Chapter 8. ‘How SCOTTISH I am’*:* Alasdair Gray, Race and Neo-Nationalism

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‘Modernity without illusions’

Nationalism of the kind promoted by Alasdair Gray must distinguish itself from ‘the monstrous ethnic nationalisms of early twentieth-century imperial nations’, not least because those versions of nationalism have *not* been confined to that historical period or to ‘imperial nations’.[1] The move is rarely straightforward in execution, with all versions of cultural nationalism having to negotiate territory where ethnic and linguistic dimensions of race, however untimely, remain persistently engaged in one way or another. But for many theorists, including Tom Nairn, the early analyst of ‘the break-up of Britain’, modern Scottish nationalism is different. ‘This is overwhelmingly a politically-orientated separatism’, Nairn wrote in the 1970s, ‘rather exaggeratedly concerned with problems of state and power, and frequently indifferent to the themes of race and cultural ancestry’. [2]

Alasdair Gray adopts a similar position in his public political persona where he constructs his fictional writing as operating in diversity and multiplicity. In *Why the Scots Should Rule Scotland* (1992), Gray acknowledges that

> Readers who live in Scotland but were born elsewhere may feel threatened by the title of this pamphlet; I must therefore explain that by *Scots* I mean everyone in Scotland who is able to vote [… which] includes second or third generation half-breeds like me whose parents or parents’ parents were English, Chinese, Indian, Polish, Italian and Russian Jewish.

Gray concludes his reassurance with the disarming, but risky, explanation that his liberal take on race involves an element of professional interest:

> Since nobody will read a writer who seems superior to them or tries to boss them I am terrified of being thought a racist, and hope I have cleared myself of that suspicion by demonstrating that the Scots are composed of many races, not one. Moreover this pamphlet also deals at points with the English, French, Irish, Welsh, and I think does so without prejudice.[3]

But the matter did not end there. The issue of Gray's anti-Englishness has re-emerged, most recently in a 2012 controversy when he raised considerable ire in some quarters by launching an attack on the appointment of English 'colonists' to influential positions in Scottish arts administration. 'Immigrants into Scotland', Gray insisted, 'as into other lands, are settlers or colonists. English settlers are as much a part of Scotland as Asian restaurateurs and shopkeepers, or the Italians who brought us fish and chips. The colonists look forward to a future back in England through promotion or by retirement.'[4] Faced again with accusations of racism, his response (or one of them), was a model of moderation and feigned innocence, 'All I can say is that my mother's people were English — very nice folk and many of my best friends are English'.[5] For all the attempt at smoothing things over, the furore persists producing some odd results on the World Wide Web. If you now Google Gray, a picture of him looking ill-kempt and fierce in braces pops up alongside a picture of Mel Gibbs, face blued up in Braveheart mode.

It should be said from the beginning that this chapter does not enter into the public slanging match over what Gray may be up to in such comments. The aim here is to contribute to a broader debate about the operation of neo-nationalism in its Scottish formation across a spectrum that has conservative national tradition going

back to Celticism at one end and seeks to link up with the beat generation and post-racial cosmopolitanism at the other.[6] That issue could be focused on a huge range of cultural products, from the genuine iconoclasm of a figure like Frank Kuppner to the sickly sentimentality of the recent musical film scored with the songs of The Proclaimers, *Sunshine on Leith* (2013). In this chapter, however, the emphasis is on the most well-known works of the now institutionalised figurehead of a contemporary movement that for the last thirty years or more has been stunningly innovative in constructing 'more authentic and representative images' for imagining a Scotland after 'Tartanry and the Kailyard'.[7] The issue is viewed through the lens of how race and cultural nationalism are intermingled in Gray's fictional works, both in conventional representational terms but also in relation to an idiosyncratic and highly contemporary aesthetics. The chapter argues that race remains, for all the postmodernity of Gray's fictions, a central category in which his work operates and has been received, involving as much in the way of reconstructions of racial identity as deconstructions. Here a novel like *1982, Janine* (1984), the great anti-Thatcher novel of the Thatcher decade, becomes not a withdrawal from race but a fundamental remapping of the male Scottish racial identity against what are, for Gray, the deeply flawed politics and culture of Britishness. Elsewhere, far from replacing stereotypes, Grey confirms them, in narratives where colonial power relations are traditionally re-enacted in conventional and much outmoded terms of sexual exploitation. In this respect a short story like 'YOU', which tells the story of an unnamed Scottish woman, an unnamed Englishman and their brief affair, shares significant cultural territory with eighteenth-century ballad traditions, except that here landlordism is brought up to date in the figure of the outsiderly Englishman — an ethnic stereotype, like other representations of English identities in Gray's fiction, of brutality, materialism and

self obsession that slips into race discourse too easily.[8] *Poor Things* (1993), on the other hand, seems almost entirely designed around the idea of a radical historiographical rewrite that reinscribes the modern world with new postracial hybridity. Here the *fin de siécle* loveliness, intelligence and compassion of 'Bella Caledonia' — part French, part Mancunian and yet somehow all Scottish — stands in for a new Scotland on the edge of a new twentieth century.[9] The idea of race, in short, is fundamental to Gray's work, to its politics and aesthetics. Both within single texts and across the whole Gray *oeuvre*, it figures in varied, complex and often contradictory formulations. But for all this ambiguity and nuance, there is a primary and quite singular framework in which Gray's raciological imagination operates, a framework, this essay argues, that is informed by contemporary neo-nationalism and is in various ways consubstantial with Tom Nairn's early and highly controversial articulation concerning 'the break up of Britain'.

Receiving *Lanark*— problematics of cultural nationalism and race

Gray has been an outspoken Scottish nationalist since well before the publication of *Why the Scots Should Rule Scotland* (1997). Such positions are not easy to occupy in contemporary culture. In Scotland as elsewhere, organic historical unities of the Yeatsian or Wagnerian kind can no longer seriously underwrite appeals to nation, one reason why *Lanark* has to be so hybrid, but also so problematic in reception terms. This, Gray's first novel, was widely acknowledged as a Scottish masterpiece, marking nothing less than the return of Scottish fiction to the contemporary world stage. Alan Massie, writing in *The Scotsman*, described the book as 'a quite extraordinary achievement, the most remarkable thing done in Scottish fiction for a very long time.'[10] A number of important literary figures, including Anthony Burgess, racialised

the book through comparisons with *Ulysses*, that other 'Celtic' masterpiece.[11] The status of Gray's novel was not least contingent on the self-conscious contemporaneity which seemed indicative of the cultural and political ambition of this four book gospel. Books one and two comprised a brilliant but familiar enough realistic narrative in the *bildungsroman* mould. Books three and four, however, were dystopian — something like science fiction, but more like fantasy — and it was with book three that *Lanark*, after a remarkable dedicatory illustrated page, began. Strangely, a futuristic city, Unthank, where humans feed on processed human flesh and the diseased morph into dragons, seemed conversant, if not intimate, with realist post-war Glasgow and the more or less conventional *bildungsroman* that told the story of an aspiring artist, Duncan Thaw. On the other hand, this double-sided novel was clearly and irreparably separate and divided. To put it starkly, if Duncan's imagined suicide was a tragic failure of culture and post-war politics, the exuberant illustrations for *Lanark*, the wild typographies and the comic 'index' which listed examples of plagiarism in the book, dividing the theft into three kinds — 'block', 'imbedded' and 'diffuse' — quite simply, were not.[12]

How did this formal experimentation, extravagant graphics and the wicked splicing of styles, forms and tones work in terms of the 'Scottishness' of *Lanark*? If the novel's cultural significance was underwritten precisely by the book being so much of the moment, at the same time the indulgence in contemporary aesthetics was seen by some as trivialising, a withdrawal from the realities of a distressing and immediate politics in favour of the trendy intellectualism of postmodernism. Here anarchic authors like Gray, refusing 'to accept or to reject any of a plurality of available ontological orders', appeared in some highly influential formulations to have no commitment to any kind of politics, or any kind of reality.[13]

Under these pressures, commentators tried to reconcile the remarkable innovation of *Lanark* with historical versions of cultural nationalism and racial identity. The contemporary Scottish novel was seen as taking up the Celticist charge from Ireland. Introducing *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (2001), Colm Toíbín, invited his readers to 'compare the calmness of contemporary Irish writing with the wildness of contemporary Scottish writing'. Drawing, ironically enough, on nineteenth-century English stereotypes of the wild and magical Celt, he imagined 'a legacy of Sterne and Swift, Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien [that] had taken the Larne-Stranraer ferry.' In the writings of 'James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, Irvine Welsh, Janice Galloway and Alan Warner', Toíbín wrote, 'there is political anger, stylistic experiment and formal trickery.'[14] Writing in the *Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth Century Scottish Literature* (2009), Ian Brown and Alan Riach formulated a different but still conventionally racialised position, normalising the new Scottish novel in terms of the nation it reproduced — a 'multi-faceted, complex identity [….] with many unfrequented areas and unexplored riches'. This was set in contrast to 'a linear monolithic literature with imperial weight and the trajectory of a colonial empire, unified by a single language', against which Scottish literature was apparently compelled to write.[15] Others still argued that *Lanark* was at its best where it was most realistic, a view which Gray himself may have contributed to through a well-known disassociation from postmodern cultural theory ('Post Modernism seems the creation of scholars acquiring a territory to lecture on. I cannae be bothered discussing post-modern critical theory') — although at times he did sound, however unintentionally, quite postmodern.[16] He asserted, for instance, that his fictions, designed as 'propaganda for democratic welfare-state Socialism and an independent Scottish parliament', were geared towards seducing 'the reader by disguising themselves as

sensational entertainment' — a sentiment immediately undercut by the further half-joke that his 'jacket designs and illustrations — especially the erotic ones — […were] designed with the same high purpose.'[17]

Some commentators, however, insisted that *Lanark* was neither somehow mysteriously 'Celtic', merely playful, nor ruinously divided but, rather, a novel which managed to pull off the feat of making contemporary literary aesthetics viable in terms of Scotland. Randall Stevenson, for instance, argued that for all the problematics, Gray ensured postmodernism had a 'particular potential for Scotland', using the idea of 'Caledonian antisyzygy' to illustrate his point — this was the early-twentieth-century formulation that racialised Scottish identity in terms of doubleness, a propensity to alternate between dour matter-of-fact realism and wild fantasy, 'confusion of the senses, the fun of things thrown topsy-turvy, the horns of elfland'.[18] Antisyzygy and 'the experimental tradition of postmodernism' might be 'different in origin', Stevenson reminded us, but 'they naturally, fruitfully fall into alignment with each other. The Thaw/Lanark and Glasgow/Unthank pairings, or the entanglement of erotic fantasies with miserable reality in *1982, Janine*, show how suggestively the two traditions can coincide and coalesce within single works.'[19] Stevenson's role in this and other essays was to find a way of reconciling some of the genuinely radical new writing appearing in Scotland with the traditions of a literary culture which figures like Cairns Craig saw as written out of history by the authority of 'England'. From such postcolonial perspectives the intriguing pairing of postmodernism and racialised identity became not just possible but, as Stevenson said, somehow natural.

'Dependable tools': Scottishness and *1982, Janine*

Stevenson, positioning Gray in relation to divided texts central to the idea of Scottish literature and the 'Scottish predicament' — like James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and My Hyde* (1886) — reconciles Scottish new writing with well-established tradition. Others have taken the double sidedness of Scottish culture back much further, to the Reformation and earlier still to Celticism.[20] The raciology most contemporary with Gray's writing however, and most directly influential on its redrawing of racial identity, was Tom Nairn's treatment of the same concept of antisyzygy which appeared in *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977).[21]

Nairn's account conducted itself in terms of neo-Marxist discourses, but its radical interference with progressivist historiographies and the Derridean deconstruction of race as otherness would have been quite impossible without the space clearing generated by the broader intellectual culture with which it was contemporary. His historical account of nationalism in 'Scotland and Europe' and 'Old and New Scottish Nationalism' drew on traditional accounts in some ways, where the Scottish Enlightenment was typically seen as aligning itself with Britain's nineteenth-century industrial development and civilising mission. But Nairn did not see this as the conventional Lowland betrayal of an authentic Scotland. Rather, it was an inevitable product of a dynamic that under normal conditions linked nationalism to the margins, but which had a unique and in Nairn's terms 'schizophrenic' configuration in Scotland. Scottish intellectuals of the modern age, Nairn emphasised, did not belong to an economically 'backward' culture. On the contrary, putting to one side the question of the Highlands, modern Scotland was central to the development of the 'workshop of the world'. There had been no historical logic compelling figures like James Burnett, David Hume, Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith to appeal to the

masses on the basis of a romanticised past, no reason to formulate any version of standard nineteenth-century nationalism other than the one which aligned them to the progressivist historiography of a State formalised by the Act of the Union. 'The new bourgeois social classes' were unique in Scotland. They

> inherited a social-economic position in history vastly more favourable than that of any other fringe or backward nationality. They were neither being ground down into industrial modernity, nor excluded from it. Hence they did not perceive it as alien, as a foreign threat or a withheld promise. Consequently they were not forced to turn to nationalism, to redress the situation.
>
> (*TBUB*, 145)

At the same time, Scotland was decisively distinct on a number of grounds. Civically, in terms of religious culture, folklore and custom, education, administration and so on, it evolved as 'too much of a nation […] to become a mere province of the U.K.; yet it could not develop its own nation-state on this basis either, via nationalism' (*TBUB*, 146). This, according to Nairn, accounted for the curious absence/presence of nationalism in Scottish culture, a particular 'pathology' where Scotland figured as 'a sort of lunatic or deviant, in relation to normal development during the period in question'. Blighted by a kitsch version of nationalism that appeared infantile and stunned into a conspiracy of silence about the 'true' nation, Scottish culture became doubly scarred, both by the horror of its own self neglect, the original sin, and by a feigned and (until fairly recently) necessary indifference to any serious version of national destiny. This accounts for what Nairn saw as 'the Jekyll-and- Hyde physiognomy of modern Scottishness'. He drew analogies between Scottish 'realism' and the acceptance of the Union (and Conservatism). Fantasy — and Scottish nationalism must turn to fantasy — had to be sublimated. 'Is this not

why', asked Nairn, 'among the multiple caricatures haunting Scots society, we still find a peculiarly gritty and grinding middle-class "materialism" — a sort of test tube bourgeois who does, indeed, think everything but business to be nonsense?' (*TBUB,* 164, 146, 170).

This is the estate embedded in the doubleness of *Lanark*'s end-stopped imagined pasts (progressivist, humanist, individualist) and terrifying futures (militarist, consumerist, materialist) and configured over and over in Gray's fiction generally, and in racial terms, as artistic failure, shame, disease, impotency and self abuse. The antisyzygy of *1982, Janine*, Gray's darkest and most powerful novel, turns precisely on the formulation of an identity that is in outward respects the 'test-tube bourgeois' of Nairn's account, a conservative, no-nonsense, middle-class business man — 'almost everyone of my income group is a Conservative'— who tours the country as a security advisor for 'national installations'.[22] Inwardly, however, which is the ground where almost all the novel takes place, the I-narrator lives a fantasy life constructing the tiniest details of an endless sado-masochistic fantasy constantly subject to anticipation, deferment, rehearsal and refinement. The fantasies are enacted as a kind of text in-the-making:

> But Janine is not (here come the clothes) happy with the white silk shirt shaped by the way it hangs from her etcetera I mean BREASTS, silk shirt not quite reaching the thick harness-leather belt which is not holding up the miniskirt but hangs in the loops round the waistband of the white suede miniskirt supported by her hips and unbuttoned as wide enough to insert three fingers. I HATED clothes when I was young.
>
> (*J*, 18)

1982, Janine is typically in a moving, provisional state, its imagined author subject to self-congratulation and rebuke as he passes a single night of drunken masturbation in a hotel room, although the narrative stops at various points for refills, sleep, ejaculation — not just named but enacted as an astonishing textual pyrotechnics — 'death' and, finally, reality: 'Footsteps in the corridor./ KNOCK KNOCK./ A woman's voice./ "Eight-fifteen, Mr McLeish. Breakfast is being served till nine."/ My voice./ "All right." ' (*J*, 341) [23]

The fundamental distinction between 'Jock' McLeish's divided self is notionally measured by ironic control. Thus chapter 2 begins with '**THIS is splendid**. I have never before enjoyed such perfect control. I have abandoned Janine at the exact moment when I nearly got too excited'. His other self, and this is where the influence of neo-nationalist discourses like Nairn's becomes most evident, is a construct over which he has little or control. He has been formed by what he calls 'politics': 'POLITICS WILL NOT LET ME ALONE' — 'Everything I know, everything I am' has 'been permitted or buggered up by some sort of political arrangement' (*J*, 28, 231-32). This is why, for all his bitter espousal of right-wing ideas, he cannot be a 'true Conservative', no more than he can be called 'true' in any sense. Like Edinburgh itself, 'a setting for an opera nobody performs nowadays … an opera called Scottish history' (*J*, 151, 233), 'Jock' is a fabrication, entirely contingent on his imagined Other — indeed impossible to formulate outside of this mirror image and at the Other's disposal.

Again as in Nairn's *The Break Up of Britain*, the other of McLeish's divided self is a political culture which McLeish is both intimate with and yet separate from, a Britain which has failed to modernise and continues to be ruled by a small elite — part of the logic determining McLeish's rationalist submission to Conservatism.

Labourism, and democracy generally, are redundant. Thus 'Glasgow means nothing to the rest of Britain but unemployment, drunkenness and out-of-date radical militancy' and 'it doesn't matter how the British manual worker votes at the election, because the leader of the big parties only disagree about small things, things which do not disturb their investments', a 'perfectly frank and open conspiracy'.[24] Set against a nightmare of rampant and brutal individualism, a 'Falstaffian' Britain where 'The Great British Fictional Hero is a secret policeman [James Bond] licensed to kill and […] rewarded with all the sexual and social privileges the country can afford' (*J*, 136, 98, 138), McLeish's sexual fantasies bleed into a political discourse which becomes increasingly crude and paranoid in its formulation. McLeish 'can only identify with middle class rapists who fuck with the help of expensive machines and a corrupted police force and a worldwide financial network. This is not surprising. National security thinks the sun shines out of my arsehole'. Where the 'Jails and mental hospitals are full of sexually desirable women', it is as if, as one of McLeish's lovers, Sontag, says, the fantasies have in their violence 'a convincing political structure' and vice versa — the political structures take on the dimension of a cruel and brutal fucking. 'Scotland has been fucked. I mean that word in the vulgar sense of *misused to give satisfaction or advantage to another*' (*J*, 103, 120, 136).

The result is an astonishing amalgam of desire, guilt and anger all contextualised in a periodic flashback narrative which reconvenes McLeish's earlier life. Here there is the promise of a different national identity in the hybrid Alan, who has a 'sallow-skinned Arabic-Italian-Jewish look. I think his father was Jewish. His mother was Irish'. In this enigmatic and highly-idealised figure, McLeish sees the promise of something real and authentic. This is a practical engineer, an inspirational young man,

who sees 'the true strength in a thing' (*J*, 109, 111); 'not a coward, not an instrument', but someone whom McLeish has a strange 'superstitution' about:

> If Alan had lived [….] I believe Scotland would now have an independent government […] he would have set an irresistible example by doing exactly what he wanted in the middle row [….] A fantasy, of course, but given time Alan would have worked upon Scotland like a few ounces of yeast on many tons of malt, he would have fermented those arselickers and instruments, these stoical and hysterical losers into a sensible coherent people.
>
> (*J*, 108)

The promise is cut off, of course. McLeish is condemned to life as a product of a British culture organised itself 'like a bad adolescent fantasy' under 'Machiavellian rule' (*J*, 139/141).

Just to re-state, the *1982, Janine* narrative, however much it evokes duality, is completely monologic, apart, that is, from an epilogue written for 'the discerning critic'. Both underlining and undermining the fictionality of things, these almost final pages of *1982, Janine* (the final page is just **'GOODBYE'** writ in large print) mostly acknowledge artistic debts to such figures as Joyce, Buñuel, Tom Leonard, Berlioz, and James Kelman. But they also include a deeply ironic 'personal remark which purely literary minds will ignore. Though John McLeish is an invention of mine', Gray writes, 'I disagree with him', a hardly surprising distancing given the contents of this long, wild and often crazy *Walpurgisnicht*. '[F]or example, he says of Scotland, "We are a poor little country, always have been, always will be." In fact, Scotland's natural resources are as variedly rich as those of any other land.' (*J*, 345) Set against the monstrous discourses that form so much of *1982, Janine*, this correction seems part playful. It works in comic ways, winking knowingly at the dirt exposed in this

powerful text. But it is also hugely poignant, a marker both of Gray's separation and identification with this dark Jekyll and Hyde, the pitiable, perverse but somehow elevated 'Jock' of modern times.

'God has sent the Anglo-Saxon race to purify the globe with fire and sword': *Poor Things* and anti-Englishness

1982, Janine is postmodern but hardly postracial. Racial identity is at the heart of this novel, a construct which both is and is not a product of such mysteries as language and blood. It also invokes a particular interpretation of politics and history evoked everywhere in Gray's fiction. That interpretation is shaped in very specific ways not only by Nairn's account of the historical underdevelopment of Scottish nationalism but also by his account of the break up of Britain in 'The Twilight of the British State'.

This, the first essay in *The Break Up of Britain*, was a radical piece of historical reasoning that sought to render Britain's past incompatible with Scottish futures, a splitting essential to the development of a genuinely populist Scottish nationalism. It did so largely by constructing nineteenth-century Britain not as the prototype modern nation but as a very particular failure, one condemned to archaism by the peculiarities of a political settlement entirely geared towards the preservation of a corrupt and decaying English social and political elite. From this position, Nairn was able to argue that Britain, forever tied to the past by virtue of a unique political conspiracy, never actually modernised at all. Far from being the balanced, rational compromise of Whig myth, 'the pioneer modern-liberal constitutional state never itself became modern: it retained the archaic stamp of its priority', remaining 'a basically indefensible and inadaptable relic, not a modern state form' at all. With this analysis, the idea that

'Britain' represented a wider consensus 'outside England (empire, federation of Scotland, Ireland, England, Wales)' became nothing more than a 'delusion' (*TBUB*, 22, 75, 78).

The fundamentally patrician nature of British culture was accepted, even embraced, Nairn argued, in return for the considerable compensations of industrial transformation and 'national security', which generated public prosperity and prestige at the expense of any real transfer of political power. It was then sustained by a series of what appear to be disastrous accidents — London's control of the world's money market in the early twentieth century when industrial supremacy failed; the cultural impact of the heroisms of the Second World War; and a 'particular kind of peaceful stability' derived from Britain's 'civil relaxation of customs, its sloth, even its non-malicious music-hall humour'. From this perspective, neo-nationalism, especially in its Scottish variety, became the radical intervention that displaced a failed class politics. More than a viable alternative to the Scottish Labour Party, nationalism took on the status of an imperative if Scotland was to avoid the awful fate of the British mess — 'social sclerosis, an over-traditionalism leading to incurable backwardness' (*TBUB*, 69, 40). Stability became a paralytic 'over-stability' operating across the political spectrum from Conservatism to the 'so-called "social revolution" ' of the Labour Party in the postwar years and leading only 'to rapidly accelerating backwardness, economic stagnation, social decay, and cultural despair' (*TBUB*, 40, 43, 51).

Operating under the guise of a nineteenth-century Gothic romance, *Poor Things* connects up with Nairn's deconstructive analysis in a number of central ways, although there are important divergences too — Gray's cultural politics in the 1990s were much more shaped by second wave feminism, for instance, than Nairn's version

in the 1970s. In the first place, *Poor Things* is scoped like Nairn's work in terms of an implied historical archaeology. Gray sees modern Scotland, imagined somewhat problematically as a twentieth-century woman, in terms of a break-up of Britain and narratised as Bella's dramatic escape from her brutal husband. This is the English aristocrat par excellance — General Sir Aubrey de la Pole Blessington Bart V. C. Indeed archaeological practice, the aesthetic correspondence to Nairn's dialectic, is central to *Poor Things*. Like Nairn's account this is a text that digs into a nineteenth-century past, working through the pretence that the text itself is a concoction of lost memoirs, diaries and other 'historical' detritus — a detective's notebook; an extract from the 1883 edition of *Who's Who*; graphics and illustrations by 'William Strang', and so on. The conceit becomes the basis for the novel's historical interrogation. Claim and counterclaim become central, both to the main narrative of *Poor Things* and the novel's wider structure where the fantasy narrative of the lost book is countered by a wife's letter to posterity and both are subject to Gray's 'notes historical and critical'. This characteristic opens up the past to radical reinterpretation, as does the conceit where the world is perceived through the brain of an unborn child transposed into the body of her dead mother — Gray's revisionist version of Scottish Gothic. The new composite thus has a mature body, but no personal history. She understands the world with the eyes of an innocent and a brain that develops at a hugely accelerated rate — from innocence to maturity in a matter of months. In complete antithesis to her monstrous prototypes, Bella is no freakish outcast but, rather, a delightful, loving, precocious, life-enhancing creature. The product of benign Scottish medical science, her only pathology is an 'obsessive linguistic trait' that also becomes part of the textuality of the novel as Bella struggles to articulate her sense of the world. Thus when she is confronted with the visceral reality of poverty and

injustice for the first time, the page becomes an indecipherable scribble of tear and blood-stained anguish. Such devices establish the strangeness through which familiar ideologies become defamiliarised anew. Bella listens with awe and astonishment to an American evangelist's account of why poverty and apparent injustice are predetermined, unalterable:

> The Anglo-Saxon race to which she and I and Mr Astley belong have begun to control the world, and we are the cleverest and kindliest and most adventurous and most truly Christian and hardest working people and most free and democratic people who have existed [….] This means that compared with the Chinese, Hindoos, Negroes and Ameridian — yes, even compared with the Latins and Semites — we are like teachers in a playground of children who do not want to know that school exists.
>
> (*PT*, 139)

Harry Astley, a 'thin stiff figure' whose 'stiff face, glossy top-hat and neat frock-coat' renders him 'so comically English', provides the counterpart ideology — a monstrous Malthusian mixture of laissez-faire and cynicism, so sickening that it acts as a prelude to Belle's return to Scotland and the figure who remade her, Godwin Baxter ('God' as she refers to him). Here she plans to fulfil a twentieth-century destiny by marrying her intended, the medical student, Archibald McCandless — a 'thoroughly rational Scot' — and determines that she 'must be a Socialist' (*PT*, 128, 220).

Like *The Break-Up of Britain*, *Poor Things* renders the idea of a redemptive Scottish independence outside of Britain not just possible but a necessity of historical logic quite outside the issues of historical controversy, ambiguity and outright contradiction.[25] Again, the role of traditional aristocracy here is critical, central to the rationale of the break-up of Britain thesis, and aristocracy is configured in *Poor*

Things as entirely irredeemable — a brutal, hypocritical, immoral, elite entirely contingent on mercantile money for its continuance and, above all, absolutely racialised as 'Anglo-Saxon'. Thus the point to which McCandless's lost narrative moves inexorably is the vanquishing of aristocratic authority, achieved in the wonderfully cathartic moment when Bella realises that her first husband, General Sir Aubrey de la Pole Blessington Bart V. C., is also the masked libertine well known to the sex workers of Parisian brothels, as Mr Spankybot:

> Most brothel customers are quick squirts but you were the quickest of the lot! The things you paid the girls to do to stop you coming in the first half minute would make a hahahahaha cat laugh! Still they liked you. General Spankybot paid well and did no harm — you never gave one of us the pox. I think the rottenest thing about you (apart from the killing you've done and the way you treat the servants) is what Prickett calls the pupurity of your mumariage bed. Fuck off, you poor daft silly queer rotten old fucker hahahahaha! Fuck off!
>
> (*PT*, 238)

The other central pillar of Nairn's argument, the element that caused so much difficulty for intellectuals on the British Left, was the radical intervention which effectively erased labourism from any version of the past or future political progressive. This was the crucial step which underwrote the inescapable logic of cultural nationalism and it figures poignantly in the various endgames of *Poor Things*, at the end of the letter to the future, for example, written at the outset of the First World War, where Bella/Victoria celebrates the strength of 'the Internationalist Socialist Movement' and almost hopes that,

> leaders DO declare war! If the working classes immediately halt it by peaceful means then the moral and practical control of the great industrial nations will

> have passed from the owners to the makers of what we need and the world YOU live in, dear child of the future, will be a saner and happier place.
>
> (*PT*, 276)

And there is a later return to optimism, perhaps even more poignant, in one of the last 'historical and literary notes', where Bella/Victoria writes to 'Chris' (Hugh Macdiarmid), knowing he will disagree with the sentiment, applauding the first Labour government 'with an overall working majority' as a victory that makes Britain 'suddenly an exciting country' (*PT*, 316). The ironies set up here are all part of the space-clearing exercise that makes Scottish nationalism inevitable.

Conclusion

In her 2004 book *Questioning Scotland*, Eleanor Bell argues provocatively that, with a few exceptions and in sharp comparison to Irish Studies, Scottish Studies has been theoretically unsophisticated, inclined towards essentialism — she cites the continued viability of the concept of antisyzygy as a case point. Her own account is designed to 'map the realities of present, and future, forms of nationalism in ways that take account of […]. theoretical developments without lapsing into convenient forms of national essentialism.'[26] By contrast, Scottish creative artists are privileged in Bell's account. They have struggled more heroically to 'highlight the fundamental unpindownability of our own national identity, while also encouraging cultural identification'. She analyses how 'Scottish writers and artists have often sought to escape from the overly rigid definitions of Scottish identity as defined by Scottish critics.'[27] Maybe, but as this account has shown there is no absolute cleanliness to 'creative' writing as against critical writing, even among the most accomplished of Scottish writers and Gray, rightly, is certainly considered that. As these fictions

illustrate, for all the innovation of his work, traditional raciologies echo throughout it, either as Derridean hauntologies of a racialised past, or as the persistent stereotypes necessary to the kind of neo-nationalist political intervention Gray makes. The English stereotypes — outmoded versions by any truly contemporary account — are somehow expected, part of the demotic world which his novels write to, even as they operate as high-class fiction. This might account for the carnivalesque frivolities he deploys, the comically monstrous accumulation which renders 'Thunderbolt' Blessington so much a giant of Anglo-Saxon stereotype — brutal governor of the Andman and Nicobar Islands and Jamaica; one-time 'hero' of the Crimea, the Indian Mutiny and the Opium Wars; eugenicist responsible for the suppression of the Chartists; 'personal supervisor' of an 'experimental farm where slum orphans train for resettlement in the Colonies' (*PT*, 206-7); vile molester of maids and sexual inadequate. This is a truly overdone 'Englishman', wrapped up into one masterpiece of political discourse and rhetoric, posing with irony and no shortage of seriousness, as new national culture.

Notes

[1] David McCrone, *The Sociology of Nationalism: Tomorrow's Ancestors* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 132.

[2] Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977; London: Verso 1981), 71. Hereafter referred to in the text as *TBUB.*

[3] Alasdair Gray, *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* (Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1997), 8.

[4] Alasdair Gray, 'Settlers and Colonists' in Scott Hame (ed.), *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (Edinburgh: World power Books, 2012), 100-110 [104].

[5] *The Scotsman*, 25 August 2013.

[6] For examples of these positions compare Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) with Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

[7] John Osmond, *The Divided Kingdom* (London: Constable, 1988), 93.

[8] 'You' appears in *Ten Tales Tall & True* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 60-73. It continues the long tradition of reconstructing colonial relations in terms of sexual power. Significantly the 'Englishman' (the 'You') is done in literary style complete with speech marks and full sentences. The Scots woman, speaks in a first person style that seems improvised, more 'real'.

[9] See Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993) and the delightful portrait of Bella on page 45. Hereafter referred to in the text as *PT*.

[10] *The Scotsman* (28 February 1981).

[11] Anthony Burgess, *Ninety-Nine Novel, The Best in English since 1939*: *A Personal Choice By Anthony Burgess*, (London: Allison and Busby, 1984), —.

[12] Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in 4 Books* (London: Canongate, 1981), 485.

[13] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London & New York: Methuen, 1987), 37.

[14] Colm Toíbín, *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), xxxii.

[15] Ian Brown and Alan Riach, *Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth Century Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1.

[16] Quoted in Dietmar Böhnke, *Shades of Gray: Science Fiction, History and the Problem of Postmodernism in the Work of Alasdair Gray*, (Berlin, Madison/ Wisconsin: Galda and Wilch Verlag, 2004), 284.

[17] Quoted in Susan Windisch Brown, *Contemporary Novelists*, 6th edition (London: St James Press, 1966).

[18] G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919) 150.

[19] Randall Stevenson, 'Alasdair Gray and the Postmodern' in Robert Crawford and Thom Nairn, *The Arts of Alasdair Gray* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 48-63 [61].

[20] See especially chapters 1 and 4 of Craig's *The Modern Scottish Novel*.

[21] The significance of Nairn's work for reading Gray is well established. See Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel* which observes in relation to Gray that 'the language of schizophrenia is used, for instance by Tom Nairn in *The Break Up of Britain*', fn 45, 249.

[22] Alasdair Grey, *1982, Janine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), 61, 104. Hereafter referred to in the text as *J*.

[23] The extremities of this are difficult to reproduce but they include such formulations as 'THE SWEATSWERE CAUSED BY NOTHING BUT FUNK AND (GOD HELP ME)
FUNKANANANANANANANANANANANHYSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSTERIA good to see you again folks thought we had lost you back there just as things were getting interesting.' (*J*, 183)

[24] See also *J*, 130. 'Our Harold and Our Maggie, by playing along with the Stock Exchange and cutting taxation and the public healing, teaching and life-saving

services have given a new power to the strong bits of Britain, the bits that keep it running.'

[25] Donald Kaczvinsky argues that *Poor Things* is a playful exercise in 'historiographic metafiction', set up to expose the fancifulness of historical truth. 'What is fact and what is fiction in *Poor Things* is up for grabs' and claims for 'objectivity and truth' become a mere 'fictional construct'. There are a number of difficulties here. In the first place, Gray takes a very different position, suggesting that the 'fictional construct', or 'art' as Gray would have it, has a better chance of staking a claim to truth than does history contaminated by ideology. This, presumably, is the point behind the final words of the *Poor Things*, a 'factual' note that appears to testify to the essential 'truth' of the McCandle fantasy, that Bella really was the creation of Godwin Baxter. More centrally for this chapter however, the idea of *Poor Things* operating at this abstract, philosophical level removes it from the cultural and political immediacies where its political intent is so manifest. See Donald Kaczvinsky, ' "Making Up for Lost Time": Scotland, Stories and the Self in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*' in *Contemporary Literature* (2001), 42.4, 775-99.

[26] Eleanor Bell, *Questioning Scotland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), 29.

[27] Bell, *Questioning Scotland*, 98,