Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon

https://www.pynchon.net
ISSN: 2044-4095

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Title: Review of Crystal Alberts, Christopher Leise, and Birger Vanwesenbeeck (eds), *The Last of Something: Critical Essays*
Date: 2012
Volume: 1
Issue: 1
URL: https://www.pynchon.net/owap/article/view/36
DOI: 10.7766/orbit.v1.1.36

Abstract:

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Matthias Mösch

Gaddis's work, to paraphrase Christine Brooke-Rose, stretches our intellectual, spiritual and imaginative horizons to breaking point. No wonder, then, that the pendulum of criticism swung from early hatchet jobs to hagiographic endeavours and back to the Jonathan Franzen tirade, that misrecognition of the fact that *prodesse*, *delectare* and *movere* can indeed coincide in fiction that refuses to infantilize its readers. While in the shadow of these debates emerged a corpus of more specialized criticism, it was Tabbi and Shaver's 2007 *Paper Empire* that broke with the tradition of narrow views. *The Last of Something*, edited by a new generation of Gaddis critics, follows their ethos of engaging with one of the first American postmodern writers as an example of innovative literature in transatlantic contexts but adds a crucial dimension by also scrutinizing the traditional aspects of his work. "The arch never sleeps," a saying cherished and used by Gaddis, thereby becomes the guiding metaphor for a collection of eleven essays that exceed the thematic arch-suspects associated with novels such as *The Recognitions* or *J R*, while felicitously excavating the vast range of literary and intellectual cross-currents gestating in 'Mr Difficult's' fiction and criticism.

Co-editor and Gaddis archives expert Crystal Alberts opens the collection by tracing coordinates of the author's life, thoughts and work. In a refreshingly factual tone, her essay surveys the symbolic space in his debut novel, discussing key factors contributing to Gaddis's image of Europe, in particular his fascination with Spain's Catholic glamour and veneration of the past. Rather than short-sightedly finding at work a *laudatio temporis acti*, at worst of an alleged pre-protestant arcadia, however, she soberly illuminates concrete places and events of his anti-Baedeker world in their full, often tongue-in-cheek significance. Without resorting to great gestures, her meticulously documented work is thereby authoritative in terms of testimony but also makes the important point that creative imagination committed to indeterminacy, aporia and paradox can indeed converge with historical horizons.

No critic is perhaps more suited to deliver a scrutiny of Gaddis's rhetoric of futile rage than William H. Gass, who once had to take over when Gaddis explained at a public reading why reading in public makes no sense and then fell silent. "The Kvetch, the Rant, and the Bitch," in itself a rhetorical feast, is both an acute reading of *Carpenter's Gothic* and an apology for the state of being "aghast at the length the human race

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will go to prove its incompetence" (27). Ingeniously comparing Gaddis's compendia of "imbecilities" (30) with the spirit of Erasmus, Rabelais, and Viennese critic Karl Kraus, not sparing a hearty dig at "religious lingo" (29), self-righteous know-it-alls, and "much fearful stupid stubbornness" (32), Gass shares with the last novel his friend published in his lifetime the question 'why the bother?' Yet even if vanity threatens to become the *ultima ratio* – "Death indeed is our destination and true god. Not money. Not duncery. Not even a saving membership in some rigmarole society. So what's the point of ranting and raving?" (32) – he lets us infer why taking pleasure in bickering and steaming invectives may be preferable to "a sadness too sad for rant" (34).

"I'm not reader-friendly," Gaddis admitted on receiving the NBA for *A Frolic of His Own*. In "The Power of Babel," Christopher Leise expounds on this thought, discussing the place of art and the use of ambiguity in Gaddis's novels. Leise demonstrates how the author invites us to rethink America's reliance on the dollar as a yardstick that tends to "reduce all meaning to a pragmaticist's cash value" (36). His underlying synthesis of semiotics and systems theory is convincing, excellently illustrated, and lucid. Gaddis, he argues, opens "various discourses to their environments" (37) and thereby prevents an entropic decline of language into homogeneity. The author's use of aporia, on the other hand, erodes absolute values by asking questions to which there are no firm answers. And this is where paintings and Greek parlour games meet: the enforcement of contradictory discourses, the inability to win, and the equal impossibility of losing. Another of Gaddis's takes on the dull logic of capitalism is discussed by Tim Conley. Correlating the immoral growth of the financial wunderkind and eponymous protagonist JR with that of Rousseau's *Emile*, he shifts the focus away from the American tradition of tricksters and opens the space for more a thematically oriented analysis, showing why the world of *J R* is all work but no play. Related to both is the collection's coda by Stephen J. Burn, who returns to the topic of information ecology he discussed in the Tabbi and Shavers collection. A short, yet very clear contribution, Burn's essay locates Franzen's indictment of literary 'snobbism' (as contrasted to a pseudo-Rousseauean compact) in the context of epistemological challenges in a postmodern world, while presenting Richard Powers and David Foster Wallace as two more recent representatives of the debatable and still debated rubric encyclopaedic writer.

Christopher J. Knight seamlessly continues Leise's observations on style with a masterly piece on Gaddis's modern version of hell-fired writing. "Trying to Make Negative Things Do the Work of Positive Ones" eruditely presents a genealogy of authors committed to obscurantism and insidious satire in the service of good. Far from presenting Gaddis as a crypto-Catholic (because anti-Protestant) successor of T. S. Eliot and Evelyn Waugh, however, Knight carefully traces the specifics of his use of indirection and apophaticism, that is, negative theology. The only concern one might have is that in comparison the equally strong presence of Nietzsche and Hans Vaihinger's

philosophy of 'as if' in Gaddis falls a little short. However, this long necessary work on the power of negativity is exemplary in every respect, especially read in conjunction with John Soutter's inquiry into the willful suspension of disbeliefat the basis of *The Recognitions* and *Carpenter's Gothic*. Explicating the author's "deceitful and coercive priestcraft" (125), his charges against Pauline Law and its political economy of salvation, this gem in the collection acutely fathoms the distinctions between theological dogma and moral action.

Theory-rich, yet an exercise in modesty, Joseph Conway's "Failing Criticism" sets new directions for Gaddis scholarship. Conway contests the tradition of single-minded readings and makes a plea for not mistaking "the position of critical partiality for the fullness of interpretative totality" (70). The following substantiation is complex yet convincing: after exposing the flaws of works that tried to reinvent *The Recognitions* as a Freudian (Wolfe), Jungian (Moore) or Bakhtinian (Johnston) fairground, Conway turns to a solid analysis of Gaddis's symbolism and refusal of communicative transparency. With Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* in mind, he finds in Gaddis an "an aesthetic of waste" (77), which he couples with Erwin Panofsky's work on perspective in painting (see also Knight's monograph), and concludes that on account of the novel's excess of detail and allusion as well as its provision of multiple interpretative alleyways an "exhaustive reading is neither possible nor desirable" (85). Refusing to read into the novel a poetics of pure simulacra or indeterminacy on the other hand, he comes full circle with a Benjaminian trope. Despite, or rather through fragmentation, Gaddis, he claims, "open[s] the chance that some transcendental presence (God, history, an ideal reader?) might rescue the referential frame from incoherence" (81). Even though such a messianic angle runs the anger of amounting to some grand-unifying-meta-single-mindedness (where Heidegger's *Lichtung* or Agamben's "destruction of aesthetics" might prove an equally fertile ground), Conway's documentation of changing critical fashions is a remedy for scholarly hubris and naivety alike.

Birger Vanwesenbeeck's is one of the few examinations of Gaddis's *alpha et omega*, the relation between Christianity, the democratisation of art, and intersubjectivity. This refreshing essay closes a gap in terms of more sketchy criticism of Gaddis's posthumously published *Agapē Agape* and is a thorough investigation into what it means to attempt to write the Last Christian Novel. Continuing his successful mix of philosophy, history of ideas, and textual analysis that marks also his 2009 *Mosaic* essay, Vanwesenbeeck does full justice to Gaddis's appropriation of Christian concepts and the author's mourning of the loss of artistic community spirit in modern society. Less inspired is Lisa Siraganian's argument that the protagonist of *The Recognitions* performs with his forgeries of Flemish masterpieces "a cultural critique of modern painting" (112). She substantiates her justified point that the novel is "a thorough aesthetic critique, grounded in mid-century art debates" (114) by providing a solid

overview of trends in the art world at Gaddis's time (108-9). Especially her discussion of the role of the spectator adds to the existing body of criticism, yet I would have wished for a slightly more differentiated view. Gaddis's treatment of epistemology in relation to power is given far less attention than his indictment of the cultural marketplace, which is a missed opportunity, especially since the latter has been treated by Salemi, Johnson, Knight, Heffernan, and Vanwesenbeeck. Equally, an inclusion of more theoretical material might have aided in unearthing the contradictions in such disciplined nostalgia and that Gaddis's criticism, despite his distaste for Abstract Expressionism, is not directed against modern art or spectators as such (104) but at principles of co-optation and the impossibility of a Great Refusal. As acutely as she observes how Gaddis's forger instantiates a "cultural memory" (113) of both painting as a discipline and form of critique, thereby paradoxically becoming an "avant-garde artist hero" (114), the collapse of his aesthetics (especially in relation to Huizinga, Adorno, and Paul Mann) is not discussed.

The Last of Something is rounded off with some excellent observations on ideological dehumanization in *Carpenter's Gothic*. Examining Gaddis's most popular novel through a postcolonial lens, Matthieu Duplay identifies here the hitherto less discussed spirit of colonialism. In this lucid piece, he analyzes scientific, linguistic, and epistemological strategies devised in order to present Africa as a "biopolitical 'other' whose supposed inability to rise above the dictates of mere survival" (148) justifies more than just the smugness of fishy missionaries. Drawing from Agamben's theory of sovereignty, Duplay demonstrates how biblical literalism in Gaddis's satire allows for the creation of the linguistic equivalent of a state of exception and a social rift, a performative act of dehumanization the centre of which Gaddis portrays as unstable as Agamben the arch of power. While the political observations are comprehensive and conclusive, the discussion of language and agency deserves to be elucidated a little further, especially since formulations such as "language, which mysteriously breaks loose and becomes an autonomous entity" (152) evoke mysticism in an otherwise earthbound contribution.

Overall, this collection is a substantial contribution, to the still growing corpus of work on Gaddis but also to a field dedicated to challenging fiction. As such it is also highly recommendable for Pynchon scholars, not only because of its treatment of "the three American truths," to nick a phrase from *Gravity's Rainbow*, but also because of its focus on various intellectual traditions. Elucidations of Gaddis's indebtedness to Nietzsche and Vaihinger, for instance, his formative experience of reading Spengler and Wiener, his affinity to Hawthorne, his complex relationship to Eliot's poetry, or his closeness to the irony of Kraus and Thomas Mann will help to re-evaluate the relationship between the two authors. Further criticism on Pynchon's religious and political vision could equally gain impulses from a perusal of Alberts, Vanwesenbeeck, and Knight, while

Simon de Bourcier's observations of Vaihinger in the context of Pynchon might fruitfully be set in dialogue with Soutter's work.

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