the text as Derridean “supplements,” they contribute to the textual disturbance, the Bahktian dialogic, and thus the engine of the uncanny by enacting their own stilted maintenances of Platonism through constructions like, “The creation of art is an act of atonement, in that it constellates true significance in the midst of falsity, redeeming that falsity just as the cross redeems sin” (Salemi 56); and, “The process of art is the artist's working out of his own redemption” (Knight 58).

and Romanticism.

Freud anticipates this dialogic dynamic in his discussion of the uncanny as it is experienced in real life versus in literature. He notes that the author of fiction has license and the ability to create scenes as terrifyingly fantastic as one could conceive. While these scenes might be shocking or tense, they will never arrive at the horror of estrangement as they were never familiar to start. However, "the situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality" (Freud 18). By grounding a work of fiction in recognizable reality the writer creates a sense of familiarity, identification, intimacy, and comfort between the reader and the text. These elements must be in place if the estrangement and fear of the uncanny are to be felt. Thus, that the reality Gaddis creates at the outset (which is a wholly plausible Spain and New York) is not far-fetched or fantastic amounts to his foregrounding of the uncanny. In maintaining the familiar and traditional currency of realism, he concocts a perfect situation for their evisceration, arriving at the terror of the uncanny.

This plausible reality is corroborated at the outset by Gaddis' deployment of traditional, inherited narratives, namely the major Modern Epics alluded to above: Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Wasteland*, and, reaching farther back, the more traditional epical structures of Goethe's *Faust* and *The Clementine Recognitions* about which the narrative arch of the novel is loosely coiled. Insofar as these narratives are taken apart alongside the characters' sense of reality, Gaddis' novel operates as an uncanny specter of its forebears. Reading *The Recognitions*, one feels as though one has been through similar literary spaces before. Gaddis employs a variety of exceedingly familiar tropes, including (but certainly not limited to) the Coming of Age narrative, the debauched adventuring and return of the Prodigal Son, the Resurrection and subsequent Parousia, or return, of Christ, the Redeemer, on and on. All of these tropes, however,

are corrupted, perverted, or distorted in some way just barely beyond the point of readerly identification but never quite so much as to forestall readerly recognition: Wyatt cannot be said to "come of age" through his tribulations, at least not in the Salingerian sense wherein he might emerge a more stable or at least better-oriented character for his trials; his repentant return home is not met with raucous celebration; he does not defy the figurative death he suffers at the parsonage and does not, upon his reintroduction to New York, gather the shattered masses for redemption and no one is saved. These tired, broken narratives figure only as venues for pastiche, which Jameson categorizes as "the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language" (Jameson 1963). Here, the estrangement of the familiar occasions the black humor and dark satire that run throughout the entire novel, but not via the traditional avenues of parody, which "capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original" (Jameson 1963). It is rather the tragedy of misrecognition and the fear it precipitates that is always coupled with a bleak brand of comedy. These instances of pastiche reproduce the sensation of loss by introducing traditional narrative structures to a dismantled literature of diffused myth and linguistic drift and thus highlighting the lack of a "linguistic norm" to ridicule (Jameson 1963)³. These pastiches are, in this way, uncanny versions of what would have functioned as parodies in the "stable and comic" idioms of the eighteenth century (Jameson 1963). Insofar as the old structures are at once present and deconstructed or shown to be

³ Elaine B. Safer, in her book chapter "Ironic Allusiveness and Satire in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*," commits the same omission as her peers Joseph Salemi and Christopher Knight, by halting her commentary at the level of parody and irony, understanding the primary source of Gaddis' comedy (which, for her, is a light and pleasurable endeavor devoid of tragedy) to be his appeal to "the disparity between twentieth-century concerns and traditional values evident in the original sources" (Safer 113). For Safer, there still exists an original text or linguistic norm to be mocked. Insofar as she does not address the loss or impossibility of this father text, she too misrecognizes Gaddis' accomplishment.

inadequate or, worse, impossible, they reify the tension and horror that persists throughout *The Recognitions*.

Within this logic-schematic, this treacherous dialogic, what is finally rendered uncanny is not a particular painting, not Memling or his forger Wyatt, not the encounter with a work of art and its subsequent exposure as a forgery (which is always already an occasion for repression and fear); the work of simulation is much more insidious. Within this universe of simulation, reality itself is rendered uncanny, as every encounter with the familiar in the outside world is marked by suspicion, doubt, a vague, indefinable, and unlocatable but persistent sense of loss, and, ultimately, terror.

*The Deconstruction of Platonism as a Creative Critical Turn and The Gestation of
Postmodernity*

While the deconstruction of Platonism and the subsequent estrangement from reality suffered by the characters of *The Recognitions* could be understood to be a wholly negative condition imposed on the universe of the novel, it is more productive and accurate to understand the (a)Platonic dialogic, for all its violence, to be a creative mechanism. Though the crumbling of the old foundations of the real produces an immense amount of anxiety in the characters of *The Recognitions*, it also frees them into the multiplicity alluded to in Johnston's assessment of forgery and simulation. As origin-based identity is seen to be impossible, characters are given the freedom to perform themselves. Deleuze argues accordingly in his book *Difference et Repetition*, stating that "modern thought is born from the bankruptcy of representation, as from the loss of identities, and from the discovery of all the forces which act beneath the representation of identity. The modern world is one of simulacra... All identities are only simulated, produced like an "optical effect" by a deeper play which is that of difference and repetition" (Deleuze as qtd. by

Johnston 19). Simulation and counterfeit in this way touch the deepest levels of the self. This is the final reversal enacted by the text. Though the deconstruction of Platonism would seem to strip its patrons of their ability to operate by casting them into a universe totally unfamiliar and terrifying, it also allows for the *play* necessary for new creation⁴.

Furthermore, the reversal of Platonism and the loss of origin on the level of narrative mark another creative critical turn wherein the text is liberated from the author, the father of the text. This is articulated explicitly (though perhaps unconsciously) in the narrative through Wyatt's harsh rebuke of Esther for her "passion for wanting to meet the latest poet, shake hands with the latest novelist, get hold of the latest painter" (Gaddis 95). He asks,

What is it you want from a man that they didn't get from his work? What do they expect? What's any artist, but the dregs of his work? the human shambles that follows it around. What's left of the man when the work's done but a shambles of apology. (Gaddis 95-6)

Not only is the author/artist/father of the text not very useful, his identity outside the text is totally irrelevant. Insofar as the text is thusly reduced to "the status of [an] orphan" (Derrida 77), the text is released into a multiplicity of meaning, is reinvigorated as it is effaced by the loss of its origin, the author. Just as Wyatt's foundation for belief and meaning is erased with the estrangement of Reverend Gwyon, the foundation for meaning in the text is lost in the effacement of its father. The reading of Gaddis' novel then becomes an effort in dialogue wherein the reader is made to participate in the meaning of the text. In the same way that the

⁴ This "play" of the text, this emergent multiplicity, is akin to the conditions necessary for Harold Bloom's understanding of poetic influence and creation. At the first stage of influence/creation, the new poet performs a "Clinamen," a poetic misreading, or "misprision" proper. He "swerves away from his precursor" in what is called his "corrective movement" (Bloom 1802-3). This work is enabled by the openness of the text, without which meaning would be set and the new poet would never be able to get out from under his forebears.

viewer works to complete Wyatt's forgeries, his simulations, by in turn simulating the experience of identification with the painting through Johnston's "recognition-effect" (Johnston 26), the reader is seen to complete the literary work, rendering it an open and infinitely malleable Barthesian text. This movement marks "the birth of the reader," which, Barthes argues, "must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 148). He notes, "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 148), and this destination is none other than the reader's critical conversation with the literary text.

Insofar as *The Recognitions* introduces the notions of identity as play and performance and the liberation of the text from its author, Gaddis' novel can be understood as the site of gestation for the postmodern turn in literature, marked by its fragmentation and shift. "By decentering characters in relation to fictional and historical structures within which the individual was a continually displaced position (rather than a substantial entity)," Gaddis begins "to move away from the mimetic and humanist assumptions that had governed the traditional novel since its inception" (Johnston 185). Through the treacherous work of simulation, every object, every character, every allusion, and finally the author and the novel itself are estranged; the reader, alongside the characters of *The Recognitions*, is made to know the "horror of intimacy" with entities that perpetually slip away and is thus cast into the very "intimacy of horror" until finally intimacy is refigured and opened by the birth of the reader, and a new literature is possible once again.