

ANALYSIS

JR (1975)

William Gaddis

(1922-)

“When Gaddis returned to fiction in the 1970s, with the monumentally conceived *JR* [726 pages], his world was a thriving, writing, buzzing nightmare, a continuation of 1950s counterfeit. The key part here is the method: interrupted conversation, incomplete lines of thought, a shorthand language; language that no longer serves its traditional functions. Gaddis has tried to put gesture and expression into the written word. But it is, also, the language we feed into computers, set phrases programmed for rapidity, where out interest like only in the printout.

The walls that come tumbling down at the finale of *The Recognitions*, Gaddis’s *Gotterdammerung*, lead, fittingly enough, into an early part of *JR*, which presents a school production of *Das Rheingold*, with JR himself as the dwarfish Alberich. But Gaddis’s Wagnerian model does not lead to the death of the gods or to human love, but to another kind of god, which is business, high finance. *Das Rheingold* accommodates the prologue of this immensely long novel, since gold, *Geld*, capitalism are forms of paradise or nightmare for all who enter.

We recall Alberich’s key speech to Wotan and Loge in *Das Rheingold*, and we need only substitute JR, the school performer who becomes Alberich, Wagner’s dwarf... The content, once extracted, is familiar: the business of America is business; but Gaddis has found a form, a language as well as a focus for his view of postwar America. Many devices from *The Recognitions* remain. The withholding of vital information is crucial; for the retention of material creates a pressure on the reader. We are caught, in a guessing game, a suspense drama, a purely dramatic action. Postponement, as in drama, is the key; we push against unknowns.

That device in isolation does not convey Gaddis’s method. Along with Hawkes, Barth, Pynchon, and Barthelme, Gaddis tried to parallel or even improve upon the major moderns in creating ‘voices.’ The withholding of information recalls Faulkner, in particular *Absalom, Absalom!*, perhaps *The Sound and the Fury*. The Faulknerian presence (and behind that, the Joycean) is, in fact, everywhere—in phrasing, in interrupted speech which suggests great unspoken depths, and in broad verbal wit. Intermixed with the incomplete or withheld information is an analogous device, also familiar from Faulkner: the unidentified speaker.

The beginning of *JR* is one of the most deliberately confusing in literature... This continues for pages, with names slipped in that meaning nothing, the speakers unidentified. The reader struggles not only for identification of the speakers, or for information, but for some thread of argument which connects these discrete pieces of material. Long before recognition is forthcoming, the scene, we discover suddenly, has shifted to a school, where the main part of the plot eventually settles. Without warning, different speakers appear. Words and voices, however, seem disembodied. Location, direction, content are unclear. Compared with *JR*, *The Recognitions* is almost traditional.

The scene becomes fixed on a musical performance, *Das Rheingold*, with a shadowy schoolboy as the dwarfish Alberich, our JR. But the JR or Junior of the title rarely comes clearly into focus. He is a sixth grader, and a full-faced portrait, Gaddis realized, would be of little interest. Moving in shadows, however, he can be a giant, the mastermind of a vast corporate enterprise, something it takes us hundreds of pages to identify. In those early school scenes, we know him only as Alberich, in an opera concerned with the Gold of the Rhine. Since the opening lines were fixed on paper money—that is, stocks and shares—we begin to perceive a theme, although unassociated with any particular characters. The theme, then, rather than characters, will dominate the novel. Just as *Das Rheingold* the Gold of the Rhine will dominate the opera and the entire Ring, so money will open and close the cycles of *JR*.

This is still only a crude description of methods which could create initial difficulties. Paramount is the use of interrupted speech, in what approximates a contemporary lingo. About 75,000 words into the novel, we have our first clear indication of what is going to be significant. The unidentified JR says to Mr. Bast, the music coach: ‘...you know what I was thinking on the train hey?’... This is one of JR’s few long speeches, and it is interspersed with interrupted sentences, a printout or shorthand method. The long sequences are fluid and of a conversational ordinariness which is remarkable. Gaddis’s execution is merciless; more than satirical, the style strikes at the heart of every type of communication. Later, a radio plays because the turn-off knob cannot be reached. It catches out attention in small bursts, then fades. Our speech patterns are similar: people listen, then stop, then are caught up in their own speech, interrupt, are interrupted, and the cycle renews itself on human self-indulgence. We hear, ultimately, only our own thought patterns, which we attempt to relocate in a language that is strangled before it reaches fulfillment. Counterfeit thoughts become part of an oral tradition.

Incomplete speech is the language of money-making. The director of the school operations, Whiteback, also heads a bank; and all school business is interrupted by his telephone, which signals bank business. The educational plant, and the language interred in it, is intermixed at every level with the world of the bank. A financial scheme advanced, in fact, is to advertise in textbooks, suitable to the needs of the reader; for example, in advanced algebra or French III, deodorant tampons. Within this frame of reference, the sixth grader JR is carrying out a function, with words he can barely pronounce, no less understand: to do the work of the banks and make money. We bank while we learn.

I understand that his manuscript originally made no distinction between the spoken word and narration, and only when his publisher insisted on it did he insert dashes to indicate dialogue. Without dashes, the novel would have approximated [a] jigsaw puzzle.... Obstacles are overwhelming: Gaddis is so unbending, and, one must add, obsessive, that the reader is forgotten. If he makes the effort, however, there are scenes that are among the most hilarious in American fiction, despite this being a doom-filled vision. We can cite the Marx Brothers scenario for the Ninety-sixth Street apartment that is the financial hub, with mail pouring in, Bast trying to write music for a ‘zoo movie,’ the hippie Rhoda protesting that the scene is too far out even for her, water cascading from a broken sink and then a broken tub faucet, a radio playing something beneath the books, the books themselves identified only by ‘III GRIN-LOC,’ the floor covered with cartons of ‘24-One Pint Mazola New Improved 36 Boxes 2-Ply’ and ‘Wise Potato Chips Hoppin’ with Flavor,’ volumes of *Textile World*, *Forest Industries*, *Supervisory Management* strewn everywhere—all this as part of the financial empire JR has been building by way of telephone and mails. This is incomparable comedy, although for the reader to reach it, he must come through a verbal and narrative obstacle course.

Gaddis is, in a sense, carrying on an extended, obsessively detailed dialogue with himself; he is the programmer and he receives the printout. All voices echo, a true universe of words, a parallel phenomenon to *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The chief conduits for all information are telephones and mails. In no novel has there been so much fed into the telephone. Essentially, these are tools of obsession: placing calls, needing phone booths, making change for the call, and then gathering information without appearing. JR is a small, impersonal figure, in act only a voice (often disguised) or a signature on a printed form requesting free goods.

The idea behind the novel is remarkable: that with the telephone and mails, money can be made by any marginal operator, by a sixth grader; through a self-perpetuating system. The basis of JR’s fortune is a shipment of about one million navy forks. The goods of the world are simply recycled: the forks, originally ordered by the navy, were produced for the navy, and then dumped by the navy as detritus, only to be picked up by JR through the mails, started through the system once again, becoming the basis for further deals, all of which involve recycled materials, paper deals, penny stocks, goods which, having become unfashionable or dysfunctional, are then returned into fashion. JR is the new generation of entrepreneurs, and his fortune will result from his intuition that goods shuffling through the system become themselves the touchstones of wealth; movement, not production, is necessary. Without money or visible goods, JR is worth millions.

Gaddis stresses the depersonalization of money-making as part of the waste land in which people live and thrive. The structural equivalent of this is hundreds of thousands of words of dialogue, Gaddis's demonic way with conversational gambits: interrupted speech, run-together names and statements, broken-off phrases and barely uttered words, an oral shorthand. As in *The Recognitions*, we must pick up speakers from the situation and their words; but here the torrent of language pouring over us makes identification more difficult. In terms of language, Gaddis has tried to do for the oral American idiom what Joyce did for the written English—rediscover it as a literary voice, defamiliarize it so it seems fresh. His is the poetry, flow, and rhythm of routine speech, as much code as communication...

For scenic development, Gaddis works with a very complicated montage: not simply shifting within a scene, or shifting from brief scene to brief scene, but moving from one long segment to another without any shading in or sense of direction. This fits his sense of modern communication, as aborted phraseology, undigested bits of information, false data purveyed as fact. It conveys, as well, his detestation of contemporary drift, lack of commitment, whether work, art, or even self. It is a true response to the vapidness one felt in the postwar years, when high finance *was* good for America and the life of the mind was considered counterfeit.

Since the goal is seamless flow, there is considerable and conscious overlap of data. Gaddis's game is a form of suspense, based on completion and interruption, sudden shiftings of locale from school to bank to investment office to apartment, in a verbiage that permits no clear definition. This is a suspenseful story without crime or traditional criminals, and the reader must play along for clues. Since so much is a compulsion *not* to give, the reader desperately scrambles for what is given, like the tension we experience in crime stories. Our role is to be shaped by data.

In the deepest sense, Gaddis is concerned with crime: the crime of the decade, century, American history itself. For him, the deepest crime, whether in the counterfeiting process of the earlier novel or the financial recycling of the latter, is individual loss of recognition, actuality, perception of the realm, if that can ever be determined. It may be impossible to achieve recognition, but to forgo the possibility is to collapse and subvert the individual. A good example of a young man trying to attain perception and definition is Edward [*sic*] Bast, a composer. A serious composer in the contemporary mode, he is first seen directing and conducting a school performance of *Das Rheingold*.

Yet despite his aspirations, Bast, whose name can be 'enough' or 'bastard,' finds himself drawn into JR's financial schemes. He also becomes drawn into composing 'animal music' for a zoo movie, a scheme intermixed with financial shenanigans by a man named Crawley. Like Whiteback, who blends education with banking, Crawley moves back and forth effortlessly between financial deals and his 'zoo movie.' Bast is caught between, drawn toward finance, which he cannot comprehend, and yet intent on music, which he tries to compose amidst the clutter of the Ninety-sixth Street apartment. Music, his kind, would help define him, whereas JR's schemes and Crawley's offer suck him in. Unable to resist, he begins to float toward his own kind of doom, loss of recognition of himself and of what is outside.

One peculiarity of the novel is that the titular figure is really not a character in the book. As we suggested above, JR hovers, but is not a presence: somewhat like the Holy Ghost floating over Wyatt in *The Recognitions*. He is the catalyst for the financial empire that develops around the mail drop at Ninety-sixth Street, but the novel functions almost entirely without his appearance. We note the Joycean conceit: a Ulysses of the title who is absent from the book, and whose presence must be extrapolated from his opposite, Bloom. JR becomes, on his smaller scale, a mythical figure—only 'Hey Mister' signals he is there.

One of his very few solid presences comes late in the novel, about two-thirds through, and characteristically, JR is on the telephone. He is speaking to Bast, but not as a sixth grader or an eleven-year-old. Here he is completely the corporate manager, the financial plunger, the man who has studied the market, futures, pork bellies, and margins. He has all the lingo of finance, although parts of it confuse him. He turns to his sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Joubert, for further instruction: '...like now we already learned about the stock market and all with this here our share of America?'... JR sees millionaires wherever he looks; he is obsessed with the ideology of money and money-making, pointing to water-fountain

millionaires, light-bulb millionaires, even locker millionaires, while Mrs. Joubert tries to make him *see* the evening, the sky, the wind, the moon.

Implied in the parodying of finance is the parody of technology and science, such as we see contemporaneously in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Gaddis works at several levels, describing devices such as an electric letter opener that is a devastating weapon, a 'Steakwatcher,' which computes the time necessary for cooking steaks and chops. Science parodies itself, as it tries to develop a 'Frigicom': 'Dateline New York, Frigicom comma a process now being developed to solve the noise pollution problem...' The translation: Sounds can be frozen into a solid state.

Since all is flow, whether sound, water, conversation, a radio playing, publicity and advertising, or characters and scenes themselves, there is no order. Once caught in JR's international money schemes, the characters have no lives except what the flow determines. As a novelist who carries the 1950s into the 1970s, Gaddis is linked with Pynchon and Barthelme, writers who have constructed their universe almost entirely of words and whose basic theme is counterfeiting. To these we can add Nabokov, in *Ada*, as well as the earlier *Pale Fire*. Behind them is Borges and parallel is Barth. For all, their verbal constructs are not solely connected to a more experimental phase in the arts—although that may be present—but to a distinct reaction to political and social themes. That stress on verbal constructs is not withdrawal from statement, but statement itself. Fiction has become an intensification of a verbal universe. Gaddis and Pynchon, in particular, do not use language to enter an interior world where all is self, narcissism, or indulgence; but as a way of exploring the outer reaches of language where it blurs into disorder. Their verbal construct is not a hiding behind words as a shield, but the forcing of words outward, where language and things merge into each other.

This distinction is quite important, for it separates Gaddis and Pynchon as wordsmen from Barthelme and Nabokov. The latter two are following in the Joycean tradition of internalizing experience, shunning the external, and locating activity by way of voices that point inward. Barthelme does this and, at the same time, disbelieves in it; whereas Nabokov pursues it for the sheer exuberance of his own versatility, especially in the fruitcake-like *Ada*, all performance. Gaddis and Pynchon are social and political novelists, quite concerned with external worlds, whether America as itself a corporate empire, in *JR*, or as part of a multinational cartel, as in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Their barrages of words, like Pynchon's rockets, are centrifugal, not centripetal, forces. The impersonality of *JR* results from Gaddis's construction of a huge 'outer world' with an existence of its own; in that world, which spans two decades, we find an entire value system, not a retreat from it. Similarly, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, we discover that language works to thrust us into energy and movement, toward a confrontation not with enervation but with infinitude.

For both Gaddis and Pynchon, the corporate empire embodies tremendous energy. Once created, it takes on a vitality and vibrancy that is cataclysmic. The key image is Pynchon's *thrust* and *thrusting*, sexual as well as financial, athletic as well as martial; the method is based on movement. Both may parody finance, capitalism, the corporation, but they see in that a form of existence which gives real meaning to individual lives. While it may, in its multiplicity and energies, bury the individual, it also engages him. Edward Bast may reject the financial dealings of JR, but he comes alive in that chaotic, nightmarish Ninety-sixth Street apartment. And JR, that schoolboy, grows into an energetic, resourceful giant once he attaches himself to high finance.

Barthelme and Nabokov, to whom we could add Barth, are exuberant wordmen of exhaustion and enervation; they play not only with the death of the novel but with the death of feeling itself by constructing verbal analogies to the state of dying. Nabokov's work is almost always the end of something; and Barthelme has worked a similar vein: the death of the fairy tale in *Snow White*, the death of the father and an age of paternalism, the death of communication at social functions, the death of writing and painting, the death of verbal communication itself.

Gaddis and Pynchon, however, limn the contours of energy, even when their goals are satire and parody. *The Recognitions*, a more formal work than *JR*, is roughly equivalent in Gaddis's career to *V.* in Pynchon's, published eight years later. In both novels, the expression of the 1950s and early 1960s created a certain amount of exhaustion—the feeling of 'the end of.' Their novels of the 1970s are a different matter,

however, a recovery from the malaise, an exuberance which may be a partial extension of the previous decade, and a direction for the American novel so outside the realist-naturalist tradition that the critic can point to a revitalized fiction.

We have, fortunately, I believe, entered another modernist phase [Postmodernism]. This phase did not begin in the 1960s, but in long novels which, in Gaddis's case, reach back to the late 1940s, continue into the 1950s for their ideological base and textures, pick up again in the 1960s, with the gestation of *JR*, and continue into the early 1970s, when the novel was completed. For almost a thirty-year period, Gaddis had been developing two works displaying an American form of modernism [Postmodernism]. *JR*, in particular, has affinities to the other major developments in the arts. The electronic sounds of new music, for example, lead directly into the telephonic nature of the novel. The reliance there on sounds alone, in new sequences, or in seemingly random patterns, finds its parallel in the nature of media communication, a polyphony of voices that explodes into different and contrasting levels of meaning. The loss of melodic line in modern serial music finds still another parallel in the interrupted speech patterns of *JR*.

In art, in particular, the laid-on paint we associate with Jackson Pollock, or the stress on linear arrangement and field of vision of the action painters, can be found in both *The Recognitions* and *JR*, although more recognizably in the latter. Pop art, whose development paralleled the gestation and writing of *JR* (itself a pop title), informs the novel at every turn, with the apartment on Ninety-sixth Street a repository of the junk objects that inform pop culture.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 186-91

“*JR* is also encyclopedic in scope, and, like *The Recognitions*, it details Gaddis' abiding awareness of cosmic meaninglessness. Its concrete details treat the corruption of contemporary, moneyed society, with its wasted human relationships and aborted creative energy. The novel lacks traditional form: There is little description, characterization, or narrative; the book consists of unfinished sentences with minimal punctuation; there are not even chapter divisions. Although the novel contains fewer characters and locales than does *The Recognitions*, it is extremely difficult to read. Gaddis tries to mirror in his writing the distortions of language and the decay of communication in a dying modern world.

After a great effort, the reader can discern that *JR*'s extremely minimal plot deals with an eleven-year-old delinquent, JR, an outcast from his family and society, who is a sixth-grade student at a Long Island school. A representative of the ugly wheeler-dealer society, JR brilliantly builds an enormous, corrupt paper empire that touches the political, cultural, and social power bases of the contemporary American scene. Into JR's life comes Edward Bast, a onetime composer and teacher. Bast becomes JR's agent. At the end, JR gains an understanding of love and personal values, and Bast returns to the world of art.”

Lois Gordon
Cyclopedia of World Authors II
ed. Frank N. Magill
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Michael Hollister (2015)