Fake Supreme

William Gaddis and the Art of Recognition[1]

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In his 1759 essay "Conjectures on Original Composition", the English critic Edward Young argued that novelty and originality should be the most important categories for evaluating a work of art.[2] "Originals", Young declared, "are, and ought to be, great favourites, for they are great benefactors; they extend the republic of letters, and add a new province to its dominion. Imitators only give us a sort of duplicates of what we had, possibly much better, before" (1975: 319). By valorising original contributions over popular, slightly disguised copies of earlier texts, Young's essay paved the way for modern discourses on authorship and copyright. Annoyed by an increasing number of books that were basically "duplicates of what we had," he separates the mechanically manufactured text from the truly inspired, original work of art. Imitative artists are then dismissed as a sort of mechanics, mere manual labourers who manipulate and piece together material that is already there. "Imitations",

1 | This essay is an abridged and revised version of a chapter originally published in Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers, ed. (2007): *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, pp. 28-45.

2 | Writing about the value that our culture puts on originality, progress and innovation, the Austrian historian of science Paul Feyerabend sees this myth of "creativity" already at work in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where in his seventh letter, Plato explains how "understanding or building a work of art contains an element that goes beyond skill, technical knowledge, and talent. A new force takes hold of the soul and directs it […] artistic achievement" (1987: 701). Feyerabend criticises "the view that culture needs individual creativity [as] not only absurd but also dangerous" (701). It is absurd because of its underlying assumption that "human beings are self-contained entities, separated from the rest of nature" (708) and it is dangerous because, on a larger historical scale, it "led to tremendous social, ecological, and personal problems" (711).

Young concludes, "are often a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics […] out of pre-existent materials not their own" (333).

If much of modern literature thrived on the aesthetic ideals articulated by Young and his Romantic followers, Postmodern writers seemed to be at odds with the belief that great art is constituted solely by original acts. In a programmatic essay reviewing the appearance of Postmodern writing in America titled "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), novelist John Barth denied that the so-called 'newness' of a work of art has anything to do with its originality as such; rather it is the critical use of tradition, the creative rewriting of existing artistic concepts and inherited forms and techniques that guarantee the uniqueness of the individual artist. As he later explained, literary production has the potential to constantly reinvent itself without having recourse to an essentialist, reified and highly ideological notion of originality.[3]

In what follows, I discuss the dialectics of repetition and originality by focusing on *The Recognitions*, a 1955 novel by American Writer William Gaddis. *The Recognitions* is perhaps the first American novel to deal at length with the problem of assessing originality in a cultural environment that thrives on an abundance of copies, representations and simulacra. As a prime example of what critic Thomas LeClair has called the "Art of Excess" (1981-82), it represents and, at the same time, amplifies the confusion about the 'real' and its double in contemporary, mediated society. While educated readers still experience moments of recognition when tracing some of the novel's obscure references to their possible historic origins, such interpretative efforts are constantly subverted by the shifting meaning of uniqueness itself. Unable to pin down the narrative's complexity to a single, encompassing design, we are left with nothing more than the sobering realisation that the more adroit we become at deciphering the intricate web of textual doubling, the more confused we are about the epistemological value of origins and originality.

By rewriting the history of Western art as a history of doubling and counterfeiting, *The Recognitions* turns into a sort of literary echo chamber bustling with the cacophonous reverberations of Europe's greatest masterpieces — we might call this the 'Joycean mode' — while, at the same time, constantly obfuscating their historical context and questioning their referential authenticity. If Gaddis' "Carnival of Repetition" (as John Johnston called the novel's redundant, cross-referential style, 1990) foreshadows Postmodern narrative techniques, it also provokes a deeply humanist critique of its own hypertrophied use of fleeting repetitions/recognitions.

3 | In particular, Barth's argument was directed against what he saw as an ideological superimposition of a single, rather limited literary tradition upon all of literature: "What my essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion' was really about, so it seems to me now, was the effective 'exhaustion' not of language or of literature, but of the aesthetic of high modernism: that admirable, not-to-be-repudiated, but essentially completed 'program' of what Hugh Kenner has dubbed "'the Pound era'" (Barth 1982: 39).

Yet to approach *The Recognitions* as a brilliant, but basically unreadable, literary 'borderline' case between Modernism and Postmodernism does not do justice to the novel's obsession with reproductions, doubling and forgery. Instead I try to overcome the various fault-lines of the Modernist/Postmodernist paradigm by emphasizing a concept of repetition that appears to be Gaddis' own 'original' solution to the crisis of originality in modern and postmodern cultures. Responding to the shifting conditions of artistic production during the latter half of the 20th century *The Recognitions*, I argue, sets out to redefine the very act of repetition itself.

The form of repetition I find most interesting in Gaddis' text is primarily philosophical and spiritual. At its most general level, the multiplying acts of repetition in the novel conjoin to evoke a single regenerative practice of "re-petitioning".[4] My model for this kind of repetition as the 're-capturing' and, subsequently, unfolding of an existential truth, is Kierkegaard's short philosophical narrative 'Repetition', originally published in 1843, a text that is strikingly absent from critical discussions of Gaddis' novel.[5]

In his introduction to the Penguin edition, fellow writer William Gass notes that "following the hubble bubble of its initial reception, *The Recognitions* was left in a lurch of silence, except for those happy yet furious few who had found this fiction […] about the nature, meaning, and value of 'the real thing' […] found *it* to be the real thing" (1985: viii). Gass' ironic, marvelously convoluted remark articulates an important truth about the nature of writing in general: any literary text, regardless of cautionary stylistic devices such as irony or self-referentiality, is likely to be taken by readers as more authentic than the reality it reflects upon. Even if the frame of reference, as in Postmodern writing, is the flimsy status of authenticity itself, we are reticent to deconstruct the act of criticism in the same way that we deconstruct the concepts represented in the text. The reason for this, I believe, is not so much that upon entering the realm of art we give the author the benefit of the doubt or suspend, as Coleridge has it, our commonsensical disbelief but that we all

4 | The term "regenerative re-petitioning" is LaCapra's (1986: 35). I have borrowed it here because it strikes a nice balance between the various meanings and wordplays of the German term *wieder-holen*, which constitutes the philosophical core of Kierkegaard's *The Repetition* (as I discuss above).

5 | To this intertextual panorama, one may well add Gilles Deleuze's creative appropriation of Kierkegaard in *Difference and Repetition* (1968), a text that raises similar questions about the nature of repetition to those raised in *The Recognitions*. By the same token, it would also be possible to speak of Gaddis' novel as a precursor text to Deleuze's, even though the latter does not seem to have been conscious of his American ancestor (which is actually quite surprising, given Deleuze's explicit interest in, and frequent references to, American literature).

participate in a pervasive culture of authenticity in which writing is considered an important means to 'authenticate' the modern subject.[6]

It is important to recall that the modern valorisation of artistic authenticity did not prevent an increasing confusion about the real and its false, mechanically reproduced double. In a perceptive study of the history of doubling, copying, and counterfeiting in Western culture, Hillel Schwartz argued that the emphasis on originality was accompanied by an equally widespread tendency to reproduce the unique work of art in order to make it available to a larger, mass audience.[7] What's more, it seems that rather than working against the practitioners of doubling and copying, the modern need for originality actually signaled the end of uniqueness on a scale that could barely have been imagined by even the most avid copyists of earlier times, of which, as Edward Young complained, there were plenty. With the turn of the 19th century — a century famed for the invention of key technologies in reproduction such as photography, lithography, stereotyping, the typewriter, telegraphy, the telephone and the phonograph — uniqueness and originality were reduced, slowly but surely, to a sort of aesthetic 'gold standard': appreciated by many as a wise rule yet utterly removed from cultural practices and the material demands of the marketplace.

This is not to say that there had always been an agreement on what precisely originality is and how it might be distinguished from its negative twin, repetition. From Edward Young's rather practically minded "Conjectures on Original Composition" to Emerson's patriotic call for an original, i.e. 'American' literature, from Coleridge's highly gendered organicist view of art that fatally ricochets in much of the 19th and 20th century discourse on authorship, to T. S. Eliot's praise of individual talent and its place within the hierarchies of tradition, or, more recently, John Barth's postmodern rewriting of that very tradition, there had always been a striking vagueness as to the trappings of originality in the arts and, more specifically, to the extent to which artists could 'borrow' from their predecessors. Most commentators have attempted to solve this problem by defining, or rather, redefining originality, while only a few have used

6 | In an early interview with Tom LeClair, Gaddis himself points out that we "still cling to art as order, at the same time, that one hopes that art is a destructive force" (LeClair 2007: 26).

7 | While Schwartz's assessment of copying and twinning practices in Western society is admirable for its wide range and almost encyclopedic approach to the topic (cf. 1996), there are numerous studies that deal more specifically with the history of forgery and counterfeiting in the visual arts (a topic especially pertinent to *The Recognitions*). For a historical overview, see Matthew Rutenberg's essay "The Charms of Deception" (1991).

the concept of repetition as cornerstone for a new theory of artistic creation.[8] Because its negative connotations — stagnation, imitation, mechanisation, primitivism, etc. — are perceived as irreconcilable with the very idea of creativity, it is often taken for granted that repetition *per se* cannot generate new insight or meaning.[9]

If much of what has been said so far turns on the juxtaposition of originality and repetition as mutually exclusive concepts, Gaddis' novel deliberately blurs the boundaries between these concepts. Before taking a somewhat closer look at how *The Recognitions* defies the various negative connotations of repetition — stagnation, imitation, mechanisation, etc. — a brief synopsis of the novel's intricate plot(s) seems in order.

Gaddis' first novel takes the form of a quest. In a carefully wrought series of plots involving more than fifty characters across three continents, we follow the adventures of Wyatt Gwyon, the son of a clergyman who rejects the ministry in favour of the calling of the artist. His quest turns on the problem of making sense of reality, to find some form of order in the world through art. His initial failure as an independent artist leads him to paint in the style of old masters who, in their own time, had found the beauty and order Wyatt fails to reach. His talent for forgery is exploited, however, by a group of unscrupulous art critics and businessmen who hope to make money by passing his works off as 'originals'. As the novel develops, these artistic forgeries become a profound metaphor for all kinds of fraud, counterfeiting and fakery: aesthetic, scientific, religious, sexual and cultural. Towards the end of the novel, Wyatt seems to gain some insight from repudiating the widespread circulation of false images and mechanical reproductions, but the nature of this revelation is highly ambiguous and does not allow for easy distinctions between the real and the counterfeit artifact, between originals and fakes. Extended portions of the novel are set in contemporary Greenwich, New York, with references to 'real' artists and writers of the 1950s.

8 | Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition*, names only Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and the French catholic writer Charles Péguy as having recognized repetition as a pivotal philosophical and creative concept: "Each of the three, in his own way, makes repetition not only a power peculiar to language and thought, a superior pathos and pathology, but also the fundamental category of a philosophy of the future" (Deleuze 1994: 5). Obviously, the list should also include Deleuze's own attempt to reconceptualise repetition vis-à-vis a cultural environment predicated upon difference and change.

9 | With the exception, perhaps, of its classic variant emulation (repetition as improvement), which was revived in America during the early national period to vindicate the lingering importation of ideas and technology from Europe.

To manage the various, interrelated patterns of repetitions and recognitions, Gaddis' novel sets out to redefine the concept of repetition as *re-cognition*; that is, as a second cognition (from *recognoscere*, which means to examine or investigate a lost or hidden truth).[10] The structural and epistemological dynamic which Gaddis sees at work between the two activities is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's analysis of repetition as a spiritual and poetical mode of knowing. It is to these resemblances or, if you like, repetitions, which I will now turn in more detail.

In a brief article titled "Stop Player. Joke No. 4", which appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1951, Gaddis ridicules the monotonous movement of the player piano and, in particular, its popularity among middle class Americans who smugly assume that possession of the automated instrument can be at all compared to mastering a piece of classical music.[11] Because of its dehumanising, crippling effects on the individual repetition, being merely the imitative, mechanical process of doubling (or aping), it is equally scorned in *The Recognitions*. References to technical means of reproduction abound, from the radio, the telephone or the record player to print reproductions of Wyatt's paintings, the burning of effigies and, in one of the

10 | In a very broad sense, *The Recognitions* can be read as a modern adaptation of the themes (and title) of a 1st century, anonymously published theological romance, also known as the *Clementine Recognitions*. As one of Gaddis' prominent characters, Basil Valentine, remarks, this "first Christian novel" (1955: 373) is already linked to yet another core narrative of Judeo-Christian culture, namely, the Faust legend or the fatal quest for truth outside the sanctioned avenues of, initially, Christian theology and, in later renderings, Enlightenment thought. Yet even though the search for redemption and the search for truth — as highlighted in the *Clementine Recognitions* and the Faust legend respectively — constitute an important undercurrent of meaning in Gaddis's text, the novel as a whole seems to be driven more specifically by a self-reflexive inquiry into the wide-ranging ramifications of repetition/recognition as pivotal techniques in the cultural accretion of knowledge, including the composition of the text at hand. It is worth noting, however, that the meaning and function of both categories — repetition and recognition — vary considerably. What's more, they are embedded in a series of contradictory, if not mutually exclusive, narrative contexts, which need to be thoroughly distinguished.

11 | This brief piece is actually the first instance of Gaddis' lifelong obsession with the history of the player piano as a glaring manifestation of cultural and intellectual decline. It foreshadows the use of the same theme in *JR* (1975) and the posthumously published novella *Agape Agape* (2002a). See also the notes on this and related material in *The Rush for Second Place* (2002b) and the afterword to *Agape Agape* by Joseph Tabbi.

novel's funniest scenes, the naïve attempt to directly apply set phrases from Dale Carnegie's bestseller *How To Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) to real-life situations. The list could easily be extended. On one level, then, *The Recognitions* clearly resonates with traces of Arnoldian cultural critique; and on another, it adumbrates, if in a subtler, poetic register, the harsh analysis of contemporary postindustrial society by Herbert Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man* (1964). Consider the following incident:

> The cab had turned east. As it stopped at a corner […] he looked out the closed window. People who passed, passed quickly and silently, leaving behind a figure barely taller than the barrel organ mounted on a stick, whose handle he turned, his only motion, the hand, clockwise, barely more enduring than the sounds he released on the night air, sounds without the vanity of music, sounds unattached, squeaks and drawn wheezes, pathos in the minor key and then the shrill of loneliness related to nothing but itself, like the wind round the fire place left standing after the house burned to the ground. (Gaddis 1955: 264)[12]

The description of the barrel organ highlights Gaddis' interest in the history of mechanical instruments (especially the player piano), yet it does so by condensing the far-reaching symbolic ramifications of 'mechanised' music into a single, compelling image. Juxtaposed with the cranking motions of the hand that 'plays' the instrument are sounds — pathetic "squeaks and wheezes" — that appear to be entirely detached from human agency or a physical center; the groaning murmur of the barrel organ, produced not by natural forces (as in the aeolian harp) but by the repetitive movement of a metallic cylinder scarred with dents and protrusions, has ceased to relate to anything but itself. As a fine example of 'repetition as mechanical reproduction', the image powerfully cuts across a wide range of concerns about the course of contemporary society. Most prominently, the concern about the loss of a centre or referent, of being caught in an endless loop of self-reflexive, autistic repetitions of a plot in which, as Wyatt puts it, the "hero fails to appear, fails to be working out some plan of comedy or, disaster" (263). As an artist, Wyatt has an acute sense of the tragedy of

12 | The above scene occurs towards the end of a crucial encounter between the protagonist, Wyatt Gwyon, and Basil Valentine, the priest-turned-critic and barely veiled mouthpiece of the author. The two men initially met at the offices of Recktall Brown, who commissions counterfeit paintings from Wyatt, and Valentine offered to take Wyatt to his apartment where he wants to show him blown-up photographs of paintings by Flemish masters. The incident is further contextualised by a reference to Thoreau's *Walden*, a book that Wyatt stealthily places on Valentine's lap while both are riding uptown in a cab.

this failure, of his being inextricably linked to a larger society that has lost its ability to deal with 'original' art in any other way than by endlessly reproducing it.

The difference between Wyatt's copying of Flemish masterpieces and the reproductions of these paintings in the art magazine *Collectors Quarterly*, which he dismisses as sham, "mechanical reproductions," is not easy to grasp. The ambiguous, if not paradoxical, definition of repetition as, on the one hand, a viable artistic technique and, on the other, a sign of cultural deprivation, can be traced throughout *The Recognitions*. They appear to be most pertinent in the novel's self-reflexive discourses on art and artistic production. In a crucial conversation with Esther, his first wife, Wyatt defends his obsession with copying against the modern, self-righteous emphasis on originality. The words here are those of his Munich art teacher Herr Koppel:[13]

> That romantic disease, originality, all around we see originality of incompetent idiots, they could draw nothing, paint nothing, just so the mess they make is original […]. Even two hundred years ago who wanted to be original, to be original was to admit that you could not do a thing the right way, so you could only do it your own way. When you paint you do not try to be original, only you think about your work, how to make it better, so you copy masters, only masters, for with each copy of a copy the form degenerates […] you do not invent shapes, you know them, auswendig wissen Sie, by heart […]. (89)

Wyatt's/Koppel's argument strikingly synthesises the divergent aspects of repetition in Gaddis' text, and it provides the key to an alternative, philosophical understanding of the term. This alternate meaning of repetition pivots on the German expression "auswendig wissen," which translates as *knowing by heart*, but contrary to its English equivalent derives from the verb "aus-wenden" or to *turn something inside out*. "Auswendig wissen" thus is a form of knowing that involves the turning of something inside out or looking at it from both sides, to know it by heart but also to know it 'inside out'. It is an activity that implies simultaneously the immersion *in* as well as a distancing *from* the phenomenon you intend to learn or know more about. According to Wyatt's reasoning, originality cannot be understood by way of difference, that is, as being different from what is already in existence, nor should repetition be reduced to a similarity with some pre-existing design or work of art. While the mass reproduction or copying for the sake of copying will lead to degeneration and decline, copying of a great work of art to the point where you begin to know it by heart — because you have become immersed in it, looked at it from the inside out — demarcates a mode of repetition of a different order.

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13 | "The First Turn of the Screw" and "The Last Turn of the Screw" are Gaddis's titles for the very first and last chapters, respectively.

Enter: Kierkegaard and Repetition

In his philosophical narrative *Repetition*, Kierkegaard proposed a radical revaluation of repetition as "the new [philosophical] category that will be discovered" (1983: 148). His complex use of repetitions and recognitions — both true and false — resembles Gaddis' technique in *The Recognitions*. It also triggered a host of critical interpretations of which Gilles Deleuze's post-structuralist re-reading *Différence et répétition* (1968) marks the beginning of a renewed interest in Kierkegaard as one of the most important thinkers of modernity.

In a very broad sense, Kierkegaard's *Repetition* is primarily concerned with re-conceptualising our relationship with time. Rather than explaining time as following a linear axis from past to present to future, as in Hegel's philosophy, Kierkegaard posits that we cannot experience time (including future time) other than through a recollection of things past, and that therefore our whole life comes to rest on the act of repetition:

> When the Greeks said that all knowledge is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been; when one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence. If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise. (149)

Put simply, the argument runs as follows: repetition is life because without repetition the present would be irrecoverably past or perpetually passing. Yet if reality is made of repetition, then the form by which repetition becomes manifest is *recollection*, or the act of remembering. Repetition, therefore, does not just happen; it is neither mechanical and automatic nor does it freeze human agency in a series of passing, identical moments. "The dialectic of repetition", Kierkegaard argues, "is easy; for that which is repeated has been — otherwise it could not be repeated — but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new" (149). Rather than marking the end of human life before it has even begun, repetition represents a powerful instrument to overcome death. "It may be true," Kierkegaard contends, "that a person's life is over and done with in the first moment, but there must also be the vital force to slay this death and transform it to life" (137).

Kierkegaard's definition of repetition as an ongoing process of remembering and representation is essentially poetic. To repeat (in German *wieder-holen*, to collect again) is an act of wilful recovery by way of re-imagining the past as presence. Moreover, the dynamics of repetition are volatile, it cannot be contrived or determined: repetition, according to Kierkegaard, "is and remains a transcendence" (1983: 186). By freeing repetition in this way from its negative material connotation, he is also able to posit a special place for the artist. If repetition is the driving force behind human existence, the artist — whose professional interests are centred in the

representation of being as 'past' time — becomes what Kierkegaard calls an 'exception', and a bridge to that other "aristocratic exception", namely religion. Insofar as he *re-petitions* life as art, the artist constantly navigates the shifting boundaries between the paradox of repetition and the dreadful possibility of irretrievable loss. This, then, is what connects him to the sphere of religion and spirituality and, by way of 'forward' recollection, to that mid-20th-century priest-turned-artist figure, Wyatt Gwyon.

Towards the end of *The Recognitions*, Wyatt, who by now has re-appeared under the name of Stephen, is seen in a Spanish monastery where he feverishly scrapes off layers of old paint from a 16th century genre painting. In keeping with the austere, spiritual surroundings, Wyatt is obsessed with "simplicity" (Gaddis 1955: 872), a reductive, self-annihilating approach to painting that he learned from studying Renaissance masters, who in turn had copied it from Titian (the American transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau, who has a cameo appearance in the novel, is yet another important reference here). Wyatt has pushed this idea to an extreme, in which simplification becomes erasure or the removal of every existing layer of paint. His model, obviously, is Praxiteles, the Greek artist who defined the process of sculpture as the removal of excess marble to the point where one "reaches the real form which was there all the time" (875). If Wyatt's search for perfection, purity and formal concretisation coincides with core modernist aesthetic values, his project can also be read as a re-petitioning of Kierkegaard's definition of art to "expose what is hidden" (1983: 135). Whereas Kierkegaard's protagonist Constantine "shaves off the beard of all [his] ludicrousness" every morning only to learn that "the next morning [his] beard is just as long again" (214), since repetition cannot be avoided, Wyatt scrapes off heaps of paint only to arrive at the recognition that "we all studied […] with Titian" (Gaddis 1955: 873), and that all his life has been marked by a form of artistic theft: "I am lived as a thief," he once remarks, "all my life is lived as a thief" (868).[14]

By positing repetition as a powerful, creative force, both Kierkegaard and Gaddis have attempted to relieve it of its negative cultural and philosophical image. From this perspective, reality is nothing but the repetition of an abstract idea, and artistic representations are always mere actualisations of the real. But even though it necessitates a series of repetitions, art is not — as in Plato's understanding — merely a mimetic imitation of life. Though ceaselessly actualising the real by way of repetition, art does not just reproduce what was there before. Rather it

14 | One is also struck here by a parallel between Kierkegaard's quip on shaving as castrating ("I sit and clip myself," 1983: 214) and Gaddis' mention of "that most extraordinary Father of the Church, Origen, whose third-century enthusiasm led him to castrate himself so that he might repeat the *hoc est corpus meum, Dominus*, without the distracting interference of the rearing shadow of the flesh" (1955: 103).

resembles Kierkegaard's experience of re-reading the Book of Job: "Every time I come to it, it is born anew as something original or becomes new and original in my soul" (1983: 205).

According to an oft-quoted essay by Umberto Eco, postmodern media culture signals a shift from innovation to repetition, from the modern aesthetics of novelty to the postmodern aesthetics of recognition. In doing so, it also introduces a form of myth-making. Yet myth, Eco argues, "has nothing to do with art. It is a story, always the same. It may not be the story of Atreus and it may be that of J. R. Why not?" (Eco 1985: 182). Gaddis would not agree. To this relentless critic of mechanical forms of reproduction, postindustrial man is veiled by an "undimensional darkness", a self-perpetuating, endless repetition of "static patternless configurations [that] recalled nothing" (Gaddis 1955: 286). To escape "the Diaspora of words" (85) associated with contemporary mediated society, Gaddis proposes a return to simplicity, to that "unmeasurable residence of perfection, where nothing was created, where originality did not exist: because it was origin." This, to be sure, entails both the process of making and that of un-making, of "scraping off" (cf. 873).[15]

The Recognitions may be seen as the next best solution to this challenging task of the postmodern writer to embrace repetition as a new category while simultaneously resisting the dangers of self-effacement. Given the increasing skepticism about the postmodern reduction of art as either a commodity or a site of conflicting ideologies, we might wish that Gaddis's re-configuring of repetition as re-petitioning would finally be recognised as an original contribution in its own right to the ongoing debate about aesthetics and the place of art in contemporary society.

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15 | An impossible task, most readily associated in the novel with Esme, the enigmatic, ephemeral muse of Greenwich's artistic community (and fictional alias of Sheri Martinelli, Ezra Pound's long-term friend and partner), who knows how to create without creating. Working through a thousand words that by now have become "a million inanities", she moves on to where "work and thought in causal and stumbling sequence did not exist, but only transcription: where the poem she knew but could not write existed, ready-formed, awaiting recovery in that moment when the writing down of it was impossible: because she was the poem" (2000–01: 299-300).

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