

**WORKING TOWARDS A BETTER NATION:  
INNOVATION AND ENTRAPMENT IN THE FICTION  
OF ALASDAIR GRAY**

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There can be few more firmly established points within the theoretical reception of Alasdair Gray than the notion that his work shows a consistent commitment to political engagement. It has been twenty years since Robert Crawford identified “one of [Gray’s] principle continuing obsessions [as] the struggle against entrapment,”<sup>1</sup> a judgement which he was not the first - and far from the last - to make, although the near-pathologising connotations of his terminology make the point more strikingly than most. Unlike more contentious tropes in criticism on Gray, most infamously his status as a postmodernist, this is an assertion with which even Gray himself has agreed. Not only has Gray questioned the extent to which an element of political commentary – defined as the result of “a sense of justice...a sense of what is just, right and fair”<sup>2</sup> – can be avoided in any fiction, “except the most blandly escapist”<sup>3</sup>, he has explicitly highlighted one manifestation of political engagement as a central seam running through his fiction. Echoing the struggle which Crawford places at the centre of his work, Gray has commented that “all my writing

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is about personal imagination and social power, or (to put it more crudely) freedom and government.”<sup>4</sup>

While the extent to which the author and his critics seem in agreement on this matter works to emphasize the importance of considering Gray’s political engagement in approaching his work, accepting the centrality of this engagement still leaves important facets of its realisation undefined. The most basic of these is clearly the technical means by which this engagement is enacted, and following from this, the relationship between “freedom” and “power” thus depicted. One interesting means of opening up what is involved here is to consider one counter-argument to theoretical orthodoxy on Gray which attains a level of productive utility despite, or perhaps even because of, its failure to garner extensive support among Gray’s commentators. From the outset, Alison Lumsden’s discussion of Gray identified itself as running contrary to accepted wisdom, noting the “[t]ypical criticisms” of Gray’s work which she suggests as “describing it as an exploration of, and imaginative escape from, the systems which serve to entrap and enclose the individual.”<sup>5</sup> While she does little to challenge the centrality of this trope - “[i]t is certainly the case,” she writes, “that what concerns Gray thematically is the ways in which his protagonists are entrapped within systems and structures”<sup>6</sup> - Lumsden’s assessment of the overall import of this thematic meditation stands in contrast to that which she affords to “typical critics”. Apprehending these entrapping systems on two broad fronts, the entrapment of characters within Gray’s fiction and the entrapment *of* Gray’s fiction, Lumsden offers for both a more pessimistic conclusion, where Gray ultimately displays an “acceptance of the inevitable encroachment of entrapping systems...[which] is in the end only a form of retreat, a form of *collaboration* with these systems themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Where others see critique, Lumsden sees collaboration.

The utility of Lumsden's argument lies in its provocation to interrogate the possibility of implicit acceptance within the relationship established between Gray's depiction of reactionary and revolutionary forces. Such provocation is to some extent less an effect of the originality of her thesis than of her potential simplification of the alternate commentators she subsumes within the notion of the typical Gray critic. While Lumsden may contrast with more orthodox responses in identifying Gray's collaboratory quietism, her suggestion that such responses necessarily ascribe to Gray's fiction some valorised route to imaginative escape intensifies this contrast to potentially misleading levels. As shall be considered below, the relationship between freedom and entrapment in Gray's fiction is both more complex and more dynamic than this may suggest. Considering entrapment as coinciding with the notion of escape, particularly where this "freedom" is associated with "imagination," recalls the two dimensions of this theme as Gray characterises it. Yet the suggestion that one might be privileged over the other - where "escape" marks freedom's triumph over government - stands in contrast with his observation that "neither side [is] simply right or wrong. Both are essential."<sup>8</sup> As with Gray, so with his commentators, who have likewise drawn attention to this more dialectical elaboration of the relationship between freedom and entrapment, in which the two are held in continual contrast and mutual modification rather than either ascending to final triumph. Crawford's characterisation of Gray given above, after all, speaks not of Gray's obsession with entrapment or escape, but with the *struggle* between the two. Even that reading which Lumsden offers as representative of the typical response, Cairns Craig's "Going Down To Hell Is Easy," places the two in such a dialectical relationship where "every escape route ... leads straight into the maw of another monstrous head on the hydra."<sup>9</sup> The final escape which Lumsden finds lacking is something which seemingly only she

expects to find. Why this might be the case will here be explored on three broad fronts. The central point in this the crucial role which Gray reserves for struggle itself in the political element of his fiction. Leading on from this, the limited role played by representations of final escape – the world beyond struggle that is utopia – will be considered in terms of the effect such representations may bear upon active participation in political change beyond the realms of the purely fictional. The circumstances in which both these aspects of Grays fiction operate, however, the very mechanics by which this political engagement is constructed, shall first be explored as a foundation which already works to privilege, if only in practical terms, the representation of struggle over its utopian culmination. At each of these junctures the final import read into Grays thematic explorations of entrapment will however stand as a defence against charges of quietism, showing the radical potential of this very stance.

Consideration of the mechanics by which Gray's political engagement operates can first begin by approaching his own comments on political engagement in any fiction, certain of which may seem at first glance as heterodox in any application to his own work as Lumsden's suggestion of reactionary collaboration. Certainly, there may seem an immediate contrast between the political "obsession" ascribed to Gray's work and his lament that:

It's a pity that storytellers cannot be moralists. They can invent people who pass moral judgements, when these are convincing and appropriate, but if they make their inventions the text of a sermon then a sermon is all they will write, no matter how well they have reflected part of the age and body of their time. Readers must be enticed to their own conclusions, which cannot be predicted.<sup>10</sup>

One means of circumventing this potential contradiction is to note the space left for open didacticism, through the use of fictional characters as authorial mouthpieces. This is a resource Gray has exploited through various sermonisers, from *Lanark's* Polyphemus to *Poor Thing's* Harry Astley, the "excuse" he has offered for such interventions being that "I put these things into a personal voice."<sup>11</sup> Such sub-texts within Gray's fiction do not however amount to the extensive focus implied by "obsession," and for a means of locating political commentary in a form more central to Gray's fiction we must turn to the strategy which he suggests as an alternative to moralising, the writer's reflection of their time. This, too, is a firmly established landmark within critical orthodoxy on Gray. As Edwin Morgan observes, "Gray never lets Glasgow slip out of his sights,"<sup>12</sup> and this suggestion that Gray is intent on representing the immediate location in which he writes is one as undeniable as his obsession with the political. Indeed, the two are combined in a notion discussed by some of Gray's characters, and which may serve to describe the narratives they inhabit, the epic. As defined by "she" in *The Loss of the Golden Silence*, "[a]n Epic is a work which gives a complete map of the Universe as far as a civilisation is able to understand it,"<sup>13</sup> a function which Gray's fiction, particularly *Lanark*, signals for itself through an extensive metaphorical model based on cartographical terms, and, more directly, in the comments of Gray's surrogate author, Nastler. In the epilogue to *Lanark*, Nastler describes his initial conception of the novel as the "epic ... [of] the Scottish cooperative wholesale Republic, one of the many small peaceful socialist republics which would emerge (I thought) when all the big empires and corporations crumbled."<sup>14</sup> Given subsequent political developments, however, Nastler must contend with the non-appearance of the socialist republics, and so, he tells Lanark, "I soon abandoned the idea."<sup>15</sup> Abandoned, or substantially modified. Among the features of the epic described in E. M. W.

Tillyard's *The English Epic and its Background* – suggested by Nastler and ‘she’ as the form’s standard model – is the notion that the epic “must have faith in the system of beliefs or way of life it bears witness to,”<sup>16</sup> clearly not the case here. The only feature whose direct relevance to *Lanark* might go uncontested, in fact, is again the process of reflecting contemporary reality, to “communicate the feeling of what it was like to be alive at the time.”<sup>17</sup> In abandoning his epic intent, Nastler explains, he must consider “the fact that my world model would be a hopeless one,”<sup>18</sup> and in this respect it is his continued commitment to the mapping function of the epic form which leads to his otherwise deviating from its expected pattern. As Liam McIlvanney concisely expresses it, the strategy of Gray’s fantastic narratives is to provide “working models of the world they seek to condemn.”<sup>19</sup>

It is in this implicit moralisation, conducted through the representation of reality rather than commentary upon it, that Gray marks his political engagement. The seeming inescapability of entrapping systems is thus in its most basic regard the effect of this condemnatory, representative thrust, which sets a pattern for Jock McLeish, dreaming his own mastery in a world realised as “a security installation powered by the sun and only crackable by death”<sup>20</sup> or Victoria McCandless, “taught freedom” in a world where women “are allowed to decide nothing for themselves.”<sup>21</sup> In representing his protagonists in perpetual struggle with this reified allegory of the contemporary world-system, Gray may well leave himself open to charges of accepting systems to the extent that necessarily limited victories are represented in a positive light. Lumsden herself points to something like this in her contention that the entrapment theme works to suggest “that, while the vast economic and political structures...may be difficult, if not impossible to challenge, the individual may nevertheless find some kind of freedom within these frameworks.”<sup>22</sup> Such a notion of freedom realised within entrapment is certainly borne out in the fate of Gray’s

protagonists. Thaw/Lanark, having escaped Glasgow for Unthank, Unthank for the institute, and the institute for Unthank again, finds his final moment of peace through escaping the darkness associated with their systems of repression, “glad to see the light in the sky.”<sup>23</sup> Yet this light is accompanied by the announcement of Lanark’s forthcoming death, an announcement whose source – a chamberlain from “the ministry of earth”<sup>24</sup> – and specificity – “[y]ou will die tomorrow at seven minutes after noon”<sup>25</sup> – both suggest that this naturally insurmountable enclosure is, if not wholly conflated with repressive political structures, at least organised with the same bureaucratic precision. Several features of these hard-won freedoms do however stand in the path of any attempt to translate them into implicit collaboration. The systems which have trapped Lanark in darkness play no part in this moment of happiness, which comes not through his collaboration, but as the culmination of his continued resistance. This victory in Lanark’s quest to find the sun has a precursor in a dream which prompts Lanark to forgive God as “when your world has lapsed into nothing, it will have made sense because Sandy once enjoyed it in the sunlight.”<sup>26</sup> This, too, ultimately stems from Lanark’s resistance, as it is when he and Rima pass through “Emergency Exit 3124” into the Intercalendrical Zone that Alexander is conceived and undergoes his accelerated development. Leaving behind the institute and the temporal system which orders it, the couple find a temporary respite from entrapment. They are also leaving a second order – that of books three, one, two and four, the novel itself – and so a second ordering authority, Nastler, whose plans leave “no time for Rima to have a baby.”<sup>27</sup>

Lanark’s limited freedoms are not only the result of his active resistance against the systems which entrap him, but, more importantly, of an antithetical value system which motivates and informs this resistance, voiced in his repeated cry that “This is Hell.” This clash has been marked in the

struggle for sunlight itself, in the contrast which Ozenfant offers between a dark world where “[t]he clock keeps us regular”<sup>28</sup> and Lanark’s own ‘strange passion’<sup>29</sup> for sunlight. A further staging ground for dissent is the institute’s cannibalism, Lanark’s quitting the institute standing in contrast to the passivity demanded by the system, where one “must eat what you’re given and not fight the current.”<sup>30</sup> Where the literalised metaphor recalled in this phrase of Munro’s – Lanark has previously “fought the current” of air powering the institute to save Rima’s life – represent the system’s side of these clashes in fittingly reified terms, the cannibal theme returns the entrapping system’s values to one of individual human relations. The motif of consumption, ranging from one human’s consumption of another to the swallowing of individuals by the institute and of cities by the creature, shows cannibalism enacted on levels ranging from the personal to the systemic. The creature, embodiment of the capitalist system, may be, like The Syndicate in *1982*, *Janine*, “worldwide and irresistible,”<sup>31</sup> but this reified vision is only partial. These and the other entities by which Gray recurrently represents capitalism, although suggestive of some inhuman agency, are, by being cast as *conspiracies* - in this case “[a] conspiracy which owns and manipulates everything for profit”<sup>32</sup> – consistently signalled as the result of collective human activity. Further, as Monboddio suggests when he explains to Lanark that “[l]eaders are the effects, not the causes of changes. I cannot give prosperity to people whom my rich supporters cannot exploit,”<sup>33</sup> the value-systems ordering these conspiracies are not handed down from its leadership but developed within the body of the conspiracy. The same point is made in *McGrotty and Ludmilla*, its conspiratorial network described as “not like the conspiracies in the James Bond film with one evil mastermind. Hardly anyone in this – let’s call it an organisation - knows all the organisations that are part of it.”<sup>34</sup> In the case of the creature this ignorance displayed by its constituent parts extends to the (im)moral values at their centre; as Noakes laments, much

of the creature is “owned by gentle, powerless people who don’t know they are cannibals and wouldn’t believe if you told them.”<sup>35</sup> The personal cannibalism which Lanark eschews and the systemic cannibalism of the creature are not only alike in kind, but are the direct, if unwitting, result of each other.

This valorisation of limited autonomy continues in Gray’s later protagonists. The “New June” of *Something Leather*, “liberated” through being sadistically raped by lesbians, offers an image of escape which, as in Lanark’s repeated swallowings, is closely intertwined with entrapment, a union captured in Douglas Gifford’s hesitancy over June’s being “caught in the sexual trap (or therapy) of the three others.”<sup>36</sup> The physical transformation which marks her new freedom continues this problematic realisation of liberty. Possessed of “a discarded doll look but ... [a] doll discarded because it is a *dangerous plaything able to act for itself*,”<sup>37</sup> June remains subject to the systems which entrap her, yet her semi-autonomous position allows her actions to express an antithetical system of values. Similarly, the “new man”<sup>38</sup> which Jock McLeish becomes at the end of *1982*, *Janine* is characterised by his ability to act in ways which cannot be predicted by those systems which previously wrote his ‘script.’<sup>39</sup> “[F]ree for nearly ten whole minutes”<sup>40</sup> because now “[n]obody will guess what I am going to do...But I will not do nothing,”<sup>41</sup> Jock’s combination of active participation in the world with a disregard for those systems which dominate it typifies the struggle of Gray’s protagonists. Before reading this emphasis on circumscribed personal action as some form of political quietism, however, it is important to relate this to the realisation that Gray’s “vast corporate systems” are themselves explicitly offered as the result of the actions of individuals such as Lanark, June and Jock. Here Gray’s treatment of entrapment recalls in the creature something like the “many individual human wills, of which each again has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life”<sup>42</sup> which, for Engels, determined the character of

historical change. What Lumsden reads as Lanark's comfortable complicity with his entrapping systems may instead be the recognition of the limitations by which "[w]e make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions."<sup>43</sup> In a system which is worldwide and inescapable, the most an individual can do to effect their liberation is to assert their own autonomy to whatever extent this is possible; where the system is itself the result of such semi-autonomous agents colliding, this necessarily limited freedom does not represent 'some compensation'<sup>44</sup> for the system's effects, but the means by which the system can be changed. Again and again the position of Gray's protagonists displays their curtailed freedom as a situation in which the active struggle of semi-autonomous agents represents the sole substance of any liberation achieved in the present, and the sole hope for total liberation in the future.

The borrowing from Dennis Lee which Gray repeatedly confronts his readership, the command to "work as if you live in the early days of a better nation," suggests several important facets of this theme.<sup>45</sup> The injunction to "work" not only stresses the active nature of his protagonists' struggle, but also implies the productive qualities of this activity. In one sense, where this work is the continuous process by which the struggling protagonist is constituted, the ambiguous "as if" suggests a conscious disregard for the "old" nation of entrapping systems. Here the systems themselves remain unchallenged, although the illusion of freedom may provide a necessary foundation from which to actively express the values which they deny. Given that the systems ordering the world are represented in Gray's fiction as the total result of social activity, however, there is also the suggestion that this is itself the work by which the "better nation" shall be constructed. The individual's choice to live as freely as possible within the system here leads directly to an escape from that system based around its transformation.

If Gray's fiction offers anything like the total escape which Lumsden requires of it then it is in this form, where the desire for individual freedom and the inescapability of systems of social organisation are reconciled through reconceiving such systems. The means by which such utopias are represented does however pose some problems for any reading which would incorporate them within the entrapment theme, not least of which is the fact that the two are quite literally separate. Instigated by the revolutionary war which serves as a backdrop for Lanark's final moments – a war led by Alexander, fruit of his earlier struggle – the social transformation of Unthank is clearly related to his own more personal escape into the sunlight. Yet any direct relationship between the two can only be established by the reader, for this sketchily described "Hyper-Utopian Euphoria"<sup>46</sup> appears, not in the central narrative of the novel, but in its Index of Plagiarisms, in a reference to an unwritten chapter not included in the book. The same use of paratexts to establish a separation between the struggle with entrapment and the wider freedom it wins can be seen in *Something Leather* and *A History Maker*. In the former, an even clearer link is established between personal and social liberation through June's role as instigator of "a feminist socialist revolution."<sup>47</sup> This revolution belongs, however, not to the novel as published but to episodes in the original manuscript which are related here in a postscript describing their composition. In the case of *A History Maker*, this separation is two-fold. Here notes by fictional historian Kittock not only provide an opportunity for Gray to discuss the novel's theme of historical change in more general terms, but to represent within this discussion two key moments of transition absent from the central narrative. In one respect, the paratextual relationship in *Lanark* is here reversed, for the society in which *A History Maker's* central narrative is set has been taken by critics to be something like the utopia elsewhere seen only indirectly, a world in which "humankind has shrugged off the trammelling onuses of

economic deprivation, political strife and marital coupledness.”<sup>48</sup> With Utopia centre stage, it is the contrasting reality of our present which finds its realisation in Kittock’s notes. Here this world, and its development into Kittock’s present, is expressed in terms which recall the process of transformation described above, where her society “grew from more than two thousand years of decent people struggling to live as Jesus advised – struggling to do as they would be done by, not as lords and government officials did with them.”<sup>49</sup> The transition between the two remains, however, a moment described rather than represented, implied rather than present in the narrative.

At the same time, any reading of Kittock’s world as utopia is brought into question by various negative qualities which critics – not least the novel’s central protagonist – have identified in its organisation. The very technological and societal advances which mark this world off from Gray’s capitalist dystopias – labour free communal production by the powerplant and the waning of the nation-state – are here responsible for the two principal flaws in its organisation, female omnicompetence and historical stasis. As with Gray’s other worlds, these traps are the result of a “conspiracy” of social interaction inextricably linked to the distribution of wealth, in this case the female monopoly on powerplant operation; as Kittock explains, the “gossip” of great-grannies “has been the only government and police the world has needed for more than a century.”<sup>50</sup> Even the exploitation-free mode of production contrasts with what Gray himself might regard as utopia, for consideration of his comments on the perfect society draws out a further significance of the “work” of a better nation. Asked to describe his conception of “heaven,” Gray has envisaged a society in which labour, rather than being abolished, instead gains a new nature and fresh emphasis. “Heaven,” he explains, “is the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Republic where everyone lives by making and doing good things for each other,”<sup>51</sup> a notion of

work without profit motive or exploitation which places productive activity at the centre of social interaction. A similar conception of happiness is offered by Wat, who dreams of escaping with his lover to a wilderness where “the hard work of making an old-fashioned house together would teach us to depend on each other and love each other more than other men and women love each [sic] nowadays.”<sup>52</sup> If Wat’s struggle for societal reorganisation stems from a desire for “work” in this sense, the static society which he must alter to achieve this simultaneously forces him to valorise “work” as it is considered above. Yearning for “a period of excitement when folk thought they were making a better world,”<sup>53</sup> Wat faces a society in which all activity has lost its meaning, and his struggle is that for struggle itself. Despite its differences, then, Wat’s world is as restrictive as Lanark’s, Jock’s or June’s, and Wat’s struggle a continuation of theirs, “just another bit of bloody history which spared women and children.”<sup>54</sup> As such, it awaits the transformation to true utopia, in which sexual equality and meaningful action have been returned as women now use powerplants “enough to keep them independent of us [men], not enough to make us dependent on them.”<sup>55</sup> A utopia and a transformation described only in Kittock’s notes, and in little more detail than this.

The question of exactly why Gray feels required to limit the realisation of his utopias in this way has several possible answers, all of which are suggested by his concise response to an enquiry after “heaven’s” location: “The future.”<sup>56</sup> This temporal orientation, already suggested to the extent that the better nation is always in its early days, is reflected in his utopias’ positioning after the closure of each novel. Here the lack of specific detail signals towards a mimicry of their condition as future states. This same characteristic also meets a separate demand, suggested in Gray’s comment that “[o]nly folk with perfect faith in one god or one political system believe that they have the answer to every great question. I have not.”<sup>57</sup> Thus Gray’s incompletely

defined utopias allow him to raise suggestions that a final Answer may be reached without limiting the possibilities as to what this answer may be. The same is true of the more immediate “answers” on the path to utopia, the specific programme of action which prompts social transformation, contained in those moments of transition which are if anything realised even more obliquely than the utopias themselves.

What Gray does seem to have “perfect faith” in is the future itself. This is not a simple faith in inevitable progress, dismissed by Kittock as a self-justifying notion “adopted by the officer class of empires too recent to claim that they had always existed.”<sup>58</sup> Nor, again, can any more critical formulation of belief in inevitable future perfection find complete rehabilitation through its elaboration in the context of “one god or one political system.” As they are represented in Kittock’s notes, the messianic teleologies of Christianity and socialism can be taken as two attempts to do just this. One immediate effect of Kittock’s discussion of these systems is to implicitly undermine their claims of inevitability. A similar disavowal of a future states’ inevitability, specifically that associated with socialism, is shown in a further Gray utopia, the “worker’s co-operative nation”<sup>59</sup> which Victoria McCandless heralds with certainty in her last known letter. This shares in the key characteristics seen in its equivalents above, paratextually invoked as a future occurrence after the closure of *Poor Things*’ central narrative. This “future” state is however given a temporal location unique in both its specificity and the fact that its immediate genesis – the 1945 general election – is, for the reader, an already historical event. Framed within further paratexts which emphasise this historical context, this assertion of belief in an inevitable transformation of society – already self-diagnosed as a sign of “a heart “too easily made glad””<sup>60</sup> – is shown as a naïve fantasy. Rather than dismiss this belief entirely, however, it is possible to consider it in a more positive light. For Kittock,

Christian and Marxist promises of future utopia are possessed of both positive and negative ramifications, each centring upon their capacity to foster or deny political change. Early Christianity's promise of liberation – while closer to compensation for, rather than challenge to, its contrasting entrapping systems – is here positively appraised for its ability to allow the conceptualisation of change. Further, the content of this change is one which allows for the propagation of values critical of those displayed by society's governing systems, making this teleological scheme “popular with slaves, women, labourers and other Roman subjects who did not view the empire as a continual improvement.”<sup>61</sup> If this creation of a space for personal morality is reminiscent of the limited freedom open to Gray's protagonists, the relevance of this scheme of history to their more active struggle becomes clearer in its revised reappearance in Marxism. This, Kittock tells us, “resembled the Jewish and Christian time division in giving hope for the future, though the future was to be created by human effort instead of God.”<sup>62</sup> Returning to Gray's injunction to work as if in the early days of a better nation, this union of utopian belief and human action again shows the inter-relationship between the two possible interpretations of this phrase's “as if.” As Kittock warns, both Christian and Marxist teleologies bear potential dangers through their co-option by entrapping systems. In the former case, the “political usefulness of a history which promised mankind a happy future if it left the management of the present time to landlords”<sup>63</sup> lies in its ability to divorce social critique from any requirement for human action. The claim by “a party dictatorship which did not share its advantages with other Russians”<sup>64</sup> that it itself represented Marxism in action, meanwhile, preserves the notion of an active effort to reorganise society but deploys this to justify the negation of its critical function. The value of utopian teleology lies not in its specific content, but in its ability to harness a fantasy of the future which enables that future's creation by human effort.

Gray's faith in the future is his commitment to historical change, and to the necessity of a vision of liberation in enacting this change.

While fantasies of utopia play an important part in Gray's project, his concern to represent the entrapping systems currently in operation necessarily excludes such fantasies from its centre. Whatever vision of the future enables the participants in his struggles, and whatever actuality will be their result, the "as if" of his maxim signals a reminder that the better nation has not yet arrived. Having stated that his works convey no commitment to a single political system, Gray went to on to suggest the alternative message they have to offer. "Tchecov said his works were meant to say, "My friends, you should not live like this." If my writing has a deep meaning it cannot be deeper than that."<sup>65</sup> Taken in tandem, his critical reflection of the present and continued evocation of the potentiality of change combine to create his work's radical impetus. Such a reminder to attend to the present offers a further reason for Gray's separation of suggested future states of total liberation from his central narratives, for Gray is aware of the dangers involved in letting any fantasy of future possibilities obscure the realities of the present. Jock's fantasies are themselves represented as one form taken by his entrapment. A self-confessed coward, he tells us that "[c]owards cannot look straight at the world,"<sup>66</sup> and thus has created a series of hermetically sealed mental universes which lull him into solipsistic inaction. In his fantasy worlds of sexual domination Jock is positioned as dominant in two separate senses, as an author with "perfect control"<sup>67</sup> over his material and as a figure of power within them. These fantasies of power, while they provide an imagined escape from his position within his own entrapping systems, do so through his relocation at the heart of these systems themselves. Both as a fantasy, and in his fantasy, the conspiracy of domination stands as his creation 'spun like a web out of one brain – this brain,'<sup>68</sup> and the quality of inescapability ascribed to

entrapping systems is transferred to himself in the claim “I am worldwide and irresistible.”<sup>69</sup> Such escapes can only offer imaginative compensation for his true position in his conspiracy’s real-world equivalents, and create a situation in stark contrast to the socially-oriented action which characterizes his climactic liberation.

Interestingly, however, when Jock proclaims his abandonment of politics because “I can only stop raving by retreating into fantasy,”<sup>70</sup> these compensatory sexual narratives are “NOT the fantasy I intended.”<sup>71</sup> What Jock refers to here as his “retreat” from facing his entrapment is a separate strand of his imagined existence concerned with realising a utopia beyond such systems. In contrast to the coward’s refusal to face the world, these fantasies privilege, but tellingly do not enact, its opposite. Where the escapism of Jock’s sexual fantasies saw his self-representation as a film-director, his utopian self shifts this conceit to that of lighting director, not creating but revealing a reality, with explicitly political consequences, ‘searchlights and cameras [showing] the bad schooling and housing of folk whose work was essential...Social reform always followed these revelations.’<sup>72</sup> It is tempting to suggest this as a parallel to Gray’s own practice, a possibility reinforced by its culmination in a project directly associated with the cartographic theme by which this is represented elsewhere, “the greatest work of scientific art conceived by the human mind: THE MAP OF EVERYWHERE.”<sup>73</sup> Here Jock’s sexual fantasies, re-creating the systems which entrap him, play an important role, “an insistent attempt by Jock,” as Gavin Miller has it, “to grasp the subjective reality of his life.”<sup>74</sup> The liberation which marks the novel’s closure is thus not their abandonment, but the recognition of the truth they have to convey. Previously, Jock explains, “I did not notice that this was the story of my own life. I avoided doing so by insisting on the *femaleness* of the main character.”<sup>75</sup> Now he is willing to make this identification, and accept “Janine, my silly soul.”<sup>76</sup> If the

utopian strand of his fantasy life plays a comparable part in Jock's liberation, it is in this signalling of the practical purpose his less savoury fantasies serve, and providing a hope of change.

While the representation of utopian fantasy is here suggested as one of the "ideas which make people brave,"<sup>77</sup> it can only ever possess a secondary role in the liberation of Gray's characters. In this light, Gray's comment that "[t]he world which fantasy can only be a temporary alternative to seemed the world my imagination should tackle...though sometimes under a fantastic disguise,"<sup>78</sup> while implicitly criticising Jock's initial deployment of sexual fantasy as compensation for reality, comes down more heavily against the idea of "imaginative escape" as it appears in his retreat into utopia. Where Lumsden reads *Lanark's* coda, with its admission that "[m]y maps are out of date ... it is time to go,"<sup>79</sup> as a potentially reactionary confession, this context offers a different interpretation. Tentatively identifying this comment with Gray himself, she suggests that "the speaker's decision that it is "time to go" now that his "maps" – his familiar and secure yet entrapping structures – are out of date seems, after all, a type of quietism, a refusal to attempt to draw *new* maps."<sup>80</sup> Announced in the midst of the revolution which will bring about the end of entrapment, the conclusion that Gray's maps – not the landscape of these entrapping systems but the author's attempt to describe the multiple human relationships which comprise them – will soon be out of date proclaims both this liberation and the irrelevance of Gray's project in such a world. If "new maps" are necessary at all, they represent the project initially envisaged by Nastler, rather than that to which he was subsequently reconciled. His "fear that the men of a healthier age will think my story a gafuffle of grotesquely frivolous parasites"<sup>81</sup> is not truly a fear, but a hope for future escape.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Crawford, "Introduction," in *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, ed. Robert Crawford and Tom Nairn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 1-9, 4.
- <sup>2</sup> Tom Toremans, "An interview with Alasdair Gray and James Kelman," *Contemporary Literature* XLIV, No. 4 (2003), 565-586, 578.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Axelrod, "An Epistolary Interview, Mostly with Alasdair Gray," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 15, No. 2 (Summer 1995), 106-115, 108.
- <sup>4</sup> Alasdair Gray, "Author's Postscript Completed by Douglas Gifford," in *Unlikely Stories, Mostly*, (Edinburgh, 2001), 278-290, 280.
- <sup>5</sup> Alison Lumsden, "Innovation and Reaction in the Fiction of Alasdair Gray," in *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, ed. Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 115-125, 115.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.
- <sup>8</sup> Gray, "Author's Postscript Completed by Douglas Gifford," 280.
- <sup>9</sup> Cairns Craig, "Going Down To Hell is Easy: *Lanark*, Realism and The Limits of the Imagination," in *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, ed. Crawford and Nairn, 90-107, 94.
- <sup>10</sup> Alasdair Gray, "Thoughts Suggested by Agnes Owens's *Gentlemen of the West* and an Appreciation of it," *The Edinburgh Review* 71 (1985), 27-32, 31.
- <sup>11</sup> Kathy Acker, "Alasdair Gray Interviewed by Kathy Acker: 1986," in *Alasdair Gray – Critical Appreciations and A Bibliography*, ed. Phil Moores (London: The British Library, 2002), 45-57, 49. Although Gray does indeed establish a distinction between the authorial position and the fictional vantage point of these spokespersons, the extent to which they find a separate "personal voice" is however questionable. Often similar in style to Gray's non-fiction, and likewise displaying similarities of world-view, the sermons offered by these characters are regularly identified with their author when cited in critical responses.
- <sup>12</sup> Edwin Morgan, "Gray and Glasgow," in *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, ed. Crawford and Nairn, 64-75, 66.
- <sup>13</sup> Alasdair Gray, "The Loss Of The Golden Silence," in *A Gray Playbook* (Edinburgh, 2009), 101-109, 107.
- <sup>14</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (London, 1994), 493.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

<sup>16</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and its Background* (New York, 1966), 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Gray, *Lanark*, 493.

<sup>19</sup> Liam McIlvanney, "The Politics of Narrative in the Post-War Scottish Novel," on *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 181-208, 200.

<sup>20</sup> Alasdair Gray, *1982, Janine* (Harmondsworth, 1984), 69.

<sup>21</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things: Episodes From The Early Life of Archibald McCandless, M.D. Scottish Public Health Officer* (San Diego and New York, 1992), 263.

<sup>22</sup> Lumsden, "Innovation and Reaction in the Fiction of Alasdair Gray," 118.

<sup>23</sup> Gray, *Lanark*, 560.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 559.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Gray, *1982 Janine*, 123.

<sup>32</sup> Gray, *Lanark*, 410.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 551.

<sup>34</sup> Alasdair Gray, *McGrotty and Ludmilla or The Harbinger Report* (Glasgow, 1990), 108.

<sup>35</sup> Gray, *Lanark*, 102.

<sup>36</sup> Douglas Gifford, "Dreams of Tradition and Modernity," *Books in Scotland*, 34 (1990), 10-19, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Something Leather* (London, 1991), 225.

<sup>38</sup> Gray, *1982, Janine*, 340.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Engels, "Letter from Friedrich Engels to Joseph Bloch," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Peter Simon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 787-8, 788.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 787.

<sup>44</sup> Lumsden, "Innovation and Reaction in the Fiction of Alasdair Gray," 116.

<sup>45</sup> Somewhat fittingly, this injunction has passed from the cover-boards and emblematic illustrations of Gray's fiction to the walls of the Scottish Parliament building at Holyrood. Criticised by Gray as a potentially powerless institution designed to quell Scottish nationalism, the limited freedom represented by devolution offers an interesting real-world example of autonomy within entrapment, as he describes it, "not a final achievement but the start of a different new period." [Alasdair Gray, "Parliaments and Power Games," in *What A State!: Is Devolution for Scotland the End of Britain*, ed. Alan Taylor (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 260-267, 267.]

<sup>46</sup> Gray, *Lanark*, 498.

<sup>47</sup> Gray, *Something Leather*, 247.

<sup>48</sup> Berthold Schoene, "A History Maker," *The Edinburgh Review*, 95 (1996), 151-3, 151-2.

<sup>49</sup> Alasdair Gray, *A History Maker* (London, 1995), 204.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>51</sup> "The Heaven & Hell Quiz," *The Scotsman Weekend*, 30 January 1993, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Gray, *A History Maker*, 53.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> "The Heaven & Hell Quiz."

<sup>57</sup> Lidia Vianu, "I Have Never Wanted To Confuse Readers," in *Desperado Essay-Interviews* (Bucharest: Bucharest University Press, 2004). [http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/alasdair\\_gray.htm](http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/alasdair_gray.htm), Accessed 4 October 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Gray, *A History Maker*, 198.

<sup>59</sup> Gray, *Poor Things*, 316.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>61</sup> Gray, *A History Maker*, 198.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-2.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>65</sup> Vianu, "I Have Never Wanted To Confuse Readers."

<sup>66</sup> Gray, 1982, *Janine*, 305.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>74</sup> Gavin Miller, "'We Are All Murderers and Prostitutes': R.D. Laing and the Work of Alasdair Gray," *PsyArt: A Hyperlink Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts* 6 (2002).

[http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipasa/journal/2002\\_miller01.shtml](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipasa/journal/2002_miller01.shtml), Accessed 4 October 2010.

<sup>75</sup> Gray, 1982, *Janine*, 193.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>78</sup> "The Devil's Audience With Alasdair Gray," *The Printer's Devil* D (September 1994), 15-34, 19.

<sup>79</sup> Gray, *Lanark*, 560.

<sup>80</sup> Lumsden, "Innovation and Reaction in the Fiction of Alasdair Gray," 120.

<sup>81</sup> Gray, *Lanark*, 494.