JR: The Narrative of Entropy

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Several years after the bestowal of a National Book Award, William Gaddis's *JR* (1975) remains surprisingly neglected. The neglect may be more understandable when the narrative form of Gaddis's satire on capitalism is considered. *JR* consists of 725 pages of dialogues, which take place between often unnamed speakers and are interrupted, confused, or intermittently disconnected. In fact, the communications system within the world of *JR* malfunctions so grieviously that an avaricious sixth-grader, J.R. Vasant, becomes the head of the gigantic, disorganized J R Corporation through a series of misunderstandings and miscommunications. The collapse of the J R Corporation ends Gaddis's work, but in narrating his entropic vision, Gaddis approaches the boundaries of the novel, for *JR* is very close to a novel without narration.[1]

In terms of structure, the chaotic conversations of *JR* hardly make one think of modern attempts to compose symphonic fiction, such as sections of *Ulysses*, Hermann Broch's *Death of Virgil*, and Anthony Burgess's *Napoleon Symphony*. Nevertheless, Gaddis may have developed *JR* from the experiments in writing symphonic novels, for, as Steven Weisenburger notes in the first substantial critical article about *JR*, Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* "serves as mythic sub-text to the fictional plot" of *JR* as Homer's *Odyssey* serves as the foundation of Joyce's *Ulysses*.[2] The Alberich of Gaddis's opus is J.R. Vansant (who plays Alberich in his school's presentation of "The Rhinegold") and renounces love as Alberich does.[3] JR's manipulation of mail-order catalogues and the telephone leads to the power and wealth of the "JR Family of Companies." JR hires Edward Bast, a would-be composer and possible heir to the Bast family fortune or talent (musical compositions), thus establishing the discordant relationship between art and commerce.

As *JR*'s Long Island school is the Nibelhome of this work, the Wall Street skyscrapers are the steel and glass Valhalla of Gaddis's work. Governor Cates (Wotan) presides over this castle in the clouds and supervises the actions of the Valhallans (Crawley, Davidoff, and Moncrieff) as they make international deals and put out corporate "brush fires." Cates's daughter, Amy Joubert (Brunnhilde) teaches JR's class and actually brings JR to the corporate Valhalla on a class tour. Caught between JR and the Wall Street Valhalla are the male teachers at JR's school, who

[1]Gaddis experimented with narration in his first novel, which was originally published in 1955. *The Recognitions* (New York: Avon Books, 1974) is, in the words of one of its characters, almost "a whole Odyssey without Ulysses," for the protagonist disappears for hundreds of pages (p. 871). Ironically, *The Recognitions* is now becoming recognized as an important novel. The University of Nebraska Press has recently published Steven Moore's *A Reader's Guide to William Gaddis's "The Recognitions,"* and *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* has published a William Gaddis/Nicholas Mosley number (2, No. 2; Summer 1982). And Syracuse University Press is scheduled to publish a collection of essays on Gaddis in 1984.

[2]Steven Weisenburger, "Contra Naturam?: Usury in William Gaddis's *JR*," *Genre*, 12 (Spring 1980), p. 95. See also Thomas LeClair, "William Gaddis, *JR*, & the Art of Excess," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 27, No. 4 (Winter 1981-82), 587-600.

[3]*JR* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 36. Further references to *JR* will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

are all so beset with monetary worries that they are creatively jejune—either they cannot create because of financial concerns or they never receive recognition and payment for what they do produce.

Edward Bast's possible inheritance of his family's riches leads to his attempted seduction by Stella Angel and results in a distantly incestuous affair which recalls Siegmund and Sieglinda of "The Valkyrie." However, when Weisenburger argues that Bast "embodies both the Siegmund and Siegfried characters from the *Ring*" (p. 98), he neglects the importance of Jack Gibbs, who more clearly qualifies as Gaddis's Siegfried. After all, Jack Gibbs has an affair with Amy Joubert, Gaddis's Brunnhilde, trysting in the 96th Street apartment, which has, instead of a rock surrounded by flames, a hot water faucet and a radio, both continuously on. Instead of being corrupted by drinking a magic potion, Jack Gibbs suffers from a wrongly diagnosed case of leukemia. Furthermore, Jack Gibbs is one of the few characters to confront the dragon of depreciation (as Siegfried) by trying to produce something creative with his pen. The Wagnerian debt is clear: if Wagner's operas with their consistent and careful use of lietmotifs can be said to present Wagner's vision, Gaddis's persistently interrupted and disconnected conversations can be said to present Gaddis's vision of increasing disorder. If Wagner's operas are symphonies of symbols, then Gaddis's *JR* is the cacaphony of chaos.

A comparison of Gaddis's work to that of other unusual narratives reveals how Gaddis's narrative technique so effectively complements his vision of increasing chaos and miscommunication. Comparing Gaddis's conversations to epistolary novels such as *Clarissa* or even Barth's *Letters* reveals that the character/writers reflect on the past; whereas, almost all the action in *JR* is in the present tense: the characters are in the process of acting and deciding and rarely have time for reflection. Yet, the discussions in *JR* can hardly be compared to the *Dialogues* of Plato, which are teleologically oriented, moving toward a definite conclusion. The chaos of the narrative can also echo the state of the protagonist's mind as in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, but Wayne Booth's comments about Tristram Shandy are especially instructive in terms of the difference in narrative techniques. Booth says that in the case of Tristram Shandy, "the dramatized narrator has ceased . . . to be distinguishable from what he relates," because Booth says, "the chaos is all of [Tristram's] own making."[4] The novel that resembles *JR* in narrative technique and focus on the individual's quest for success is Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* consisting of confessional monologues which focus intently on the character of Bob Slocum and his climb up the corporate chart.

Gaddis's elimination of conventional authorial intrusions in *JR* (which identify locale or explain the passage of time) create a sense of disorientation in time and space. In other words, the author offers no help in explaining narrative action. Gaddis did explain that he chose *JR*'s narrative technique to avoid boredom:

> In approaching J R [sic] as a novel, I was at pains to remove the author's presence from the start as must be obvious. This was partly by way of what I mentioned earlier, obliging the thing to stand on its own, take its own chances. But it was also by way of setting up a problem, a risk, in order to sustain my own interest, especially since the largely uninterrupted dialogue raised the further risk of presenting a convincing sense of real time without the conventional chapter breaks, white spaces, such narrative intrusions as A week later . . . How some of the writers I come across get through their books without dying of boredom is beyond me.[5]

[4]Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 223, 231.

[5]John Kuehl and Steven Moore, "An Interview with William Gaddis," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 2, No. 2 (Summer 1982), p. 5.

The narrative technique of *JR* most closely resembles the narrative form of dialogues which Ivy Compton-Burnett used in her novels, particularly *A Heritage and Its History* (1959). Both Gaddis and Compton-Burnett have dispensed with distance between the reader and the characters so that the reader is extremely close to the characters, who are never introduced. Moreover, both Gaddis and Compton-Burnett, unlike Heller, have eliminated almost any kind of central perspective or organizing principle such as character/narrator or intrusive narration; consequently, the reader (as Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader* says) "must leave behind his own familiar world and plunge into the unknown." Gaddis claims that he has never read Compton-Burnett, but both confront the reader with a world of indeterminate immediacy.[6] Although Compton-Burnett includes sparse neutral comments such as, "He said" (which Gaddis does not), Gaddis achieves much better characterization than Compton-Burnett. Compton-Burnett's characters seem faceless because little of the dialogue refers to anything concrete, and because the actions of the characters do not match their ambitions; thus the plot gets reduced to irrelevancy (See, Iser, pp. 251, 157, and 163).

Because Gaddis's narrative intrusions are so limited, and because he does not label his speakers—as Compton-Burnett does—he has to identify the speaker only from the speaker's utterance. Gaddis either has to make the style of the speaker's speech, the idiolect, so distinctive that it could be easily recognized (as with the "God damns" of Jack Gibbs), or he needs to make the subject of the speaker's utterance unique. Thus in a Wagnerian manner, the characters often have a motif—a particular obsession (for example, Crawley's plans to populate public lands with African animals so he can enjoy American safaris), or a definite motivation. Perhaps because the fabric of *JR* is interwoven with these connecting threads, Gaddis could so thoroughly explore chaos in his novel.

Gaddis does achieve an almost perfect emblem of the breakdown of systems and resultant chaos when he has Bast and his cohorts try to work out of the 96th Street apartment, which is the apartment visited by unwelcome and misinformed guests and is innundated by JR's merchandise and junk mail. The "occupants," who cannot distinguish the important from the unimportant mail, resort to an electric letter opener, which malfunctions, cutting the letters in half. These would-be artists with careers of quiet desperation cannot work because their compositions can never be located in the morass of accumulating material that keeps arriving hourly. Furthermore, even if they could locate their work, they would be distracted by the radio constantly blaring from somewhere under the piles of delivered stuff, or by the constantly running hot water tap in the bathroom. As Jack Gibbs concludes in exasperation: "—Problem Bast there's too God damned much leakage around here, can't compose anything with all this energy spilling you've got entropy going everywhere. Radio leaking under there hot water pouring out so God damned much entropy going on think you can hold all these notes together know what it sounds like? Bast?" (*JR*, p. 287).

Jack Gibbs serves as the commentator on entropy because he is the one character who confronts the issue for Gaddis. (Jack Gibbs may be derived from Josiah Willard Gibbs, the nineteenth-century scientist who first expounded the concept of entropy.) Gibbs has plans to write a difficult book "about order and disorder more of a, sort of a social history of mechanization and the arts, the destructive element" (*JR*, p. 244). As a teacher, Gibbs insists that order is important for information and knowledge: "Order is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos" (*JR*, p. 20). Jack Gibb's evaluation of the "perilous condition" of order sounds very similar to Gaddis's own:

[6]Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 161. Typed letter (signed) from William Gaddis, 3 May 1982.

> The real marvel in our complex technological world, given the frustration implicit in Murphy's law, is not that if anything can go wrong it will go wrong but that anything goes right at all. In communications and control "we are always," wrote cybernetics' pathfinder Norbert Wiener, "fighting nature's tendency to degrade the organized and destroy the meaningful." The more complex the message, the greater the chance for error. Entropy rears as the central preoccupation of our time. As computer technology's appetite for precision is enhanced by its own enlarged complexity, the archenemy, disorganization, must look increasingly to human error for an ally; and failing error, where foul is useful and fair is not, to sheer deceit.[7]

In *JR* human failings with simple and complex messages cause disorganization. Gaddis develops this theme brilliantly in the very first scene of *JR*, when a lawyer, Mr. Coen, attempts to explain to the elderly Bast sisters (Gaddis's Rhinemaidens) the problems resulting from their brother dying intestate. Amid the disorder caused by dropping his papers and his glasses and losing a button from his coat (increasing disorder), Mr. Coen, speaking in legal jargon, utterly fails to make his purpose clear to the Bast sisters. While miscommunications may be bathetic, they also may illustrate failures in relationships, as Jack Gibbs notes: "Whole God damned problem read Wiener on communication, more complicated the message more God damned chance for errors, take a few years of marriage such a God damned complex of messages going both ways can't get a God damned thing across, God damned much entropy going on" (*JR*, p. 403).

The disintegration of human relationships matches the decay and "depreciation" of the language. The diction of *JR* often deteriorates to curses as with Jack Gibbs, specialized jargon such as the jargon of the Wall Street, or the following language of school board members: "You might say that he structured the material in terms of the ongoing situation to tangibilitate the utilization potential of this one to one instructional medium in such a meaningful learning experience that these kids won't forget it for a hell of a long time" (*JR*, p. 47). But there is also an implicit suggestion that the concepts which words express have also deteriorated, become shabby. Gaddis makes the point most succinctly in his other novel, *The Recognitions*, when he has an unnamed character say, "Derive venereal, and see what you get, if you don't call *that* decay" (p. 669).

If the meaning of words has deteriorated, the structure of the language in *JR* has equally deteriorated. Characters rarely, if ever, complete sentences they start: either their sentences are abrasively interrupted, or the speakers allow their words to trail off without reaching a definite end. If the conversations are not short, staccato dialogues, then the characters speak in a kind of rambling run-on style. Furthermore, Gaddis has some of the more important conversations take place and be overheard in the school and corporate bathrooms. Gaddis compounds the decay of the structure of the language when he includes a brief transitional narrative passage such as the following:

> —Thought your gang took him to the money museum, he said in a turn for the door—most popular man in town . . . and it banged closed behind him where smoke and flame escaping the black spread up Burgoyne Street found purchase on a descending bloat of Chloe as he dodged the car mounting the curb in arrival, digging in pockets at a half trot through the reek of asphalt to come up with a crushed cigarette package, matches with a half fare ticket stuck in the cleft, still digging as the door banged behind him and he reached the grilled window emptying a pocket—just turning in some tickets . . . (*JR*, p. 188)

[7]William Gaddis, "The Rush for Second Place," *Harper's*, 252, No. 1571 (April 1981), p. 35.

Gaddis uses such transitions (a catalog of gestures or unimportant objects as if recorded by a camera—a visual analog to the type of tape recorded narrative) fairly consistently in *JR*, and the effect of such transitional elements is disorientation. In concentrating on the details of the transition, the reader can easily lose track of the two scenes the transition should be connecting. The lack of almost any referentially logical structure in the transitional passages is reinforced by the lack of conventional grammatical structure. In the same manner, when the reader concentrates on the details of the conversations, to identify the speakers and understand the relationships between them, the possibly clear connections between different conversations become clouded or are subsumed by the effort to clarify the immediate context.

Understanding the conversations in *JR* can be difficult because Gaddis has included so much "noise" in the narrative. The entropic leakage Jack Gibbs speaks of shows up in the narrative as a babble (or babel) of incomplete thoughts, unfinished sentences, and interrupted ideas, in other words, a kind of "noise pollution," partially from mechanical devices; the noise from telephones, tape recorders, televisions, radios, and dictaphones permeates *JR* so much so that many of the characters talk to or into mechanical devices rather than people. For example, *JR* learns the business system so well that he buys companies over the telephone without ever meeting those whose lives he rearranges.

Logically enough, given the world of *JR*, the supersaturation of noise leads to "Coach" Vogel's attempt to develop the Frigicom "noise screens" as described, appropriately, in dictated press release form:

> Dateline New York, Frigicom, comma, a process now being developed to solve the noise pollution problem comma may one day take the place of records comma books comma even personal letters in our daily lives comma, according to a report released jointly today by the Department of Defense and Ray hyphen X Corporation comma a member of the caps J R Family of Companies period new paragraph. The still secret Frigicom process is attracting the attention of our major cities as the latest scientific breakthrough promising noise elimination by the placement of absorbent screens at what are called quote shard intervals unquote in noise polluted areas operating at faster hyphen than hyphen sound speeds comma complex process employing liquid nitrogen comma at temperatures so low that they may be handled with comparative ease by trained personnel immediately upon emission before the noise element is released into the atmosphere period the shards will then be collected and disposed of in remote areas or at sea comma where the disturbance caused by their thawing will make that where no one will be disturbed by their impact upon thawing period new paragraph . . . Vogel envisions concerts commas entire operas comma and books read aloud and preserved by the Frigicom process commas stressing its importance to longer works of fiction now dismissed as classics and remaining largely unread due to the effort involved in reading and turning any more than two hundred pages period new paragraph getting all this? (*JR*, p. 527)

This Frigicom enterprise fails because the shards did not thaw out correctly when they contained the "strident" music of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (*JR*, p. 673). With this invention, Gaddis brings *JR* full circle for part of the Bast family fortune is derived from piano rolls. Ironically, then, *JR* originates with piano rolls, a mechanical means of recording and preserving sounds, and ends with the Frigicom screens, a mechanical means of recording and destroying sounds.

It is quite fitting that Vogel's first attempt at eliminating noise pollution should involve a Beethoven symphony because Vogel, like many of the other characters,

cannot distinguish between different kinds of noise and seeks to eliminate exactly the kinds of noise, a symphony, which would have been preserved by a piano roll. This could be interpreted as a triumph of art over mechanization in as much as the attempt to "package" the symphony fails. But it can also be seen as an endorsement of entropy: the creation of even a temporary state of non-deterioration is impossible.

More importantly, Gaddis directly confronts the potential entropy in the reader's minds. Neither books nor symphonies can be easily "capsulized" to avoid the effort of reading intently or listening intently, and by avoiding almost any kind of narrative capsulization altogether, Gaddis has created an entropic narrative. As Steven Weisenburger says on page 106 of his "Contra Naturam?" article, "The rule basic to entropy and information theories in general: any attempt to decrease the entropy of a system must involve an operation of ordering (acquiring information), which in turn adds energy to the system, leading to an increase in entropy." In other words, the reader's act of making sense of the non-ordered, narrativeless *JR*, of getting some knowledge from and of the novel, requires effort and increases entropy. Or as Jack Gibbs explains to Bast:

> "Pay attention here bring something to take it take something away problem most God damned writing's written for reader's perfectly happy who they are rather be at the movies, come in empty-handed go out the same God damned way what I told him Bast. Ask them to bring one God damned bit of effort want everything done for them they get up and go to the movies" (*JR*, pp. 289-90). The reader cannot finish *JR* empty-handed, for *JR* is emphatically not like going to the movies.