

## Chapter Five

# J R: Empedocles on Valhalla

*The Recognitions* draws extensively, even ostentatiously, on world literature and myth to provide structural analogues and colorful parallels to Wyatt's progress and to give historical resonance to his struggles. *J R* uses a comparatively smaller yet equally significant set of literary allusions, deployed more sparingly and more realistically. While the bulk of the allusions in the first novel are to works of personal crises, largely concerning the salvation of the soul, those in the second novel are to works of cultural crises, concerned with the salvation of a society. They fall into three general categories: first and most important is Richard Wagner's operatic tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*, an epic response to the growing mechanistic materialism of the mid-nineteenth century that dramatizes the disastrous results of "loveless egoism and the desire for power and gold."<sup>1</sup> This sense of cultural crisis, shared by Wagner's contemporaries Carlyle, Marx, and Thoreau—to name only those mentioned in *J R*—also animates the works by those in Gaddis's second provenance of literary allusion, a set of Victorian writers consisting of Tennyson, Kipling, Wilde, and Conrad. A third matrix of allusions is drawn from the classical world: Empedocles' cosmology, the darker elements of Greek myth (Typhon, Erebus, Charon, the Erinyes), and Philoctetes, who emerges as the model for Gaddis's artist-hero. These allusions are small voices crying in the wilderness of *J R*'s financial discourse and consequently can easily go unheard during a first reading. But like Gibbs's *Agapē Agape* they provide important cultural and historical underpinnings for the contemporary American crisis depicted in *J R* and fulfill Eliot's prescription for a "historical sense [ . . . ] not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."<sup>2</sup>

While many characters in *The Recognitions* can toss off nearly word-perfect quotations from a variety of texts, the characters in *J R* more realistically mangle or misattribute quotations. Gibbs advises Eigen "read Wiener on communication, more complicated the message more God damned chance for errors" (403). Literary culture is complicated

enough that it too is subject to error—errors rarely corrected by anyone in Gaddis's text. On one occasion Eigen does correct Gibbs's misquotation from Hart Crane's "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" (621), but it is left to the reader to correct Gibbs's deliberately misleading attribution of the Greek motto over *J R*'s school to Empedocles (45; actually by Marx); his misquotations (usually because drunk) of Yeats, Donne, and others; Amy's opinion that *Carmen* was initially a success (116; it was a failure); and other misattributed quotations that confuse Shakespeare with Marlowe (630) or Mark Twain with Cummings (684). Literary allusions, like everything else in *J R*, are presented in fragmented or elliptical form, shorn from their original contexts; but when threaded together, they display a remarkable thematic coherence and consistency that effectively allow a novel occupied with a few frantic months in the early 1970s to encompass, like Wagner's *Ring*, the beginning and end of the world.

### Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*

Among the reviewers of *J R*, only Robert Minkoff seems to have noted the presence of *The Ring* in the novel, and among later critics only Steven Weisenburger has devoted any space to this crucial subtext.<sup>3</sup> It would not be going too far to say, as Weisenburger does, that Wagner's *Ring* is to *J R* what the *Odyssey* is to Joyce's *Ulysses*. Although Gaddis's novel, unlike Joyce's, lacks a scene-by-scene, character-by-character correspondence with its model, it alludes to Wagner's work throughout on literal, symbolic, and formal levels. Bast is first introduced rehearsing a chaotic school production of *The Ring* at a Jewish temple(!), with teenaged Rhinemaidens and a Wotan played by a sulky young girl "freely adorned with horns, feathers, and bicycle reflectors" (33). *J R* has volunteered to take Alberich's part to get out of gym and makes off with the makeshift Rhinegold (the sack of money for his class's stock share) at the end of a scene that comically but effectively sets out *The Ring*'s basic conflict between love and greed.<sup>4</sup> Thereafter, this literal production recedes (like the Rhine at the end of *The Rhinegold*'s first scene) and its teenaged cast is replaced by more symbolic counterparts in the business world where, as Wieland Wagner once remarked, "Valhalla is Wall Street."

Wagner himself was the first to underscore the modern economic implications of *The Ring*. Writing in 1881, five years after the first performance of the complete tetralogy, he argued:

Though much that is ingenious and admirable has been thought, said and written concerning the invention of *money*, and of its value as an all-powerful cultural force, nevertheless the curse to which it has always been subject in song and story should be weighed against its praises. There *gold* appears as the demonic throttler of mankind's innocence; so, too, our greatest poet has the invention of *paper money* take place as a devil's trick. The chilling picture of the spectral ruler of the world might well be completed by the fateful ring of the Nibelung as stock portfolio.<sup>5</sup>

It was George Bernard Shaw who first developed the thesis that Wagner's *Ring* is a critique of predatory capitalism and the morally corrupt status quo. His clever and insightful book *The Perfect Wagnerite*—the source of a memorable aphorism in *The Recognitions* (552) and perhaps the inspiration for Gaddis's adaptation of the opera—argues from Wagner's revolutionary activities and the philosophic nature of the opera itself that Alberich forswears love “as thousands of us forswear it every day” to establish a Plutonic empire that is Wagner's “poetic vision of unregulated industrial capitalism as it was made known in Germany in the middle of the nineteenth century by Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*.”<sup>6</sup> Opposing the dwarf are the gods—representing church and state—who have as little use for love as Alberich does (Wotan is willing to sacrifice Freia, the goddess of love, to gain his fortress Valhalla) and who have let themselves “get entangled in a network of ordinances which they no longer believe in, and yet have made so sacred by custom and so terrible by punishment, that they cannot themselves escape from them.” Wotan relies on Loge, whom Shaw calls “the god of Intellect, Argument, Imagination, Illusion, and Reason,” to extricate him from his contract with the simple but honest giants who have built his fortress, and who likewise forswear love and agree to accept gold in lieu of Freia. Sinking deeper into corruption, Wotan and Loge descend to Alberich's Nibelheim to steal the gold Alberich has produced via the ring he fashioned from the Rhinemaidens' gold. By the end of the first opera in the tetralogy, gold and/or its attendant lust for power has corrupted everyone but Loge—who expresses his contempt for the gods in a significant aside—and the Rhinemaidens, whose lament ends *The Rhinegold*: “false and base / [are] all those who dwell above.”<sup>7</sup>

Shaw sees in this prelude “the whole tragedy of human history and the whole horror of the dilemmas from which the world is shrinking today,” dilemmas rooted in the exploitation by capitalists of a disen-

franchised working class, a subjugation supported by the political and religious structures still firmly in place by “the end of the miserable century” when Shaw published the first edition of his book. Shaw's socialist reading of *The Ring* accounts for only one of its many levels, but it is this level that Gaddis uses to reinforce his characterizations and to give a mythic resonance to his novel. The parallels between J R and Governor Cates, for example, take on greater subtlety when they are compared to those between Alberich and Wotan. Wagner's god is a noble, tragic figure who is all too aware that his willingness to compromise his ethics reduces him to Alberich's level of greedy power-mongering and admits as much when he refers to himself in *Siegfried* as “Light-Alberich” to the other's “Black-Alberich.” As Deryck Cooke notes, “Wagner made Alberich and Wotan opposite sides of the same coin, representing two complementary images of man-in-pursuit-of-power.”<sup>8</sup> Cates shows none of Wotan's self-awareness, but he does develop a grudging respect for J R as he learns more of his financial dealings (433) and unwittingly makes use of Wotan's same light/black imagery with his mistaken assumption that J R's company is run by a “couple of blacks” (431). Nor does Cates show any of Wotan's shamefacedness as he works his financial deals; where Wotan turns away in dejection as he haggles with the giants in order to take possession of Valhalla (“Deep in the breast / burns the disgrace”), Cates displays an amorality as empty as J R's in pursuit of a goal suitably represented by a different kind of Valhalla: “you saw the site of the new parent world headquarters building up the street, you saw the sign? Nothing but a big hole there now” (195) and a hole it remains at the end of the novel as Cates perishes as surely as Wotan does but with none of the renunciation that dignifies the god's self-annihilation.

Where Cates suffers in comparison with his counterpart in *The Ring*, J R wins some sympathy in his role as Alberich. Wagner's dwarf is driven by revenge and malice to become the “sworn plutocrat,” as Shaw calls him: after the Rhinemaidens spurned him, Loge explains, “the Rhinegold / he tore in revenge from their rock,” and once empowered by the ring he uses it to enslave his fellow dwarfs and to threaten the gods themselves with enslavement. Although J R does cry out “Hark floods! Love I renounce forever!” as directed (36), love renounced him long before: he doesn't seem to have a father, only a mother whose odd hours as a nurse apparently leave him alone more often than not. He is indifferent to girls (like many eleven-year-olds), but he seems to have no friends other than the Hyde boy. Amy is the only one who notices

"There's something a little touching about him, [ . . . ] he's such an eager little boy but, there's something quite desolate, like a hunger . . ." (246–47) and the reader should share her sympathy for "that bleak little Vansant boy" (497). Where Alberich uses the Tarnhelm to make himself invisible in order to spy on and torment his workers, J R's Tarnhelm is a telephone with a handkerchief stuffed in the mouth-piece, used in a ludicrous attempt to remain "invisible" to his business contacts and associates. It should be noted that J R never buys himself anything in the course of the novel but is lavish in the (unwanted) gifts he bestows on Bast, not to mention well-meant tax advice and a foundation to enable him to continue composing. Alberich hurls curses and imprecations when he loses his empire; J R only snuffles and complains with some justification that he is a boy more sinned against than sinning. And although J R remains amoral and no wiser at the end—except that next time he'll go after banks first—he never becomes immoral, as Alberich does by the end of Wagner's tetralogy.

Amy Joubert's sympathy for J R extends to Bast and Gibbs as well, and she moves between the well-propertied world of Typhon International and their grubbier world of Long Island much as Brünnhilde does between the supernatural and human realms in *The Ring*. "It is Brünnhilde," George G. Windell writes, "the goddess transformed into a human being when her pity for Siegmund led her to disobey Wotan's command, who serves as intermediary between the old, corrupt reign of the gods and the new world, which will be redeemed by human love."<sup>9</sup> Amy is more explicitly associated with Wagner's Valkyrie in the *Dutton Review* version of *J R*'s opening pages: first described as a "high-bosomed brunette," Amy has her counterpart in "a high-bosomed well-biceped Valkyrie bearing aloft a dead warrior on her pommel" in one of the visual aids to Bast's lecture (the final text drops "high-bosomed").<sup>10</sup>

The parallel is inexact—Amy is Cates's grandniece, not his daughter as in the Wotan/Brünnhilde relationship—but Amy exhibits many of the same traits that characterize Wagner's heroine. Brünnhilde receives Alberich's magic ring as a love token from Siegfried and is indifferent to its capacity to wield power. Valuing love over power, she tells her sister Valkyrie Waltraute that she will not return the ring to the Rhinemaidens even to save the gods: "My love shall last while I live, / my ring in life shall not leave me! / Fall first in ruins / Walhall's glorious pride!" (*Twilight of the Gods* 1.3). Amy shows a similar spirit of defiance, first in marrying Lucien Joubert against her parents' wishes, then

turning her back on her failed marriage and debutante world to take up "teaching school out in the woods somewhere just to have something to do," she explains to Beaton, "something alive to do even if it's, even if I hardly know what I'm teaching them just following the lesson guide but it's something it's, something" (211). Amy likewise follows Brünnhilde in her willingness to marry beneath her class: "if Daddy could just see the only men I've met I can imagine getting into, into anything with them he'd die, one's probably Freddie's age<sup>11</sup> he drinks and plays the horses his face is like the, he laughs and his face is just torment and, and his hands and the other's a boy, a composer and he's just a boy just all, all radiant desolation and he's dear" (213). Amy alone discerns these qualities (albeit somewhat romanticized) in Gibbs and Bast, as she alone is able to discern J R's better qualities.

Although she has a brief affair with Gibbs, she marries neither him nor Bast but an associate of Typhon named Richard Cutler, a step she had earlier dismissed as absurd: "that would be like, like marrying your issue of six percent preferreds [ . . . ] avoidance payable semiannually" (214). Amy's loveless marriage to Cutler at the end of the novel has its parallel in Brünnhilde's "marriage" to Gunther, the foolish king of the Gigichungs, made under the mistaken assumption that Siegfried has abandoned her for Gunther's sister Guttrune. Brünnhilde acts to avenge herself against her faithless husband; Amy apparently acts to avenge herself against a faithless family more concerned with its financial interests than the welfare of its children. Realizing that financial power is the only way to regain control over her life and the lives of her retarded brother Freddie and her son Francis, Amy marries the deferential Cutler apparently to be in a better position to wrest financial control out of the hands of the men who have controlled her life for so long. At the end of *The Ring* the Rhinemaidens regain the Rhinegold from the gods, dwarfs, and men who have misused it; at the end of *J R*, male dominion is similarly extinguished as women attain control over most of the assets fought over throughout the novel. Amy, Boody Selk, and Stella Angel are in this regard the Rhinemaidens of the novel, but there is little evidence that they will use their "Rhinegold" more responsibly than their male relations did. None of the three makes the heroic self-sacrifice that redeems Brünnhilde at the end of *Twilight of the Gods*, nor does love play a significant part in their calculations.

By this point it should be obvious that Gaddis is as free in his use of *The Ring* as Wagner was in his use of the Nibelung legends. Gaddis

identifies Stella with Freia, for example, but here he leaves Wagner aside and returns to the original Norse myths. Wagner's Freia is weak and (along with her brother Froh) one of the blandest characters in *The Ring*, showing none of the pronounced sexuality of her Norse original. Such characterization is appropriate for *The Ring*; Freia is little more than a cipher, Cooke explains, because she "stands as the goddess of love in a world which has rejected love. [ . . . ] In the world of *The Rhinegold*, ruled over by Wotan, love does not exist—or rather, it has shrunk into the weak, helpless, hunted figure of Freia."<sup>12</sup> Unlike Gaddis, Wagner makes no mention of Freia's famous necklace Brisingamen, a symbol of her rampant sexuality which a late account in the Icelandic *Flateyrbók* says she won "by sleeping one night in turn with each of the four dwarfs who forged it." To this account, H. R. Ellis Davidson adds in a note: "Students of Freud will recognize the significance of a necklace for a fertility goddess (cf. the ring in Rabelais). It illustrates the familiar tendency to represent the sexual parts of the body by others higher up, and by ornaments worn on these."<sup>13</sup> Students of Gaddis will recognize all of these elements in *J R*, from the bawdy humor regarding Miss Flesch's tendency to rub everybody's face in her *Ring* (26–27, 313), to the necklacelike scar around Stella's neck (from a thyroid operation) that also takes on sexual connotations. But it is Gibbs, Stella's former lover, who makes explicit the identification of Stella with Freia. Learning from Bast that Schramm used to talk to the young composer about "Freya and Brisingamen," Gibbs responds, "Well Christ I could have told you about that Bast I told him about Brisingamen, seen the necklace around her throat I know every God damned link in it have to talk to you about her Bast" (282), but he saves his revelations for Eigen: "Didn't want to tell Bast [ . . . ] cousin's a God damned witch take you right off at the roots" (407). Like Venus, Freia/Freya is principally associated with sexual love, but she is also one of Graves's dangerous White Goddesses associated with witchcraft and emasculation. Gibbs taunts Stella about this aspect by facetiously offering her the ingenue lead in his hypothetical comedy *Our Dear Departed Member* (74), book by the witch-hunting authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (398, 407).

All this learned wit at Stella's expense has its justification in her calculating efforts to gain control of General Roll, largely by captivating then destroying her male rivals with her sexuality. "There were beautiful witches after all," Stella admits (61), but her sexuality is the sterile, destructive opposite of that represented by Wagner's Freia. She

apparently married Norman Angel only because he had earned a substantial number of shares in her father's company, but they sleep in separate beds and have had no children. Her sexuality is directed instead at Bast and Gibbs (both of whom she tries to seduce in order to win their shares in the company) and at a mysterious foreign lover who also teases her about Brisingamen (353).<sup>14</sup> Bast welcomes her rather mechanical favors in fulfillment of his long-held desire for her, only to be interrupted by her unsuspecting husband. Bast doesn't realize until the end of the novel that Stella has tried to destroy him and his music in revenge against Bast's mother Nellie, who left Stella's father Thomas for Bast's father James, only to be spurned by the composer James because "he was afraid for anything to come between him and his work" (716). Stella had been blamed by the family for blurting out when much younger the details of the scandal to a neighbor disguised as a gypsy fortune-teller at a fair; her ambition to seize control of General Roll seems motivated less by an urge for power than by a desire to punish the family that has made her so unhappy for so many years. Wagner's Freia is helpless when bartered away by her brother-in-law; Gaddis's Stella means to take Valhalla in return for her mistreatment, and does indeed emerge in control of the company at the end of the book. However, her husband's attempted suicide and subsequent coma seem to have broken her destructive pattern of behavior; Coen tells Bast that her "deeply exaggerated feelings of responsibility" for Norman's attempt "led her to insist on being held by the police" (713), and Stella's recommendation to Vida Duncan to plead for James's return to save the New York Philharmonic suggests she is willing to be reconciled with the family. It is difficult to say for certain; as Coen warns, "her appearance of cold calm I think may be deceptive" (713).

Other characters in *J R* have only superficial resemblances to characters in *The Ring*. Stella's husband Norman, for example, can be associated with the love-sick giant Fasolt, but his interruption of the love tryst between Stella and Edward also links him with Hunding, the hulking husband of Sieglinde, in *The Valkyrie*. Her tryst with her long-lost brother Siegmund has its parallel in that between Stella and her cousin Edward, but even though *The Ring* is alluded to in this scene (142) the principal allusions are to the relationship between the cousins in Tennyson's "Locksley Hall." Similarly, Beaton has a superficial relation to Wagner's Loge, who despises the gods and promises to return the ring to the Rhinemaidens. Beaton likewise plots the downfall of the "gods" of *J R* to return financial control into Amy's

hands, but he lacks Loge's wit, irony, and playful intelligence. The Hyde boy sounds like Alberich's brother Mime at one point when he complains "we used to have this neat time trading boy but now everything's . . ." (172), and their schoolmates are consistently called a "horde" as are the Nibelheim dwarfs. Zona Selk sits on Schepperman's paintings as much as Fafner the dragon does the Nibelung treasure, but whether Gaddis intended to push the parallels this far is doubtful. Conspicuous in their absence are any clear-cut counterparts to Wagner's heroes Siegmund and Siegfried; Steven Weisenburger makes a tentative case for associating Bast with both on the basis of various incidental parallels, but aside from Siegfried's naïveté, Bast has little of significance in common with either.

Along with putting a number of Wagner's characters into modern dress, *J R* imitates *The Ring's* uninterrupted formal design. Wagner dispensed with traditional operatic divisions of arias, recitatives, and ensembles in favor of "a continuous, endlessly varied web of melody," as one of Gaddis's sources describes it,<sup>15</sup> built on musical phrases called motifs that identify particular characters, places, objects, and dramatic ideas. Modernist writers such as Mann, Pound, and Joyce make extensive use of literary motifs in their works—a practice parodied by Wyndham Lewis in *The Apes of God*—but Gaddis's *J R* is the most ambitious attempt to do in writing what Wagner did in music (to paraphrase Willie in *The Recognitions* [477]). Length is the first characteristic. *The Rhinegold* alone lasts two and a half hours without a single break; the other three parts of *The Ring* have single acts as long as entire operas by other composers, and use their great lengths to impose their reality on the audience. Bast is especially appreciative of this point; in a discussion of Wagner with Amy, he corrects her assumption that an artist is "asking" an audience to suspend its disbelief: "No not asking them making them, like that E flat chord that opens the Rhinegold goes on and on it goes on for a hundred and thirty-six bars until the idea that everything's happening under water is more real than sitting in a hot plush seat with tight shoes on" (111). *J R* goes on and on for 726 pages of dialogue until the frankly unbelievable story of a sixth-grader's overnight financial success seems more real than the plot of the most plausible novel. While Wagner's lengthy operas are tolerated, however, Gaddis's lengthy novels still meet with resistance, a point worth a brief digression.

In his review of *J R*, George Steiner complains, "All this could have been said compactly, and made accessible to the reader,"<sup>16</sup> a complaint

echoed by others who, one suspects, would likewise be satisfied with one of those anthologies that reduces *The Ring's* twenty hours of music to ninety minutes of highlights. Both Wagner and Gaddis attempt a critique of an entire culture, and in Gaddis's case especially the validity of his critique is largely dependent upon his specificity of detail. In this regard, Gaddis resembles Wagner's contemporary Gustave Flaubert, who in his last, unfinished novel attempted to take stock of his culture in much the same manner. Lionel Trilling could be describing Gaddis when he writes of Flaubert in his introduction to *Bouvard and Pécuchet*:

He was unique too in the necessity he felt to see the crisis [the death of culture] in all its specificity of detail. For him the modern barbarism was not merely a large general tendency which could be comprehended by a large general emotion; he was constrained to watch it with a compulsive and obsessive awareness of its painful particularities. He was made rabid—to use his own word—by *this* book, *this* phrase, *this* solecism, *this* grossness of shape or form, *this* debasement of manners, *this* hollow imitation of thought. [ . . . ] What he wanted to do, he said, was nothing less than to take account of the whole intellectual life of France. "If it were treated briefly, made concise and light, it would be a fantasy—more or less witty, but without weight or plausibility; whereas if I give it detail and development I will seem to be believing my own story, and it can be made into something serious and even frightening." And he believed that it was by an excess of evidence that he would avoid pedantry.<sup>17</sup>

What is lacking in more compact critiques of American manners and mores—Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, say, or Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*—is the breadth and density of detail that give *J R* its greater weight and plausibility, comprehensiveness and exactitude. Gaddis's novel is as witty as Fitzgerald's and as fantastic as Pynchon's, but easily outdistances either as a critique of the American dream due to the "detail and development" that Gaddis, like Flaubert, pursues with such encyclopedic thoroughness.

Gaddis develops his details in much the same way Wagner develops his musical details in *The Ring*. The entire opera, in one sense, is generated from the opening E flat pedalpoint and the arpeggio figure that represents the Rhine, growing to ninety or so distinct motifs by the fourth part of the tetralogy, by which point nearly every bar contains elements of one or more of these musical ideas. Gaddis imitates Wagner's method by opening with his own pedalpoint, "money," qualified

in the second line as “paper” money (equivalent to the B flat that joins Wagner’s E flat after four bars), which continues to take on further qualities (Eastern, lifeless, worthless), to become associated with power (Father), contrasted to silver (i.e., authentic) money, and then implicated in the arts and education—all within fifteen short lines. The introduction of Julia and Anne’s father leads in similar fashion to his sons, their sibling rivalry, the father’s vindictive presence (his ashes blown back into the sons’ beards), and the inevitable entrance of law to mediate between the brothers and, later, between other conflicting parties. By the bottom of the first page, then, Gaddis has introduced all the thematic components of his novel in a way that both imitates and alludes to *The Rhinegold*. Gaddis’s first descriptive sentence—“Sunlight, pocketed in a cloud, spilled suddenly broken across the floor through the leaves of the trees outside”—seems to adapt Shaw’s description of the “green light” of the Rhinemaidens’ underwater playground, where the gold is initially “eclipsed, because the sun is not striking down through the water.”<sup>18</sup> During the first scene of *J R* we also hear “a tone that seemed to echo the deep” (7)—another allusion to Wagner’s E flat pedalpoint—and the sounds of hammering (10, 16, etc.), recalling the hammering of the Nibelung dwarfs later in *The Rhinegold*. At this point Wagner is named for the first time (16), *The Ring* two pages later, and all of these allusions given a context when Bast leads his farcical rehearsal of the first scene of *The Rhinegold* later that day (32–36).

The close parallel with Wagner’s opera is dispensed with after this rehearsal, but Wagner himself is kept in view by dozens of passing references to his work habits, family life, his other operas, the tuba that bears his name, even references to Rheingold beer and its Miss Rheingold competitions in the 1940s and 1950s. One of the companies *J R* buys is the Wagner Funeral Homes chain—a witty allusion to Wotan’s Valhalla, a funeral home for dead heroes—whose gay spokesperson Brisboy is quite entertaining on the problems incurred by such a name (545). The recurring references to Wagner remind the reader of the form Gaddis is using, the scope of his enterprise, and the ominous inevitability of the *Götterdämmerung*, which is punningly kept in the air as Gibbs and Eigen repeatedly “God damn” everything in sight. (A cellist once told me that musicians pronounce this title “God-damn-the-Ring.”)

But most importantly, Wagner is evoked as that rarest of birds, the successful composer. In his radical lecture on Mozart, Bast cites ex-

ample after example of composers who succumbed to the pressures upon them—“like Franz Schubert dying of typhus at thirty-two yes or, or Robert Schumann being hauled out of a river so they could cart him off to an asylum or the, or Tchaikowski who was afraid his head would fall off if . . .” (43)—indicating that Bast is suffering less from the anxiety of influence than from the anxiety of survival, of whether he too will be destroyed by an indifferent society or be tempted to destroy himself. Noticing Bast’s earphone, Brisboy hopes Bast is not going deaf as Beethoven did and pleads with him not to take his life (547); this is a comic misunderstanding at one level, but at another refers to the same pressures that cause Schramm to take his life early in the novel and cause the other artists to wonder, as do Stanley and Wyatt in *The Recognitions*, whether art is worth creating for such an unresponsive, even hostile society. Of all the composers mentioned in *J R*, Wagner alone provides an example of an artist who survived, who created demanding, uncompromising art, and who persisted long enough to see a society that exiled him finally come to him on its knees. Just as Wyatt finally realizes that Titian is a better model than the Van Eycks and their followers, Bast attains something of the iron resolve that drove Wagner to create *The Ring of the Nibelung* against formidable odds, a model that perhaps Bast will someday emulate as triumphantly as Gaddis does in *J R*.

### The Victorian Heritage

In the meantime, Bast struggles with setting to music Tennyson’s poem “Locksley Hall,” one of four nineteenth-century British works alluded to with some frequency in *J R*. Tennyson’s poem, Kipling’s “Mandalay” and Wilde’s “Impressions of America,” and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* are associated in the novel with Bast, Gibbs, and Eigen, respectively, and are used by Gaddis to broaden the historical contexts of his characters’ personal problems. The four older works offer Victorian perspectives on the difficulty of fulfilling obligations to a culture not completely believed in, the temptation to forsake those obligations for unfettered freedom, and the tendency to make romantic fictions of women. Although a number of other Victorians are quoted or alluded to in *J R*—Browning, Bulwer-Lytton, Carlyle, Stevenson, Pater—these four warrant closer attention because of the extended use Gaddis makes of their work.

Searching for a text to express his unrequited love for his recently

married cousin Stella, Bast remembers from school Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" (1842), the dramatic monologue of a sensitive young man who, spurned by his cousin Amy, resolves to "mix with action, lest I wither by despair." Tennyson's speaker has difficulty, however, maintaining his optimistic vision of his (and England's) glorious future after his romantic hopes are dashed. Predicting a loveless future for submissive Amy, he predicts England too will have a bleak future: progress, he suspects, will be at the expense of the individual, and he expresses grave doubts over the advances promised by science, democracy, imperialism, and women's emancipation. He is tempted to escape to a tropical paradise where "never floats an European flag" and where he can avoid progress altogether, but the true Victorian in him wins out ("I the heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time")<sup>19</sup> and he decides at last to join his lot with that of the "Mother-Age."

Bast identifies with Tennyson's protagonist as strongly as most adolescents do when they discover a character who embodies their ambitions and frustrations. The parallels here are numerous: both characters have been spurned by their beloved cousins, both are orphans, both have a romantic, idealistic outlook on life incompatible with practical reality, and both are faced with that perennial Gaddis quandary:

What is that which I should turn to, lighting upon days like these?  
Every door is barr'd with gold, and opens but to golden keys.

Every gate is throng'd with suitors, all the markets overflow.  
I have but an angry fancy; what is that which I should do?

(ll. 99–102)

Tennyson's poem is introduced into *J R* at the end of its first frantic day, when Bast allows Stella to visit the converted barn behind the Bast house where he composes. In a scene fraught with sexual tension—conveyed partially by Bast's unconscious manipulation of the cleft of a beer can, into which he stuffs an earlier intruder's condom—Stella notices his work in progress on the piano, much to Bast's embarrassment, but reacts with polite indifference to Bast's broken confession of her part in inspiring the work (69–71). Stella returns a few nights later to look for some paperwork and discovers with Bast that his studio has again been broken in to and ransacked. In what Stella later calls an effort to rid Bast of his "romantic ideas about him-

self and everything else" (148) she initiates a passionless sexual encounter, only to be interrupted (though not caught) by her husband Norman. Temporarily unhinged at the violation of his private studio and at the frustration of the interrupted tryst, Bast plays wildly from his operatic suite, taking a cue from the thunder outside and mixing with the Tennyson libretto a number of phrases picked up during a frustrating day in Manhattan with *J R*'s class (142). This mélange of lines from "Locksley Hall"—mocking Amy and her oafish husband and calling down the thunder on their mansion—reminds us that Tennyson's speaker is by turns blustering, naive, self-pitying, and spiteful (as is Bast in his worst moments) and that consequently his valid criticisms of the Victorian social order are undercut somewhat by his histrionic posturing. Bast, to his credit, does not indulge in social predictions as Tennyson's protagonist does, but Stella is correct in thinking Bast would do well to abandon those "romantic ideas about himself and everything else." When Gibbs learns of Bast's operatic suite, he too chides him: "Locksley Hall Christ, next thing you'll shock us with a novel call it the Sorrows of Young Werther" (280). (Gibbs goes on to taunt Eigen with another quotation from "Locksley Hall": "ought to get yourself one Tom wed some savage woman let her rear your dusky . . ." [281].)

Aside from modifying his operatic suite to a cantata, little is said of his musical project until the end of the novel—largely because he is too busy writing two hours of film music for Crawley. Hospitalized with double pneumonia and nervous exhaustion—and in a delirium reciting to the nurse "some poetry about some ancient founts" and "some creepy poetry about the dreary moorland" (670–71, from "Locksley Hall," ll. 188 and 40)—Bast comes close to renouncing Tennyson and all art, much as Tennyson's protagonist comes close to renouncing England for the jungle. But both characters recognize these temptations to retreat and to withdraw as no more than the other side of the same coin of romantic delusion, equally foolish and self-defeating. Both adopt instead a more existential willingness to act in the face of uncertainty and possible failure: Tennyson's protagonist accepts "However these things be" and bids a contemptuous farewell to Locksley Hall and all it represents. Similarly, Bast declares, "No, no I've failed at other people's things I've done enough other people's damage from now on I'm going to do my own, from now on I'm going to fail at my own here those papers wait" (718), and retrieves his discarded cello sketches to begin his art anew on a more modest scale and on a more realistic aesthetic foundation.

Old enough to know better, Gibbs likewise gives his beloved the trappings of a romantic heroine from literature and risks compromising his art by making it dependent upon a woman's approval. Having long admired Amy Joubert from afar, he can hardly believe his luck when she welcomes an affair. He calls Eigen from her apartment to tell him of his good fortune, claiming he has "found a cleaner greener maiden in a neater sweeter land" (494), a tongue-twister repeated several times thereafter, though never accurately. The quotation comes from Kipling's once-popular poem "Mandalay" (1890)—coincidentally in the same trochaic octameter as "Locksley Hall"—a ballad filled with nostalgic longing for the Far East and a distaste for England:

I am sick o' wastin' leather on these gritty pavin'stones,  
An' the blasted Henglish drizzle wakes the fever in my bones;  
Tho' I walks with fifty 'ousemaids outer Chelsea to the Strand,  
An' they talks a lot o' lovin', but wot do they understand?

Beefy face an' grubby 'and—  
Law! wot do they understand?  
I've a neater, sweeter maiden in a cleaner, greener land!  
On the road to Mandalay. . . .

(ll. 35–42)

The same tropical paradise that Tennyson's upper-class protagonist considered but rejected is here extolled by a lower-class Cockney soldier. Both Victorian characters are drawn not only to exotic lovers but to states of lawless freedom; compare Tennyson's "There the passions cramp'd no longer shall have scope and breathing space" with Kipling's "Where there aren't no Ten Commandments an' a man can raise a thirst." That Gibbs would cite Kipling is revelatory both of the nature of his short-termed relationship with Amy and of the impossibility of its success. Amy is not a part of his world, intellectual or social, despite the fact she teaches at the same school as he. Instead, she is as exotic as Kipling's maiden and just as far removed from Gibbs's real needs and social obligations. During their week-long tryst he may as well be in Mandalay, for he quits teaching, sees none of his friends, and forgets to visit his daughter as usual. All of this becomes apparent to him only after she leaves.

When Amy departs for Switzerland she extracts from Gibbs a promise to work on his book, but while looking through his notes he comes

across a short story he once began, punningly entitled "How Rose Is Read" and heavy with literary allusion. The short fragment concludes:

Mention her name and you'd see them, or their sharp edges, surface briefly in the young men's eyes dropped quickly elsewhere once they'd learned how many times she'd read Go lovely Rose, in how many different hands, forcing her door with flowers, fleeing it home to books to flee her there. Elena in Turgenev's *On the Eve* flung down at two am as elsewhere pages feverishly turned to find her serving tea to friends by one gone back to bed to toss alone till dawn came in another part of town where someone else gave up importuning her shade through Gluck's underworld with a twist of the dial to study in his own unsteady hand of the night before beware women who blow on knots and then take all of an hour to find perhaps it was right to dissemble your love, but why did you kick me downstairs? No book heroine as they wanted, this crowd who would not understand how much more human she was, like old Auda after battle and murder, heart yearning [ . . . ]. (584)

Within two and a half sentences, allusions to Waller, Turgenev, Gluck, the Koran, Isaac Bickerstaffe, and T. E. Lawrence crowd around to rob Rose of any real identity, reducing her to a "book heroine" of the most artificial sort. Gibbs displays a similar tendency to think of the women he meets in literary terms, to "read" into them qualities that tend to reduce them to literary stereotypes. We recall Gibbs comparing Stella to Freya and to a witch out of the *Malleus Maleficarum*; he associates Amy with Kipling's maiden but first with the woman in Eliot's "Hysteria" (117, 120, 130); after meeting Rhoda he compares her to a variety of figures ranging from a sorceress by Hans Baldung to "Bess, the landlord's daughter" from Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman" (388). (Eigen picks up Gibbs's allusion to "Mandalay" and gives Rhoda the "beefy face and grubby hand" of Kipling's Chelsea housemaids [615].) At one point Gibbs even resorts to a printing metaphor to describe a woman: "Ann, she's sort of you [Amy] in a cheap edition, twentieth printing of the paperback when things begin to smear" (245).

On one hand, such remarks are just a playful habit on Gibbs's part, the learned banter of a well read man. But on the other hand, they betray a tendency to find excuses, justifications, and ideals in literary works for his own behavior, a tendency more excusable in someone of Bast's age and temperament. Throwing his Tennyson back in Bast's face, Stella refuses to take part in "this whole absurd, her bosom shaken by a sudden storm of sighs this whole frightened romantic nightmare you'd put me into" (716); substitute Kipling for Tennyson and Amy

would find Gibbs doing much the same thing were she not so preoccupied with her own problems. A confrontation like that between Bast and Stella is unnecessary; Gibbs soon sees that he has been acting like a Cockney soldier pining away in useless regret and avoids Amy upon her return. Like her namesake in "Locksley Hall," Amy decides to play it safe and marry dull Dick Cutler—a nice dovetailing of allusions—but by that point Gibbs has shaken off his escapist fantasy and thus is able to avoid the romantic agony that bedevils Bast.

The other Victorian Gibbs most often quotes is Oscar Wilde, whose bantering lecture "Impressions of America" (1883) figures prominently in Gibbs's *Agapē Agape*. The lecture is based on Wilde's 1882 tour of America, where he promulgated doctrines that, as Richard Ellmann has noted, "constituted the most determined and sustained attack on materialistic vulgarity that America had seen." More important, "Wilde presented a theory not only of art but of being, not only a distinguished personality but an antithesis to getting on without regard for the quality of life."<sup>20</sup> This same annoyance at "getting on without regard for the quality of life" underlies Gibbs's concerns, and he shares Wilde's conviction that America is antagonistic toward art. Noting that "America is the noisiest country that ever existed," Wilde warns, "All art depends upon exquisite and delicate sensibility, and such constant turmoil must ultimately be destructive of the musical faculty" (289). *J R* is the noisiest novel that ever existed, and the efforts of its artists to create amid its continual turmoil painfully illustrate Wilde's observation. Gibbs takes as his epigraph to *Agapē Agape* the notice Wilde saw posted above a saloon-hall piano in Leadville: "Please do not shoot the pianist. He is doing his best" (288). Wilde playfully calls this "the only rational method of art criticism I have ever come across," but Gibbs knows he lives in a shoot-the-pianist culture that destroys its artists, for in the arts "one's best is never good enough" (604), as Wilde himself would learn when his country destroyed him. While Kipling informs Gibbs's romantic urges, Wilde justifies his cultural and artistic fears.

As Bast has Tennyson and Gibbs has Kipling and Wilde, Eigen has Joseph Conrad. Gaddis makes the same ironic use of *Heart of Darkness* as Conrad makes of the *Aeneid* and the *Inferno*, putting as much ironic distance between Eigen and Marlow as Conrad does between Marlow and Aeneas or Dante. Although there are only two clusters of allusions to Conrad's 1899 novella in *J R*, they help to illuminate both Eigen's motives through the second half of the novel and his complicated relationship to his own Kurtz, the suicide Schramm.

The first set of allusions follows Gibbs's and Eigen's meeting with the lawyer Beamish, who has come to see them about settling Schramm's estate. Recovering the copy of the *Malleus Maleficarum* he had once loaned him, Gibbs discovers that Schramm kept a photograph of his young stepmother in its pages. Eigen is immediately taken by the photograph for reasons Gibbs coarsely points out:

—Real number Tom, really see how she made the old man's mickey stand for him can't you Beamish . . .

—Well she, she was a good many years his junior yes, even younger than your friend Mister Schramm himself but . . .

—See why Schramm felt like Hippolytus turned backwards can't you, get a hand on that raw lung see how Schramm felt can't you. (392)

Beamish goes on to say he has some papers for her to sign and Eigen volunteers to take the picture and papers to her. Though drunk, Gibbs is able to point out the obvious parallel a little later that evening when he comes across a copy of *Heart of Darkness* at Eigen's apartment and badgers him about it: "Heart of Darkness, God damned cheerful reading Heart of Darkness, part at the end he takes her picture and letters back to her[, . . .] part she says you were his friend, part she says you knew what great plans he had something must remain wants his last word to live with, part you knock on the mahogany door take the papers up to Mrs Schramm wants his last words to live with believing and shitting are two very different things Mrs Schramm always remember that part" (408).

But just as Marlow delays a year before returning her picture and letters to Kurtz's Intended, Eigen forgets about the papers until he finds them in his pocket a few weeks later. This time a sober Gibbs more bluntly confronts Eigen with his carnal motive for seeing Mrs. Schramm:

—Meet her yes, probably be God damned grateful, shame you can't take [Schramm's] folder along too show her he was on the threshold of great things, might have kicked the world to pieces . . .

—I don't know what you're, why you can't give me this either can you any credit for, credit for any loyalty to his memory my God see him in that canvas sack it's like being loyal to a nightmare . . .

—Had your choice of nightmares go ahead you've got custody of his memory Christ, all you've done for it certainly got the right to sweep it up with the trash why not take that picture he had of her too, see you waiting there in the lofty drawing room her pale face floating toward you in the dusk takes

both your hands in hers no chick but good Christ she's survived hasn't she, probably tell you she knew him better than you did want to hear his last words give her something to live with, dream the nightmare right through to the God damned end when you come out with it . . .

—What with, what do you mean I . . .

—Mean you'd better fix your trousers in front there first that's all. (631)

All the allusions in *J R* to *Heart of Darkness* are to its final third, in which Marlow struggles first to comprehend what Kurtz represents to him, and then with the dilemma whether he should preserve or destroy the Intended's naive illusions about Kurtz. Eigen faces only the former struggle; the latter is inconsequential, for though Mrs. Schramm makes only one brief appearance in the novel (508–9), it is clear that she's little more than an opportunistic young woman who only married the older Schramm for his money. She probably has no illusions about anything, and certainly lacks the Intended's "mature capacity for fidelity." Abandoned by his wife and tormented by sexual frustration, Eigen takes up with Mrs. Schramm (now a wealthy young widow) with basely pragmatic motives that burlesque Marlow's more reverent approach to Kurtz's fiancée. Marlow's dilemma—which, as Gibbs points out by way of Mozart, amounts to choosing between "believing and shitting"—is one Eigen is spared.

Eigen's relationship to Schramm is more problematic. Like Kurtz (with whom he shares a monosyllabic German surname), Schramm left his native land to go abroad, not for Africa and ivory but for Europe to fight in World War II, and there underwent experiences that turned him against his country with as much contempt as Kurtz has for his Belgian company. "The only time he was ever really alive was the war," Gibbs tells Amy, "he was a tank commander in the Ardennes and when it was all over he just never could quite, he has some bad periods that's all" (246). But after his suicide Gibbs reveals that Schramm was taken prisoner by the Germans while trying to defend a small town after the rest of his division had retreated without telling him (390–91).<sup>21</sup> Schramm's efforts to write a book about his experiences fail—partially because of paternal disapproval—though he does manage a screenplay for a western called *Dirty Tricks* that allegorizes the events. But Eigen takes as proprietary an interest in Schramm's notes for this book as Marlow does in Kurtz's papers. Although both Eigen and Schramm are writers, there is no professional rivalry: Eigen has written an important if neglected novel that surely overshadows Schramm's western. He has had difficulty following up that first novel, however, and apparently

sees in Schramm's notes the means by which he can overcome his own writer's block and, perhaps, expiate the guilt Gibbs has instilled in him for indirectly contributing to Schramm's suicide. The scuffle for Schramm's notes is as ludicrous as that for Kurtz's papers: Gibbs comes across them in Schramm's typewriter case and reads them, but lies to Eigen that he hasn't seen them (595, 597); when Eigen arrives at the 96th Street apartment to look for them himself, he tells Rhoda the notes are "some work I started" (613); Rhoda, Schramm's last girlfriend and crude enough to compare to Kurtz's savage concubine, tells Eigen he is lying (616), but he finally finds them stuffed under some boxes and is last seen bearing them to Mrs. Schramm's with motives that are mixed, at best.

Gibbs and Eigen, like Marlow before them, bear witness to the compromises, self-deceptions, and outright lying that paradoxically are sometimes necessary to maintain a realm of ideals, that beautiful world Marlow feels Kurtz's Intended epitomizes so well. She represents the moral imagination which, even if more of a curse than a blessing, is what separates her, Kurtz, and Marlow from the pilgrims, flabby devils, and the other moral bankrupts in Conrad's novella. It is this same moral imagination that, with all their faults, distinguishes Eigen, Bast, Gibbs, and the better characters in *J R* from the rest, and Gaddis's sparse but incisive use of *Heart of Darkness* underscores the precarious artificiality of this moral realm. The four works by Tennyson, Kipling, Wilde, and Conrad share this concern for the validity of cultural and moral ideals and the difficulty involved in pursuing them in the face of personal unhappiness and widespread corruption.<sup>22</sup> Gaddis's dramatic update of these concerns and difficulties reminds the reader that culture is always in a state of crisis, and will always demand the most from that minority still convinced culture is worth preserving.

### The Classical Heritage

The reference to Hippolytus in Gibbs's discussion of Schramm's family is one of many allusions to Greek myth and philosophy scattered throughout *J R*. Some of them, like this particular one to Phaedra's love for her stepson, are casual and local in the sense they do not form a particular pattern other than evoking the darker corners of Greek myth. Thus we hear Amy compare the sound of buzzsaws to the Erinyes (75) and have companies named after the hundredheaded monster Typhon, the Delphic priestess Pythia, and Erebus, the personification

of darkness (and the name of a ship mentioned at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*). Brisboy wanted to name his funeral home chain after Charon, but his mother "found that a trifle recherché" (545). Plato is mentioned a few times, Heracleitus quoted once, and Gibbs cites Aristotle's *Politics* often in his *Agapē Agape*, but the most important references are to the Greek philosopher Empedocles and to Philoctetes, the wounded archer who ended the Trojan War. The relative paucity of references to these two figures is in inverse proportion to their importance in *J R*.

Empedocles is known to students of literature chiefly as the despairing suicide of Matthew Arnold's poetic drama "Empedocles on Etna," but Gaddis's references are to the original poet-philosopher of the fifth century B.C. and to the extant fragments of his cosmological poem *On Nature*. Empedocles posited a cosmic cycle in which two contrasting forces alternate in control over the world—Love (or amity, harmony, unity) and Strife (or hatred, disorder, division)—and believed that organic life evolves in four stages. The first generation of life consists of disunited limbs: "Here sprang up many faces without necks, arms wandered without shoulders, unattached, and eyes strayed alone, in need of foreheads" (fragment 57). In the second generation, body parts join randomly with others, creating monsters:

solitary limbs wandered about seeking for union [ . . . ] But as one divine element mingled further with another, these things fell together as each chanced to meet other, and many other things besides these were constantly resulting. [ . . . ] with rolling gait and countless hands [ . . . ] Many creatures were born with faces and breasts on both sides, man-faced ox-progeny, while others again sprang forth as ox-headed offspring of man, creatures compounded partly of male, partly of the nature of female, and fitted with shadowy [or sterile] parts. (fragments 58–61)

The third generation produces "whole-natured forms," androgynous beings of the sort described by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, and in the fourth and final generation these beings are sexually differentiated into the human race.<sup>23</sup>

Asked about the pseudo-Greek inscription over *J R*'s school—actually by Marx,<sup>24</sup> a parting joke of Schepperman's—Gibbs refers the writer Gall to "Empedocles [ . . . ] I think it's a fragment from the second generation of his cosmogony, maybe even the first" (45) and proceeds to paraphrase the relevant fragments, much to Hyde's annoyance:

—I'm trying to have a serious discussion with these Foundation people on closed-circuit broadcast and you butt in with arms and legs flying around somebody's eyes looking for their forehead what was all that supposed to be!

—He was asking about one of the preSocratics, Major, the rule of love and the rule of strife in the cosmic cycle of Emp . . .

—They didn't come here to talk about comic cycles [ . . . ] (48)

The world according to Gaddis is ruled by Strife, a parodic or "comic" cycle in which fragmentation and division are rampant. In crowded Penn Station where "elbows found ribs and shoulders backs," Gibbs mumbles, "—place is like the dawn of the world here, this way . . . countless hands and unattached eyes, faces looking in different directions" (161). Although here as elsewhere Gaddis literalizes Empedocles' image of random body parts (cf. 406–7), it pervades *J R* more in the metaphoric sense Emerson uses in "The American Scholar": "The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man." Emerson is complaining not only of specialization but of fragmentation, of allowing oneself to diminish from Man to a thing, a function, and then treating others likewise. The result is the incomplete creatures who stumble through *J R* bumping into people, using them, misunderstanding others and being misunderstood in turn, each insisting on his or her narrow outlook, and coming together only in strife-ridden marriages, chaotic school systems, or monstrous combinations such as the *J R* Family of Companies that rival anything in Empedocles. Love, except in the person of Amy (amity), is conspicuous in its absence.

Gaddis creates lexical equivalents to Empedocles' limbs and monsters with his elliptical, fragmented dialogue and a heterogeneous discourse made up of incongruent diction, specialized jargon, mixed metaphors, and tortuous syntax. Examples are unnecessary; open any page of *J R*. What protects the novel from the charge of merely recreating the lexical chaos it deplores, however, is the selective ordering of the artist, where *this* particular idiotic comment is chosen from many others and placed next to *that* one, so that together they echo a remark made in a dissimilar context elsewhere, and in turn anticipate a line from Tennyson, and so on. *J R* does indeed look chaotic, but it is a "perfectly ordered chaos" (*R* 18) created to fight Strife with strife with the strongest bow Gaddis can wield.

Philoctetes, Gaddis once explained to an interviewer, "was the hero with the bow, the great champion of the Greeks, who goes into the

sacred garden where he's not supposed to be and is bitten by the snake, and has a festering wound and they get rid of him, they exile him. Then, when there's trouble and they need him and his bow, Ulysses and the prince [Achilles' son Neoptolemus] come and say, 'Please, come and help us.' And that idea has always fascinated me."<sup>25</sup> In *J R*, Philoctetes is most closely associated with James Bast, the composer of an opera called *Philoctetes*, and living abroad in self-imposed exile. He is called back at the end of the novel to save the ailing New York Philharmonic in much the same spirit as Philoctetes is called back to end the Trojan War. But in a larger sense, Philoctetes is the prototype of all of Gaddis's troubled and troublesome artists; his limp is shared by both Schramm and Gibbs, and the latter especially manages to save a number of companies by the novel's end despite (or perhaps because of) the "festering wound" of his bitter sarcasm. In *The Recognitions*, Basil Valentine offers Wyatt the epigram "the priest is the guardian of mysteries. The artist is driven to expose them" (261). The artist is accused for profaning the sacred garden, and yet the insight and power gained from the transgression is sorely needed by the very society that curses him when those mysteries are used for fraud and oppression. Among artists in general, the satirist especially is driven to expose mysteries, an act that opens him to charges of disrespect, impiety, pessimism—further terms can be culled from Gaddis's harsher reviews—and yet the health of any society is dependent upon the satirist's corrective lash, as Pope argues so eloquently in his satires and epistles.

Sophocles makes it clear in his *Philoctetes*—which seems to be the basis for James Bast's version (117)—that the wounded archer has himself to blame as much as anyone for his troubles. Gaddis's artists are no better, frequently given to disruptive, self-destructive behavior, drunkenness, vanity, and callous selfishness. Pope's satirist is a good citizen, but Gaddis's artists are closer to Edmund Wilson's conception of Philoctetes and the satirist as hero:

I should interpret the fable as follows. The victim of a malodorous disease which renders him abhorrent to society and periodically degrades him and makes him helpless is also the master of a superhuman art which everybody has to respect and which the normal man finds he needs. [ . . . ] It is in the nature of things—of this world where the divine and the human fuse—that they cannot have the irresistible weapon without its loathsome owner, who upsets the process of normal life by his curses and his cries, and who in any case refuses to work for men who have exiled him from their fellowship.<sup>26</sup>

This is the nature of the tension that exists between the artists and the businessmen in *J R* and was the subject of the concluding pages of the section on the Protestant ethic in chapter 4. But Gaddis's interest in this theme is obviously personal as well as professional. His first novel ignored by the literary establishment, he must have felt like Philoctetes in exile while staring out the windows of Pfizer International in the late fifties and early sixties, trying to write speeches on balance of payments problems and the hazards of direct investment overseas while other, lesser talents were being lauded. In 1962–63 he had the same commission from the Ford Foundation for a book on the uses of television in the schools that his character Gall has in *J R*, and a more fitting name for this alter ego cannot be imagined. (It also recalls the fact that Philoctetes' arrows were dipped in the gall of the hydra.) Later in the sixties, Gaddis was tempted to take part in protesting against the Vietnam War but realized that his work in progress would make a more permanent statement about the values that led America into the war, so he continued to work in isolation like Philoctetes on the isle of Lemnos. By the time *J R* was finally published in 1975, he had been absent from the literary scene twice as long as Philoctetes had been absent from Troy, but the novel's National Book Award and his subsequent honors, grants, and critical accolades form an ironic parallel to the despised Greek hero's career that Gaddis must have relished. Philoctetes' powerful bow brought an end to the Trojan War; Gaddis's powerful *J R*—the greatest satirical novel in American literature—brings an end to the American dream of "success and like free enterprise and all" (726). Twilight has fallen upon the gods, and the romance of America darkens to Gothic.