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Alasdair Gray and Postmodernism

Critical responses to Alasdair Gray's writing have often sought to label his work as postmodern. Since *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981) Gray's fiction has been examined for postmodern narrative techniques and postmodern critiques have been applied. Any current thesis or critical work on Gray would be expected to at least acknowledge the so-called postmodern aspect of his writing. My intention is not to argue that postmodern readings of Gray are critically fraudulent. Instead my aim is to outline aspects of Gray's so-called postmodernity, to consider some of the possible counter-arguments to this definition, and finally to explore some of the wider critical debates in world literature out of which the postmodernist conceptualization of Gray emanates. The more Gray has argued that his work is not postmodern, the more some critics have insisted on the application of the term. This paper will propose that this insistence is part of a more fundamental debate between authors and critics, and this debate is to do with the issue of ownership of literature.

Even critics without a discernibly postmodernist agenda have applied the postmodern label to Gray's work. David Hutchison examines the filmed version of Gray's stage re-creation of Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Story of a Recluse" (in which Gray provides an ending to Stevenson's unfinished fragment), and concludes that "we are being offered a postmodernist narrative in which the ideas of truth and authenticity are in question."¹ Robert Crawford

¹David Hutchinson, "Gray the Dramatist," in *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, ed. Robert Crawford and Thom Nairn (Edinburgh, 1991), p.154. Henceforth Crawford.

views Gray's use of the word "GOODBYE" at the end of *Lanark* as "typical of the postmodern imagination" (Crawford, p. 7). Hutchison and Crawford are not necessarily wrong to suggest that Gray's work can be understood within a postmodernist context. Indeed there is some validity in placing the work in relation to postmodernism as Gray's writing exhibits self-conscious structural features such as playful irony, narrative fragmentation and parody, all of which have been identified as salient aspects of postmodernism.² Gray has traditionally chosen to end his fictional texts with postscripts addressed to the critics. In *Lanark*, the section entitled "Epilogue" deals with the relationship between art and criticism. In a remarkably self-reflexive fashion Gray adds a pseudo-academic "Index of Plagiarisms" which leads the reader to dead-ends, non-existent chapters and nonexistent texts.³ It is the author himself who helps create a form of artistic duplicity, for example, in naming his 1996 collection of short stories *Mavis Belfrage: A Romantic Novel*, then admitting on the dust jacket, "I call this book a novel since most readers prefer long stories to short." The fictionalized and autobiographical Alasdair Gray who makes appearances as fallible or unreliable characters in *Lanark*, *Poor Things* (1992), *Ten Tales Tall and True* (1993), and *1982 Janine* (1984) can also be considered within this context. There is further evidence of the concept of artistic duplicity in the paperback edition of *Poor Things* which features critical comments from the publications *Private Nose* and *The Skibereen Eagle*, both of which turn out to be nothing more than chimerical products of the author's imagination. An important consideration is Gray's control of all aspects of his work, including book design, font, the size and use of margins, through to the writing of his own author profile and blurb. Gray fell out with his publisher at Penguin Books when illustrator Mark Entwistle was commissioned to design the paperback edition of *The Fall of Kelvin Walker* (1985) in preference to re-using Gray's own original design for the hardback edition. Elements such as the blurb and the author profile, traditionally existing outside the text, are now integrated into the fiction. The fact that Gray plays with notions of reality and textual authority helps to explain the reasons behind the proliferation of postmodernist responses to his work.

One negative result of the postmodernist reading is that at times the political dimension in much of Gray's fiction has been de-emphasized in favor of a reading which prioritizes narrative concerns. Indeed the endnotes to Gray's novel *Poor Things*, entitled "Notes Critical and Historical," provide an instance where the reader is free to decide whether the author is simply indulging

²See Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (London, 1992), p. 7. Henceforth Waugh.

³Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 485-90. Henceforth *Lanark*.

in some ironic postmodernist high jinks (in drawing attention to the artificiality of the main narrative by highlighting the concept of text as imaginative construct), or—without the benefit of any theory other than common sense—that he is attempting to make a straightforward economic and political point. Referring to the decision of one of his characters to sell his shares in a well-known Scottish insurance company, Gray notes:

It was improvident of Wedderburn to do so since this insurance company (now called Scottish Widows) is still a highly flourishing concern. In March 1992, as part of Conservative publicity preceding a General Election, the chairman of Scottish Widows announced that if Scotland achieved an independent parliament the company's head office would move to England.⁴

To term the above postmodern is one possibility (although it can be presumed that Gray would object). Alternatively, without resort to any theory, it can be argued that it is Gray, the socialist with a yearning for Scottish political independence, citing yet another economic and political abuse of a subservient nation by a profit-driven corporate community. In the apparently objective prose can be found an implicit appeal which asks the reader to regard Scottish Widows as an ironical misnomer, to catalogue the injustice, acknowledge the hint of racism in the sentiment, and to turn again to the imperialist accusation that the colonized nation is incapable of managing its own affairs without the assistance of the superior colonial power.

A key distinction between a typical postmodernist approach and a more political critique can be made. While a political critique will primarily deal with the subject of political discourse, the postmodernist perspective will in most cases have a wider aesthetic agenda which will usually prioritize form over content to such a degree that the content is deemed redundant. Therefore a postmodernist interpretation of the above may pay more attention to the author's presence in the work of fiction rather than the overt political content. Undeniably Gray's fiction displays an obsession with the political. However, it appears that the complex nature of much of Gray's narrative structure (the complicated counter-pointing evident in the realist and fantastical books of *Lanark* and the elaborate use of footnoting and intertextual referencing) has led critics to feel obliged to respond with equally ambitious and sophisticated critiques. An impressive work of literature can engender a conscious or unconscious feeling of reciprocation on the part of the critic and this is not in itself problematic. While the standard postmodernist critique of Gray's fiction might displease the author himself, it is in essence extremely complimentary: a form of tribute which implicitly states that the highly sophisticated nature of the work deserves nothing less than a worthy riposte. It is true that the ingenuity

⁴Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things* (London, 1992), pp. 285-6.

of Gray's narrative techniques is the first feature many readers of his fiction countenance and this, at least in part, explains why there has quite rightly been a critical engagement with this facet of his work. However, the fact that a political dimension is present in all his major fictional work inevitably leads to the opinion that Gray has serious aspirations for his political subject matter which should be addressed. To a large extent postmodernist readings of Gray's output have trivialized or ignored the political themes.

A good example of the standard postmodern interpretation of Gray's work is found in Beat Witschi's *Glasgow Urban Writing and Postmodernism*. A brief outline of some of Witschi's main points is instructive. Witschi chooses to view much of Gray's fiction as a "postmodern mapping of the [Scottish] world."⁵ Building upon this concept *Lanark* is defined as "Gray's postmodern version of 'the cult of ego'" (Witschi, p. 157) while Gray's second novel, *1982 Janine*, is "undoubtedly a postmodern novel" (p. 202). Witschi emphasizes the fragmentary nature of postmodern fiction in general, and extols the way in which the "experience of disintegration" is central to such writing (p. 157). He detects in Gray's *1982 Janine* a "dynamic flow of imagined discourses inside the protagonist's head" and reads such "imagined discourses" as symptomatic of the postmodern condition (p. 151). Gray's explicit references to cinema (the actress Jane Russell is referred to throughout *1982 Janine*) are seen as further indications that the novel should be thought of as the work of a postmodernist. Witschi writes: "Gray clearly shares the love of many postmodernist writers for the cinema, or rather he shares their love of the literary possibilities by drawing on the cinema for models and raw material" (p. 161). He continues in this vein, interpreting most of the novel with postmodernist explanations. When it is argued that Gray speaks, at times, in a knowing fashion directly to his readers, this is also a characteristic of postmodernism (p. 173).

Likewise the fact that *1982 Janine* exhibits moments of "literary self-consciousness" and "delights in self-consciously emphasising its fictionality" is "particularly postmodern" (pp. 170-71). The character of Hislop is correctly viewed as "one of the stock figures of Glasgow writing" (p. 177). The subsequent nervous breakdown the character experiences, as a result of too much cognitive dissonance, allows Witschi to uncover a "self-conscious re-writing of the past," containing a "destabilizing quality" which "de-familiarises" the reader and is consistent with the postmodern process (p. 177). Gray's entertaining and imaginative use of typography is summed up as "Gray's use of postmodern narrative strategies" (p. 182). Even the employment of pornographic material is "a well-known feature of postmodern writing" (p. 203). Without wishing to belabor the point, it can be determined that any and every aspect of the novel is liable to be interpreted in this fashion. My aim here is

⁵Beat Witschi, *Glasgow Urban Writing and Postmodernism: A Study of Alasdair Gray's Fiction* (Frankfurt am Main & New York, 1991), p. 150. Henceforth Witschi.

not to suggest that such a reading is an entirely incorrect one. For example, Witschi writes of the fragmentary nature of *1982 Janine* and indeed the novel is a fragmented and non-linear narrative. At key points competing discourses displace one another—the political interrupts the pornographic, the historical transposes the personal and autobiographical—and what the reader is left with is a narrative which is fragmented, disjointed and unresolved. It can be compared to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) which is similarly a fragmented account. As *Tristram Shandy* abounds in tangents and digressions, the narrator even goes to the lengths of self-reflexively commenting upon this aspect: "Digressions... they are the life the soul of reading!,—take them out of this book, for instance, you might as well take the book along with them;—one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer."⁶ The fragmentary nature of Sterne's novel is also found in the numerous short chapters: Chapter Five in Book Four reads in its entirety: "Is this a fit time, said my father to himself, to talk of PENSIONS and GRENADIERS?" (Sterne, Vol. IV, Chapt. 5, p. 200).

It is evident that Witschi is correct to view *1982 Janine* as being fragmentary also. However, from a postmodern perspective the comparison between Gray and Sterne can be problematic. Certain literary critics are eager to view the term postmodern as one that should properly be applied to literary works written only in the second half of the twentieth century. Patricia Waugh writes that postmodernism is "a concept designating a cultural epoch" (Waugh, p. 7). Therefore writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut and Paul Auster are viewed as postmodern, while others such as James Hogg, Franz Kafka and Nikolai Gogol are not. Primarily these critics wish to date the literature in order to substantiate their argument that there is something radical and unfamiliar about the post-World-War-Two literary era which in turn demands an equally new critical and theoretical response. For those who attest that postmodernism is distinct from, and follows on from modernism, it is vital that postmodern characteristics in earlier literatures are deemphasized. For example, if it is suggested that the term postmodern can be applied to eighteenth, nineteenth or early twentieth century writing, then the historical roots (and surely the term itself) are essentially challenged. Gray's appreciation of writers like Hogg, Sterne and Tobias Smollett means that he may consciously be drawing inspiration from the narrative techniques and strategies of these writers who predate the postmodern period in literature. Therefore Sterne's extreme use of typography in *Tristram Shandy* appears as a forerunner to Gray's employment of typography in *1982 Janine*.

A useful starting point in attempting to outline the influence of Sterne on Gray is found in Gray's *Book of Prefaces* (2000) which includes a glossary on

⁶Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (New York & London, 1980), Vol. I, Chapt. 23, p. 52. Henceforth Sterne.

Sterne. Although A. L. Kennedy is listed as the author of the individual piece on Sterne, Gray is the editor of the book, and merely asked for and received assistance from fellow writers to help him finish a project which was years behind schedule. Gray writes: "I admit to having tampered a little with some of their contributions (Janice Galloway says her commentaries on Brontë and George Eliot have Gray fingermarks all over them) but have nowhere contradicted their opinions."⁷ The short glossary on *Tristram Shandy* should therefore be strongly associated with Gray, although not completely attributed to him. The glossary reads:

The book is wilful, exuberant, bawdy, gleefully plagiarizing, eccentric and humane. It delights in its fiction, freely acknowledging the conversation that joins author & reader, & using every device that late 20th-century critics label post-modernist" (*Prefaces*, p. 396).

It is true that *Tristram Shandy* employs all the major narrative devices that would normally lead a book to be termed postmodern. It is a novel that very obviously exhibits a literary self-consciousness. Time and again the narrative refers to its own existence and construction. Chapter 23 begins: "I have a strong propensity in me to begin this chapter very nonsensically, and I will not baulk my fancy.—Accordingly I set off thus" (Sterne, Vol. I, Chapt. 23, p. 51). At the beginning of the second book of the novel, the narrator comments: "I have begun a new book, on purpose that I might have room enough to explain the nature of the perplexities in which my uncle Toby was involved" (Sterne, Vol. II, Chapt. 1, p. 58). The reader is directly addressed and given access to the motivations behind the construction of the text; the narrator states: "I must sustain my character properly, and contrast it properly too" (Sterne, Vol. II, Chapt. 2, p. 61).

In *Tristram Shandy* other narrative and technical features also found in Gray, and usually deemed to be postmodern, are explicitly rendered. The appearance of the author as a character in his or her own work is often regarded as a characteristic of postmodernism. For example, in Auster's novella *City of Glass* (1985), part of his *New York Trilogy* (1987), a fictionalized version of Auster appears as a character in the text and gets involved in dialogues with the main character. In a section subtitled "Encounters a Critic" in the "Epilogue" of *Lanark*, a fictionalized version of Alasdair Gray makes an appearance as the author of the novel, and confronts the character of Lanark. The fictionalized author states: "'I am your author.' Lanark stared at him. The author said, 'Please don't feel embarrassed. This isn't an unprecedented situation. Vonnegut has it in *Breakfast of Champions* and Jehovah in the books of

⁷Alasdair Gray, *The Book of Prefaces* (London & New York, 2000), p. 630. Henceforth *Prefaces*.

Job and Jonah” (*Lanark*, p. 481). What is of greatest significance here is that Gray seems to be aware that a postmodernist interpretation might be fuelled by such an inclusion, and to forestall this he references not only Vonnegut (widely regarded as a postmodernist) but also two books of the Old Testament, a text which is decidedly outwith the postmodern canon. Of course, if the Bible is understood as being essentially a work of imaginative literature, then Gray is quite correct to assert that the fictionalized author, God, is present within his own text. Sterne also attempts to forestall critics, in a similarly comedic fashion to Gray, when he directly addresses them and attempts to anticipate them. Sterne writes:

Now, my dear Anti-Shandean, and thrice able critics, and fellow-labourers (for to you I write this preface)—and to you, most subtle statesmen and discreet doctors (do—pull off your beards) renowned for gravity and wisdom;—Monopolus, my politician—Didius, my counsel; Kysarcus, my friend;—Phutatorius, my guide;—Gastripheres, the preserver of my life; Somnolentius, the balm and repose of it—not forgetting all others, as well sleeping as waking, ecclesiastical as civil, whom for brevity, but out of no resentment to you, I lump all together.—Believe me, right worthy. (Sterne, Vol. III, Chapt. 20, p. 141)

This knowing and self-reflexive narrative clearly corresponds in motivation and execution to Gray’s addresses to the critics in *Lanark* (pp. 480-99) and *1982 Janine* (pp. 343-5). In *Lanark*, Gray writes of the address to the critics: “To have an objection anticipated is no reason for failing to raise it” (p. 482). This gesture might debatably be termed postmodern: however, it can without any doubt be seen as part of a wider tradition of writing which includes The Old Testament and *Tristram Shandy*.

The fact is that all of the testimony that Witschi provides to account for Gray as a postmodernist is found in abundance in earlier literature. The experience of disintegration is seen explicitly in Gogol’s short story “The Overcoat” (1842) and in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes From the Underground* (1864). The “flow of imagined discourses” which Witschi detects in *1982 Janine*, is also a feature of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939). That Gray makes explicit reference to cinema and pornography in his fiction can essentially be understood as the act of a writer making use of the materials which present themselves as being part of the contemporaneous fabric of the culture within which the writer operates. Writers have always written about aspects of their own contemporary culture, but Gray goes beyond mere representation in *1982 Janine* when he employs particular narrative strategies strongly associated with cinema within Jock’s fantasies. The fact that Jock imagines and scripts his sexual fantasies while self-reflexively commenting upon their construction is a method which obviously draws attention to the fact that the narrative is influenced by the visual narrative techniques of cinema. In the following passage, pornographic representation and the cinematic narrative are combined in a knowing fashion by Jock to construct his sexual fantasy.

Her lovely and increasingly naked body is displayed in stretched and quivering positions.

This lets me enjoy her in the postures of lovemaking without having to envy men or women sharing them...I want no bloodshed. Metal cannot touch or pierce her if I cannot. So although this episode will look realistic it must be cunningly contrived. Better imagine it happening in slow motion.⁸

Jock conceptualizes his fantasy as an "episode" that "will look realistic," and imagines that it is "happening in slow motion." Gray is thus emphasizing the employment of the cinematic narrative. After the above passage there is a cut to another episode which the reader learns is part of the same overall sexual fantasy. At this point Jock imagines that the pornographic scene has been cinematically presented to an audience of which he is a member. "Everything goes black, then white, then I see that the whiteness is a blank cinema screen, a small one in a private viewing theatre. The seats are upholstered in red velvet, four steeply banked rows with six seats to a row" (*Janine*, p. 102). It is a fantasy containing and framing a fantasy. Now Gray explicitly alerts the reader to the fact that the narrative is self-consciously adopting and utilizing cinema as a mode of narration. Examining these instances where the contemporary culture (cinema) is referenced and employed as part of the narrative structure, critics like Witschi have concluded that the text is fundamentally a postmodern construct. However, in many ways Gray's action of referencing cinema and pornography in his fiction is not substantially different from the practice of earlier writers in adapting strategies from other art forms and employing them in literary art. Thus writing draws on the strategies of caricature as first seen in pictorial art. The writers who adopted this strategy, such as John Dryden in his *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), were aware that they were employing a technique which emanated from a current and popular form of visual art. The fact that caricature is traditionally seen as a lower art form only serves to strengthen the comparison with Gray's employment of cinema: until very recently cinema was viewed as being a lesser art form than that of creative literature. The use of caricature by Dickens in his novels is directly related to the resurgence in popularity of caricature as a visual form of representation in the nineteenth century. Likewise Gray is merely drawing upon a similarly popular and contemporary form of visual expression.

Gray himself enters the debate surrounding postmodernism in a powerful fashion, his first instinct being to dismiss it as an altogether meaningless concept:

I have never found a definition of postmodernism that gives me a distinct idea of it. If the main characteristic is an author who describes himself as a character in his

⁸Alasdair Gray, 1982 *Janine* (London, 1984), p. 101. Henceforth *Janine*.

work, then Dante, Chaucer, Langland, and Wordsworth are as postmodern as James Joyce, who is merely modern.⁹

It is significant that Gray seeks to question the very existence of postmodernism by casting doubt on its definition. His dislike of postmodernism has found several outlets in his fiction and in interviews. In 1997 he was moved to publish an extraordinary poem in *The Times Literary Supplement* entitled "Postmodern Hymn to Obscurity" (Aug. 11, 1995). This poem was later published in *Sixteen Occasional Poems 1990-2000* under the title "Postmodernism." It is worth citing in full:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
All things were made by him.
In him was life;
And the light was the life of men.
And the light shone in darkness;
and the darkness partly understood,
and lectured on it,

Light died before the uncreating word.

Now darkness lectures to darkness on darkness
and the darkness sees it is good.¹⁰

The poem symbolically attacks the nature of this particular branch of literary theory. Gray explains "The first seven lines of this poem are quotations from the start of *Saint John's Gospel* in King James Authorized Version, the tenth line is from Pope's *Dunciad* but shifted to the past tense" (*Occasional*, p. 30). One interpretation of the poem is that "the Word" acts as a symbol for literature, and "God" stands for the writer. The "darkness" is symbolic of those within the academy who have taken ownership of the art, and of the deliberate destruction of rationality and understanding which this has often involved. With a line such as, "Light died before the uncreating word," the reference point could be taken to be Barthes' famous dictum, "the birth of the reader

⁹Mark Axlerod, "An Epistolary Interview Mostly with Alasdair Gray" in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 15 (Summer, 1995), 111.

¹⁰Alasdair Gray, *Sixteen Occasional Poems 1990-2000* (Glasgow, 2000), p. 14. Henceforth *Occasional*.

must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”¹¹ Gray’s speaker attacks this concept by inverting Genesis 1:4, which states, “And God saw the light, that it was good,” so that it now appears, “and the darkness sees that it is good.” For Barthes as a critic the death of the author is presented as a positive liberation, whereas Gray as a writer reads it as an event of tragic significance. In “Postscript on What Occasioned Foregoing Verses,” Gray contextualizes this poem by detailing an occasion in which he encountered an individual who spoke on the subject of Postmodernism, and “seemed sure that critics and lecturers were now entitled to read any idea they liked into a work.” Gray continues:

His energetic speech led to a discussion that said nothing about links between vision and word and ignored descriptions of our intricate universe and how well or badly we live in it. Ideas Homer, Jesus, Shakespeare, Mark Twain et cetera thought important seemed irrelevant to the Postmodern speech game (*Occasional*, p. 29).

Written during a decade in which much of the criticism of Gray’s work took on a decidedly postmodernist bent, the poem can best be understood as a response to the imposition of this critical agenda. The reality, however, is that such statements have had little sway with the critics, who are quite correct to insist that they should interpret works of literature without recourse to the views of the creative writer, and by the same token it is hardly surprising when writers respond by claiming proprietorial rights associated with the construction of their own work. So on the one side are the critics who claim that Gray is a postmodernist, and on the other side is Gray who is adamant that he is not. Rather than getting involved in this argument, a more interesting way of proceeding might be to explore the wider literary debate out of which the above emanates and in turn feeds into. It can be argued that the notion of Gray as a postmodernist has as much to do with economics and social control as it has to do with aesthetics.

In literature it is the case that the arguments over the moral rights and wrongs of critical and theoretical practice are part of a more general debate involving creative writers, academics and professional critics. It is a debate which has much to do with the notion of who owns and controls literature as a cultural commodity, and this is a problematic area given that many creative writers are also academics and/or critics. Umberto Eco is a best-selling and highly acclaimed novelist as well as the author of critical works such as *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (1979), and he has stressed his concerns with the critical role in relation to creative writing. He writes: “I have been studying the dialectics between the rights of the texts and the rights of the interpreters... I have the impression that, in the course of the

¹¹Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” in *Image Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), p. 148.

last decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed."¹² It may be accepted that academics will tend to share a far more positive view of theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin or Jacques Derrida, who ostensibly validate their own existence as academics, while writers of creative literature will tend to be somewhat more hostile in their reactions.

In the context of contemporary Scottish literature (one context of many where Gray can be located) the ill feeling which exists between certain creative writers and academics/critics is all too apparent. This has led to expressions of discontent and discernible hostility. Although the question regarding the status and practice of literary theory is not placed at the center of this exchange, the chasm is without doubt a product of the same general debate concerning the ownership of literature. James Kelman can be seen as crystallizing aspects of this argument. In numerous published interviews, including one with fellow writer Duncan McLean, he expresses his antagonism towards those he considers to be "vultures on literature."¹³ He rejects the "criteria of the Great Critic" and states: "it is important to realize that literature doesn't belong to any one class at all, literature just belongs to mankind—it's a universal...it doesn't belong to universities, it doesn't belong to schools" (McLean, p. 69). For Kelman it is the imposition of a preconceived critical agenda, with its own racist, economic and class-based assumptions, that writers committed to serious political dissent have to resist. While it would be overstating the case to suggest that Kelman is opposed to the very idea of literary criticism, there is a prevailing antipathy to the nature of critical enquiry as practiced by those in what Kelman would view as the literary establishment. Behind this lies the persuasive economic argument that whereas writers engaged in the creation of serious literary art often suffer financial hardship in the pursuit of their art, the critics who reside within the university system are usually immune from such penury. Kelman regards this economic situation as being beyond the status of mere metaphor. For him it is symptomatic of the divisions which segregate writers and critics. As he said:

The whole of the resources of literature belongs to, say, university critics, more or less, you know libraries, stationery, every single thing belongs to people who either work for, within universities, or else who have degrees in English Literature, and they're the people who own literature, who own its resources...writers for instance like Alasdair Gray, and people like that, they don't have typewriter ribbons! They don't have fucking paper, they don't have anything! (McLean, p. 68).

¹²Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, 1992), p. 23.

¹³Duncan McLean, "James Kelman Interviewed" in *The Edinburgh Review*, 71 (1985), 68. Henceforth McLean.

The explicit anger is evidence of the distrust with which Kelman and other Scottish writers such as Tom Leonard and Irvine Welsh regard the literary establishment. Kelman's main suspicion is that the "culture of the universities" (specifically in the average department of literature) is merely an elaborate propagation of a system in which the primary objective is to be found in the creation of "jobs for the Literary Boys." So for Kelman it remains a system which is "not only barren creatively, but it plunders the whole of literature" (McLean, p. 68). A link between academic fraudulence and economic self-advancement is clearly implied, and the connection between Kelman's critique and Chomsky's concept of the academic star system is apparent.¹⁴

Leonard shares this viewpoint. Sarcasically describing the world of academic publishing as being full of "wonderful people going up the academic ladder producing books about real writers," Leonard is eager to question the seemingly anti-democratic nature of an industry which consistently produces books which are considerably beyond the price range of most readers.¹⁵ The democratic instinct is fundamental to Leonard's own critical work. As editor of the poetry anthology *Radical Renfrew* (1990) he brings to the reader a selection of social and political poetry, excluded from the literary canon, and "not held worthy of serious consideration."¹⁶ This particular project seeks to promote literature which may have been unfairly marginalized, and to present the reader with the opportunity to examine the evidence with minimal mediation. In his Introduction to *Radical Renfrew* Leonard echoes Chomsky's position when he criticizes the way knowledge is governed by the so-called experts and removed for the public sphere.¹⁷ The historical perspective, which Leonard endorses, informs the reader that the dramatic rise in literacy levels in the twentieth century as the result of compulsory state education led directly to the possibility of mass participation in the field of literature. For those who controlled literature as an academic and critical subject this democratic potentiality was viewed as a threat which had to be countered.¹⁸ It can be argued that in the twentieth century highly accessible—though admittedly deeply layered—

¹⁴See Robert F. Barksy, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1997), pp. 196-7.

¹⁵Kasia Boddy, "Interviews with Tom Leonard," *The Edinburgh Review*, 77 (1987), 61. Henceforth Interviews.

¹⁶Tom Leonard, *Reports from the Present: Selected Work 1982-94* (London, 1995), p. 43. Henceforth Leonard.

¹⁷See *Radical Renfrew*, ed. Tom Leonard (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. xvii-xxxv. Also see Noam Chomsky, *Language and Responsibility* (New York, 1979), p.4.

¹⁸See Leonard, p. 51.

works of literature, such as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), have been sought after as the cultural property of an elite group. Paraphrasing the ideas of Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791-92), Leonard writes: "With mystification, one might add, comes the caste that can be called the Keepers of the Mystery. And the Keepers of the Mystery are the Keepers of the Right to Dialogue, among themselves" (Leonard, p. 51). In many subjects, from psychology to politics, from history to medicine, and from mathematics to literature, the experts have acted to deter the majority of the uninitiated who may have imagined that access to knowledge was a fundamental human right. When Leonard writes of the "Keepers of the Right to Dialogue" it is unequivocally a reference to those who maintain that formal training and formal qualifications are required in order for an individual to enter into the critical dialogue across a broad range of subjects. This is not to suggest that writers like Leonard and Kelman are against the notion of literary criticism. Leonard, for example, states that he is not anti-criticism, and emphasizes the way in which "a really great piece of literary criticism always makes you go back to the thing" (Interviews, p. 61). What Leonard objects to is the "bankruptcy of political values," found in much criticism, and he is aware of the process involving "the making of commodity" which is "related to self-advancement in a materialistic way" (Interviews, p. 61).

Like Kelman and Leonard, Gray is suspicious of the academic appropriation of works of creative literature. However he is also a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow and the compiler of *The Book of Prefaces*, itself a scholarly and academic work. Despite these connections to the academic world, Gray has been unswerving in his dislike of postmodernism. This is partly to do with the political nature of his writing. In an appendage to his novel *A History Maker* (1994) entitled "Notes & Glossary Explaining Obscurities" Gray employs fiction to make the necessary correlation between this particular branch of theory and the mechanisms of state and corporate power. He writes: "Postmodernism happened when landlords, businessmen, brokers and bankers who owned the rest of the world had used new technologies to destroy the power of labour unions."¹⁹ This is not only a reference to the apparent lack of political reality inherent in much of postmodernist theory, but also alludes to the way in which theory can function as an ideological state tool to be wielded against those who are denied any real access to political power. In the above passage, the "new technologies" (theory) are in conflict with the "labour unions" and the true period of postmodernism occurs only when political dissent has been eradicated, and the state, representing the economically powerful, emerges victorious.

With the rise of literary theory in the second half of the twentieth century, it is no surprise that critics have chosen to term Gray's work postmodern.

¹⁹Alasdair Gray, *A History Maker* (Edinburgh, 1994), p. 202.

Without doubt, in the years to come, many more critical studies will label him in this way. Whether the label is accepted or not, it is clear that this particular conceptualization of Gray can be understood as a typical example of the gulf between criticism and creative writing, and between academics and artists. With groundbreaking novels such as *Lanark*, *1982 Janine* and *Poor Things*, Gray has helped to define the contemporary novel in Scotland, and in the process has inspired the likes of Janice Galloway, Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh. The artistic and commercial success of these younger writers has led to Scotland being viewed as a place of genuine cultural possibility. Gray should therefore be understood primarily as a creator of innovative and inspiring work, and not merely as a proponent or product of a critical theory which obtains much of its force from dubious considerations within the academy.

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