WILLIAM GADDIS was born in New York City in 1922. After receiving a degree from Harvard, Mr. Gaddis worked as a writer for corporations and for film studios; he also worked on magazines and taught for brief periods. In 1955, his complex and controversial novel THE RECOGNITIONS appeared. A new novel is in progress. Mr. Gaddis has received grants from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Nihil cavum neque sine signo apud Deum.

—Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*

THE RECOGNITIONS

WILLIAM GADDIS

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The quotation on page 56 is from Sir James Frazer's THE GOLDEN BOUGH, and is used with the permission of The Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc.

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PART I

I

THE FIRST TURN OF THE SCREW

MEPHISTOPHELES (*leiser*): Was gibt es denn?
WAGNER (*leiser*): Es wird ein Mensch gemacht.
—Goethe, *Faust*, II

Even Camilla had enjoyed masquerades, of the safe sort where the mask may be dropped at that critical moment it presumes itself as reality. But the procession up the foreign hill, bounded by cypress trees, impelled by the monotone chanting of the priest and retarded by hesitations at the fourteen stations of the Cross (not to speak of the funeral carriage in which she was riding, a white horse-drawn vehicle which resembled a baroque confectionery stand), might have ruffled the shy countenance of her soul, if it had been discernible.

The Spanish affair was the way Reverend Gwyon referred to it afterwards: not casually, but with an air of reserved preoccupation. He had had a fondness for traveling, earlier in his life; and it was this impulse to extend his boundaries which had finally given chance the field necessary to its operation (in this case, a boat bound out for Spain), and cost the life of the woman he had married six years before.

—Buried over there with a lot of dead Catholics, was Aunt May's imprecation. Aunt May was his father's sister, a barren steadfast woman, Calvinistically faithful to the man who had been Reverend Gwyon before him. She saw her duty in any opportunity at true Christian umbrage. For the two families had more to resent than the widower's seemingly whimsical acceptance of his wife's death. They refused to forgive his not bringing Camilla's body home, for deposit in the clean Protestant soil of New England. It was their Cross, and they bore it away toward a

bleak exclusive Calvary with admirable Puritan indignance.

This is what had happened.

In the early fall, the couple had sailed for Spain.

—Heaven only knows what they want to do over there, among all those . . . those foreigners, was one comment.

—A whole country full of them, too.

—And Catholic, growled Aunt May, refusing even to repeat the name of the ship they sailed on, as though she could sense the immediate disaster it portended, and the strife that would litter the seas with broken victories everywhere, which it anticipated by twenty years.

Nevertheless, they boarded the *Purdue Victory* and sailed out of Boston harbor, provided for against all inclemencies but these they were leaving behind, and those disasters of such scope and fortuitous originality which Christian courts of law and insurance companies, humbly arguing ad hominem, define as acts of God.

On All Saints' Day, seven days out and half the journey accomplished, God boarded the *Purdue Victory* and acted. Camilla was stricken with acute appendicitis.

The ship's surgeon was a spotty unshaven little man whose clothes, arrayed with smudges, drippings, and cigarette burns, were held about him by an extensive network of knotted string. The buttons down the front of those duck trousers had originally been made, with all of false economy's ingenious drear deception, of coated cardboard. After many launderings they persisted as a row of gray stumps posted along the gaping portals of his fly. Though a boutonnière sometimes appeared through some vacancy in his shirt-front, its petals, too, proved to be of paper, and he looked like the kind of man who scrapes foam from the top of a glass of beer with the spine of a dirty pocket comb, and cleans his nails at table with the tines of his salad fork, which things, indeed, he did. He diagnosed Camilla's difficulty as indigestion, and locked himself in his cabin. That was the morning.

In the afternoon the Captain came to fetch him, and was greeted by a scream so drawn with terror that even his doughty blood stopped. Leaving the surgeon in what was apparently an epileptic seizure, the Captain decided to attend the chore of Camilla himself; but as he strode toward the smoking saloon with the ship's operating kit under his arm, he glanced in again at the surgeon's porthole. There he saw the surgeon cross himself, and raise a glass of spirits in a cool and steady hand.

That settled it.

The eve of All Souls' lowered upon that sea in desolate disregard for sunset, and the surgeon appeared prodded from behind down the rolling parti-lit deck. Newly shaven, in a clean mess-boy's apron, he poised himself above the still woman to describe a phantasmagoria of crosses over his own chest, mouth, and forehead; conjured, kissed, and dismissed a cross at his calloused fingertips, and set to work. Before the mass supplications for souls in Purgatory had done rising from the lands now equidistant before and behind, he had managed to put an end to Camilla's suffering and to her life.

The subsequent inquiry discovered that the wretch (who had spent the rest of the voyage curled in a coil of rope reading alternatively the Book of Job and the Siamese National Railway's *Guide to Bangkok*) was no surgeon at all. Mr. Sinisterra was a fugitive, traveling under what, at the time of his departure, had seemed the most logical of desperate expedients: a set of false papers he had printed himself. (He had done this work with the same artistic attention to detail that he gave to banknotes, even to using Rembrandt's formula for the wax ground on his copper plate.) He was as distressed about the whole thing as anyone. Chance had played against him, cheated him of the unobtrusive retirement he had planned from his chronic profession, into the historical asylum of Iberia.

—*The first turn of the screw pays all debts,* he had muttered (crossing himself) in the stern of the *Purdue Victory*, where the deck shuddered underfoot as the blades of the single screw churned Boston's water beneath him; and the harbor itself, loath to let them depart, retained the sound of the ship's whistle after it had blown, to yield it only in reluctant particles after them until they moved in silence.

Now he found himself rescued from oblivion by agents of that country not Christian enough to rest assured in the faith that he would pay fully for his sins in the next world (Dante's eye-witness account of the dropsical torments being suffered even now in Malebolge by that pioneer Adamo da Brescia, who falsified the florin, notwithstanding), bent on seeing that he pay in this one. In the United States of America Mr. Sinisterra had been a counterfeiter. During the investigation, he tried a brief defense of his medical practice on the grounds that he had once assisted a vivisectionist in Tampa, Florida; and when this failed, he settled down to sullen grumbling about the Jews, earthly vanity, and quoted bits from Ecclesiastes, Alfonso Liguori, and Pope Pius IX, in answer to any accusatory question.

Since it was not true that he had, as a distant tabloid reported, been trapped by alert Federal agents who found him substituting his own likeness for the gross features of Andrew Jackson on the American twenty-dollar note, Mr. Sinisterra paid this gratuitous slander little attention. But, like any sensitive artist caught in the toils of unsympathetic critics, he still smarted severely from the review given his work on page one of *The National Counterfeit Detector Monthly* ("Nose in Jackson portrait appears bulbous due to heavy line from bridge ..."); and soon enough thereafter, his passion for anonymity feeding upon his innate modesty amid walls of Malebolgian acclivity, he resolved upon a standard of such future excellence for his work, that jealous critics should never dare attack him as its author again. His contrition for the death which had occurred under his hand was genuine, and his penances sincere; still, he made no connection between that accident in the hands of God, and the career which lay in his own. He was soon at work on a hand-engraved steel plate, in the prison shop where license number-tags were turned out.

For the absence of a single constellation, the night sky might have been empty to the anxious eye of a Greek navigator, seeking the Pleiades, whose fall disappearance signaled the close of the seafaring season. The Pleiades had set while the *Purdue Victory* was still at sea, but no one sought them now, that galaxy of suns so far away that our own would rise and set unseen at such a distance: a constellation whose setting has inaugurated celebrations for those lying in graves from Aztec America to Japan, encouraging the Druids to their most solemn mystery of the reconstruction of the world, bringing to Persia the month of Mordad, and the angel of death.

Below, like a constellation whose configured stars only hazard to describe the figure imposed upon them by the tyranny of ancient imagination, where Argo in the southern sky is seen only with an inner eye of memory not one's own, so the ship against the horizonless sea of night left the lines which articulated its perfection to that same eye, where the most decayed and misused hulk assumed clean lines of grace beyond the disposition of its lights. "Obscure in parts and starless, as from prow / To mast, but other portions blaze with light," the *Purdue Victory* lay in the waters off Algeciras, and like Argo, who now can tell prow from stern? Vela, the sails? Carina, the keel? where

she lies moored to the south celestial pole, and the end of the journey for the Golden Fleece.

The widower debarked in a lighter that cool clear November night, with one more piece of luggage than he had had when he set out. Gwyon had refused to permit burial at sea. He faced strenuous difficulties entering the port of Spain, most of which hung about an item listed as "Importación ilegal de carnes dañadas," difficulties surmounted only by payment of a huge fee covering the fine, duties, excises, imposts, tributes, and archiepiscopal dispensation, since the cadaver was obviously heretical in origin. The cumbrous bundle was finally sealed in a box of mahogany, which he carted about the country seeking a place suitable to its interment.

Eventually, on the rise behind the village of San Zwingli overlooking the rock-strewn plain of New Castile, Camilla Gwyon was sheltered in a walled space occupied by other rent-paying tenants, with a ceremony which would have shocked her progenitors out of their Calvinist composure, and might have startled her own Protestant self, if there had been any breath left to protest. But nothing untoward happened. The box slid into its high cove in the bóveda unrestrained by such churnings of the faithful as may have been going on around it, harassed by the introduction of this heretic guest in a land where even lepers had been burned or buried separately, for fear they communicate their disease to the dead around them. By evening her presence there was indigenous, unchallenged, among decayed floral tributes and wreaths made of beads, or of metal, among broken glass façades and rickety icons, names more ornate than her own, photographs under glass, among numerous children, and empty compartments waiting, for the moment receptacles of broken vases or a broken broom. Next to the photograph of a little cross-eyed girl in long white stockings, Camilla was left with Castile laid out at her feet, the harsh surface of its plain as indifferent to memory of what has passed upon it as the sea.

The Reverend Gwyon was then forty-four years old. He was a man above the middle height with thin and graying hair, a full face and flushed complexion. His clothing, although of the prescribed moribund color, had a subtle bit of dash to it which had troubled his superiors from the start. His breath, as he grew older, was scented more and more freshly with caraway, those seeds often used in flavoring schnapps, and his eyes would glow one moment with intense interest in the matter at hand, and the next

be staring far beyond temporal bounds. He had, by now, the look of a man who was waiting for something which had happened long before.

As a youth in a New England college he had studied the Romance languages, mathematics, and majored in classical poetry and anthropology, a series of courses his family thought safely dismal since language was a student's proper concern, and nothing could offer a less carnal picture of the world than solid geometry. Anthropology they believed to be simply the inspection of old bones and measurement of heathen heads; and as for the classics, few suspected the liberties of Menander ("perfumed and in flowing robe, with languid step and slow . . ."). Evenings Gwyon spent closeted with Thomas Aquinas, or constructing, with Roger Bacon, formidable geometrical proofs of God. Months and then years passed, in Divinity School, and the Seminary Then he traveled among primitive cultures in America. He was doing missionary work. But from the outset he had little success in convincing his charges of their responsibility for a sin committed at the beginning of creation, one which, as they understood it, they were ready and capable (indeed, they carried charms to assure it) of duplicating themselves. He did no better convincing them that a man had died on a tree to save them all: an act which one old Indian, if Gwyon had translated correctly, regarded as "rank presumption." He recorded few conversions, and those were usually among women, the feeble, and heathen sick and in transit between this world and another, who accepted the Paradise he offered like children enlisted on an outing to an unfamiliar amusement park. Though one battered old warrior said he would be converted only on the certainty that he would end up in the lively Hell which Gwyon described: it sounded more the place for a man; and on hearing the bloody qualifications of this zealous candidate (who offered to add his mentor's scalp to his collection as guaranty), the missionary assured him that he would. But the tall men around him would have none of his ephemeral, guilt-ridden prospects, and continued to beatify trees, tempests, and other natural prodigies. In solemn convocation, called in alarm, his superiors decided that Gwyon was too young. He was certainly too interested in what he saw about him. He was called back to the Seminary for a refresher course, and it was at that time that he developed a taste for schnapps, and started the course of mithridatism which was to serve him so well in his later years.

As a youth in college he had also got interested in the worldly indulgence of the theater (though it was not true, as some had it years later when he was locked up, defenseless, that he had made pocket money while in Divinity School playing the anonymous end of a horse in a bawdy Scollay Square playhouse). As he observed, no theater can prosper without popular subscription; which may well have been why the sincere theatricals of religions more histrionic than his own appealed to him. It was why he donated a resplendent chasuble, black with gold-embroidered skulls-and-bones rampant down the back, to the priest at San Zwingli in Spain (whom he would have costumed like an archbishop had the poor fellow dared let him). It was why he had given money for a new plaster representation of the canonized wraith (though, as the priest said, what they dearly needed was a legitimate locally spawned patron saint) who watched over the interests of the multitude: to them he gave Camilla's clothes, and an assortment of tambourines. And that was why, in Christian turn, they reciprocated with the festival which committed the body he had shared to rest on earth, and cajoled the only soul he had ever sought toward heaven.

In the next few months, various reports were received at home concerning the pastor's sabbatical: rococo tales, adorned with every element but truth. It was not true that, to exercise the humility struck through him by this act of God (in later years he was heard to refer to the "unswerving punctuality of chance"), he had dressed himself in rags, rented three pitiful children, and was to be encountered daily by footloose tourists in a state of mendicant collapse before the Ritz hotel in Madrid; it was not true that he had stood the entire population of Málaga to drinks for three days and then conducted them on an experimental hike across the sea toward Africa, intending that the One he sought should manage it dryshod; it was not true that he had married a hoary crone with bangles in her ears, proclaimed himself rightful heir to the throne of Abd-er-Rahman, and led an insurrection of the Moors on Córdoba. It was not even true that he had entered a Carthusian monastery as a novice.

He had entered a Franciscan monastery as a guest, in a cathartic measure which almost purged him of his life.

The Real Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez had been finished in the fourteenth century by an order since extinguished. Its sense of guilt was so great, and measures of atonement so stringent, that those who came

through alive were a source of embarrassment to lax groups of religious who coddled themselves with occasional food and sleep. When the great monastery was finished, with turreted walls, parapets, crenelations, machicolations, bartizans, a harrowing variety of domes and spires in staggering Romanesque, Byzantine effulgence, and Gothic run riot in mullioned windows, window tracings, and an immense rose window whose foliations were so elaborate that it was never furnished with glass, the brothers were brought forth and tried for heresy. *Homoiousian*, or *Homoousian*, that was the question. It had been settled one thousand years before when, at Nicæa, the fate of the Christian church hung on a diphthong: Homoousian, meaning of *one* substance. The brothers in faraway Estremadura had missed the Nicæan Creed, busy out of doors as they were, or up to their eyes in cold water, and they had never heard of Arius. They chose Homoiousian, of *like* substance, as a happier word than its tubular alternative (no one gave them a chance at Heteroousian), and were forthwith put into quiet dungeons which proved such havens of self-indulgence, unfurnished with any means of vexing the natural processes, that they died of very shame, unable even to summon such pornographic phantasms as had kept Saint Anthony rattling in the desert (for to tell the truth none of these excellent fellows knew for certain what a woman looked like, and each could, without divinely inspired effort, banish that image enhanced by centuries of currency among them, in which She watched All with inflamed eyes fixed in the substantial antennae on Her chest). Their citadel passed from one group to another, until accommodating Franciscans accepted it to store their humble accumulation of generations of charity. These moved in, encumbered by pearl-encrusted robes, crowns too heavy for the human brow with the weight of precious stones, and white linen for the table service.

They had used the place well. Here, Brother Ambrosio had been put under an iron pot (he was still there) for refusing to go out and beg for his brethren. There was the spot where Abbot Shekinah (a convert) had set up his remarkable still. There was the cell where Fr. Eulalio, a thriving lunatic of eighty-six who was castigating himself for unchristian pride at having all the vowels in his name, and greatly revered for his continuous weeping, went blind in an ecstasy of such howling proportions that his canonization was assured. He was surnamed Epiclantos, 'weeping so much,' and the quicklime he had been rubbing into his

eyes was put back into the garden where it belonged. And there, in the granary, was the place where an abbot, a bishop, and a bumblebee ... but there are miracles of such wondrous proportions that they must be kept, guarded from ears so wanting in grace that disbelief blooms into ridicule.

They got on well enough, even with the Holy See, the slight difficulties which arose in the seventeenth century being quite understandable, for who could foresee what homely practice would next be denounced as a vice by the triple-tiered Italian in the Vatican. The Brothers were severely censured for encouraging geophagous inclinations among the local nobility, whose ladies they had inspirited with a craving for the taste of the local earth, as seasoning, or a dish in itself: it was, after all, Spanish earth. But the commotion died. The ladies were seduced by salt (it was Spanish salt, from Cádiz), and peace settled for two more centuries, broken only by occasional dousings of the church altar with flying milk by peasants who chose this fashion of delivering their tithes, or monks knocked senseless by flying stones when they were noticed beyond the walls.

No one had ever got round to installing central heating, or any other kind. In summer, no one thought of it; in winter the good Brothers were immobilized, stagnating round heavily clothed tables with braziers underneath which toasted their sandaled feet, warmed them as far as the privities, and left them, a good part of the time, little better than paraplegics. The winter Reverend Gwyon appeared was a particularly harsh one in Estremadura. He was admitted as a curiosity, for few had ever seen a living Protestante, let alone one of their caudillos. But for Fr. Manomuerta, the organist, their guest might have been invited elsewhere: had not the confessor to the young king recently declared that to eat with a Protestante was to nominate one's self for excommunication? not vitando, perhaps, but at the least implying the consequence of working for a living. Curiosity prevailed. And at Christmas, Fr. Manomuerta reported to his fraternity that he had witnessed (through the large keyhole) their heretic guest administer the Eucharist to himself in his room, a ceremony crude and lonely compared to their own. —He is a good man, Fr. Manomuerta told the others, —there is some of Christ in him ... But a few of those others wanted Gwyon castigated for defiling their rite, and even those who did not credit him with an actual Black Mass felt there was no telling how much damage might have been

done simply by his tampering. Fr. Manomuerta understood some of the English language and assured them no such thing had happened, but for those whose suspicions were not allayed, reward seemed imminent some days later.

Gwyon had impressed his hosts with his capacity for their red wine, inclined to sit drinking it down long after they had finished eating, wiped their silver on their linen napkins and hidden it, and padded away. But he finally succumbed to a bronchial condition which threatened to become pneumonia and give him opportunity to pay the highest of Protestant tributes to Holy Church by dying on the good Brothers' hands. In a small room whose window lay in the countenance of the church façade overlooking the town's muddy central plaza, he developed a delirium which recalled the legends of the venerated Eulalio Epiclantos to some, to others (better read) the demoniacal persecution of Saint Jean Vianney, the Curé d'Ars, whose presbytery was in a continual state of siege, demons throwing platters and smashing water jugs, drumming on tables, laughing fiendishly and even, one night, setting fire to the curtains round the curé's bed. Gwyon himself was a big man. It was considered wise to leave him alone during these visitations.

So he lay alone one evening, perspiring in spite of the cold, almost asleep to be wakened suddenly by the hand of his wife, on his shoulder as she used to wake him. He struggled up from the alcoved bed, across the room to the window where a cold light silently echoed passage. There was the moon, reaching a still arm behind him, to the bed where he had lain. He stood there unsteady in the cold, mumbling syllables which almost resolved into her name, as though he could recall, and summon back, a time before death entered the world, before accident, before magic, and before magic despaired, to become religion.

Clouds blew low over the town, shreds of dirty gray, threatening, like evil assembled in a hurry, disdained by the moon they could not obliterate.

Next day the Brothers, in apprehensive charity, loaded Gwyon onto a mule, and after conducting him as far as the floor of the valley, Fr. Manomuerta Godsped him with benediction and the exhortation to return. Following a horrendous journey, Gwyon was delivered to the best hotel in the country, where he was left to recover.

At night, his was the only opened window in Madrid. Around him less than a million people closed outside shutters, sashes, inside shutters and curtains, hid behind locked

and bolted doors themselves in congruent shapes of unconsciousness from the laden night as it passed. Through that open window he was wakened by lightning, and not to the lightning itself but the sudden absence of it, when the flash had wakened him to an eternal instant of half-consciousness and left him fully awake, chilled, alone and astonished at the sudden darkness where all had been light a moment before, chilled so thoroughly that the consciousness of it seemed to extend to every faintly seen object in the room, chilled with dread as the rain pounding against the sill pounded into his consciousness as though to engulf and drown it. —Did I close the study window? ... The door to the carriage barn? Anything ... did I leave anything out in the rain? Polly? ... a doll he had had forty years before, mistress of a house under the birch trees in the afternoon sun, and those trees now, supple in the gale of wind charged inexhaustibly with water and darkness, the rest mud: the sense of something lost.

On the hill in San Zwingli the rain beat against the figure crucified in stone over the gate, arms flung out like a dancer. It beat against the bóveda, vault upon vault, bead flowers and metal wreaths, broken stems and glass broken like the glass in a picture frame over a name and a pitiful span of years where the cross-eyed girl in white stockings waited beside Camilla, and the water streamed into the empty vaults. Outside another wall enclosed a plot of grass long-grown and ragged over mounds which had sunk from prominence, to be located only by wooden triangles and crosses, unattended and askew in that fierce grass, unprotected like the bodies beneath whom poverty denied a free-standing house in death as it had in life, and faith alone availed them this disheveled refuge of consecrated ground, wet now.

Gwyon bounded out of bed in sudden alarm, his feet on the cold tile woke him to himself in Madrid and he stood shivering with life, and the sense of being engulfed in Spain's time, that, like her, he would never leave. He dressed with his usual care but more quickly, drank down a glass of coñac, and went out. The rain was over. When the huge gates were opened he walked into the formal winter wastes of the Retiro Park, waiting for the late sunrise, menaced on every hand by the motionless figures of monarchs.

In that undawned light the solid granite benches were commensurably sized and wrought to appear as the unburied caskets of children. Behind them the trees stood leafless, waiting for life but as yet coldly exposed in their