

SALTIRE SELF-PORTRAITS 4

Alasdair Gray



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*Saltire
Self-Portraits 4*

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SELF PORTRAIT

10.30 PM, MONDAY THE 18TH OF MAY, 1987

According to my birth certificate I am 52 years, 167 days, 40 minutes old. According to my passport I am 1.74 metres or 5 feet 9¼ inches tall. According to the scales in the lavatory I weigh 13 stones and 7 pounds in my socks, semmit, underpants, bath robe, national health spectacles and false upper teeth: from all of which a doctor will deduce I am not in the best of health. I have the lean, muscular legs and small bum of the brisk pedestrian but the bulging paunch of the heavy drinker, the fleshy shoulders hunched too near the ears of the asthmatic with bronchial tendencies. The neck is thick; hands and feet and genitals small; the chin strong and double with the underside not yet grossly pendulous; the moustache pale sand colour; the straight nose survives from the years when I was thin all over; the eyes are small and sunken with blue-grey irises; the brow straight and not deeply lined; the hair of the scalp is fading from nondescript brown to nondescript grey and thinning behind a slightly eroded scalp-line. In repose the expression of the face is as glum as that of most adults. In conversation it is animated and friendly, perhaps too friendly. I usually have the over-eager manner of one who fears to be disliked. When talking freely I laugh often and loudly without being aware of it. My voice (I judge from tape-recordings) is naturally quick and light, but grows firm and penetrating when describing a clear idea or recollection: otherwise it stammers and hesitates a lot because I am usually reflecting on the words I use and seeking to improve and correct them. When I notice I am saying something glib, naive, pompous, too erudite, too optimistic, or too insanely grim I try to disarm criticism by switching my midland Scottish accent to a phony form of Cockney, Irish, Oxbridge, German, American or even Scottish.

At present I sit on a low comfortable chair in the room where most of my work and sleeping is done. I wear the

aforementioned socks, semmit etcetera, and am being painted by Michael Knowles B.A. (Hons.), a quiet-spoken English artist living in Edinburgh who hopes to sell the portrait to the Royal Scottish Museum. I like and fear the idea of becoming a thing with an unliving public shape, but I obviously like it more than fear it for I am embalming myself in words for the Saltire Self-Portrait Series while Mr Knowles paints me doing it. I had planned to start less blatantly with a platitude everyone would accept, a platitude told in rhyme to make it seem original. I would then cunningly shift to an account of the people who made me, using old certificates and memories but mostly some pages my father once wrote about his early life in Bridgeton. I was reading these pages an hour ago when Mr Knowles arrived. I laid them down, we arranged the furniture to let the window-light fall equally on me and on his canvas, then the pages could not be found, though we rummaged for them in all the places I could think of and a few where they could not possibly be. From childhood this habit of slyly, casually hiding valued objects from myself has deprived me, sometimes permanently, of money, travel tickets, useful tools, keys, paintings, notebooks, manuscripts and appliances to assist breathing when the asthma is bad. A psychiatrist once suggested these losses were caused by a hidden wish to attract attention and get proofs of love from those close to me. I doubt it. I have often inflicted such accidents on myself when nobody is close and nobody notices. The cause is surely that sneaking appetite for disaster which Edgar Alan Poe calls *The Imp of the Perverse* and associates with alcoholism, irrational vertigo and procrastination. The older Freud calls it *The Death Wish*, perhaps too sweepingly. It has done me no lasting harm. Perhaps a defective grasp of solid externals is sometimes not caused by unconscious will, but by too much reflecting on mental innards. I'll find the lost pages eventually (for they are certainly within arm's reach) and use them to add dignity to an otherwise selfish narrative.

Meanwhile, what am I for? What does this ordinary-looking,

eccentric-sounding, obviously past-his-best person exist to do apart from eat, drink, publicize himself, get fatter, older and die? Stars, herbs and cattle exist without reasons, they fit the universe wherever they occur without need of language to maintain their forms, but a born human has no foreseeable shape. It is turned into a Chinese housewife, a neolithic hunter, an unemployed car mechanic or Ludwig von Beethoven by an always changing *when* and *where* pressing on a unique yet always ripening or rotting bundle of traits: traits joined by a painfully conscious need to both stay the same and grow different. This need generates ideas, arts, sciences, laws and a host of excuses, because one of our traits is garrulity. Even in sleep we talk wordlessly to ourselves. So what are you for, Gray?

At present I do not know. Until a few years ago I wanted to make stories and pictures. While writing or painting I forgot myself so completely that I did not want to be any different. I felt I was death's equal.

*We live and have lived, die and will die in this place
and millions have been and will be forgotten
with hearts and faces we struggle to keep
until folded in sleep or gone rotten
and most, before dying, give blood to son or daughter
and when the bones of these children crumble, remain
not even memories — names cut on stones, perhaps:
otherwise we are a procession as featureless as water*

unless we get into a lasting image or repeatable pattern of words. But the most necessary and typical people are seldom commemorated in art and history which whore after the rich, the disastrous, the eccentric and love, above all, monstrous folk with one ability, one appetite so magnified that they seem mere embodiments of it — that is how our heroes and gods get made. I tried to tell convincing stories by copying into them pieces of myself and people I knew, cutting, warping and joining the pieces in ways suggested by imagination and the example of other story-makers, for I wanted to

amuse, so my stories contain monsters. I do not decry them for that, but I have no new ideas for more. Can I entertain with some of the undistorted facts which generated them?

Early last century a Scottish shepherd whose first name is now unknown fathered William Gray, a shoemaker who fathered Alexander Gray, a blacksmith in Bridgeton, east Glasgow, a district then brisk with foundries, potteries and weaving sheds. And Alexander married Jeanie Stevenson, powerloom weaver and daughter of a coalminer, who became his housewife and bore another Alexander, who became a clerk on a weighbridge on a Glasgow dock, then a private in the Black Watch regiment in France, then a quartermaster sergeant there, then worked a machine which cut cardboard boxes in a Bridgeton factory until another world war began. While some of this was happening Hannah, wife of a Northampton hairdresser called William Fleming bore Henry Fleming who became a foreman in a boot-making factory, and married Emma Minnie Needham. Henry, nicknamed Harry, also became a trade-unionist, and his bosses put his name on a list of men not to be employed in English factories. He and Minnie came to Glasgow where she bore Amy Fleming who first became a shop assistant in a clothing warehouse, then married Alex Gray the folding box maker, thus becoming a housewife. She and Alex lived in Riddrie, a Glasgow corporation housing scheme where she bore Alasdair James Gray who became a maker of imagined objects, and Mora Jean Gray who became a physical exercise and dance teacher in Aberdeen, and married Bert Rolley from Portsmouth, a chemist who analysed polluted water. Alasdair Gray married Inge Sorenson, a nurse in an Edinburgh hospital, thus making her a housewife in Glasgow, though only for 9 years; and she bore Andrew Gray who became a supplies lieutenant in a Royal Air Force base near Inverness. But long before Mora and Alasdair got married all the workers preceding them in this crowded little tale were dead, excepting their father Alexander. After cutting cardboard for 21 years he became

manager of a hostel for munition workers, then a builder's labourer, a wages clerk, a persuader of hoteliers to subscribe to the Scottish Tourist Board, a remover of damaged chocolate biscuits from a conveyor belt, a wages clerk again, a warden and a lecturer for the Scottish Youth Hostels Association, a guide to walkers over mountainous parts of Scotland, England and Wales, and finally a house-husband in a polite little town called Alderley Edge in Cheshire, England, where he died a month before his 76th year on the fourth of March 1973.

Here follow some of his earliest memories. He typed them at my request in 1970 or 71. I have cut out five conjunctions, replaced two pronouns by the nouns themselves and added three commas and a period. Nothing else is changed.

NOTES ON EARLY LIFE IN GLASGOW

BY ALEXANDER GRAY

My Father was the product of an age when children left school at 10 years and were sent to sea to learn the ways of the world. He served on two voyages, one when the crew were men released from Barlinnie Prison to man the sailing vessel while on the second the ship had to leave Cuba because of the war with U.S.A. On reaching home he was made drunk by the crew (he being a popular cabin boy) and taken home where his Mother found him at the door, sitting on his box, the crew members having knocked on the door and run off. That ended his sea-faring education.

By the age of 25 years Father must have become a blacksmith. He had made two journeys to London from Glasgow, working his way from casual job to job, for walking was his passion and recreation. He had married, had two sons, William and James, after which his wife died. He married again and I was his third son by his second wife and I had a sister Agnes. He died in 1921 aged 70. His grandfather was a shepherd on the Earl of Home's estate at Douglas Water. His

Father was a high class bootmaker whose shop was in (now) London Road near Glasgow Cross.

My Mother came from a mining family at Wishaw. I had several Uncles and Aunts from both sides of the family and it was our Sunday afternoon and evening visitations to them or being visited by them that provided the changes in the domestic routine, for all were within walking distance or tram distance from home in Bridgeton.

My early recollections were of our room and kitchen in a street off Main Street, Bridgeton, in a dirty grey tenement of three storeys. My step-brothers slept in the room while Father and Mother slept in the kitchen bed. Agnes and I slept in the hurley bed, kept below the kitchen bed during the day and rolled out at night. The lighting was by gas on a long piped bracket fixed to the mantelpiece, which could be angled to suit a reader. The light was poor, not white as was later the case when gas mantles were introduced, first by vertical mantles and later by the small mantles now used on calor-gas lamps. The fire-place was blacklead with the door handles and fire-irons in polished steel, the polishing of them being my weekly job, together with the oval dishcovers which hung on the kitchen wall below the shelves of the crockery and other dishes. In front of the window in the kitchen was the jaw-box or sink with the brass water pipe, another of the weekly polishing jobs, which provided the cold water.

Father worked in a smiddy some 10 minutes walk from home, which lay between the Clyde and French Street. These were the days when work started at 6 am and breakfast was taken during a break about 8 am. Midday dinner was around 1 pm and work ended around 6 pm. Father would have a cup of tea and buttered bread before work and return for a breakfast of porridge, an egg or other "kitchen" (cooked food like bacon or sausage). Dinner was of soup or broth, meat, potatoes, veg. followed by a milk pudding or fruit. Tea would be bread, tea bread, scones, cheese and tea, while supper would

be porridge or peas brose. During school holidays, Father would have his dinner at the smiddy and I carried his soup in a can and his main course in plates tied in a towel. There I would pump the bellows so fast that the fire would blaze. Sometimes I would look over the wooden fence to Auld Shawfield, the football ground of Clyde before they moved to the site of the present stadium and I can remember seeing players in red shirts running around, though whether training or playing a match I cannot remember.

When the season for running girds¹ came around, Father would make iron girds and cleeks for my friends and me and we would make the iron ring as we ran round the streets in Bridgeton or made expeditions to the Sauny Waste, the open ground in the loop of the Clyde upstream from Dalmarnock Bridge. From the short street which gave access to works and a piggery on the Rutherglen bank, an earth path followed the river bank. It was uneven, with hills and dales which required skill with the gird to maintain an uninterrupted run. Hills and hollows of sand filled the river's loop in the middle of which was a flat hollow where we could play football. Often at the two ends of the loop a man would be on the lookout for the police for in some hollow there would be a pitch and toss school of some two dozen men. In the centre a man would swing a leather belt to keep the ring clear, while one man would be laying the bets with the surrounding crowd, another would be balancing two pennies on a sliver of wood or his fingers as a preliminary to tossing them high in the air to descend as head or tail, as two tails or two heads. A head and tail was a neutral toss and it had to be repeated till they both came down head or tails. With tails the crowd was happy at its win and with heads put up with a loss in the hopes that the

¹ A gird was a thin iron hoop, originally a barrel hoop, at least waist-high to the child racing it but the bigger the better. A cleek was a short iron rod ending in a hook or ring enabling the racer to drive the hoop. The pleasure of this was the pleasure of running as fast as a big wheel running beside you, a wheel which depended on your skill for it to turn corners, avoid obstacles and leap over holes without either of you losing speed or falling down.

tosser could not continue in a winning vein for ever. We small boys were not welcomed to such a ring, but we would crawl through the grass to the rim of the hollow and peep down over the heads of the gamblers and run when we were spotted, to return to our street by the river bank or the joining street. Football was of course our favourite pastime. The streets were cobbled, the ball did not run true of stot in the expected angle, except when the wall of the houses was used when passing an opponent and the lamp posts were the goals. When each team was of two or three, the near posts on each side of the street would be used, but if more boys were available, two near posts on the same side would be used thus providing a longer pitch. Such football was not looked upon with pleasure by the folks who lived on the ground level and sometimes by those above, for windows could be and were broken. Sometimes a policeman would appear so the ball was snatched up and we all disappeared up the various closes to cross the intervening walls of the backcourts to adjoining streets and freedom. Leave-O or kick the can were alternatives to football, while the girls either had wooden hoops or peeper and beds, or hop-scotch. Sometimes selected girls would play with the boys at hide and seek and the closes and dunnies provided scope for initiative in avoiding discovery.

Father and Mother were deeply religious. Father was involved in the creation of the Congregational Union, ie the union of Congregational Churches.¹ He sometimes took the pulpit when the Minister was ill, was superintendent of the Sunday School, an elder, and when a new church was created, Dalmarnock Road CC, gave some seven years service as church officer as his donation to the new church. Mother, because the Minister's wife was an invalid, was President of the Mothers

¹ The Congregational Church was the church of Cromwell and Milton, and for a short time during the Protectorate almost became the legally established church of England, though it more clearly resembled the established church of Scotland in its lack of liturgy and ornament. But Church of Scotland clergy ordain each other and are partly paid from the revenues of the state. Congregational clergy are ordained and supported by their congregations.

Meeting. Both were to my mind examples of Christian living for they not only observed the daily observancies but in their treatment of people of all religions or none, were helpful and kind and tolerant. We had grace at all meals, and each night before retiring to bed, Father would read the daily lesson from the Bible and Mother would say a prayer or the roles would be reversed and sometimes I or Agnes would be asked to take part in the service.

Father and Mother were both mild of temper. I never heard them raise their voices in discussion or argument between themselves or with others. These days in the first years of this century had no social security or health insurance and doctors' bills had to be avoided. I remember Father coming home with his face and hands bandaged after he had been splattered with molten lead at work. He came from hospital where he had the pieces of lead picked from his skin, had his dinner and went back to work. On another occasion when our home had been burgled and drawers and dressers and cupboards ransacked and clothing etc taken, he returned home to learn of the theft. His first thought was for his working clothes and all he said was "Well, they have left me the best suit, the one I need for my work". After 40 years with the same firm he reached the age of 65 and was told he was getting too old for his work as a blacksmith. Without warning he was handed his weekly wage, which I don't think ever exceeded 30 shillings, and thanked for his long and useful service and was given the advice to look for a lighter job. His hand was shaken by the owner, and he left, knowing that at his age he would not be able to get a tradesman's job. His last five years of labour was a hammerman to blacksmiths at Stewart & Lloyds at Rutherglen, much heavier work than the men he worked for. I never heard him complain. He was a teetotaler and did not smoke. His weekly spending was for butter scotch, the odd tram fare when on his Saturday afternoon walk. Often he would rise on Sunday morning and walk up to ten miles before going to church at 11 am. Before I played football on

Saturday afternoons he would take me on walks along the paths round or over the hills which surround Glasgow, the paths which Alexander McDonald wrote about in *Rambles Round Glasgow*. When Mother, after an illness, spent a week at Strathaven, Father and I walked there and back each Saturday having taken the tram to Cambuslang.

One of my treats was to be taken to Celtic Park by Uncle John, who was Mother's brother and manager of the newside at Beardmores' furnaces. The oldside was hand-fed furnaces, where Uncle Tom was the leading hand. Both lived at Parkhead. I still can hear the hush of the thousands on the terraces as Jimmy Quinn barged his way toward goal with his opponents floored by his strong shoulders to be followed by the roar which exploded when he cannoned the ball into the net.

Mother was good with her hands. She knitted, crocheted, made jam and baked and had time for church work. Her contribution to the family purse always ensured that at Glasgow Fair the Grays had a week's holiday. Never once did we stay at home at that time. Occasionally we also had a day Doon the Watter¹ on other days of holiday.

In politics my Father was a radical liberal, though he never was active as a political worker. He knew Keir Hardie and was instrumental in getting K.H. to speak at Dalmarnock Congregational Church where the Minister at that time was the Rev. Forson. Incidentally Father had a bible class at the Sunday School and from his class came the two Graingers who later were medical doctors in Bridgeton and three Forsons, all of whom became ministers in Congregational churches, one of whom became minister to Father's own church.

I went to John Street Higher Grade School as an infant and later in the higher school, where I was a mediocre scholar, being better with my feet and hands than with my head. I

¹ This was a trip by paddle-steamer on the river from the centre of Glasgow to one of the many resorts on the Firth of Clyde and its islands; the trippers usually returning the same day by the same ship.

remember the celebrations when George VII¹ became King. We each received a small box with the heads of the King and Queen embossed on the lid. We were marched from school to Glasgow Green for fun, games and sport, but what I did is now beyond me. Glasgow Green was not only where football was played, part was the bleaching field and the nearby folk after the weekly washing would spread out or hang their clothes and water them for the sun to make them white. It was nearby what was to become the Greenhead Baths. It was also here where we school children were taken for swimming lessons. We would line up outside, having raced for first place from school to the baths where we prepared by partially undressing so that no time would be lost in the boxes beside the pool.

Every New Year all the Stevenson family visited Granny who lived above a wide pen just beyond the present Tramway Garage at Parkhead. All the Uncles and Aunts and their children were present, four families in all. The youngsters sat down first and had steak pie followed by plum pudding in large helpings. They were sent out to play while the parents had their dinner. Through the pen there was a large gable end where we played hand ball. We picked sides and each side in turn had to hit the ball against the gable end, the ball being hit after it stotted once on the ground. The side which failed to do so, that is return the ball to the wall after one stot, lost a point and the side reaching perhaps 10 points lost the game. Once the elders finished washing up after the meal, we all returned to the house and games and song passed the afternoon, each person reciting or singing his or her party piece.

It was on Sunday that the morning coats were worn for church. Father, Bill who was church organist and choir master, and Jim, who sang in the choir (he also sang in the Orpheus Choir) wearing their tall hats. When Father died in 1921 I was an out-patient at Bellahouston Hospital, a military

¹ This is an error. My father muddled Edward VII who was crowned in 1902, with George V who was crowned in 1910.

hospital, being given treatment following a war wound. In order to maintain the dignity of the family at the funeral I also had to get a morning coat and tall hat.

END OF ALEXANDER GRAY'S NARRATIVE

You are reading this pamphlet because you are interested in Alasdair Gray, the maker of imagined objects, so I am sorry this essay is a preface to an autobiography instead of a sketch for one, as I intended. I am too fond of precise details to be capable of a broad quick sketch. Yet my father's self-negating account of his family – even the style of his language – tells much about those who made me, though the gentle radical blacksmith who taught Congregational clergymen died thirteen years before I was born, and I don't know when his wife died. I first learned of them in my late teens, when I had bouts of asthma which sometimes made me feel all life and history was a bad disease, a disease which could only be cured by a god of love in whom I had no faith. My father was a radical atheist who believed, with Marx, that humanity would one day solve every problem it had the sense to recognise. As he could not persuade me of this he tried to help by introducing me to the god of his parents in words which respected both their faith and his own. I made a note of these words (which told some things his later account does not) and eventually paraphrased them in the 26th chapter of a very long novel:

"My father was elder in a Congregational church in Bridgeton: a poor place now but a worse one then. One time the well-off members subscribed to give the building a new communion table, an organ and coloured windows. But he was an industrial blacksmith with a big family. He couldnae afford to give money, so he gave ten years of unpaid work as church officer, sweeping

and dusting, polishing the brasses and ringing the bell for services. At the foundry he was paid less the more he aged, but my mother helped the family by embroidering tablecloths and napkins. Her ambition was to save a hundred pounds. She was a good needlewoman, but she never saved her hundred pounds. A neighbour would fall sick and need a holiday or a friend's son would need a new suit to apply for a job, and she handed over the money with no fuss or remark, as if it were an ordinary thing to do. She got a lot of comfort from praying. Every night we all kneeled to pray in the living room before going to bed. There was nothing dramatic in these prayers. My father and mother clearly felt they were talking to a friend in the room with them. I never felt that, so I believed there was something wrong with me. Then the 1914 war started and I joined the army and heard a different kind of prayer. The clergy on all sides were praying for victory. They told us God wanted our government to win and was right there behind us, with the generals, shoving us forward. A lot of us in the trenches let God go at that time. But Duncan, all these airy-fairy pie-in-the-sky notions are nothing but aids to doing what we want anyway. My parents used Christianity to help them behave decently in a difficult life. Other folk used it to justify war and property. But Duncan, what men believe isn't important – it's our actions which make us right or wrong. So if a God can comfort you, adopt one. He won't hurt you."

This speech – or, to be accurate, the words it paraphrases – did not help me at the time, for words cannot cure a physical pain unless they are a sort of hypnotism. But when my health mended it helped me believe what I still mainly believe: that original decency is as old as original sin and essentially stronger: that those who pray are consciously strengthening wishes which (whether selfish or not) are already very strong in them, and which decide the nature of the god they invoke.

I swear that the above quotation contains no inventions of mine, just two bits of condensing and one exaggeration: I turned 7 years of voluntary service into 10. It also contains an image I used in another piece of writing: the image of a small boy at family prayers who suspects he is at fault because he feels God is not with him. This became part of *The Fall of Kelvin Walker*, a play I wrote in 1964 which was televised by the BBC in 1968 and published as a novel in 1985. This is a fable about a monstrously pushy young Scot getting rich quickly in London. He is buoyant with energies released by his escape from a nastily religious father who has used the god of Calvin like a rubber truncheon to batter his children into submission. Neither father nor son in that fable much resemble my father, or his father, or me, and none of the incidents in it befell any of us. When copying a thing from the experience of myself or acquaintances I often gave it a context like the one where it happened, and often did not. My most densely and deliberately autobiographical writing is in books 1 and 2 of *Lanark*. Apart from the encounter with the Highland minister, the encounter with the prostitute, the fit of insanity and the suicide, nearly every thought and incident is copied from something real in context where it happened, but so much of my life was not copied that *Lanark* tells the story of a youngster estranged by a creative imagination from family, friends, teachers and city. I hope this is a convincing tragedy, though it never befell me. My family and at least half my schoolteachers deliberately encouraged my imagination. They did it in a Scottish way, allowing me the materials and almost all the time I wanted to paint and write in, never praising me to my face but talking and boasting about the things I made when they thought I could not hear them. My family and schooling made art seem the only way to join mental adventure, physical safety and social approval. Indeed, they pressed upon my bundle of traits in a way which made other work dull or threatening.

The foregoing paragraph is written to emphasise the

connections and divergences between life and art. To those who want more information on this fascinating topic I offer:

AN ADVERTISEMENT

For only FIVE POUNDS you may buy from the bookshop of the National Library of Scotland a souvenir catalogue of an art exhibition I organised last year, each of which cost nearly that amount to print. It contains colour reproductions of work by me and four close artist friends: John Connolly, Alan Fletcher (deceased), Carol Gibbons and Alasdair Taylor. The introduction (by me) contains personal gossip about all of us and much information upon the country where we work. This publication is essential reading for all writers of essays, theses, dissertations and books about art, economics and Alasdair Gray in late 20th century Scotland. Over a thousand unsold copies have as yet no salesplace but the bookshop of the National Library of Scotland, George IV Bridge, Edinburgh EH1 1EW, telephone 031-226 4531, telex 72638 NLSEDI G, so buy now. Specialists who want even more information on Gray will find a heap of unpublished stuff divided into boxfiles in the Original Manuscript Department of the above Library, and open to inspection in return for the usual guarantees.

18 June 1987

ADDENDUM

REPLIES BY ALASDAIR GRAY, TO QUESTIONS FROM
CHRISTOPHER SWAN AND FRANK DELANEY,
AUGUST 1982

Q. What is your background?

A. If background means surroundings: first 25 years were lived in Riddrie, east Glasgow, a well-maintained district of stone-fronted corporation tenements and semi-detached villas. Our neighbours were a nurse, postman, printer and tobacconist, so I was a bit of a snob. I took it for granted that Britain was mainly owned and ruled by Riddrie people – people like my father.

If background means family: it was hardworking, well-educated and very sober. My English grandad was a Northampton foreman shoemaker who came north because the southern employers blacklisted him for trade-union activities. My Scottish grandad was an industrial blacksmith and congregational kirk-elder. In the 30's, when my father married, he worked a box-making machine in a factory, hiked and climbed mountains for a hobby, and did voluntary secretarial work for the Camping Club of Great Britain and the Scottish Youth Hostel Association. My mother was a good housewife who never grumbled, but I now know wanted more from life than it gave – my father had several ways of enjoying himself. She had very few. They were, from that point of view, a typical married couple. I had a younger sister I bullied and fought with, until we started living in separate houses. Then she became one of my best friends.

Q. What was childhood like?

A. Apart from the attacks of asthma and eczema, mostly painless but frequently boring. My parents' main wish for me was that I go to university. They wanted me to get a professional job, you see, because professional people are not so

likely to lose their income during a depression. To enter university I had to pass exams in Latin and mathematics which I hated. So half my school experience was passed in activities which felt to my brain like a meal of sawdust to the mouth. And of course there was homework. My father wanted to relieve the drudgery of learning by taking me cycling and climbing, but I hated enjoying myself in his shadow, and preferred the escapist worlds of comics and films and books: books most of all. Riddrie had a good library. I had a natural preference for all sorts of escapist crap, but when I had read all there was of that there was nothing left but good stuff: and myth and legend, and travel, biography and history. I regarded a well-stocked public library as the pinnacle of democratic socialism. That a good dull place like Riddrie had one was proof that the world was essentially well organized.

Q. When did you realize you were an artist?

A. I did not realize it. Like all infants who were allowed materials to draw with, I did, and nobody suggested I stop. At school I was even encouraged to do it. And my parents (like many parents in those days) expected their children to have a party piece – a song or poem they would perform at domestic gatherings. The poems I recited were very poor A. A. Milne stuff. I found it possible to write verses which struck me as equally good, if not BETTER, because they were mine. My father typed them for me, and the puerile little stories which I sent to children's magazines and children's radio competitions. When I was eleven I read a four-minute programme of my own compositions on Scottish BBC children's hour. But I was eight or nine years old when it occurred to me that I would one day write a story which would get printed in a book. This gave me a feeling of deliriously joyful power.

Q. What sort of things did you draw when you were a child?

A. Space ships, monsters, maps of imaginary planets and kingdoms, the settings for stories of romantic and violent adventure, which I told my sister when we walked to school together. She was the first audience I could really depend on in the crucial years between seven and eleven.

Q. How did your parents react to your wish to become a professional artist?

A. They were alarmed. They wanted art to enrich my life in the spare time left over from earning a wage, but they thought, quite correctly, that living to make it would bring me to dole-queues, and wearing second-hand clothes, and borrowing money, and having my electricity cut off – bring me to the state many respectable working folk are forced into during depressions, for reasons they cannot help. That I should choose to become a seedy parasite in order to make obscure luxury items hardly anybody wanted worried them, as it would worry me if my son took that course. So till a few years ago I was embarrassed when I had to tell people my profession. But that feeling of shame stopped last year when I earned enough to pay taxes, so it was not important.

Q. Is it possible that your concentration on Scottish subject matter will make *Lanark* inaccessible to the non-Scottish?

A. You would not be interviewing me if my book was only accessible to Scots. And all imaginative workers make art out of the people and places they know best. No good writer is afraid to use local place names – the bible is full of them. No good writer is afraid to use local politics – Dante peoples Hell, Purgatory and Heaven with local politicians. I don't think Scotland a better country, Glasgow a better city than any other, but all I know of Hell and Heaven was learned here, so this is the ground I use, though sometimes I disguise the fact – just as Dean Swift pretended to describe an island peopled by pygmies, when describing England.

Q. What made you write *1982 Janine*?

A. A wish to show a sort of man everyone recognizes and most can respect: not an artist, not an egoist, not even a radical: a highly skilled workman and technician, dependable, honest and conservative, who should be one of the kings of his age but does not know it, because he has been trained to do what he is told. So he is a plague and pest to himself, and is going mad, quietly, inside.

Q. What are the main themes of your painting?

A. The garden of Eden and the triumph of death. All my pictures use one or other or both. This is nothing abnormal. Any good portrait shows someone at a point in the journey from the happy garden to the triumph of death. I don't regard these states as far-fetched fantasies. Any calm place where folk are enjoying each other's company is heavenly. Any place where crowds struggle with each other in a state of dread is a hell, or on the doorstep of hell.

Q. How important to you is religion as a theme?

A. Religion is not a theme, religion – any religion – is a way of seeing the world, a way of linking the near, the ordinary, the temporary with the remote, the fantastic, the eternal. Religion is a perspective device so I use it, of course. I differ from church people in seeing heaven and hell as the material of life itself, not of an afterlife. Intellectually I prefer the Olympian Greek faith. Emotionally I am dominated by the Old Testament. Morally speaking I prefer Jesus, but he sets a standard I'm too selfish to aim for. I'm more comfortable with his daddy, Jehovah, who is nastier but more human. The world is full of wee Jehovahs.

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