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'You've got no business with the Bible': *Carpenter's Gothic* and Rapture Fiction

'God damned Protestant ethic can't escape it have to redeem it' – William Gaddis, *JR*

Within the pages of *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), William Gaddis inscribes a damning indictment of fundamentalisms of different stripes, whether 'religious' or 'secular humanist.' Drawing heavily upon both scriptural citation, and Biblical mythology more broadly, what at first appears to articulate an overworked critique of American evangelicalism in the Reagan-era, instead directs its attentions towards even more insurmountable problems that plagued – and continue to plague – the nation. To be more specific, Gaddis's novel develops a fierce jeremiad against the neoliberal economics that undergird the United States, effectively showing how the turn to a free-market in the nineteen-eighties redirected both religious and secular projects away from their ostensible goals, shoring up a mutual antagonism between the two, and effecting a shift from utopian to increasingly apocalyptic sentiments. Ultimately, Gaddis, rather than simply aligning himself with the novel's intellectual 'secular humanist' character, McCandless, becomes a prophet preaching against profits. This foundational motivation in the novel not only establishes it as an important moment in postmodern literature, but also affords *Carpenter's Gothic* cultural value outside the literary institution. Gaddis effectively articulates what at once appears to be a reaffirmation of elitist sentiments over against those of the masses, but, by playing fast and loose with generic constraints – gothic, romance, conspiracy – develops his work into something quite different; a critique of the capitalist economy that governs America.

In terms of its Biblical intersections, and an interest in 'popular' forms, it may be productive to interpret *Carpenter's Gothic* alongside a broad discussion of evangelical 'rapture fiction,' that set of popular apocalyptic texts concerned with the last days before the

Second Coming of Christ. Such novels attend to the event of the rapture, whereby the Christian populace will be suddenly drawn up to heaven; the arrival of the Antichrist and his rise to a position of world domination; and the return of Christ to wage the final war of Armageddon, and reign once more.¹ Furthermore, rapture fiction novels generally have a long history of anti-communist ideology, which contributes greatly to plot and character development. The contention, then, is that high literary texts like *Carpenter's Gothic*, by combining elements of the popular imaginary with politically informed criticism – both ‘delighting’ and ‘teaching’² – may be able to refocus the ire of the more obviously didactic rapture fiction novels, toward the insidious logic of late-capitalism.

The plot of *Carpenter's Gothic* revolves around a couple, Liz and Paul, who rent a mansion just north of New York City in order to get away from it all. Paul is a young Vietnam veteran, and works as a scheming PR man for the fundamentalist Reverend Elton Ude, who is attempting to build a Bible school and regain his position as a famed televangelist. Liz is heir to an African-based mining company, but it is currently in the hands of a trustee, as both she and her hippy brother, Billy, were not so well esteemed in their father's eyes. Liz goes along with her husband's insurance scams, keeping up doctor's appointments so as to prove, as the result of a plane accident, that she can no longer maintain her marital duties. Meanwhile, Paul travels interstate to try and resurrect Ude's media career; for, after being responsible for an accidental drowning during a baptism in the Pee Dee River, Ude employs Paul as a spin doctor to turn the catastrophe into a usable miracle. Hovering in the background of all this is the mysterious McCandless, geologist and landlord to Liz and

¹ See Roland Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 153-154.

² See Nicholas Brown, ‘Cognitive Map, Aesthetic Object, or National Allegory? *Carpenter's Gothic*,’ in *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, ed. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), p. 158.

Paul, who is also called upon as a witness in a Scopes trial situation, and is a notorious womaniser.

As the novel proceeds, Liz's tempestuous relationship with Paul pushes her into having an affair with McCandless, who, as part of an archaeological dig some years ago, was reported to have found the very gold that the mining company is after. However, it is later revealed that McCandless is a fraud; there is no gold to speak of, and so Billy, who ventures over to Africa in search of his fortune, is needlessly shot down in his plane on the way home by militant rebels. Paul is just as fraudulent; it is discovered that his campaign to keep Reverend Ude's African missions running is really just a front masking the exploits of the mining company, and he is eventually arrested over the bribing of a senator in this matter. Finally, Liz is killed during a home invasion, probably orchestrated by her husband, who is after the inheritance provided by her mineral tycoon father.

As becomes evident, while Gaddis's novel is densely plotted, and incorporates a large amount of disparate material, the Biblical thread that runs through *Carpenter's Gothic* alone offers a productive means of grasping the types of networks (economic, cultural, political, religious) that work in tandem to elucidate a mid-eighties conspiratorial American milieu. First and foremost, it is the series of scriptural malapropisms that abound throughout the novel that are the most telling instances of the infectious nature of capitalist rhetoric. As Paul reads an article to Liz detailing Reverend Ude's eulogy at the funeral of the boy he drowned, the dramatic irony is made blatant:

the Reverend Ude, the dynamic leader of Christian Recovery for America's People, called the opening salvo in God's eternal war against the forces of superstition and ignorance throughout the world and elsewhere, and the recovery of the Christian

values represented by the simple, God fearing folk gathered there before him in the bank who, on, should be one the bank not in the bank...³

The signifier 'bank' here confuses the Pee Dee River bank – a site itself chosen to signify on Exodus, the theme of the eulogy – and a financial institution. Paul, one of the people responsible for exploiting the town's public religious fervour so as to achieve his own financial success, while picking up on the grammatical error, fails to acknowledge the truth behind the polysemous 'bank' – that is, in this instance, the 'God fearing folk' are indeed closer to being 'in the bank' than 'on the bank.'

The revealing transcription of the eulogy continues, as Ude attempts to link two disparate Biblical references to literal and figurative notions of 'building,' with the need for funding to construct the Wayne Fickert Bible College in honour of the deceased boy:

And as his will came down upon me, trembling, I suddenly heard the voice of the prophet Isaiah, wherein The carpenter stretcheth out his rule; he marketh it out with a line; he fitteth it with planes, and he marketh it out with the compass, and maketh it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house. And as I pondered the meaning of these words from on high, what had been a day of mourning burst before me as a day of glory! For did they not ask, when Jesus came unto Nazareth, Is this not the carpenter's son? He who builded this edifice of refuge for the weak, for the weary, for the seekers after his absolute truth in their days of persecution, as we are gathered here today before the onslaught of secular

³ William Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 78. All subsequent references are to this edition, and page numbers will be cited parenthetically within the text.

humanism, builded with his simple carpenter's tools from the humble materials closest to his hand his father's house, wherein are many mansions? (80)

Here, Paul does not notice the misspelt word 'profit' (prophet) in the allusion to Isaiah, but it is exactly his failure to notice that gives credence to Ude's ensuing interpretation – for, if such conflation can go unnoticed, then they can easily become normalised, providing the unconscious impetus for a misreading of the passage concerned. As he continues, Ude transposes the conceptual carpentry deployed by Isaiah on to the literal carpenter, Christ. From here, it is only one more step to 'cashing out' this reading into a plea for money; what has defined Ude's reading here, from beginning to end, has been a demand for capital, from the misspelt 'profit Isaiah' to beseeching his followers 'to sit down prayerfully with your pen and checkbook' (81). Moreover, the Isaiah citation (Isa. 44:13) is self-defeating in this instance, as it describes 'the construction of pagan idols, futile because made by human hands.'⁴ Ude again betrays the inscription of capital within his religious rhetoric, for, even as he quotes from the scriptures, he unwittingly adopts the Feuerbachian critique of religion⁵ – God is made in man's image, and will, as such, always 'remain in the house,' delimited by the scope of a discourse principally concerned with financial gain.

When a dissident exposes his Bible School as a training centre for paramilitary missionaries, Ude is put on the back foot, with Paul forced to defend him from the 'liberal press':

⁴ Steven Moore, 'Annotations to Carpenter's Gothic: Chapter 3,' on <http://www.williamgaddis.org/gothic/gothicnotes3.shtml> (accessed 31 August 2009).

⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach critiqued humanity's objectification of religion, arguing that 'men project qualities of human nature into an object opposed to themselves, namely God.' However, rather than attempting to redeem the Protestant ethic, his project sought to 'invert the false relationship of subject and predicate in religion, and restore to man those qualities of human nature which he has hitherto attributed to God.' See Luke Ferretter, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 38-39.

– Talking about his Voice of Salvation radio and this great harvest they're reaping in Mozambique, press picks it up and says what harvest, it hasn't rained there in three years everybody starving, going blind, pellagra cholera they know God damn well he's not talking about a plate of beans, talking about harvesting souls for the Lord twist around whatever he says, smear stories like that his mission's running deficits of eighty thousand a day [...] (215)

Again, even as Paul, in his capacity as Ude's media consultant, acts as an apologist for a sermon he may have actually written himself,⁶ there is an ineluctable progression from the Biblical rhetoric derived from the Great Commission in the Synoptic Gospels, to the real material conditions that are actually being obscured by Ude's missionary work, and finally to the massive debts Ude has incurred. And, as it is revealed later, Ude is acting in collusion with the CIA in order to plunder the supposedly mineral-rich Mozambique, using the mission as a front to pay off his own 'two or three million dollars in debt' (215). Like Oral Roberts and other scandalised televangelists of the nineteen-eighties, Ude needs, as Paul has it, 'just a little prayerful gift maybe ten or twenty bucks help get this God damn money pressure off Elton out there trying to save the country or he may just crack up' (215).⁷

Another article, a 'full two page spread pray for America right across the top' (203), sustains the trend of malapropism coupled with the revelation of a capitalist economic base: 'Today we are fighting your battle single handedly against satanic powers of darkness in high places then he puts in this line from Paul to the Ephusians, gives the Bible school students time off from the bottling plant to dig up his research' (203). Here there is a more literal

⁶ See Peter Wolfe, *A Vision of His Own: The Mind and Art of William Gaddis* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997), p. 235.

⁷ 'In March 1987 Oral Roberts informed his substantial television audience that God would kill him unless he raised \$8 million within two weeks. The funds that saved his life turned out to have been donated by a businessman who had built his own fortune in gambling.' Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 119.

evocation of Ude's rhetorical strategy – the labour of the Bible school students is converted directly into supporting geological research that will further fund the school. And the misspelt 'Ephusians' itself yields the homonym 'effusion' – what is effused in this instance is the concealed conversion of labour power into financial increase. For 'time off from the bottling plant' is, of course, only a means of obscuring the fact that '[digging] up research' is also a revenue-raising activity.⁸

By acceding to popular secular sentiment regarding organised labour – workers engaged in profitable manufacturing and employers willing to grant sabbatical 'time off' – Ude taps in to the widely accepted 'spirit of capitalism.' This traditional Protestant ethic insists on success in worldly pursuits as a sign of providential grace, promoting individual industry as regards both production and consumption. The spirit of capitalism advocates a type of 'worldly asceticism,' whereby Protestant believers engage in secular labour for purely deontological reasons – there is an ethical obligation to successfully make money, because it is a reliable sign of belonging to the Elect; and, in turn, offers evidence of an interventionist God.⁹ However, as Gregory Comnes rightly points out, Weber's notion of labouring in one's occupation as a divine 'calling' takes on a different significance, particularly in the rampant bull market of nineteen-eighties hypercapital. In contrast to the (more suitably religious) altruistic imperative of *agapē* (a conceit sustained throughout the Gaddis oeuvre),

Gaddis's novels also admit the existence of another calling, the ethical obligation of Weber's capitalist to make money. In contrast to the virtues of love, this calling defines the good as the bureaucratic efficiency of self-interest, a cost versus benefit

⁸ And, because the character who speaks these lines is – like the writer of the epistles – named Paul, the contrast can hardly be overlooked: 'At the very least, Paul's actions serve as an ironic counterpoint to the message preached in Ephesians, especially the commands in chapter four "to cast aside corrupt communication," and in chapter six for the man to "so love his wife even as himself.'" Gregory Comnes, *The Ethics of Indeterminacy in the Novels of William Gaddis* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1994), p. 129.

⁹ See Moore, *William Gaddis* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1989), p.70.

equation that, in understanding every facet of life as a commodity, invariably stands agape – what Weber described as depersonalised – at the humanitarian ideal of loving one’s neighbour as oneself.¹⁰

Given this religious foundation, capitalism secures its position, now no longer simply a secular economic system, but one demanded by way of theological injunction. And, as such, instead of considering that evangelicalism broadly – and rapture fiction more acutely – fosters the free market in late-capitalist America, it is rather the case that capitalism has now come to circumscribe religion itself.

In *Carpenter’s Gothic*, Gaddis offers an inversion of the classic Weberian formulation, thus showing that what undergirds mainstream American culture, evangelical and humanist both, is – to borrow Mark C. Taylor’s phrase – the ‘capitalism of spirit.’¹¹ This is, effectively, a culture without solid foundations, no longer a ‘city upon a hill,’ but rather a ‘house built upon sand.’ This becomes particularly evident in some works of rapture fiction, where, in line with Comnes’s critique of the counterproductive Protestant work ethic, the agapistic love that Christianity is supposed to espouse often gets left by the wayside; for example, Jews have historically been conflated with communism, consigning both to the scrapheap.¹²

Although some of the first examples of rapture fiction from the twentieth-century actually offer a critique of unfettered capitalism and industrial excess, for the most part, it is the appearance of socialist or communist economies in these novels that soon heralds other moral disturbances, and the imminence of the rapture. As Crawford Gribben points out, by the end of the Great Depression, most of these critiques of capitalism had dissipated, and

¹⁰ Comnes, *The Ethics of Indeterminacy* pp. 7-8.

¹¹ See Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 140-167.

¹² See Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, p. ???

were soon channelled into anti-communist sentiments with the onset of the cold war. By the mid-nineties, several authors were even employing capitalism as an underground economy used to challenge ‘the hegemony of the mark of the beast.’¹³

Interestingly, the problems that communism introduces into the America of rapture fiction written during the Second World War, are problems more commonly associated with free-market capitalism. In Forrest Loman Oilar’s *Be Thou Prepared for Jesus Is Coming* (1937), although it shows hostility to Depression-era capitalism, there is the more damaging suggestion that capitalism’s failure would give rise to a communist regime, with an emphasis on the dangers of additional imposed taxes. In *Be Thou Prepared*, this communist economy would usher in a series of bank failures, driving the characters into pyramid fraud and Ponzi schemes¹⁴ – the competitive tendency of the free-market appearing under a communist guise. Similarly in Dayton Manker’s *They That Remain: A Story of the End Times* (1941), there is the notion that tax hikes under a specifically Jewish communist rule would also precipitate the fragmentation of the evangelical church, which, once its tax-free status had been lost, would force small churches into competition with one another, leading to doctrinal disagreements.¹⁵

The broad tendency towards a critique of centralised economies in rapture fiction – coupled with a desire to deliberately distance themselves from modernist theology after the Scopes Trial – led fundamentalists by the mid-twentieth-century to vehemently oppose the comingling of religion and secular politics. However, by the late-nineteen-seventies, with the rise of the Moral Majority, the trajectory of the religious right took a decisive turn. With the elections of both Jimmy Carter, and the even more religiously conservative Ronald Reagan, the evangelical church in America began a systematic shift away from political and cultural

¹³ Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, p. 15.

¹⁴ See Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁵ See Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, p. 83.

retreat, towards a reengagement with the secular world. Yet, while the cold war communist threat could be countered through education and cultural conservatism, newly discovered eschatological dangers on the homefront – such as those heralded by the New Age movement¹⁶ – were already infiltrating American institutions. And these institutions (educational, governmental, economic) were worth salvaging – the tempered evangelical political reengagement understood that ‘though open to corrupt influence, these institutions are basically sound, and their subversion [could] eventually be overturned.’¹⁷ The free-market economy was viewed as essentially compatible with the Protestant work ethic, and, as such, whenever it experienced a crisis, this was always precipitated not by systemic flaws, but by individual abuses.¹⁸

Much rapture fiction written in the nineteen-eighties, especially towards the end of the cold war, began to adjust its position concerning the identity of the Antichrist, extending its scope from the obvious target (Russia, or ‘Gog’).¹⁹ In this way, by the time that dispensationalist author Tim LaHaye came to write (with Jerry Jenkins) the first of his popular *Left Behind* novels (1995), the uncertainty surrounding the new economic adversary emerged – the question now became: if Stalinist socialism has failed, then who are our contemporary enemies?

LaHaye’s version of the Antichrist, for example, rather than employing the dictatorial model as his forebears (such as Hal Lindsey) had done, depicts him establishing a

¹⁶ See Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, p. 110.

¹⁷ See Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, p. 117.

¹⁸ Conversely, in the volatile economic climate of *Carpenter’s Gothic*, there can be no expectation that the normal functioning of capitalism could produce ‘ethically acceptable outcomes.’ Indeed, as Brown asserts, what emerges is exactly the opposite: ‘bribery, fraud, and corruption suddenly become more attractive options in the relative absence of profitably legal investments.’ Brown, ‘Map, Object, or Allegory?’, pp. 152, 153.

¹⁹ Steven Moore suggests that ‘A Christian reading of *Carpenter’s Gothic* would expose McCandless as the antichrist of the novel, spreading despair and disorder everywhere he goes. (The Christian reader might even find correspondences between the novel’s seven chapters and the seven seals in Revelation.)’ However, this is exactly the variety of ‘Christian reading’ that should be avoided, not least of all because Gaddis’s critique is never squared at individuals, but at the systemic violence caused, in this case, by capitalism. Moore, *William Gaddis*, p. 121.

decentralised system of control over humanity.²⁰ If the collapse of the Soviet Union had served as evidence for the weakness of government-controlled economies, then it was the free-market state that naturally rose from the ashes; the problem, of course, is that both the Christians of LaHaye's novels, and the Antichrist himself, realise the power of such an economy. And, by actualising the hegemony of free-market capitalism, LaHaye's characters stand as evidence of the illusion of capitalism's inescapability, as well as accenting the paradox at the heart of the rapture fiction industry, and, by extension, evangelical Christianity. As Crawford Gribben asserts, there is an underlying failure to tessellate the idealised marginality of the evangelical church in the US, with the market saturation achieved by such franchises as the *Left Behind* series:

American evangelicals are much farther from the cultural margins than they had imagined – and therefore much farther than they imagined from the second coming of Jesus Christ... The evangelical imagination has entered the cultural mainstream, but that success has undermined the central tenets of dispensational cultural theory. The commercial success of prophecy fiction therefore argues for the failure of dispensational ideas. Hopes for the imminence of the rapture have been denied by the success of the fiction that sought to represent it.²¹

Yet this is not simply to cast a pall upon dispensational theology *tout court*. No, rather, what Gribben asserts here is the complicity of evangelicalism with commercialism, thus suggesting that the former must needs extricate itself from the latter in order to avoid the mass production of 'Christianity-lite' that the evangelical enterprise is now in thrall to. Works of

²⁰ See Taylor, *After God* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 276-279.

²¹ Gribben, *Writing the Rapture*, p. 88.

rapture fiction offer a relative simplicity in terms of plotting and character, and a didactic moral framework that is contingent on a level of biblical literacy (and a mostly literal biblical hermeneutic) that many of its readers already possess. And, while in many ways, this type of popular novel has been rightly held up for contempt by the academe, there is also a sense in which that particular source of critique, whether by virtue of its vociferousness or otherwise, falls on deaf ears. In Amy Johnson Frykholm's ethnographic study, *Rapture Culture*, she describes how her interviews of readers of the *Left Behind* series were influenced by Eve Sedgwick's distinction between 'paranoid' and 'reparative' reading practices. As Frykholm reminds us:

[I]n a paranoid reading practice, we learn what we already know: that Christian evangelicalism is engaged in right-wing politics, that it is a religion, at least publicly, of male domination and female submission, that systemic oppression hides itself effectively in narrative... In reparative reading, one stays open to good and bad surprises that can emerge from the text; one does not imagine that one already knows what the text is or how it is interpreted by others.²²

In light of Frykholm's call for reparative reading practices, it may be productive to set up a dialogue between high literature and popular rapture fiction, insofar as mapping the similarities between the two can perhaps point up – or even displace – the problem at the heart of fundamentalism. And *Carpenter's Gothic* displaces the source of the problematic fundamentalist hermeneutic from the Bible to the insidious logic of late capitalism, in its geopolitical, racist, and sexist renderings.

²² Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 89.

This represents a literary 'broadening' of the apocalyptic; that is, the ostensible 'Biblical' basis for the rapture is in fact ruptured by the intrusion of discourses induced by the dominance of capitalism. The gift bestowed by high literary works like *Carpenter's Gothic* upon rapture fiction is thus to remind its readers that Biblical prophecy is constantly in danger of being circumscribed by capitalist interests. And this is a threat directed not only at the evangelical right, but one that permeates all aspects of American culture – not a weapon wielded solely by the 'secular humanists,' but an indiscriminate spectre that haunts all.

In this way, if Reverend Ude's particular hermeneutic is an irresponsible one, then it should also be noted that McCandless is just as guilty of appropriating Biblical material so as to obscure his own exploitative enterprises.²³ By unleashing militant invectives against fundamentalism, he is able to momentarily conceal his underhanded dealings in Africa. This is especially important when he is in conversation with Lester, a former preacher and now CIA agent who is trying to offer McCandless sixteen thousand dollars for the results of a geological survey that will, in effect, legitimise a US military incursion into Mozambique. In this case, McCandless compiles a litany of fundamentalist scriptural misinterpretations, closing his argument by criticising Lester himself:

- Cutting a little close to the bone here, Lester? Talking about having business with the greatest work ever produced by western man and that's what you...
- I'm talking about the work you did for Klinger. I'm talking about what you found on Klinger's site out there McCandless, not your little grandstand play in Smackover they cleaned that up in Tennessee sixty years ago, all your ranting about Genesis and evolution the whole... (134-135)

²³ As Comnes points out, 'the point of placing Fundamentalism in conflict with reason is not to claim reason's triumph but rather to expose just how fictional McCandless's humanistic premise is... because McCandless sells out, within this novel reason and humanistic values lose.' Comnes, *The Ethics of Indeterminacy*, p. 137.

But Lester is able to see through McCandless's dissimulation, and redirects the critique of religious anti-intellectualism (of 'a handful of simple people' (136)) towards its proper target – the capitalist economic base that has both corrupted fundamentalist Biblical interpretation, as well as encouraging McCandless to 'sell out.' As the argument proceeds, McCandless continues to evade Lester's accusations, again with Biblical citation:

- those bums in Samuel that pisseth against the wall by the morning light? the gang sitting on the wall in Isaiah drinking their own...
- Two thousand.
- their own piss and eating...
- Cash, two thousand cash... he tapped his breast pocket (135)²⁴

If Ude secretes his financial motivations beneath references to chapter and verse, then the correlative in Gaddis's own writing is a confluence of different discursive zones (in this case, quotational and interrogative) on a single, unbroken plane, thereby forcing scriptural and economic concerns into a contiguity only broken by the Joycean em-dash. The exchange here between McCandless and Lester is symptomatic of the fact that, despite the divergent deployments of scriptural citation on the part of believers and unbelievers, what is common in both cases is that any productive theological application of the cited verses has been usurped by late-capitalism. Where Ude invokes the Bible so as to locate a consistent kernel of meaning that will support his financial aims, McCandless invokes it only to disguise his own intentions in regard to capital; where the former offers a hermeneutic infected by an

²⁴ The references are to 1 Sam 25:22, 34, and Isa 36:12 (KJV). Moore, 'Annotations to Carpenter's Gothic: Chapter 4,' on <http://www.williamgaddis.org/gothic/gothicnotes4.shtml> (accessed 31 August 2009).

economic rhetoric, the latter – likewise in thrall to the economy he purportedly abhors – only ever tends toward a destructive reading, providing nothing prescriptive in its place. That is to say, if Ude’s interpretation is false, then McCandless’s fails to redeem it, because after destroying what is, in effect, a straw man (Ude and his followers instead of the economic system that impels them to read the Bible as they do), nothing is resurrected in its place.

Comnes is right to point out the hopelessness of redeeming the spirit of capitalism, but is perhaps too hasty in his dismissal of the simpler style that Gaddis employed:

If *Carpenter’s Gothic* abandons aesthetic complexity to make its vision accessible, what it presents is a chilling suggestion, in form as well as content, that the attempt to redeem the greed and corruption of the commodity-driven postmodern Protestant ethic by finding something worth doing might well be a ridiculous effort.²⁵

For the more ‘accessible’ vision by no means condemns *Carpenter’s Gothic* to the realms of popular fiction, but, in its formal homologies with rapture fiction texts, opens up some potentially productive lines of correspondence. The novel revolves around a conspiracy plot, which, as Brown rightly points out, is more apt fodder for a pulp novel – or, for our purposes here, a work of rapture fiction. But whereas conspiracy theories in rapture fiction denote a worldwide, religious event, Gaddis paints with broader brush strokes. Conspiracy in his novel functions as a way of mapping the interrelation of elements (political, economic, religious) in late-capitalist American society, attempting to achieve the kind of totality that was crystallised in Gaddis’s two prior – and more obviously encyclopaedic – novels, *The Recognitions* (1955) and *JR* (1976).²⁶

²⁵ Comnes, *The Ethics of Indeterminacy*, p. 128.

²⁶ See Brown, ‘Map, Object, or Allegory?’, p. 155. In a similar way, Taylor helpfully outlines the dialectical engagements of religion, art, and economics, by following their dovetailing trajectories from the Renaissance

The house in *Carpenter's Gothic* functions as a trope, which, in its very claustrophobic centrality, registers the external threat of 'Marxist conspiracies' as consigned to the colonial periphery, in the same vein as some rapture fiction. However, as the novel reaches its veritably apocalyptic climax, it becomes clear that any threats to the residents of McCandless's mansion (and, allegorically, the American nation), have germinated *internally*, their fates sealed by their own hands, or, at least, by their complicity with a capitalist economy. And, by inextricably embedding Biblical citation and allusion within this networked economy, Gaddis carves out a space in which this mistrust, this presumption of conspiracy, can be conceivably aimed at capitalism itself.

through to late-capitalism. See Taylor, *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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