Writing in the Margins: Writer in Residence: Heather Parry

in the margins: obsessive threads

from the archives of Alasdair Gray and Agnes Owens

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The desk has only two legs, and is bolted into the wall. This is only the latest in a series of walls to which it has been bolted since Alasdair Gray, the late Scottish artist and writer, dragged it off the street and determined to give it another life. On the shelves around the desk, articles from Gray's home have been curated and installed as a reimagining of his living and working space: childhood photographs; shells penned with the date and location of their finding, and in whose company they were found; a penpot made from an empty tin of *essential Waitrose prunes in fruit juice*. On the desk is an enormous ledger, saved from a skip into which it had been deposited by its former, anonymous, owner. We can guess at its style of business from the entries that remain untouched: one of the accounts to be balanced is that of Clyde Oil Extraction Ltd, and another is Caldwell's Paper Mill. Next to / around / on top of these notes Alasdair resolved to keep a diary of sorts, to collect together 'all the practical, fanatical and obsessive threads' of his life, to 'try and disentangle them a little' by 'some sort of regular entry'. [1]

The desire to try and make sense of a scattershot brain with overlapping obsessions is one I can relate to, and the absolute failure of this project in the rest of the ledger—almost immediately, in fact—is one I also know very well; by its fourth page, Gray has given in his creative compulsions, drawing an (excellent) pen portrait of a Mr Gibbons with whom he was playing chess. His dedication to write comes undone completely in the following pages, which instead are given over to sketches and cityscapes, research photographs and the early designs of what would become his 'best big oil painting',[2] *Cowcaddens Streetscape in the Fifties*. The last pages of the ledger are exclusively illustrated by large sketches of a cat. Somewhere between the absurd Waitrose elasticity of the word 'essential' and the layers of manic text and art you begin to understand where the world of Unthank was pulled from, how Glasgow itself forms the foundation on which all this man's works were created, and how Gray's singular literary world was built.

Here, in Glasgow's Whisky Bond, the desk is the centre of a recreation of Alasdair's working space, part of The Alasdair Gray Archive, painstakingly established and run by Gray's friend, the gallerist Sorcha Dallas, who

[1] AGA.1.1.128
[2] From *A Life in Pictures,* Alasdair Gray, Canongate, 2010. Chapter 10: My Second Family 1961-64.

represented his visual art from 2007 and, since his death in 2019, has since been both curator/custodian of the archive and a tireless advocate of Gray's legacy (along with a small but passionate team). In January of this year, a second archive was officially established, one focused on Agnes Owens, whom Gray once called 'the most unfairly neglected of all living Scottish authors'; coming to literary life much later than Gray, Owens nevertheless staked a serious claim for a place in the Scottish canon, and now, twelve years after her death, is starting to be properly appreciated. Polygon's reissue of her back catalogue, as part of her centenary celebrations, will no doubt bring new readers to her work, and I was thrilled to be asked to write an introduction to my favourite of her novels, *For the Love of Willie*, which will be released with the first tranche of reissues in May.

May 2026 reissues of four Agnes Owens titles. Courtesy of Polygon.

I am installed at the Whisky Bond as part of a two-handed residency, supported by The National Lottery through Creative Scotland, shared with the novelist Kirstin Innes, which will see us both in part-time residence at the archives for a total of eight months. The goal of our two residencies is a creative response to both archives; we are each working on a book, and these books will be shaped around and inspired by what we find here. This process is informed by Gray, who spent his creative life responding to, building on and inspiring the works of other artists. It is also informed by the connective tissue of the Scottish writing scene and its ability to draw out great writers; it was at a creative writing group led by poet Liz Lochhead that Owens got her real start. Despite originally having signed up mostly to get a night away from her kids, her 'deadpan gothic' style, as Ali Smith called it, was noticed by visiting writers Alasdair Gray and James Kelman, who encouraged her to continue and championed her work thereafter. It is exceedingly rare to be given so much time to embed yourself in the creative practice of other writers

with a view to creating a new work yourself, and even more rare to be financially supported to do so. While the sheer amount of material here is overwhelming, having to find a way through it creates a sort of energetic creative friction; on my very first day I had an idea that brings together everything I had hoped to write about. At the end of each of my days in the archive, I go home starving; always a sign that my brain is working in overdrive.

Though the residency is in its early stage, there are unexpected effects already: seeing Glasgow reflected in the works of these two artists is refocusing it in my mind, inspiring me to look with fresh eyes at the place I've called home since 2019. Edinburgh is more famous for its views at every turn, every street corner a picture postcard, but in the ledger's sketches Glasgow's cityscapes become both newly-colonised sci fi planets and Escher-esque lithographs. In both archives, the impassive wit of the city and its surroundings is often on display; on the second page of his ledger, writing to himself more than anyone else, Gray notes his goals for the book he'd been writing since age 18, the novel that would become *Lanark*:

> 'My book was to be an epic, the Aenaid (damn the spelling) of the new democratic socialist Britain, with an excursion into the underworld, the evocation of a complete social order, and a demonstration of the virtue which might save us. After three or four years I lowered my aims.'[3]

The first date of this overlaid diary is 25 August 1963, making Gray twenty-eight when he began to annotate his creative practice in this manner; by his own reckoning he'd been working on *Lanark* for a decade, but it would be another eighteen years before it would be published. To focus one's literary attentions on a single project for so long at such an age—and to begin to create a historical record of its creation during the process—belies an unshakeable confidence that I envy. Just three months prior, Gray and his pregnant wife Inge had been living on Gray's occasional art sales and the £5 per week he got from the Labour Exchange, the precursor to the Jobcentre; despite such tight circumstances being further stretched by an incoming baby, Gray had resolved not to be forced back into teaching, which he had studied after working as a part-time art teacher for several years having graduated from Glasgow School of Art, writing, '[I] knew that only what I enjoyed doing was worth living for, and I must reject any work which thwarted my talents.'[4] This is a noble sentiment that does not meet the modern moment well; I think now of the friends I have—award-winning, generational talents—who have similarly committed themselves to their artistic pursuits and so exist in a constant state of financial precarity and stress, or who are unable to commit

[3] From *A Life in Pictures,* Alasdair Gray, Canongate, 2010.
[4] ibid.

themselves in such a manner so work 9-5 jobs in unrelated industries while producing internationally-lauded, bestselling books in what might naively be called 'their spare time'. The phrase 'cost of living' does not begin to describe the challenges that have arisen for the jobbing artist in the sixty-two years since Gray wrote this in his ledger.

It is also not a sentiment that Owens could have shared, at such an age. She was married at twenty-two and had the first of her seven children within a couple of years. Housing was so scarce in Glasgow in that post-war period that, with a very young baby, and just over a tenner in their pockets, she and her husband travelled north, to Ullapool, to try and find a place to live—to no avail. For a year they stayed in tents and derelict buildings, and it was in these conditions that Owens had her second child. Eventually they returned south to the safety of a council house, and had two more children, working in factories and as a typist to support the family. Following decades of alcoholism her husband died at 43; she remarried, had three more children, and worked part-time as a cleaner. What room is there amongst this for a singular dedication to writing?

Owens did not publish a novel until 58, a much-commented-upon fact—but Gray also did not publish his first novel until the age of 46. Gray also had a child: a son, born the year he started his diary. He also married twice, and his was also a life of financial precarity, and sometimes ludicrous austerity. His habit of salvaging things from the street did not end at the desk he would use to write all of his novels, plays and poetry; he would often find canvases in the rubbish and take them home to paint on top of, and even his most famous works hide the work of other artists underneath. His creative life was supported first by Inge—'She accepted my unemployment with equanimity and worked well to make the little we had go far'[5]—and then by his beloved second wife Morag, in whose home he lived and worked for the last decades of his life. He was famous for following his socialist values beyond the point at which others may have abandoned them, including paying any assistants the same rate at which he was being paid, often leaving next to nothing leftover to carry him to the next project.

The extent to which we can make the choice to live in austerity, to commit ourselves to artistic practice regardless of poverty, is of course shaped by class, education, gender, race; this is inarguable. Yet I think Owens would despise any attempt to characterise her as a 'poor woman', someone whose life choices were imposed upon her. Even in her most radical and shocking novel, *For the Love of Willie*, her teenage protagonist, surely a victim of class

[5] From *A Life in Pictures*, Alasdair Gray, Canongate, 2010.

and gender if ever there was one, is shown as an agent of her own fate, and then as someone capable of both great violence and great care. There is no perfect morality in Owens' work, no clear right and wrong, so we must resist applying such rigid readings to her own life too. In the archive, already, I have found a stoic writer with a bleak and brilliant humour, someone unafraid of showing humanity in both its worst and best moments. She does not sanitise, does not tidy away, does not sand off any sharp edges. As she told interviewer Jane Gray eight years before her death, Owens explained her literary method:

> I would say I want to convey people that are condemned in a better light than what people would think, you know, or maybe to make people think, well, these people are human. Something like that.[6]

Kirstin Innes and I during a photocall at the residency, through the lens of Miriam Morris:

[6] Jane Gray, « Giving "people like that" a Voice », *Études écossaises*, 11 | 2008, 207-223.