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Abstract:

Although ostensibly a review of *The Letters of William Gaddis* edited by Steven Moore (Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2013), this article evaluates Moore's volume in light of generally accepted practices of scholarly editions and the handling of historical documents. In particular, Alberts compares some of Moore's edited letters to the originals housed either at Washington University in St. Louis or the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin and reveals issues involving the representation of the archival material, inconsistencies in editorial principles, and a misattributed letter, among other things.

William Gaddis's Immortality: Celebration, Cartoon, or Corruption?

Crystal Alberts

On his deathbed, the unnamed narrator of William Gaddis's *Agapē Agape* (2002) rails against what has become of contemporary culture. A writer himself, he laments how people, American readers in particular, have become a "whole stupefied mob out there waiting to be entertained," who shun difficult works and seek out immediate gratification. He attempts to get "this whole pile of books notes pages clippings and God knows what [...] sorted and organized" and "to finish this work of [his]" before it is "misunderstood and distorted and [...] turned into a cartoon" (*Agapē* 1-2). Yet, while he has nothing but disdain for the mediocre and the masses, he also fears that he will be "left on the shelf" forgotten after he dies, if he hasn't already been forgotten (48).

Undoubtedly, Gaddis would have loathed an autobiographical reading of these passages, but it seems appropriate. Gaddis also had what might be called a love/hate relationship with his readers, specifically with his critics, but he too wished to be remembered for the artist that he was. He also continued to arrange his literary papers so that his work and life wouldn't be misunderstood and distorted, although as he told his friend William H. Gass, he oscillated between dedicatedly working on his archive and wanting to destroy the whole thing.¹ Fortunately, since his death in 1998, Gaddis, the influential late twentieth-century author of five novels, including the National Book Award winning *JR* (1975) and *A Frolic of His Own* (1994), has not been forgotten. Generally speaking, more has been published by and on Gaddis in the last ten years or so than at any point during his life, including not only *Agapē Agape*, but also *The Rush for Second Place* (2002) (comprised of some of Gaddis's non-fiction), as well as two edited collections of criticism: *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System* (Eds. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers, U of Alabama P, 2007) and *William Gaddis "The Last of Something"* (Eds. Crystal Alberts, Christopher Leise, and Birger Vanwesenbeeck, McFarland, 2010).² This past year, 2012, has seen

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reprints of both *The Recognitions* (1955) and *JR* by Dalkey Archive Press, the latter of which inspired Lee Konstantinou to lead "Occupy Gaddis," a collective online reading of *JR* through the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, which in turn resulted in a whole new audience discovering the joys of Gaddis's texts.

However, the ongoing enthusiasm about Gaddis isn't confined to his work. Joseph Tabbi is currently writing an extended biography of Gaddis that is scheduled to be published sometime in the near future. And then there is *The Letters of William Gaddis* edited by Steven Moore, where readers, or more specifically Gaddis critics, are finally able to get their first real peek into the Gaddis archive and perhaps the artist himself. As such, careful consideration should be paid to how the volume itself was "sorted and organized" to see whether there has been distortion and to decide whether or not it should be left on the shelf.

One-time managing editor of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Moore is well known as a critic of contemporary American literature and an early champion of Gaddis; Moore counts among his many publications *A Reader's Guide to The Recognitions* (1982), *William Gaddis* (1989), and the co-edited collection *In Recognition of William Gaddis* (1984). Beginning in the 1980s, Moore worked to gather the correspondence of William Gaddis; as such, this collection is, as Moore notes, the fulfillment of "a dream [he has] had for the last thirty years" (*Letters* 12). In his introduction, Moore reveals that his early attempts to collect Gaddis's letters and publish them led Gaddis to assert that "'it's an entire area I've never condoned'" and, as Gaddis said to someone else, "'no one's [letters] are written for publication (unless they are in which case they're probably full of lies)'" (8). But, Moore declares that "they do offer glimpses of the 'real' Gaddis, and [...] they foster a deeper appreciation of the writer and his work" (8). In terms of how the letters were selected for publication, Moore explains that he

favored those in which [Gaddis] discusses his writing, his reading, his views on literature (and related fields like criticism, publishing, and book reviewing), along with a few concerned letters to politicians and enough personal matter to give the volume continuity and to allow it to function as a kind of autobiography in letters. (11)

True to the archive, Moore does include a large portion of the correspondence between Gaddis and his mother Edith, while Gaddis was at Harvard and traveled the U.S., Central America, as well as Europe, including the period in which he wrote/published *The Recognitions* (1941-1955). While this section

takes up a solid third of the volume (again, the archive preserved more correspondence from Gaddis during this period than any other), Moore also presents a reasonably comprehensive overview of the remaining forty-three years of Gaddis's life. As such, Moore concludes his introduction by asserting: "William Gaddis may not have approved of this book, but I can't imagine anyone interested in modern American literature agreeing with him" (11). It is important for the William Gaddis letters to be published, thereby making portions of the Gaddis archive more accessible and providing invaluable information to readers of Gaddis, as well as twentieth-century American literature generally. But, because literary critics will be the most frequent users of *The Letters of William Gaddis* as a resource, it should be evaluated as a "scholarly edition." And, when this collection is considered in light of the generally accepted practices of the field, a number of flaws are revealed. Specifically, inaccurate representations of the archival material, inconsistent application of editorial principles, and the inappropriateness of the critical apparatus call into question its reliability as a scholarly source and thus make Moore's Gaddis less "real."

As one might expect, Moore outlines his editorial principles near the end of the introduction; in particular, he notes that the collection represents "less than a quarter of his extant correspondence" (11). He asserts that "Gaddis's letters are transcribed virtually verbatim," except when Moore has regularized titles and punctuation or included deleted words "where interesting" (11, 12). In addition, he explains, "Some abridgments of mundane matters have been made - and they are merely mundane matters, no shocking secrets or libelous insults [...] Some postscripts and marginalia have also been omitted" (12). However, one wonders exactly how Moore defines "mundane" and "interesting" or how Moore's edits impact the larger context. G. Thomas Tanselle, one of the foremost authorities on scholarly editing and bibliographical studies, asserts that

a scholarly edition of letters or journals should not contain a text which has editorially been corrected, made consistent, or otherwise smoothed out. Errors and inconsistencies are part of the total texture of the document and are part of the evidence which the document preserves relating to the writer's habits, temperament, and mood. (48)

In spite of Tanselle's declaration, it is common practice to regularize "accidentals," as long as it is clear what those "accidentals" are. In the case of Moore, these corrections do include "obvious misstrokes and insignificant misspellings" and standardizing some punctuation (11). However, Moore's

decision to omit the Gaddis's return street address after its first appearance is an unusual choice that will undoubtedly cause confusion in the future. In addition, for Tanselle, not indicating all of the author's deletions in text with brackets "is indefensible, since they are essential characteristics of private documents" (50). Yet, Moore only incorporates deletions when he finds them "interesting" (12) and the emendations are silent. The same can be said for the representation of paragraphs, "some of which [Moore has] run together" (12), again, without an editorial note. That said, although Moore assures his readers that "**all irregularities are in the originals**" and explains that he has "boldfaced that to catch the eye of readers and reviewers and preempt complaints that this book was poorly proofread" (11), there are irregularities that aren't in the originals. With a collection this long, there are bound to be errors in transcription no matter how careful the editor is, but one would have hoped that they would have been confined to the occasional, overlooked punctuation mark, rather than mistaken dates, misspelled names, or seemingly rearranged sentences.

I discovered these issues when I took copies of the correspondence that I have from the William Gaddis Papers from Washington University in St. Louis (WashU), as well as from William Gaddis to John and Pauline Napper³ housed by the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas, Austin and compared them against the published letters found in Moore's collection. In terms of mistaken dates, Moore incorporates a number of letters from Gaddis to his mother Edith while Gaddis worked in St. Louis, Missouri, including one dated April 20, 1942 and another April 21, 1942. However, the originals in the William Gaddis Papers at WashU show that the correct dates for these letters (based on the postmarked envelope, as Gaddis didn't date them) are April 21, 1942 and April 23, 1942, respectively. For those who want to track Gaddis's day-to-day life in St. Louis, these erroneous dates will upset their timeline. But, more than that, these errors call into question the reliability of dating throughout the collection.

A letter from William Gaddis to the Nappers dated January 27, 1951 illustrates a number of the other issues listed above. For example, the original reads "(there is yet faith But the faith and love and hope are all in the waiting." However, the published version appears as: "(But there is yet faith But the faith and love and hope are all in the waiting." (184). The initial "But" was deleted by Gaddis; however, Moore does not indicate the change even though it is substantive.⁴ In addition, as Moore notes, Gaddis was somewhat inconsistent in terms of how he indicated paragraphs; in this letter, a hanging indent and/or a white space in between lines most often indicates

a paragraph break. But, again, this would be an instance where Moore has silently “run together” some of them, as there are instances in the published letter where paragraph breaks (and punctuation) do not match up with the original. As a case in point, the archival version reads:

Oh yes and unalive, also. And again “ .
Well.

While the published letter reads:

Oh yes and unalive, also. And again “ Well. (*Letters* 184)

This letter also mistakes “Isabella” for “Isabelle” (185) and supplies an example of a silently rearranged sentence (along with incorrect punctuation). Specifically, the original appears as:

Uno y uno, dos/ Dos y dos son tres..No sale la cuenta porque falta un
(that word is gypsy, I can't spell it;) chulumbes

The published version states:

Uno y uno, dos/ Dos y dos son tres...No sale la cuneta porque falta
un chulumbes (that word is gypsy, I can't spell it;) (185)

These changes may seem slight; however, by silently emending deletions, incorrectly transcribing names, adjusting paragraph breaks, and modifying sentence structure, Moore varies the text in a way that also alters Gaddis's thought process and emphasis, although they are apparent in the archival material. And while this particular piece of correspondence exemplifies a number of the errors in this collection, they can also be found elsewhere, again suggesting the unreliability of the volume as a whole.

In addition to the aforementioned glitches, there is also the issue of at least one misattributed letter. A mistake of this sort is problematic in and of itself, but is compounded by the fact that the collection asserts that the letter dated March 13, 1994 is to John Updike, which will likely gain the attention of literary scholars of Gaddis, Updike, and twentieth-century literature more broadly and be used as evidence to support a closer relationship between the authors. In fact, the letter is not to John Updike, but rather to Reverend John Snow, a friend of Gaddis's from Harvard, who was a faculty member at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.⁵ As Moore notes, like Gaddis, John Updike also attended Harvard (class of '54) and worked on the *Harvard Lampoon* (501). And, as a result of the Harvard connection, there has been much speculation about how well they knew one another. Although the attendance dates suggest otherwise (Gaddis was there from

1941-1945), Gaddis revealed in a 1994 interview, "I was still there when John Updike arrived. We were both involved in *The Lampoon*. He was always one of those clever guys. I was more quiet, more brooding, a romantic, less of a wit" (Battersby 9). By attributing this letter to Updike, Moore strengthens the connection between Updike and Gaddis, and the letter has already been used as critical evidence by Len Gutkin of the *Los Angeles Review of Books* to comment at length on the how the "fascinating 1994 letter to Updike" "can shed some light on [David Foster] Wallace's critique of the GMN's [Great Male Narcissists'] narcissism." But, the truth seems to be that Gaddis and Updike did not interact much, if at all, at Harvard, and they had limited interaction thereafter. The correspondence demonstrates this infrequent communication: the detailed inventory of the William Gaddis Papers at WashU lists only three letters from Updike to Gaddis, while the published collection only contains one letter from Gaddis to Updike from 1996, the contents of which are confined to a complaint about the state of Harvard. Moreover, in letters to others, Gaddis's tone suggests that he didn't think highly of Updike, describing the publication of Updike's *Harvard Lampoon* writings to Moore as "sheer gimmickry" (*Letters* 411). Consequently, to think that Gaddis, who revealed personal information only to a select few, would call Updike "Reverend John," reminisce about old Harvard friends, and disclose that he has "had the body's plumbing & electrical functions refurbished" is erroneous and will cause misunderstandings across the board for those studying Updike, Gaddis, or other potential GMNs (502). This also suggests that Moore was so focused on outgoing letters that he failed to look for the corresponding incoming letter to which Gaddis alludes. If Moore had done so, he would have confirmed John Snow as the intended recipient, as Snow's letter updates Gaddis on the lives of Dottie Mowery, Barney Emmart, Jake Bean, and "Wild Bill Davidson."⁶

With all of these issues in mind, the assertion that "mundane matters" have occasionally been omitted, along with the insistence that they are in fact "mundane," should be explored. I will provide just a couple of examples of what didn't (or maybe "did" is the right word) make the cut, again using the Gaddis/Napper correspondence for comparison. Moore includes approximately thirty-six letters between Gaddis and the Nappers, which isn't the whole series of correspondence, and while some of the letters relate to Gaddis's writing, they likely weren't included due to space constraints. But, of those that are, paragraphs or pages have occasionally been deemed "mundane." Just to give one example, in a letter dated April 10, 1978, Moore omits part of the second paragraph where Gaddis explains how he is managing one thing at a time, among the items on that list are "get[ting] out

of debt and get[ting] [his] health together." Moore excludes the entire third paragraph, including a discussion of Jack Gold, who at one time wanted to make a film version of *JR*. Moore also leaves out all of the final paragraph of this two-page, single-spaced, typed letter, where Gaddis asks a number of questions about how the Nappers are doing and thanks them for what they have done for his daughter Sarah, after his self-described "self-centered harangue." Thus, by excluding this paragraph, Moore hides the fact that Gaddis cared for his friends and was grateful to them for a number of things, an omission that might lead others to think that Gaddis was, as Justin Taylor phrased it in his *New York Observer* review of *The Letters of William Gaddis*, a "self-involved pain in the ass."

Leaving the exclusion of "mundane matters" aside, the critical apparatus in this collection suggests that the editor is more important than the author. In his editorial principles, Moore notes that his "own relationship with Mr. Gaddis and some of his friends, as well as other critics of his work, necessitated more prevalent use of the first person in the annotations than is usually found in collections such as this, which some readers may find intrusive and self-serving" (*Letters* 12). Here, again, there is cause for concern. For example, Gaddis sent a letter to Moore dated August 2, 1987, responding to Moore's request to vet a chapter from Moore's *William Gaddis*, which included a partial biography. Gaddis writes "p14 your interesting emphasis on Firbank; Henry Green yes but *not* CPSnow, the most wooden fiction I've ever encountered" to which Moore responds in a footnote "I was listing British writers whom WG had *read*, not necessarily those who influenced him" (438-439). Gaddis continues "p18 why limit Shakespear to those 2 (& 'perhaps' even *Lear!*)? Most of Shakespear certainly, favourite still *As You Like It*," to which Moore comments "as a result of his 'quick scanning' WG misread this paragraph: I was not listing all the Shakespeare plays he had read, but arguing that his work belongs to the same tradition of vitriolic satire that included (among Shakespeare's works) *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens*, and perhaps *King Lear*" (438-439). In both of these examples, rather than providing objective notes explicating allusions, say, for example, explaining that Firbank refers to Ronald Firbank, turn-of-the-century British author of *Five Novels*, or that Henry Green was the British author who wrote *Concluding*, and that both of those works appear in the William Gaddis Working Library,⁷ Moore, instead, seems more interested in justifying his own earlier work and nearly arguing with Gaddis, pointing out how Gaddis misread him.

Something similar happens in the unsent letter to Moore dated July 18, 1998, which responds to Moore's "Sheri Martinelli—A Remembrance." Gaddis discusses the other "stars" mentioned by Moore, whom he hopes are

more accurately portrayed here than myself "quite smitten with her" (p99) certainly but that she "didn't reciprocate (my) interest regarding (me) as something of a "mama's boy" hardly bares [sic] dignifying especially as backed by similarly invidious "literally" since "my father left (my mother) when I was 3." He did not leave her. They separated. (527, missing quotation mark in original)

Moore offers what is probably best described as a defense in his headnote to this letter, where he asserts that the article "was based on information supplied by [Gaddis's] old Greenwich Village friends Vincent Livelli, Chandler Brossard, and Sheri herself (whom I knew for the last dozen years of her life before her death in 1996; she supplied the 'mama's boy' remark)" (527). But, Gaddis reveals that he has come to expect these sorts of issues when it comes to Moore, when he wonders: "is this plain carelessness as elsewhere (trusting you see the difference)" (527).

All of which reminds one, for better or worse, of the unnamed narrator in *Agapē*, who rails against Nietzsche's sister and her choices with her brother's archive: "she seizes the rights to all her stupefied brother's work published and unpublished [...] and comes out with a completely corrupted pasted together jumble called *The Will to Power* as his final work" (78). As the narrator continues, it "wasn't that she betrayed the man, the artist, sold him out no that's to be expected, he's expendable, just the vehicle or the husk of it for the work that's what she betrayed, that's our immortality and that's what she corrupted" (*Agapē* 77). Now, this collection of letters isn't completely analogous to *The Will to Power*. But it also isn't an accurate representation of the "real" Gaddis that Moore suggests in his introduction, because it has been pasted together in ways that are problematic. In particular, given that there is only one extant copy of the correspondence, generally accepted practices of archival transcription and scholarly editions would suggest that a facsimile copy be provided or, failing that, then the text created by the editor should follow his stated principles consistently throughout with clear documentation of alterations. However, this is not the case with *The Letters of William Gaddis* and, consequently, it does not accurately or reliably represent Gaddis, his work, or the contents of his archive.

That said, in the first sentence of his introduction, Moore ponders "whether or not Gaddis would have approved of this book" (7). While alive, there were a

number of mistakes in published texts about or by Gaddis, and Gaddis fought to set the record straight, whether the blunder involved his supposedly being influenced by James Joyce's work or the errata in early, published versions of *The Recognitions*, which he declared "glaring horrors" (*Letters* 395). As a result, Gaddis would likely see this volume as a corruption of his immortality, not only because his work has been altered, but also because there are moments when it isn't even the author in the place of his work, but rather the critic in the place of the author.

End notes

1. Interview with William H. Gass. 12 May 2005.
2. A review of this text by Matthias Mösch is available in *Orbit*. 1.1 (2012) at <http://dx.doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v1.1.36>.
3. John and Pauline Napper were close friends of Gaddis from the 1950s through the 1990s, meaning that Gaddis not only discussed his work with the Nappers, but also his personal life, which was a very rare thing.
4. This letter also provides an example of a silently emended address as the original reads:

Saturday, 27 January 1951
c/ San Roque, 15
Sevilla, Spain

While the published version reads simply:

Sevilla, Spain
Saturday, 27 January 1951 (*Letters* 183)

5. See John Snow to William Gaddis 11 February 1994, William Gaddis Papers, Washington University in St. Louis.
6. *Ibid.*
7. When the William Gaddis Papers arrived at Washington University in St. Louis, three pallets of books owned by Gaddis accompanied the manuscripts. When completing the initial inventory, the aforementioned works by Firbank and Green were present (<http://web.archive.org/web/20050302101313/http://library.wustl.edu/units/spec/manuscripts/mlc/gaddis/gaddislibrary20040716.html>). Gaddis's Working Library has subsequently been catalogued and are part of WashU's Rare Books Collection (<http://library.wustl.edu/units/spec/rarebooks/>).

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