

Alasdair Gray & the Transnational Local

1

Hi, my name is Rodge Glass. I'm a novelist and short story writer, also author of Alasdair Gray's only biography, which was first published back in 2008. That book was one-part sober, critical look at Gray's life and creations, one-part series of intimate portraits of the artist as an old man. This featured Gray as the self-proclaimed Johnson figure, while I was made Boswellesque, the butt of the jokes. Gray Studies brought me great joy then, and still does. In discussing 'Alasdair Gray and the Transnational Local', I'm going to draw on my time as Gray's student, secretary, biographer, friend, then critic, and most recently as Convener of the 2nd International Alasdair Gray Conference, which took place in Glasgow last week.

2

Today, I'm going to attempt 4 simple things. Firstly, a brief introduction to who Gray is, and what is distinctive about the way he goes about 'making imagined objects'. Then a sketch of the key elements in Gray's work. Then I'll look at case studies of how this works in practice, examples of what I'm calling the 'transnational local'. Finally, I'll make an argument for Gray as an artist with a consistent outlook, one largely overlooked or misunderstood. Here's an early taster, from 1952, Gray's first year as a Glasgow School of Art student. A distorted, fantastic, but recognisably Glasgow scene, featuring Gray's 'bent perspective', his trademark use of more than one vanishing point. 'The Beast in the Pit' is inscribed 'I want, I want, let me out, let me out.' Word and picture, in conversation, suggesting this Glasgow might be anywhere, real or imagined, a kind of heaven or hell. I like that this was Gray's response to the standard art school 1st year task, 'Paint washing day'.

3

So who is Alasdair Gray? Certainly one of the most celebrated Scottish polymaths of the last few hundred years. Scottish writers like Ali Smith, Jackie Kay, Janice Galloway and Irvine Welsh have credited him with a transformative influence on their work. He also

collaborated with leading writing peers, from Owens to Kelman to Lochhead. But writing was always just one part of his practice. Described by Sorcha Dallas, Custodian of the Gray Archive, as 'a painter who fell into writing', the first thing you need to know, if you're not familiar with Gray, is that he worked across space and form. Words lived in his pictures from the start, pictures lived in his stories. He produced a huge body of work in which, I argue, his very *Scottish* Literature is indivisible from visual art: portraits, landscapes, murals, novels, short stories, nonfiction, drama, poetry, hybrid works, as well as 4 polemics arguing for Scottish independence. The first of these was published in 1992, long before a Scottish Parliament seemed likely, never mind a nationalist government. This political consciousness was formed when we was a boy. Born into a working-class family in Riddrie, Glasgow, in 1934, Gray grew up on a housing scheme built thanks to the 1928 Wheatley Act. He would later describe this community as the model for his lifelong socialism. Riddrie was, he realised, a place where heaven and hell coexisted, where all things were possible through acts of imagination.

In terms of reputation, Gray's journey has been long and winding. Until 1981, he was virtually unknown beyond Glasgow. His early murals were destroyed, repainted, ignored, while his biggest literary work, *Lanark*, was still in the making, and shorter works – plays, radio dramas, short stories – had little impact. After *Lanark*, though, Gray's literary reputation increased, and continued to do so until his death in 2019. Meanwhile, until the turn of this century, visual art was seen as a very small room in the house of his reputation. Influenced by the likes of fellow writer-painter William Blake and Dutch artist Hieronimus Bosch (both were known for fantastic representations of the divine and hellish) Gray's art was hard to categorize, valued by readers of his books as *part of his stories*, but not valued independent of those stories. From his first mural, the transnational, ambitious 'Horrors of War', painted in the Scottish-USSR Friendship Society in Glasgow, this was clear. The mural depicted mutilated bodies and landscapes ravaged by nuclear war; the few critics that saw the work disliked it, or disapproved of the young artist 'reaching out to the enemy'.

Gray was, for decades after this, a footnote in European, British and even contemporary Scottish art, his work almost impossible to find except on the walls of friends' homes. In his autopicography, written because he was convinced his work would

otherwise go undocumented, Gray described himself as ‘one of those interesting second-raters’. Most exhibitions were self-funded, minor, and rarely led to sales. He was always poor.

Towards the end of Gray’s life his artistic reputation grew, and the last 10 years has seen an international flowering, not least due to the impact of his Oran Mor Auditorium. This is now a multi-purpose arts centre, his lifelong vision finally writ large in Scotland’s biggest free-to-access work of art. Not just work of art, but work of *Scottish Literatures*, being littered with quotations, reappropriations and subversions of the words of others, not least the rewriting of Glasgow’s motto. God was deleted from Gray’s version. More inclusive, he remade it transnational too: ‘Lord let Glasgow flourish through the preaching of thy word and praising thy name’ became ‘Let Us Flourish By Telling the Truth’. Suddenly, and belatedly, Gray’s portable visual art has even gained economic value. Meanwhile, the fact that Gray’s works are sometimes painted into the landscape means that thousands see them every day. Many of those people have never heard of Alasdair Gray. But his work is part of their world.

4

Each of the following case studies show, in contrasting ways, how Gray’s insistence on mixing the local and the eternal, works in practice. As everything in Gray is recycled, reused, no example stands alone. I’ve titled these case studies: An Outward-Looking Independence, The Art of the Creative Response, A Small Scottish Model of the Universe and finally Text & Impossible Image.

5

Gray has always been closely associated with his nation. In Kevin Cameron’s BBC Scotland documentary broadcast for Gray’s 70th birthday, the artist chose to interview himself. (Two Alasdairs were shown, as if sitting across from each other – one with hair slicked back and harsh interviewer’s tone, one the familiar artist). The pretend interviewer asked questions like, Why does nobody like you in England? To which the author replied, defensively, ‘Well, *reviewers* in England have been kind’. Gray’s readers know he made a lifetime habit of anticipating and responding to criticism. His invented critic Sidney Workman appeared in *Lanark* and *Old Men in Love*; he added extensive sections titled

'Critic Fuel' to various books. When *Gray at 80* was broadcast a decade later, again directed by Cameron, the self-interview was reused. I suggest this is reflective of Gray still being routinely considered by some as 'too Scottish for the English'; that somehow his overt socialism and Scottish nationalism, dating back to when this was more of a marginal position, disqualified him, for some, from being relevant outside his country. It was an accusation levelled repeatedly, even as Gray's books became widely translated across Europe, North America, Russia too. (Many of these editions deleted Gray's visual art entirely, considering the 'literature' not to include pictorial art at all.) Gray's repeated insistence, it seemed, on rooting his works in Glasgow was, at times, interpreted as exclusionary. Certainly, when *Lanark* was rejected by literary agency Curtis Brown, it was because they believed that 'no one would be interested in the events happening in this provincial town'. Later on, Gray's many saltire flags and thistles were interpreted as a conscious look inward, concentrating only on Scotland, only with Scots in mind. Despite his independence books making a clear case for the most inclusive use of the word 'Scots', they led to charges of anti-Englishness. These persisted, through to the publication of his controversial essay 'Settlers and Colonists', published in Scott Hames' *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence*, in 2012. Even when Gray died, celebrated in a motion in the Scottish Parliament, Tory MSP Adam Tomkins – Gray's collaborator on *How We Should Rule Ourselves*, one of those 4 polemics – raised 'Settlers & Colonists' as an example of where, he felt, Gray overstepped a moral line. In *How We Should Rule Ourselves*, trying to avoid accusations of anti-Englishness, he'd rewritten previous polemics to equally address England, Ireland and Wales too, as potentially independent nations. These are represented here by leek, rose and harp, each equal to the thistle. Even for his English co-author, though, that was unconvincing.

I posit that Gray's insistence on repeatedly placing his local and national culture in the picture, is not to the exclusion of anything, or anyone, but is a kind of coherent, consistent, determinedly outward-looking socialism. For the jacket of *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland 1997*, rather than design in his usual style, he instead chose a group of flags – Denmark, Ireland, Switzerland, Latvia – nations chosen for having similar sized populations to Scotland. (And for ruling themselves.) The book's text gave a historical overview of Scotland's rulers over centuries, showing Scots ruling Scotland *had happened*; also that 'the Scots' had always been a shifting, changing collection of peoples

and cultures. Twelve years after *How We Should Rule Ourselves*, Gray returned to this theme in a collaboration with glass artist Siobhan Healy. Gray drew the illustration, before Healy transformed this into a large glass piece, commissioned for Alloa Public Library.

As you can see on the right, Gray uses national symbols, but challenges assumptions of those symbols. At the centre sits a thistle, among multiple arrows representing incomers and outgoers, 'Scots' being just one of the many arrows going inwards, alongside Picts, Jews, Italians, Sikhs – outward arrows heading to India, China, Africa and Australia. The intricately shaped structure made for a design where the arrows, packed closely together, looked like a single shape, a coherent whole. As you can see, Gray adapted the design for his final political book, *Independence* (2014), in which even the authoring is inclusive: 'by Alasdair Gray, and many others'. The Healy collaboration underlined the point: ALL LANDS ARE PEOPLED BY FOLK FROM ELSEWHERE.

6

This puts me in mind of Gray's Hillhead Subway mural, worked on around the time of the Healy commission: FOLK OF ALL KINDS, ALL KINDS OF FOLK, read the message. All around, Gray vignettes were used to represent the types of people who ride the underground, from Head Cases to Fabulous Prancers. Before it was completed, a large black-and-white sign sat in the space, impossible to miss: WORK AS IF YOU LIVE IN THE EARLY DAYS OF A BETTER WORLD. For me, this is Gray in miniature. As he kept insisting for years, 'Work As If You Live in the Early Days of a Better Nation' - his most famous line – was never his line; he read it in a poem by the Canadian Dennis Lee. Here Lee's line was finally made Gray's own, users of Glasgow's Subway system not just placed in a city, or nation, but something transnational. A potentially *better world*.

7

Repeatedly, then, Gray used literature and art to root real, ordinary Glaswegians in a landscape both real and unreal, local and transnational. Multiple works were creative responses, or modern Glaswegian-Scottish versions of works by international writers and/or artists. I suggest these are transnational acts – works of word and picture in

conversation with voices from other nations, asserting: ordinary Scots belong in this company. Here we are.

Consider Book Four of Gray's novel *Lanark*. This slide shows two works, juxtaposed. One: the frontispiece of English philosopher Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, an influential work of social contract theory, etching by Parisian Abraham Bosse. Above, the giant crowned figure is made up of hundreds of figures, facing away, making up the larger body in the style of Italian painter Guiseppe Archimboldo. The panels display elements of the social contract – powers of church and state. In Gray's creative response, the landscape is Scottish, Book of Job quote altered, now warning *against* the costs of human pride, where the original *Leviathan* used a Job quote that appeared to *celebrate* humankind's power over landscape. What at first glance may appear a Scotland-exclusive world turns out to be in conversation with multiple nations and artists, a creative response acknowledging previous canonical works while working to subvert them. This piece asserts Scottish literature's potential – not least the author's own work – to equal canonical works. (Lest we forget, this frontispiece introduces readers to *Lanark's* finale, the last section of this vast novel that aimed to transform how Scottish Literature saw itself.) That transnational context may make readers question what they thought they knew about *Lanark*. Is it about making Glasgow an imaginary place for those who come after? Or rather, a novel that places Glasgow and Scotland in international company, just one of many legitimate nations, from whom we can learn, to whom we can respond? This next slide is his handwritten explanation. It was made for Alasdair's sister Mora, though it's useful to us too.

8

You don't need to be an expert in Scottish geography to know this picture isn't realism, and isn't to scale. On the contrary, the attempt is to juxtapose real and unreal, contemporary and eternal, local and universal. Using bent perspective, this map of Scotland collapses signifiers of Aberdeen, the Lake of Monteith, Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh and many more places into a single, impossible picture. It presents the parameters of the novel's world, but suggests, partly through its relationship with Hobbes & Bosse, commonalities with other worlds too.

9

Next, we return to Gray's large Oran Mor mural, titled a 'Small Scottish Model of the Universe'. It's no accident that the words 'Scottish' and 'Universe' are found together here, as the work can be seen as an attempt to insert the people and places of Glasgow, outsized, into a universe including the Garden of Eden. This is Gray's central claim, over a life's work. That ordinary, local folk, the kind of people who could never *finance* a work of art - belong in works of art, even in a transnational, divine landscape. In amongst Adam, Eve, and Mother Earth as Glaswegian midwife were populated monuments, statues and bridges from Glasgow's West End, next to symbols of the Zodiac, which in turn sit next to quotations taken from the title of Gauguin's 1898 painting, 'Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?' The intense sky around them suggests another universe. Downstairs, multiple large mirrors contain portraits of Oran Mor cleaners and bar staff, Gray including only half his own face, while assistants and collaborators are presented whole. On the Eastern Gable, underneath a rainbow, Gray's Bella Caledonia sits alongside Gray's altered version of Glasgow's motto. Rooted in the local, like the *Lanark* frontispiece, Oran Mor looks beyond the rainbow to the horizon. According to Gray's collaborator Nichol Wheatley, Gray intended to include collapsed maps of ten Scottish towns on lower ceiling panels he died before completing. Again, Scotland was to be a whole universe, different to, and equal to, but in conversation with the universes of other inclusive nations. There are black Adam and white Eve, high up, embracing in their Garden amid Gray's impossible cloudscape. In this way, I argue, amid the artist's socially conscious message writ large, 'When We Are True to Each Other We Are Real as Stars', the viewer's imagination must contain the local, the national, the transnational, and transuniversal - even the sublime. 10 & 11.

12

This final case is a cheat, because it's several, though they do come from one place, the Alasdair Gray Archive. As this was only set up during Covid times, until recently few were able to visit. As well as containing the personal effects from Gray's flat, his library, artefacts, sketches, paintings and books, the archive also contains much in the way of private sketchbooks and materials, giving a real insight into his creative process. The first image here shows a ledger Gray rescued from a bin. It's littered with previous owners' accounts, but Gray recycled it as a diary, sketchbook, prep for various future works.

Handwritten notes cover pages at all angles. This image is typical. In the middle, two photographs of a Glasgow church, while on left and right Gray responds in two ways. The sketch in red on the left came first, being more true to the dimensions of the photo. But by the time he came to the image on the right, the purpose seems not to have been to reproduce Glasgow reality, but to use Glasgow reality as the basis for something more exaggerated, more colourful, suggestive of something beyond the city. The rich skies would soon be reproduced in a more exaggerated way in Gray's first well-known large painting, *Cowcaddens in the Fifties*. Here, the effect is subtler, but it's present, and the trademark use of bent perspective suggests this place may have something in common with a Glasgow scene, but it cannot be seen as that alone. It is beyond the city, using archetypes of certain types of places, but collapsed, like the Book 4 frontispiece, towards a disorientating effect. While studying these images in the Gray Archive, I suddenly remembered 2 other images these reminded me of; these are the last I'll show you today. As you'll see, they're both illustrated poems.

13

The first, 'The Scots Hippo #2', was made by Gray for his friend Gordon MacPherson in 1976, before eventually being made into a series of prints in 2007. This was Gray's version of the famous TS Eliot poem; he dodged copyright costs by translating Eliot into Scots. This is another work in transnational conversation, while being rooted strongly in a Scottish context, this time through the use of Scots language. The building here is what reminded me of it – the 'kirk' of the poem is clearly based on local designs. This is what the ledger shows Gray had access to, though the final piece suggests a place beyond Scotland. Again, creatively responding to the work of a major writer from outside Scotland. Again, rooted in the real, but going beyond the real, the local. Hippos are squashed inside buildings with open sides. They snuffle at the feet of a bowler-hatted man, at an unlikely angle.

The image on the right is, in my view, a different version of the same thing. This piece is called 'Inside' – it became a central motif in Gray's book of poems, *Old Negatives*, published in 1989, before being remade as prints now housed in the Gray Archive. Here we see Gray's handwritten poem describing the body's 'box of bone'. Once again, this is rooted in the local, the buildings hiding inside the male figure's leg being almost, but not

quite, identifiably Glaswegian. (The front looks like Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art, though the top of the illustration suggests a much larger building, of a different shape.) Rather, the buildings are *archetypes*, that might apply *beyond* Glasgow. The flags wave above these buildings, reading COMMAND and OBEY, words that might suit any international government building. In a different kind of impossible perspective, woman hides inside man's belly, while out of his head another building protrudes, these flags reading LAW and DUTY. Once again, the real and unreal, local and transnational, possible and impossible, in one frame.

14

A final thought. Gray often encouraged his work to be seen as a lifelong attempt to 'record Glasgow's disappearing past', repeatedly asserting the equivalence of Glasgow's imaginative potential with other world cities. For me, this is crucial to understanding his practice. In 2018, Gray stated: 'My work is Glaswegian in so far as it records my life in Glasgow...It's as much documentary work, I suppose, as Dickens documents London, Dostoyevsky Moscow and St. Petersburg.' Gray roots his work in the local, but does so as part of an international tradition of documentary art, not very modestly, but purposely, putting himself in the company of Dickens and Dostoyevsky. The subtext being, perhaps, that neither Dickens nor Dostoyevsky had to defend their right to turn their cities into places of the imagination. Gray's various works illuminate one central idea: that in looking outward to the transnational world, he believed the local had also to be present. He sought to insert ordinary Glaswegians into fantastical, hybrid worlds, as a way to assert these people and places belonged there. Even in the company of Dickens or Dostoyevsky. Even in the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve, and the animals.