Notes on William Gaddis, *Agape Agape*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

What is a Rant?

This is Gaddis's fifth and last book. Even with a large font and judicious line spacing, the book doesn't quite make 100 pages. A really excellent Afterword by Joseph Tabbi makes it 113 pages. It's a monologue, in broken grammar and logic, by a dying man. He thinks of his unfinished book on the history of the player piano, and he fights the effects of his medication and his illness. The theme is the relentless mechanization of the imagination and art.

I read this because it's been noted that Gaddis read Bernhard late in his life, and this book is said to show Bernhard's influence. My initial interest was to see whether the rant -- by which I mean Bernhard's endless, relentless and compulsive monologues -- could be the object of emulation. What can be emulated from an excess of formless bile?

I'd imagine Bernhard would have secretly admired the philosophic and historical complaints here, and he would have nastily disparaged Gaddis's lingering worship of high culture and the erudition that makes it possible. I also picture him disparaging Gaddis's the formal tricks Gaddis uses to produce his stream of consciousness text: he changes subject in the middle of a phrase, he breaks clauses with apostrophes, and in general he tinkers with the form of writing instead of letting his anger and unhappiness ruin his grammar. The closing page of "Agape Agape" is moving, but not because of its echoes of Bernhard; it sounds like wisdom literature, well in control of the painful idea it wants to communicate.

A rant, I conclude, cannot be an object of emulation. Not because it proceeds from some pure unstoppable dissatisfaction, but because a rant, in Bernhard, is a kind of writing that happens when everything is torn down, so it fights for air. The narrator in this book is not in control of his body or the sequence of his thoughts, but the author is.

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This book cannot be read without some homework. It's important, at the least, to know:

1. Agape (Christian love) agape (ruined) is Gaddis's formula for the loss of imaginative freedom, and it matters that the Christian agape is a love between brothers: for Gaddis, the author, if not for the narrator, real acts of imagination and art happen in friendship, in love. Tabbi has useful biographical information about this, regarding Gaddis's friendship with Martin Dworkin.

2. One of this book's, and Gaddis's, central texts is a verse by Michelangelo. In the original:

   O Dio, o Dio, o Dio,
   Chi m'a tolto a ma stesso
   Ch'a me fusse piu presso
   O pìu di me potessi, che poss'io?
In Creighton Gilbert’s translation:

O Heaven, Heaven, Heaven!
Who’s robbed me of myself
Who’s closer to myself
Or can do more with me than I ever can? [p. 113 n. 8]

In Gaddis’s translation (extracted from the prose in which he places it, p. 94):

O Dio, o Dio, o Dio... Who nearer to me Or more mighty... than I tore me away from myself... what can I do?

It’s crucial, as Tabbi points out, that "o Dio" remains in Italian, so it can rhyme with "odium" (this is in Gaddis’s text, p. 95).

3. It’s also important to re-read Tolstoy’s "Kreutzer Sonata" to recall the ambivalent hold of music; even though music freely played (as opposed to mechanically reproduced on a player piano) is this book’s theme, music itself is not an unambiguous synecdoche for all the arts, or even for good art.