

Last Words of William Gaddis

William Gaddis, a great American novelist, never found the wide readership that his satiric, socially astute, and, ultimately, humane books deserve. Before he died in 1998, Gaddis wrote his fifth novel, *Agapē Agape*, which has just been published.

The narrator of the book, an author on his deathbed, asks the reader more than once, “Can you hear me?” It’s a question Gaddis might well have asked his own readers.

by Paul Maliszewski

Jack Gibbs, a character in William Gaddis’s second novel, *J R* (1975), is trying to finish writing a history of the player piano. Gibbs works on his manuscript in a cluttered fire hazard of an apartment, a disorderly place always on the verge of slipping into chaos. The rooms are stacked high with boxes and littered with mops, cookie tins, an inoperable stove, and the unopened mail of previous tenants. There’s a radio somewhere, perhaps in one of the boxes, from which bursts of music and talk erupt. Nobody can find the radio, though many try. The frustrated author shares this cramped space with Thomas Eigen, “who wrote an important novel once” and who now works in business, and Edward Bast, a junior high school music teacher with ambitions to compose an opera, ambitions that, over the course of the novel, he gradually and grimly downsizes, until, by the end, he’s writing a piece for an unaccompanied cello. In this overcast climate of artistic frustration, deferred dreams, and life’s innumerable small compromises, and against the maddening background of advertising patter coming from the buried radio, Gibbs sporadically writes and revises his book, works and

reworks it. He writes without discipline, in spurts, when the will seizes him, and his emotions, in particular his anger at the mechanical player piano’s eclipse of the human piano player, run high. When asked what he’s working on, he describes his book in a halting manner familiar to anyone who has not yet completed something creative but still risks talking about it. “It’s more of a book about order and disorder,” he says, “more of a, sort of a social history of mechanization and the arts, the destructive element. . . .” As his words trail off, his description of the book, like so many sentences in *J R*, is left incomplete. His thought, like so many characters’ thoughts in the novel, is a fragment spoken hurriedly between another’s words and occupying a space too small for its full expression.

The woman listening to Gibbs picks up the thread of conversation, which is more than most of the cross-talking characters in *J R* manage to do, and asks, “It sounds a little difficult, is it?” Gibbs answers, “Difficult as I can make it.” Meanwhile, the phone in the apartment rings, people drop by, someone arrives to deliver 10,000 plastic flowers (a shipment for a witless, penny-stock business



Bill Gaddis (1987), by Julian Schnabel

empire captained by J R Vansant, age 11, that's spinning out of control). And yet somehow Gibbs lays out his argument as best he can, sentence by painfully wrought sentence: that the effects of automation on the arts have been deleterious; that technology, over the years, has removed the artist from the art and eliminated the elements of labor, revision, and failure (necessary elements, Gibbs and Gaddis would say); and that the player piano is a perfect case in point. The interruptions are finally too many and too distracting for Gibbs to persevere. The pressures of life and the material demands it makes overwhelm him, and *J R* concludes before Gibbs comes close to completing his manuscript.

Before he died in 1998, William Gaddis accomplished what Jack Gibbs could not: He completed a book about mechanization and the arts. That book, called *Agapē Agape*, has just been published, 27

years after Gaddis left Gibbs to his sprawling undertaking—a project that seems in *J R* less a book-to-be than an assortment of paper, notes, and undigested research, with some rhetorical flourishes in the margins. In some ways, *Agapē Agape* is not unlike the book Gibbs struggles with, though it's really more of a highly condensed novel, on 96 generously spaced pages, than it is any sort of social history. Its themes, as Joseph Tabbi, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, explains in the afterword, occupied, fascinated, and bedeviled Gaddis his entire writing life.

Gaddis was routinely compared with Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Samuel Butler, and although such comparisons with other writers are arguably made too often and too carelessly in book blurbs, Gaddis richly earned every one of them. He was those writers' peer. He sought in all his books to capture the ener-

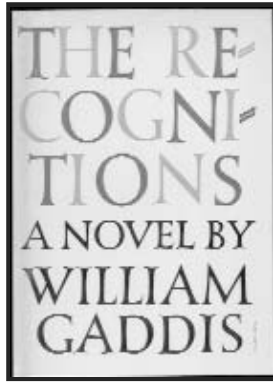
William Gaddis

gy of American speech, the sweep of New York City out across Long Island, the ceaseless moving and restless shaking of the city's people, and the fundamental contradictions and competing desires in Americans' hearts. He wrote with sharp wit (for example, about the myriad lawsuits that arise from a dog's being trapped inside a piece of public sculpture) and an eye for the perfect detail (in the cardboard buttons on a pair of pants he sees "all of false economy's drear deception"). A painter in his first novel, *The Recognitions*, published in 1955, says that what distinguishes Flemish masterpieces from other work is that "every detail reflects . . . God's concern with the most insignificant objects in life, with everything, because God did not relax for an instant." On every page of his books, Gaddis reflects a similarly relentless concern for his characters and for life's least objects.

Characters such as the man in *The Recognitions* who asks his wife why she so urgently wants to meet a certain new poet. "What is it they want from a man that they didn't get from his work?" he asks. "What is there left of him when he's done his work? 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 himself gave everything to his work. Details of his various remunerative but mind-numbing ways of making ends meet, descriptions of places and homes where he lived, and the experience, at times harsh, at times sobering, of being an uncompromising writer living in the 20th century all found their way into his books. But however much his life informed his work, the books never became advertisements for himself (as the books of

another, better-known author who was his contemporary became for him). In an age of publicity, reading tours, and book signings, Gaddis politely declined them all, and he expected, or at least hoped, that readers would follow his example and focus on the work, not the man. Although he received many awards, including two National Book Awards and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim, MacArthur, and Lannan foundations, Gaddis never won the wide recognition, readership, and appreciation his books deserve. He remains, in the words of one of his obituaries, "America's unknown great writer."

Gaddis frequently quoted with approval Gustave Flaubert's view that the artist should "appear in his work no more than God in nature." It's a trick, the ultimate trick, for an artist to make posterity believe he never existed, but it's a tragedy for the artist's work to vanish along with him. In the final scene of *The*



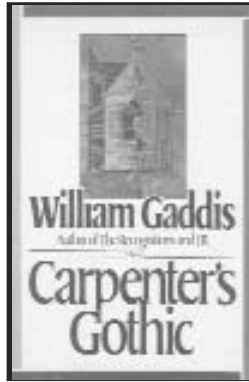
Recognitions, Stanley, a composer, organist, and true believer (in a world that mistakes belief for naiveté), enters a cathedral in Italy to practice the piece he'll play for Easter Mass. He begins to pull out the stops on the instrument, but a priest who has escorted him to the organ bench pushes them back. The priest says something in Italian—Stanley doesn't understand Italian—and walks away. Stanley, now alone, pulls out the stops, one by one, and begins to play. "The music," Gaddis writes, "soared around him." And the cathedral, set vibrating by the music, comes crashing down atop him. The novel memorializes Stanley this way: "He was the only person caught in the collapse, and afterward, most of his work was recovered too, and it is still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard, though seldom played."

>PAUL MALISZEWSKI's writing has appeared recently in Harper's, The Paris Review, the Pushcart Prize anthology, and The Wilson Quarterly, and he edited McSweeney's 8, a collection of writing that explores the border between fact and fiction. Copyright © 2002 by Paul Maliszewski.

Gaddis's novels should be not merely spoken of but played—and often.

Gaddis picked up and put down his book about the player piano many times, finding the project as endlessly interesting, and ultimately frustrating, in real life as Gibbs does in fiction. Steven Moore, a Gaddis scholar and tireless annotator of the novels, suggests that Gaddis first became interested in player pianos around 1945, after leaving Harvard and taking a job as a fact checker at *The New Yorker*. *The Rush for Second Place*, a collection of Gaddis's essays and occasional writings, edited by Joseph Tabbi and published this year to coincide with the appearance of *Agapē Agape*, preserves several early forms of the player piano project, including “Stop Player. Joke No. 4,” an essay as learned and witty as it is compressed. Imagining the United States at the dawn of the player piano era, Gaddis writes, “There was a place for everyone in this brave new world, where the player offered an answer to some of America's most persistent wants: the opportunity to participate in something which asked little understanding; the pleasures of creating without work, or the taking of time; and the manifestation of talent where there was none.”

Originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, “Stop Player. Joke No. 4” was Gaddis's first national appearance in print. But by the time the essay appeared, in July 1951, he was already at work on *The Recognitions* and no longer thinking about writing the impossible book about the player piano any time soon. *The Recognitions* is a globe-spanning comic novel about all manner of fake things, deceptive people, fabricated emotions, cheapened values, and false gods, including a fine-art restorer; a faker of paintings by Flemish masters, and the businessman and art critics who profit from him; a proud counterfeiter of American money and



Antiguan stamps who's disappointed, like most any father, that his son, a heroin addict, hasn't taken an interest in his vocation; Hieronymus Bosch's tabletop *Seven Deadly Sins* and its careful imitation; a plagiarized Rilke poem; a play everyone swears must be plagiarized but is just cobbled together from the chatter overheard at the parties the characters attend; a playwright so swollen with vanity and dragged down by insecurity that he affects an injury and wears a sling around his arm for the sake of conversation; and much else. The publisher did very little for the book, and Gaddis later remarked, “They didn't publish it, they ‘privated’ it.” Journalists reviewed the book as if its author, a relative unknown, were arrogant for expecting that they'd skim even half its nearly 1,000 pages, and the book, read and loved by the few who could find it, passed quietly out of print. The novel's actual reception was rather different from what Gaddis, in “the grand intoxication of youth,” had expected. In an interview with *The Paris Review* in 1987 (interviews with Gaddis were rare), he said, “Well, I almost think that if I'd gotten the Nobel Prize when *The Recognitions* was published I wouldn't have been terribly surprised.”

And so, after writing an important novel once, Gaddis went to work, looking for a job that paid a bit more than he earned being the author of a book that some felt was the equal of *Ulysses* (and a few believed was its better). He married and started a family, living in the New York area. He worked for Pfizer, Eastman Kodak, and the U.S. Army. He did public relations. He wrote speeches for executives. He crafted corporate reports and film scripts for educational movies (one such script, about computer software, written for IBM, is included in *The Rush for Second Place*). In the early 1960s, Gaddis

"Make Some Money Just Like Anybody"

In *J R*, William Gaddis's second novel, Edward Bast, a junior high school music teacher who'd rather be a composer, is walking home from school with J R Vansant, an 11-year-old student who'd rather control a business empire. On a field trip that morning, J R and his classmates participated in the country's free-enterprise economy, purchasing one share of a company. Flush with importance and inspiration, J R has a number of business ideas to present to his teacher.

—Mister Bast? Could you wait up a second? I just have to fix this here shoelace . . . he'd crouched jackknifed over his armload, a sneaker mounting the curb that checked the rampant advance of grassgrown cracks stemming from the empty concrete shell of the Marine Memorial Plaza where a disabled French machinegun and a vacant flagpole held off the sky. —Boy it looks like we both need shoes, right? he finished with an urgent tug—holy, shit . . .

—And look will you please stop . . .

—No but it broke again, you know what I was thinking on the train hey? he came on righting his load, hurrying alongside—like I have this thing which what it is it's this selling outfit where what you do is you send in and

they send you all these different shoes which you get to wear them around so people can see them, you know? See that's how you sell them, see? I mean not the ones you're wearing right off your feet but like you take their order and then you make this commission, you know? Like it says you can make a hundred dollars a week in your spare time and you get to wear these shoes around too, you want me to find it?

—No.

—Okay but I have this other thing about have your own import export business right from your own home, you know? Maybe you could do that . . . they crossed a rutted bog opening on a dirt road. —Would you want to do that? Mister Bast?

—Do what.

—This import export business right from your own home.

—Import and export what.

—How do I know but I mean that's not the thing anyway, you know? he kicked a can up the highway's unkempt shoulder kicking the weeds for some remnant of sidewalk, —I mean the thing is just where you get to sell something like, wait a second . . .

—Look I want to get home before it rains, I can't . . .

—No but anyway it's just this other selling

completed an introduction for a book he had by then started calling *Agapē Agape*. (The title combines the Greek noun for spiritual love with an uncommon English adjective that describes a mouth hanging open in awe and wonder. Together, the words convey Gaddis's sense that the noble concept has degenerated into merely a dumb expression.) That introduction, which appears in the new essay collection and is subtitled "A Secret History of the Player Piano," describes a book that will be satiric in mode, rigorous in its historical investigation, and, Gaddis figured, about 50,000 words in length. He had on hand at least 100 pages of assorted drafts and notes; the project and his predicament would come to resemble Jack Gibbs's in *J R* years later, as if Gaddis want-

ed nothing more than to fob his troubles off on a character. Gaddis wrote a summary of the work in progress for his agent to shop around to publishers. The agent failed to sell the book, and Gaddis went on to other things, namely the writing of three wonderful novels: *J R*, *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), and *A Frolic of His Own* (1994).

In the vicious shorthand that can reduce entire books to the two or three things that they're "about," writers and reviewers frequently say that Gaddis's novels are satires and that *J R* is about money, *Carpenter's Gothic* about religion, and *A Frolic of His Own* about the law. But satires, Gaddis knew, are not about what people devise or possess, their *things*.

thing I got where it says you'll never have to clean your toilet bowl again, see they send you this here . . .

—What makes you think I want to go around selling things! I don't even. . .

—To make some money just like anybody I mean that's what you wait up, I mean you're taking such long steps hey? Mister Bast? Did you ever hear that one about if you need any money just ask my father he's got piles?

—No.

—No but wait up hey, do you get it? Just ask my . . .

—I get it yes, look does your father know about all this sending away you're doing?

—What?

—I said does your father . . .

—No but that's just suppose to be this here joke see, where . . .

—I know it's supposed to be this here joke! it's the, it's one of the worst I ever heard, I said does your fa . . .

—No but hey Mister Bast . . . ? he came pushing shoulder high through Queen Anne's laces hemming him in behind,—like what business is your father in.

—Music.

—What he writes it? like you?

—He writes it and he's a prominent con-

ductor look, music's not a business like shoes or . . .

—No I know, I mean that's why he's this here prominent conductor right . . . ? he came hurrying alongside for the brief stretch of sidewalk,—I mean where he makes some money being this conductor so he can go write this here music in his spare time he doesn't make much off, right?

—I suppose yes now look I'm in a hurry . . .

—No that's okay I can take bigger steps it's just all this here stuff I can't hardly . . .

—Well where are you going, where . . .

—No I'm just walking you home, see I . . .

—Well you don't have to it's practically dark, doesn't your mother expect you to . . .

—Her . . . ? the sidewalk ended abruptly —no she comes in all different ow! Holy, boy I almost lost my . . .

—Different what.

—All these different times see she's like this here nurse could you wait up a second hey? My sneaker . . . he'd gone down to one knee where a pole of rust bore Doges Promenade in barely discernible letters over the rutted opening in the weeds. —Boy hey did you hear that? that thunder? □



William Gaddis, around 1970

They're about human nature and the people themselves. Thus, *A Frolic of His Own* recounts how people appeal futilely to the law to redress what it cannot possibly fix: hurt feelings, flagging self-esteem, a sense of diminished self-worth. (Gaddis trivializes none of those conditions, for genuine affection warms his most merciless satire.) *J R* observes the frenzied activity on the floor of our vast human stock market, where people buy and sell, trade, barter, and bargain their selves, talents, and abilities for money. If they acquire enough money, it will free them to pursue happiness and develop their abilities, and that will make them better people—or so the promise goes. Artists of every stripe, most of them failed, populate all of Gaddis's books, and

J R in particular. But the books are not about how good artists are crushed by evil commerce, an oft-told story, simple in its design and attractive for the clarity of its conflict, but far too simplistic for Gaddis. In a Gaddis novel, the composer speaks of stocks and net worth, while the businessman waxes eloquent about the grace and dignity of music, and each of them manages to find a way to use the other. What drew Gaddis to his failed characters, he said, was “the evidence of *their own* appetite for destruction, their frequently eager embrace of the forces to be blamed for their failure to pursue the difficult task for which their talents have equipped them.”

In 1997, a new agent sold Gaddis's on-again-off-again player piano book, and the

word went out: The published work would be nonfiction, it would still be titled *Agapē Agape*, and it would still divulge the secret history of the player piano. But, in fact, Gaddis, like Gibbs, did not write that sort of book, which is likely to have been a long, wide-ranging, scholarly treatment of the challenges technology raises for the arts and artists. *That* book exists today only in bits and pieces—in the notes and drafts Gaddis left, along with the rest of his archive, to Washington University in St. Louis, in the assorted pieces published in the new essay collection, and in the hints and suggestions of a larger work that can be gleaned from the several dense passages that Jack Gibbs reads to Edward Bast, who makes the mistake, the cardinal mistake really, of saying that Gibbs's book seems, to him, a bit, well, difficult:

. . . he slapped pages over in a heap.
—here. The music of the world is free to all.
Is that hard?

—Well no but . . .

—The Pianola is the universal means of playing the piano. Universal, because there is no one in all the world, having the use of hands and feet, who could not learn to use it that so God damned hard? Use of hands and feet . . . he got one of each on 12-38 Oz Btls Won't Burn, Smoke or Smell coming down.

The Rush for Second Place concludes with a chronology of the player piano that Gaddis assembled while working in fits and starts on the book. The chronology is the work of an avid, intellectually adventurous mind and covers the player piano's invention, development, spectacular popularity (260,000 pianos were manufactured in 1904, of which only 1,000 were player pianos; by 1919, player pianos outnumbered all other pianos made), and, with the spread of the radio, sudden irrelevance. Gaddis explored the development of automation in other industries and, like a conspiracy theorist attentive to subtle patterns and connections others miss, cross-referenced his chronology with political events, the births and deaths of notable people, and the publication of

seminal literary works. All the various extant states of *Agapē Agape*, from pithy essay to polished introduction to well-developed agent's pitch to the rough and fragmentary notes for the chronology, make clear that Gaddis's primary challenge was to devise a narrative that could accommodate his wealth of evidence (everything from Frederick Taylor's time-motion studies to the primitive robots constructed for the entertainment of nobility to Jacquard punch-card looms, early IBM computers, and so much else). He needed a way to tell the story.

After so difficult a birth, *Agapē Agape* might well have arrived stunted or blue in the face, with the signs of its long and fitful gestation all too evident. Or, worse, it might appear plainly unfinished. But that's not the case. It's not like Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*, Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, or Marguerite Young's *Harpson for a Radical*. All those works were lifetimes in the making, and the end of the lifetimes left them not completely made. But *Agapē Agape* is not a book that was finished only arbitrarily, by Gaddis's death. Which is not to say that it was completed in ease. Indeed, the pressures of life and of fighting to stay alive, pressures Gaddis shared with his narrator according to Tabbi, are apparent from the novel's opening lines:

No but you see I've got to explain all this because I don't, we don't know how much time there is left and I have to work on the, to finish this work of mine while I, why I've brought in this whole pile of books notes pages clippings and God knows what, get it all sorted and organized when I get this property divided up and the business and worries that go with it while they keep me here to be cut up and scraped and stapled and cut up again.[. . .]

What follows this opening is a loosely punctuated, single-paragraph, monologue delivered by an author recovering in bed from an operation and trying to put his financial and literary affairs in order. Before he dies, he wants—no, needs—to get

something down on paper that he's been trying in various ways to write his entire life: "that's what I have to go into before all my work is misunderstood and distorted and, and turned into a cartoon." Like Joseph Heller's *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man* (2000) and David Markson's *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), two books about writer-narrators completed under the duress of poor health by authors (and Gaddis contemporaries) determined to finish the work at hand—Heller died before his book was published; Markson is still alive—*Agapē Agape* was written by Gaddis with the understanding that it would be his last published act as an author. That crushing awareness of his own end nearing is palpable on every page. As a consequence, the writing is as deeply melancholic as it is direct. Thoughts are expressed without frills and with the utmost urgency. On more than one occasion, the narrator of *Agapē Agape* asks the reader, simply, "Can you hear me?"

The narrator proceeds associatively, and his monologue moves fluidly from idea to idea, skipping, for example, from a Leo Tolstoy quotation to remarks on the state of contemporary movies and rap music to a reference to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and, from there, to a discussion of the Pulitzer Prize, a quotation from a letter by Flaubert to George Sand, and back to the Pulitzer Prize, then on to the sad state of book reviewing at *The New York Times*, then back once more to the Pulitzer Prize. And that's in just over two pages.

The story the narrator tells is, as promised, a kind of history of mechanization and the arts. But between the allusions and quotations a smaller, more personal story unfolds, as the narrator attempts to summon enough life and sufficient health to complete the project before him. He feels his body, and, frankly, it does not feel good. His skin, he says, is like parchment, dry and brittle. Here, plainly, is "the human shambles" still following the work around. As the monologue carries the argument to some high and heated rhetorical pitches, painful and glancing references to stress and soreness, to aches and

bruising, to blood from an unknown wound spotting pages of notes, cut the argument short and interrupt its development. The narrator moves, or tries to move, mostly to shift his position, but he never leaves the room, or even the bed. The overt drama is minimal at best—a stack of books topples over; the narrator is unable to find the source, quotation, or statistic he needs in the materials with which he's surrounded himself. All the activity in the novel is mental activity, and as the narrator's thoughts speed ahead, they sometimes outstrip his ability to relate them: "I'm, no, get my breath can't get my breath," he says.

When the narrator catches his breath and feels comfortable enough to continue, when his body frees his mind to think about something other than the sorry state of his body, two key ideas animate his thoughts. The first is his frustration, and even anger, at people who want to participate in the making of culture without expending any effort, who seek, as Gaddis wrote in 1951, "the pleasures of creating without work." As if continuing the same thought more than 50 years later, he writes in *Agapē Agape*, "it's everything we've been talking about from the start," and then riffs on an advertisement from a manufacturer of player pianos:

[...] discover your unsuspected talent, you can play better by roll than many who play by hand, the biggest thrill in music is playing it yourself even untrained persons can do it, it's your participation that rouses your emotions most, those phantom hands.

Against this frustration Gaddis balances an acute despair and a belief that people who discover their talents without effort and make culture without work are capable of doing better and much more, but that they surrender, sometimes willingly and sometimes unknowingly, the parts of themselves that might do so—surrender them, for example, to technology, with its promises to do things for them—and make a thousand other compromises besides. This idea is by no means new to Gaddis. According to Tabbi, the phrase "the self

who could do more” appears in each of the novels. It originates in a poem by Michelangelo, which the narrator of *Agapē Agape* translates, “Who nearer to me Or more mighty yes, more mighty than I Tore me away from myself. Tore me away!” In his last book’s moment of blackest despair, Gaddis writes, “it’s madness it’s all madness thank God I’m not living now [. . .] yes thank God I’m not living today.” Shortly after completing *Agapē Agape*, Gaddis died, at the age of 75, of prostate cancer and the complications of emphysema.

All too frequently the books Gaddis left us are described as difficult, but like the falsely reported death of another great American writer, their difficulty is greatly exaggerated. What distinguishes his novels from most other fiction is the degree to which Gaddis asks readers to participate, collaborate, be active and involved in each book. The novels after *The Recognitions* consist almost entirely of dialogue, and narrators have gone the way of God in a philosophy class after Nietzsche: They are absent. There are few indications of who’s speaking, few descriptions of clothing, landscape, or weather, and almost no omniscient glimpses into a person’s thoughts. “He said” and “she said” are endangered species, descriptions of manner—“quietly,” “urgently,” “with a curt nod”—are extinct. So it’s true that readers need to concentrate. But Gaddis’s characters tend to use each other’s names more frequently than most writers’ characters do, and their voices are as distinctive as birds’. Through their speech they reveal their character.

Gaddis expressed deep ambivalence over the supposed difficulty of his books. When asked by an interviewer whether he wanted readers to like what he did, he replied, “Heavens yes.” In *J R* he countered Jack Gibbs’s apparent bluster about making his player piano book as difficult as he possibly could with the novelist Thomas Eigen’s clear dismay at an admirer who suggests that “you must have known when you were writing it, you must have known you were writing it for a very

small audience.” “—Small audience! His feet dropped, —do you think I would have worked on it for seven years [. . .]” Elsewhere, though, when Willie, a character in *The Recognitions* and the closest of many surrogates for Gaddis, describes the book he’s writing, his friend says, “—Good lord, Willie, you are drunk. Either that or you’re writing for a very small audience.” Ever undeterred, Willie answers, “So . . . ? how many people were there in Plato’s Republic?”

There’s no point in trying to reconcile the various views Gaddis expressed about “difficulty,” as if we might then determine what, in the end, the man behind the work really believed. Better to remark on what sets Gaddis’s writing apart: his willingness to inhabit so many points of view, his determination to keep them distinct, his sense that dialogue in a novel can represent sides of vital social arguments, and his faith that readers are more than capable of following and evaluating all the various lines of thought—capable, in other words, of doing more. It’s worth remarking, too, on what sets Gaddis’s final novel apart from his other work, at least at first glance: the absence of any dialogue. Aside from wholly fantastic conversations between two authors whom the narrator cites, *Agapē Agape* is a monologue, in the course of which the narrator poses a number of direct questions to the reader. “Can you hear me?” he asks, and later, quoting the Michelangelo poem and echoing a question that haunts many of Gaddis’s frustrated characters, “Who more mighty tore me away from myself?”

The questions hang there on the page, suspended and, for now, unanswered. But if books are conversations carried out across time and cultures, as Gaddis believed they were (with the optimism required to produce any good writing, really), then his final book, like all his previous work, poses one elegant side of a long-running discussion that will surely be continued by others, dedicated readers and writers alike, in numbers that, however small, will never allow Gaddis’s work to go unrecognized. □