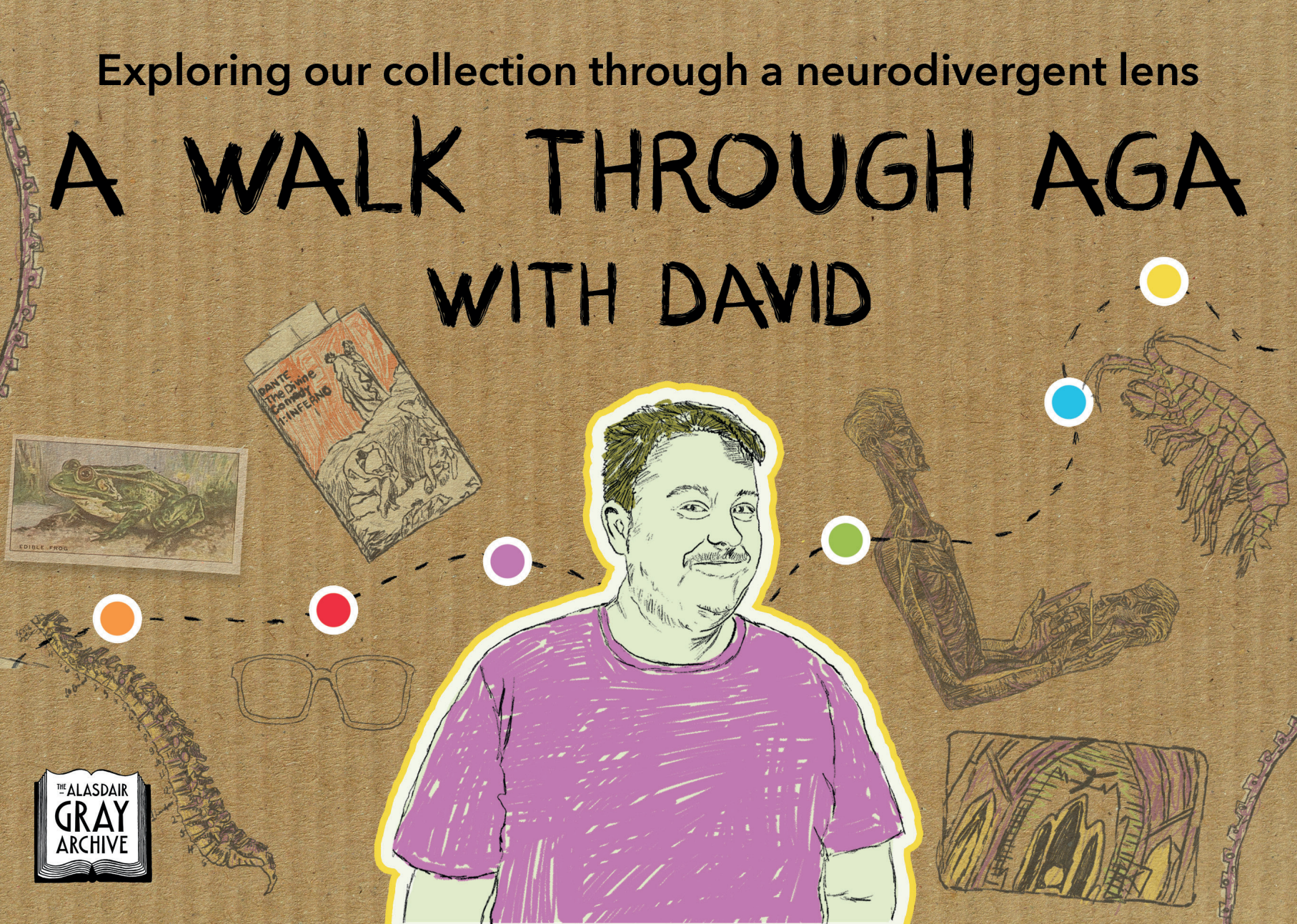
Exploring our collection through a neurodivergent lens

# A WALK THROUGH AGA WITH DAVID



CONTENTS

# Getting Started


- Custodian's Note by Sorcha Dallas 1
- A Neurodivergent Lens 2
- A bit about David 3
- Introduction 4
- What is Neurodivergence? 6


# 5.07

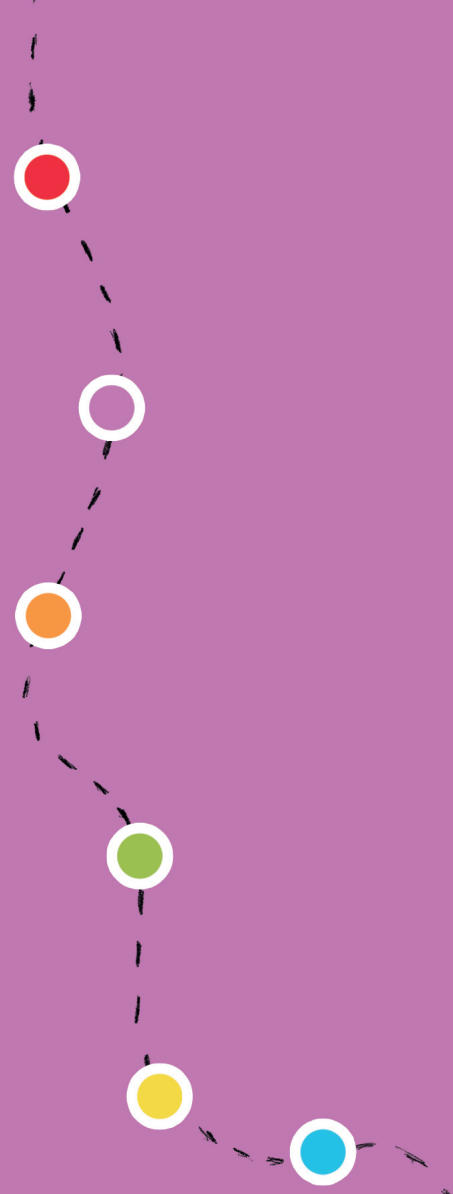

- Map of 5.07 8
- *The Harmsworth Encyclopaedia* 10
- The Dante Marginalia 14
- *Lanark* 18
- *Poor Things* 22


# 5.08


- Map of 5.08 26
- *Faust in his Study* 28
- The Cigarette Cards 32


# Conclusions and Reflections


- Journey's End 36

# CUSTODIAN'S NOTE



by Sorcha Dallas

The connection between Alasdair Gray's work and neurodiversity is not explicit in either biographical or clinical terms, but emerges through interpretation of his creative practice. Gray did not write within contemporary neurodiversity frameworks, nor did he identify as neurodivergent, yet his work consistently centres forms of cognition that sit outside normative expectations. Across his fiction, visual art, and collaborative practice, he develops ways of thinking and making that are iterative, non-linear, and resistant to fixed hierarchies of form or meaning. For many readers, particularly those who identify as autistic or ADHD, Gray's work can feel unexpectedly resonant—not as representation of diagnosis, but as a reflection of minds that operate in tension with structured systems of knowledge, authority, and communication.

This perspective becomes clearer when attention is given to Gray's working methods as much as his finished works. His practice is defined by continual revision, cross-media thinking, and a refusal to separate learning from making. Ideas recur, shift, and reassemble across texts, images, and public artworks, forming a distributed system of thought rather than a single linear output. Rather than pursuing mastery as a final stage before creation, Gray treats making itself as a form of thinking in progress. This approach aligns with neurodivergent cognitive styles often characterised by associative thinking, parallel processing, and learning through iteration rather than abstraction alone.

This project developed through the research of postgraduate researcher, David Lothian, who first engaged with The Alasdair Gray Archive (AGA) during one of its free public tours. During his visit, David spoke about his developing research interests and exploring creative practice through a neurodivergent lens. This initial conversation led to the development of a collaborative research project exploring how Gray's archive might be understood in relation to neurodiversity frameworks. David's perspective offers a valuable and timely contribution to Gray scholarship, opening up new ways of reading the archive that foreground cognition, process, and lived experience alongside artistic production.

# A NEURODIVERGENT LENS



When dealing with matters of an autistic nature, it is important to stay true to the complexities of neurodivergence whilst also speaking plainly. In the spirit of the latter, I'd like to place all my cards on the table and briefly deal with a potential pitfall which the writing and release of this guide could throw up.

> ***Simply put: both this guide and its author are in no way setting out to posthumously diagnose Alasdair Gray as autistic and/or neurodivergent.***

In the first place, this would be inappropriate and unfair to all involved, and in the second place, an argumentative case for posthumous diagnosis is far, far less interesting than the idea (and my intention) of simply applying a specific approach to Gray's life, work, and archived collection in order to discover a fresh vision of all three. In other words: reading Gray and his work as opposed to labelling them. See the *Introduction* (p.4 & 5) for details of my approach and methodology.

# A BIT ABOUT DAVID

At the time of writing this piece David Lothian was a postgraduate researcher at the University of Glasgow. His doctoral work was focused on discourses of autistic physicality, embodied neurodivergence and the nature of autistic spectatorship, the latter of which inspired his project at the Archive: utilising items from and features of The Alasdair Gray Archive (AGA) collection to explore links between neurodivergent and neurotypical tendencies in Gray's work whilst teasing out the complexities of his creative and personal approaches.

David's relationship with Alasdair Gray began during his undergraduate degree at the University of Aberdeen, for which he read and subsequently fell in love with *Lanark*; particularly the episodes from Thaw's youth, in which he saw a lot of himself, a boy growing up with Aspergers' Syndrome and a brain that wouldn't simply do the decent thing and quieten down a bit.

Besides Gray, David's other great loves are film, music, baseball, and (in the spirit of the big man himself) the magpie-like process of tending and adding to his increasingly unruly collection of books and objects. He is a stout, fair-haired, increasingly curious, Edinburgh-born pedestrian who lives and works in Glasgow with his partner and their truculent cat.



"Metaphor is one of thought's most essential tools. It illuminates what would otherwise be totally obscure. But the illumination is sometimes so bright that it dazzles instead of revealing."

Lanark, Gray, 1981: pg. 30

# INTRODUCTION

This guide was created and developed due to a specific resonance which I discovered between my own autistic subjectivity and the subjectivity represented in Alasdair Gray's work. The Alasdair Gray Archive collection, with its wide-ranging records of Gray's output, creative habits, and practices, provided a wealth of resources for exploring and teasing out this resonance; the result of which was a guide to the AGA materials centered on a vision of Gray's legacy outside of standard neuronormative parameters—a neurodivergent vision.

The process by which the guide was produced originated in my doctoral work on autistic subjectivity and embodied spectatorship, via a concept which I termed the 'neurodivergent reading'. Its political aspects were inspired by the work of theorist Alexander Doty and his writings on the 'queer reading': a sociocultural lens used to analyse works of art, film and literature through an LGBTQ+ perspective, thereby identifying queer traces in works both historical and current. Doty's reading also extended into a very specific kind of subjective territory, namely the idea that concepts, characters, plotlines etc. can be read and analysed as queer, even without the overt presence or confirmation of queer authorship or intention.

My neurodivergent reading functions along much the same lines: a lens designed to highlight non-neurotypical perspectives on art, culture, and everyday life, with a focus on identification of neurodivergent traces across aspects of culture without overt presence or confirmation of neurodivergent intention or authorship. The neurodivergent reading is largely split between two methods: detecting and understanding. In the first place, we might recognise or detect certain social or behavioural traces which can be read in the same fashion as neurodivergent examples; for instance, the motif of the bitten thumb knuckle in *Lanark* with its strong resemblance to autistic stimming. In the second place we can view and understand established creative works or practices through a neurodivergent subjectivity, thus generating an entirely fresh understanding and altering one's vision.

The following is a guided tour through the AGA collection, taking in both Gray's most famous art and prose works and the uniquely personal objects, practices, and systems used to create and correlate them. From a childhood spent sifting through encyclopaedias and cigarette cards for worldly knowledge, to the genesis of *Lanark, Poor Things* and *Faust in his Study*, we will envision an exciting and multifaceted path through not just the collection's physical premises and exhibits, but through the life, work, and career of one of Scotland's foremost artistic voices.

# WHAT IS "NEURODIVERGENCE"?

The concept of 'neurodivergence' has its roots within the autistic struggle for articulation and expression in the face of several long-running stereotypes. It was necessitated by a 50+ year continuity of pathological discourse known as the 'Medical Model' of disability: in short, the idea that autism and its embodied complexities are best understood as a disease to be mapped and cured.

As a result, an opposing 'Social Model' of disability arose to counter these medicalised views - arguing that what we think of as 'disability' is, in fact, created and perpetuated by systems of social inequality and dangerous normative standards. From the social model's rhetoric on acceptance came sociologist Judy Singer's idea of **'neurodiversity': the idea that autism is simply a normal and valid part of human variation.**

Neurodivergence and neurodiverse culture also stands for advocacy of a positive, inclusive, and celebratory attitude towards autism in both everyday life and the fields of art and culture.

# SOME DEFINITIONS:

## NEUROTYPICAL

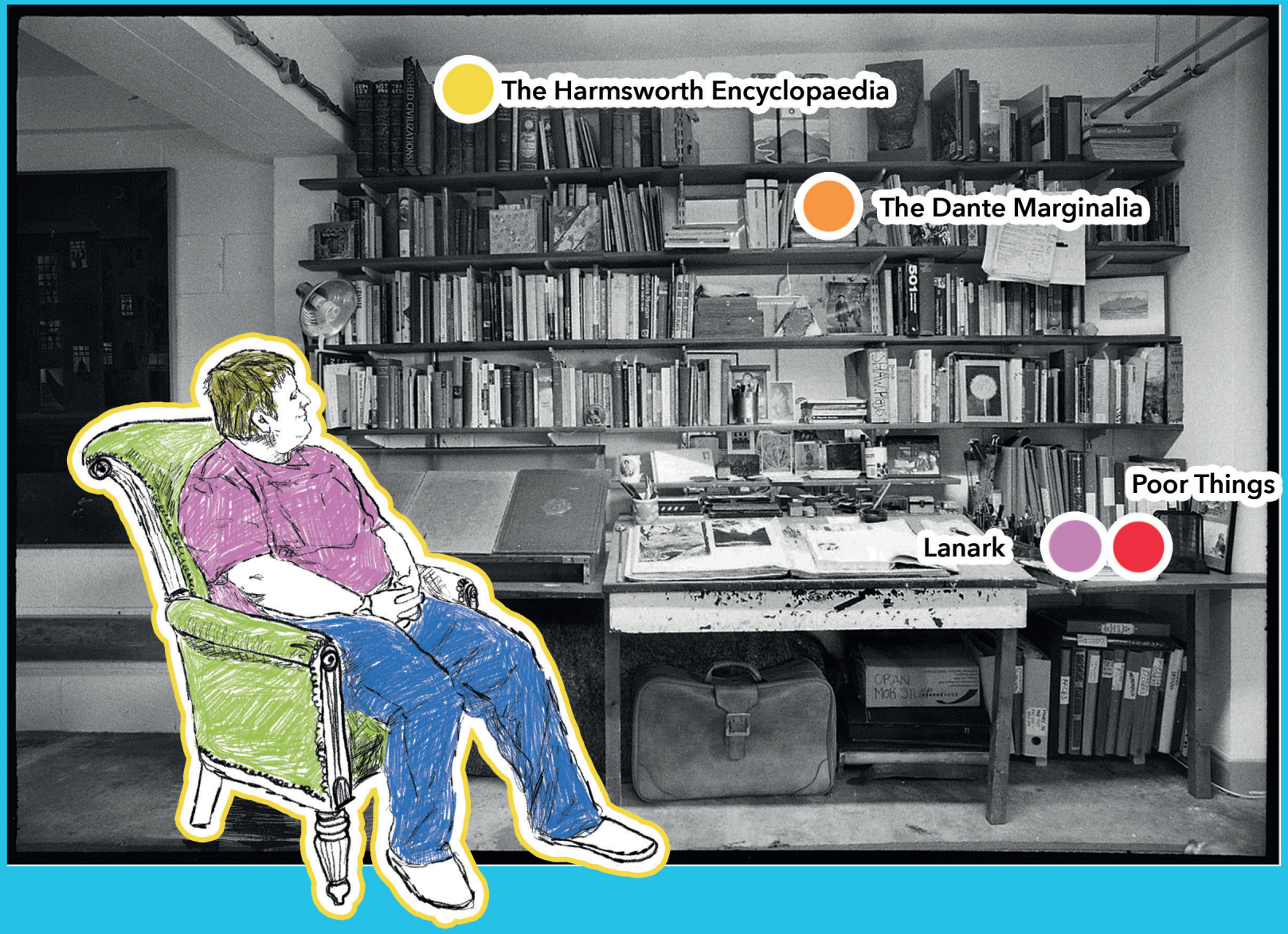
**'Neurotypical' refers to anyone who is not autistic.**
The suffix 'typical' refers to the idea that autism (a neurological phenomenon) is viewed as an acute difference from the cognitively-abled norm.

## NEURONORMATIVE

**'Neuronormative' / 'neuronormativity' refers to the various normative standards applied to society by the neurotypical majority.** In short, it suggests the ideology that most people—the environments they inhabit and the systems they interact with—should be treated as neurotypical and non-autistic. Neuronormative attitudes frequently exclude autistic perspectives from cultural discourses and are responsible for holding back many advances in making social spaces more inclusive and accessible.

## STIMMING

**Autistic self-stimulation, or 'stimming', refers to physical and behavioural tics often seen in autistic people.** Stimming is a self soothing response to sensory overload and is usually a rhythmic, repetitive action, like jumping, humming, or hand movements.


The Harmsworth Encyclopaedia
The Dante Marginalia
Poor Things
Lanark

# 5.07 MAP

## The Harmsworth Encyclopaedia

A childhood favourite of Alasdair's in which he 'dug out' information about the world.

## The Dante Marginalia

Annotated copies of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c.1321), which influenced *Lanark* (1981) and were the basis of Alasdair's translations in 2019.

## Lanark

Alasdair's self-authored film script for an unmade adaptation of *Lanark*.

## Poor Things

Alasdair's 1995 script for a potential film adaptation of *Poor Things* (1992) with Parallel Pictures. This script was never realised but *Poor Things* was adapted into an Oscar winning film by Yorgos Lanthimos, released in 2023.

# THE HARMSWORTH ENCYCLOPAEDIA




As you enter The Alasdair Gray Archive you will approach Alasdair's desk. Curated above this are groupings of books that map key influences across his working life. Look closely and you will see on the top left-hand side a series of childhood books. Pause here as you have reached the **first stop on our journey**.

Look to the top shelf on the left, you'll see a set of books in frayed binding. This is the *Harmsworth Encyclopaedia*: the ineffable centre of the young Gray's universe. It was sold to his parents some time in the early 20th Century alongside a promotional bookcase to house it in, a deal appealing to both the democratically-Socialist and thriftily-Glaswegian sensibilities of Gray's father, Alexander. Determined that their son grow up properly educated in the ways of the world, Amy and Alex Gray never discouraged Alasdair from reading and were delighted at his strong interest in the *Harmsworth*.

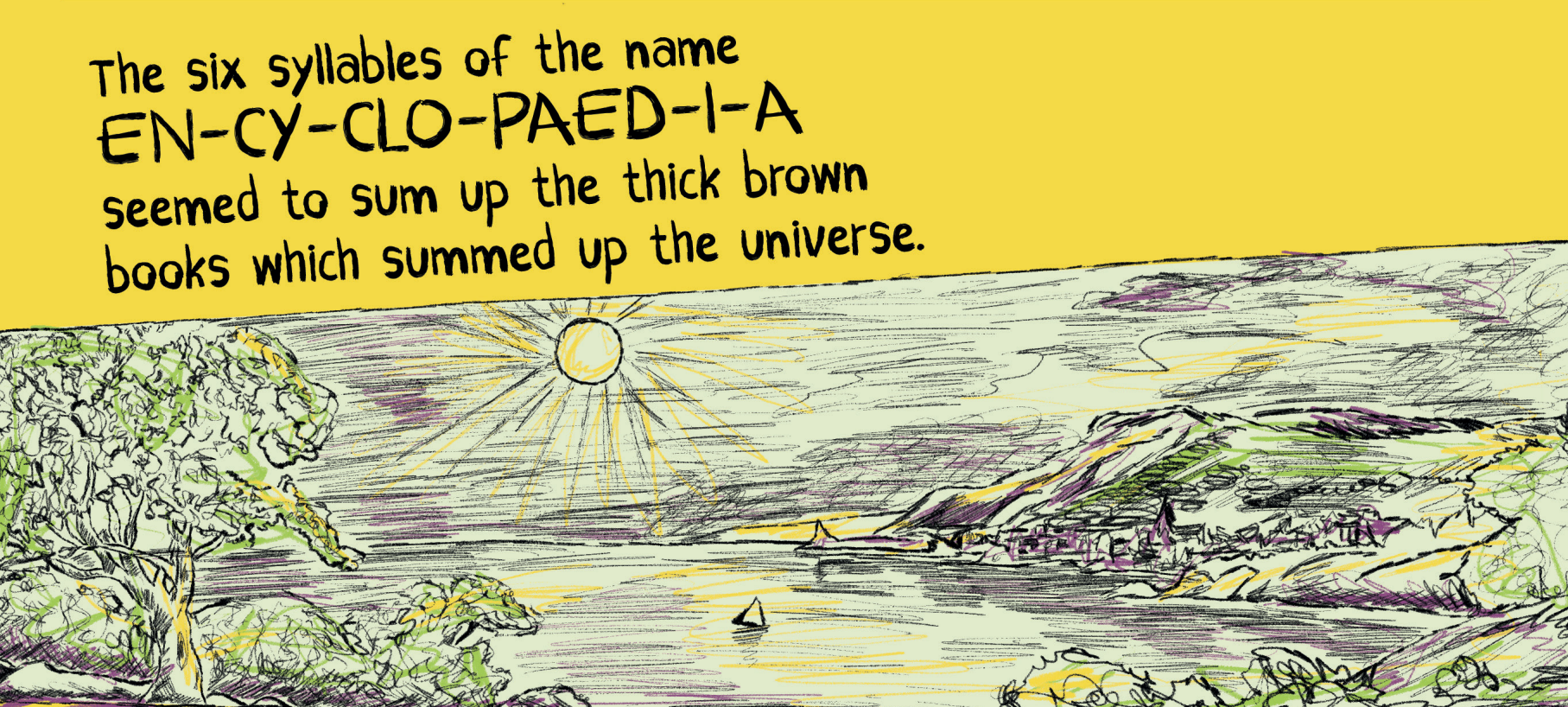
"I gathered," wrote Gray in his autobiographical essay '1951-2013 Childhood Reading', "that these volumes contained explanations of everything there is and had been, with lives of everyone important. The six syllables of the name EN-CY-CLO-PAED-I-A seemed to sum up the thick brown books which summed up the universe. Saying them (the syllables) gave me a sense of power" (Gray, 2019: 42).

The idea that a set of books could quite literally contain the sum total of human knowledge and experience supports a strong resonance with a neurodivergent view of knowledge: namely, the idea of '**material meaning-making**'.



This concept is best explained as a connection between the individual tactile experience of handling objects and the complex concepts the object or objects represent: an encyclopaedia whose physical form both represents and materially embodies the knowledge it contains. Now, when we consider Alasdair's love of saying the magic six syllables aloud alongside the physicalised knowledge represented by the encyclopaedia, an interesting comparison arises.

The sense of power derived from 'summing up the universe in syllables' bears a striking resemblance to the process of autistic stimming, particularly, the vocal variety of self-stimulating (also known as 'Echolalia'). As we saw earlier (see *Stimming*, p.7), stimming behaviours are not exclusively tied to negative experiences, but can also act as a positive and moderating or modulating influence on sensory experience.







Gray's spoken words and the power they derived from 'summing up' the almost metaphysical force of knowledge symbolised by the *Harmsworth* speaks to me in the manner of a deeply neurodivergent experience: the connection between knowledge, sensory pleasure, physical objects, and an empowered subjectivity.

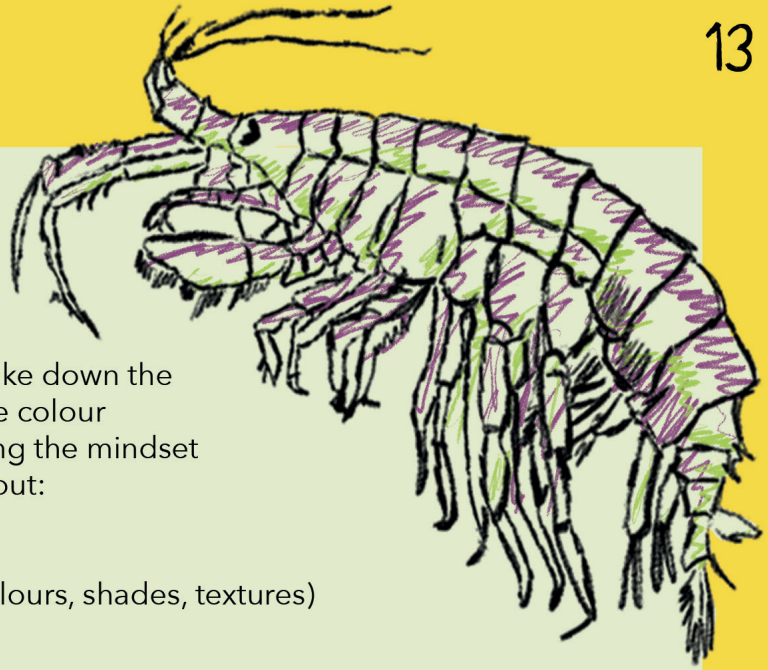
Meanwhile, Gray goes on to explain the profound effect that the encylopaedia's colour plates of national flags, crests, and coats of arms had on his young mind, giving:

> "...An undiluted pleasure that was purely sensuous. I was fascinated by the crisp oblongs holding blues, reds, yellows, greens, blacks and white combining in patterns more vivid and easily seen than anywhere else, apart from our Christmas decorations"
>
> (Gray: 42).

Despite the importance of encyclopaedic knowledge, there really is something to be said for the power of illustration, and it's clear that Gray was able to use the attractive pull of these colour plates to back up and contextualise the words he was so desperate to internalise.

In other words: the shapes, compositions, colours, and vibrancy of the plates proved a source of fixation which both complemented and empowered his drive to soak up knowledge. Crucially, this process is something I have found myself relating to time and time again; the concept of deriving sensual pleasure from the structure and composition of images (and subsequently using that pleasure to compliment and empower your own learning) has always been an important part of my subjectivity as an autistic individual.





So, now it's time to ask whoever is on hand to take down the volumes and point you to the pages bearing the colour plates of the flags and crests. Using and adopting the mindset and ideas we've covered so far, have a think about:

- How the images are constructed (the lines, colours, shades, textures)
  - And how does the above make you feel?
  - What emotions or ideas do they raise?
- What are you feeling in your mind?
- What are you feeling in your body?

**Whenever you're ready, please move on and ask your guide to see the Dante Marginalia.**



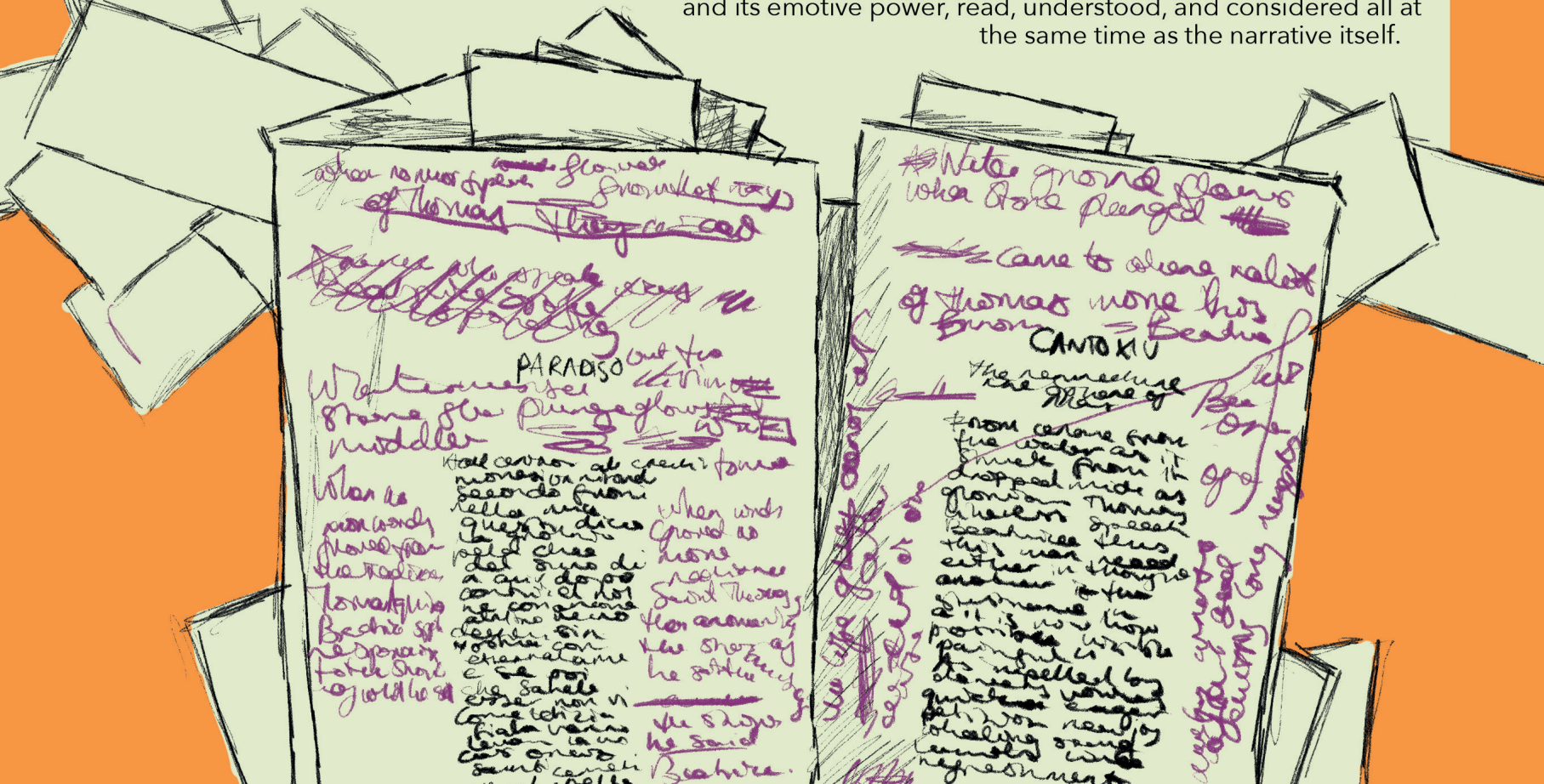
# THE DANTE MARGINALIA

Before you now are Alasdair's heavily annotated copies of the works of Italian laureate Dante Alighieri, whose *Divine Comedy* became both a major influence on Gray's *Lanark* and, later, his final creative project in the form of an illustrated interpretation completed shortly before his death in 2019.

Notice how worn, handled and visibly-consulted (my mother would call these 'well-loved') the volumes are. If you look closely you can see extensive marginalia entries written by Gray which we will be examining as the **second stop on our journey**.



When we look at most aspects of Gray's work and creative practice, one key idea emerges above all others: the learning being in the process of making and how that connects Gray to others. The idea that this relationship deserves not just to be acknowledged, but treated with textual tokens of acknowledgment, demonstrates Gray's views on the nature of books as material sites of immaterial dialogue—opening and closing the book as if it were a ouija board designed to facilitate a conversation without words or verbal exchange. Of all Gray's typographic flourishes, the latter is quite possibly my all-time favourite as it exemplifies my experience of reading within a neurodivergent subjectivity, the experiential connection between the physical reading material and its emotive power, read, understood, and considered all at the same time as the narrative itself.



We can also see this unique mode of animating and dialoguing with/within books as a form of scholarly practice visible throughout the AGA collection. Gray's handwriting exists at the archive like a living organism: decorating the walls, adorning his artworks and prints, and permeating vast numbers of the books held in his personal library. Pick a shelf and choose any book on literature, philosophy, art, politics, colour theory, folk history, economics, linguistics, or science fiction and check the margins. There's a good chance you'll find a series of annotations, sometimes linked to the text itself, others in the form of free flowing paragraphs with little or no connection to the existing passage.

**So when is a book not a book? Or, rather, when is a book more than a book?**







Applying a neurodivergent reading to these proclivities, we can note a kind of continuity between the *Harmsworth*, the cigarette cards (that you'll discover later), and Gray's books: they can all be considered as portals to a higher realm of subjective experience. Where the *Harmsworth* and Wills' cigarette cards complimented each other as modes of material meaning-making, Gray's own texts act as doorways into his continually expanding and shifting subjectivity, like map points in a constellation of active, physicalised dialogues. It bears mentioning that, on the one hand, I can't personally relate Gray's restless annotations to my own worldview (my books are my babies, deface them at your peril...) but on the other, the experiential logic makes perfect sense: there is nothing that better exemplifies the neurodivergent subjectivity than its tendency to resist and rupture both physical and mental boundaries.

All of this brings us nicely back to the subject at hand: the Dante Marginalia, chosen because of the depth and density of Gray's annotations and the volumes' importance to the final period of Alasdair's career.

Have a look through the volumes and consider the following:

- Do your personal views on books (is annotating/writing on pages good or bad?) affect your thoughts on this process?
- What kind of dialogues might Alasdair be creating here?
- How do the annotations relate to the page they're written on (is there any relation at all)?
- Does the physical structure/flow of the writing show off any emotion or feeling?

**Whenever you're ready, please move on and ask your guide to see the *Lanark* Script.**





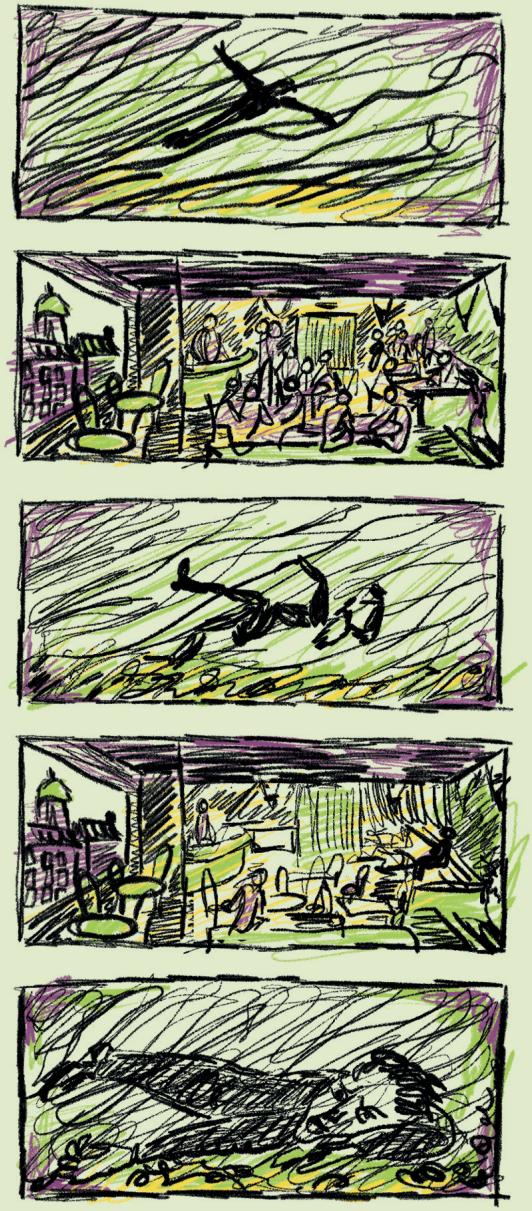

*Lanark* (1981) is Alasdair's most famous and seminal work, a grandly-dystopian and deeply personal novel about the political complexities of human nature. Here, the city of Glasgow is a character in its own right. Duncan Thaw is a young adolescent growing up in Glasgow and experiencing a series of challenges and afflications that feel like hell. Lanark is a young man living in Unthank—a surreal, hell-like place that looks like Glasgow. Their stories are intertwined by both a series of thematic twists and Gray's open confession that the novel is "deliberately autobiographical". Apart from a few select encounters "nearly every thought and incident is copied from something real in context where it happened" (Gray, 2019: 20).

Using Alasdair's self-authored film script for an unmade adaptation of *Lanark*, I'd like to illustrate a new reading of the novel's dual protagonists, one that goes deep into the heart of the neurodivergent experience. Later, we'll explore a similar reading of *Poor Things*. These will form the two-part **third stop on our journey.**

Throughout ‘Book One’, Duncan Thaw is characterised as what we might call a classic ‘problem child’. He confuses his parents, exhibits bizarre and headstrong preferences (particularly with food), and works himself into visceral stupors of self-harm beyond any normal youngster’s tantrums - the only effective defusion or punishment for which is the emotional and physical shock of a cold bath. He is also a resolutely ‘old soul’ who strives above all else to seem ‘older than his years’ and totally mysterious to his schoolyard peers, and whose physical emotions appear modular and able to be switched, changed, or hidden depending on the social demands of the moment.

Add to the above the consistent attempts by adults to define Thaw’s personality based on absence and relational ideas and a fairly clear picture begins to emerge. So, employing the ‘detecting’ modality of the neurodivergent reading, we can choose to read Thaw as a young boy growing up with undiagnosed autism. Whilst his love or hatred of certain meals calls to mind the neurodivergent need for ‘safe foods’ which help steer clear of sensory discomfort, the self-harming tantrums and cold bath punishments read clearly to me as two different kinds of extreme overstimulation, one designed to counteract the other.

Meanwhile, Thaw’s love of playing the mysterious little professor is just that: a readable example of Hans Asperger’s ‘Little Professor Syndrome’—the idea that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (previously Asperger’s Syndrome) experience an unusually adult kind of childhood; behaving beyond their years, preferring the company of adults to children, and soaking up as much knowledge as their brains can handle. Meanwhile, Thaw’s curious ability to hide, change, or counteract his emotions can easily be compared to autistic masking: the everyday practice of  suppressing and controlling emotions and physicality in order to appear more neurotypical.





Most important of all, though, is the general discomfort, anger and confusion Thaw wreaks amongst his adult caregivers who are confused and angered by the boy's absence of traditional behavioural norms. This definition-by-absence (also known as the 'autistic deficit') is a classic device of the 'Medical Model' (see *What is Neurodivergence,* p.6) designed to other autistic people by comparing their absence of neurotypical norms against the neuronormative standard. Both in real-life and in the case of the fictional Thaw, it is something to be worked hard against.

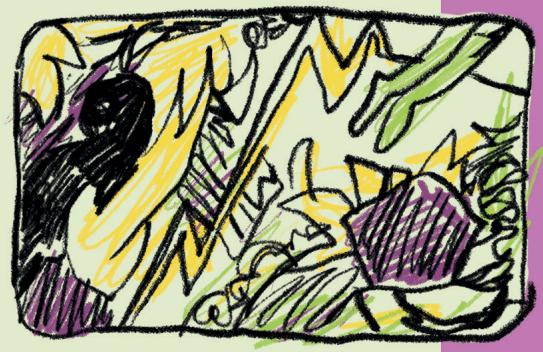
Moving to Lanark's sections of the novel, we can see that where Thaw is a 'problem child', Lanark is the classic example of a 'loner'. Through his favourite isolated spot on the Elite Cafe's balcony, his definition of freedom as "freedom from other people" (Gray, 1981: 70), and his tendency to be othered by and isolated from those around him coupled with a lack of conversational confidence, Lanark resembles the autistic young-adult struggling with his first experiences of a mature social life.

This friction between Lanark's behaviour and that of his peers produces the binary reaction of either amusement or frustration in those he meets (and his love interest, Rima). Sadly, another common experience for most neurodivergent people, whose disruptive nature is usually either deemed funny, quirky, or flat-out irritating and unexplainable by neuronormative standards. Furthermore, during heightened moments featuring all of the above, Lanark also displays a form of stimming response: biting his thumb knuckle and sinking deep into his troubled thoughts.

So, what can we make of these twinned characters and their autistic characteristics? I would like to argue that the answer lies in a brief literary reference employed by Gray at the beginning of the book. *Lanark* opens with a quote from Samuel Beckett's foundational surrealist play *Waiting For Godot* (1954), a complex narrative dealing with similar concerns of human nature and man's struggles against an indifferent existence:

**"VLADIMIR: Suppose we repented?**
**ESTRAGON: Repented what?**
**VLADIMIR: Oh… We wouldn't have to go into the details."**
(Beckett in Gray, 1981: VII)





The characters Vladimir and Estragon are (as we can see here) cursed with individual dysfunction and cannot form thoughts by themselves despite having vastly different perspectives on life. They rely on each other to collaboratively put together their ideas and actions in a meeting of the two perspectives which they represent: Vladimir with his learned and thoughtful outlook, and Estragon with his dull, down-to-earth attitude. Thus, together, they make one complete person or, rather, one complete mind in a kind of 'scale model' of human thought. The idea of metaphorical scale models was a concept which greatly interested Gray, and can be seen all across his work (particularly in Bella's worldview throughout *Poor Things*).

I would like to venture that, together, Thaw and Lanark are two halves of a scale model of autistic development, Thaw the autistic child who comes to terms with his subjectivity, battles his differences with other children, and learns how to mask, and Lanark the autistic young adult who struggles with both the friction between his own subjectivity and the new demand to socialise, and the encroaching label of other imposed on him by his peers, whilst finding comfort in an embodied form of emotional management (his thumb knuckle stimming behaviour).

With all of this in mind, it's time to ask your guide to see Gray's *Lanark* script. Paying close attention to Alasdair's illustrations and storyboards and the action-line descriptions, consider the following:

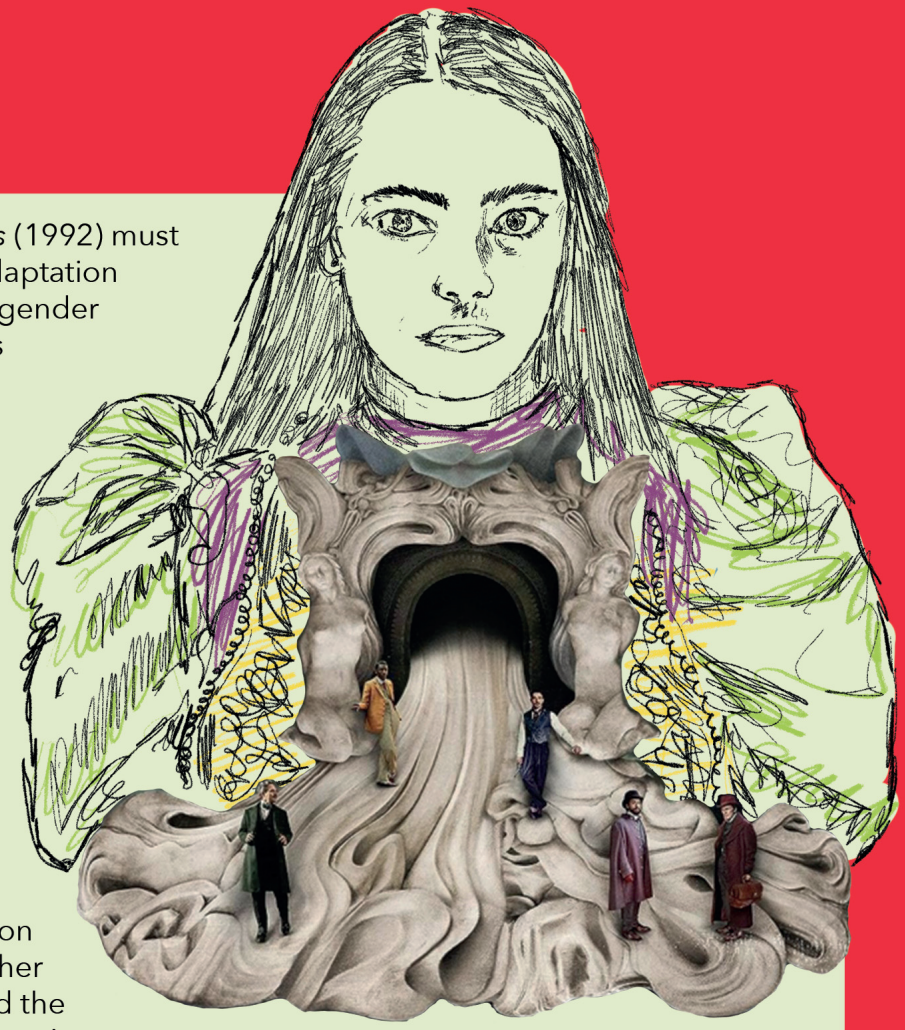


- How do Lanark and Thaw enter the world of the film?
- Are there behavioural similarities between the book Lanark and Thaw and the film Lanark and Thaw?
- How do Lanark and Thaw physically interact with their world(s)?

**Whenever you're ready, please move on and ask your guide to see the *Poor Things* Script.**

22

# POOR THINGS



If *Lanark* is Gray's most famous novel, *Poor Things* (1992) must be his most infamous. With both the 2023 film adaptation and the ever-expanding public discussions of cisgender politics and Scottish Nationalism, *Poor Things* has seen a surge of new interest and has arguably become more relevant now than ever before. Gray takes us on an allegorical journey through three perspectives on the life of Bella McCandless (née Baxter): one neutral and historical (Gray's brief self-insert role as an investigative historian), one deceptive and controlling (Archie McCandless's misogynistically fictionalised biography of Bella), and one revisionist and truthful (the 'real' Bella's closing letter of explanation).

But whether it is the Frankenstein-esque resurrected Bella of McCandless's narrative or the bluntly-aggrieved 'real' Bella of the novel's final twist, the fact remains that her main motivation is regaining control of her life and, by extension, her personhood. Focusing on McCandless's Bella and the allegorical side of her character, I would like to examine the key parts of her behaviour from an autistic perspective. It should also be noted that, because Bella's allegorical qualities only function if they are separated from the twist ending, it would be deeply inappropriate not to acknowledge the misogyistic implications. So, to do the right thing, I have decided




to stay true to the feminist perspective that the 'real' Bella represents by focusing purely on the disruptive and assertive aspects of her autistic qualities.

All throughout his retelling of their relationship, Bella's open sexuality and its expression in her embodied desires is a source of both terror and attraction for the patriarchal and conservative Archie; who finds himself quite literally dragged along by her romantic advances and physical behaviours, each in affront of the "conventional moralist" attitudes of the Victorian age. But beyond any perceived vulgarity, Archie notes that Bella's sexuality and womanhood are problematised by her childlike nature (embodied in her deeply literal subjectivity and verbose speech patterns).

Considering these disruptive characteristics from our neurodivergent perspective, some interesting readings emerge. Bella's open sexuality represents a conflict between one of the most basic aspects of humanity (embodied desire) and the imposition of formal and moralist systems; closely resembling the open neurodivergent attitude towards sexuality/desire and its friction against the neurotypical tendency to suppress and control it. The invocation of misogyny also calls to mind the female neurodivergent experience of struggling against patriarchal rules not designed to be easily explained to divergent subjectivities. Meanwhile, Bella's existence in the liminal space between childhood and womanhood can be framed within theorist Sonya Freeman Loftis's concept of the 'Eternal Child': in short, the idea that neuronormative attitudes frequently brand



autistic characteristics as childlike and, thus, brand the autistic individual as an 'eternal child' who will never properly grow up. With the emotional strength of a child (complete with childlike speech patterns similar to autistic vocal stimming) and the fortitude of a grown woman, Bella's hypersexuality becomes even more disruptive.

Switching focus to Bella's assertive behaviours, her profound impulse to self-educate forms a huge part of her identity. Whether embarking on quests to understand the world's inequality or debating politics with Astley (whom she uses as a conduit of knowledge for her own ends), Bella continually asserts her right to educate herself on her own terms, going so far as to challenge her station as a woman and vocally express her ideals (prompting one acquaintance to remark that she is like a Russian woman as she 'holds nothing back'). Bella also works hard to assert her sexuality from an embodied political perspective during her (highly accomplished) employment in the Parisian brothel.

Once again, we return to Gray's fascination with and combining of autodidactic practice and the neurodivergent parallel of childhood and adulthood self-education. Due to neuronormative standards and their wide-ranging effects, neurodivergent people often feel the need to cross-examine neurotypical people to learn as much about the world as they can—'using' them for their own advancement in much the same way Bella claims to use Astley (though admitting his moral faults, she 'needs him' for his knowledge). Here, we also see a return to a female neurodivergent disruption of patriarchal and neurotypical norms: Bella chooses to speak her mind and challenge inequality against the wishes of society at large. Her assertion of her sexuality reclaims an embodied sense of identity by using her divergent subjectivity. Only a woman of her emotional means and ideas could succeed in this fashion.

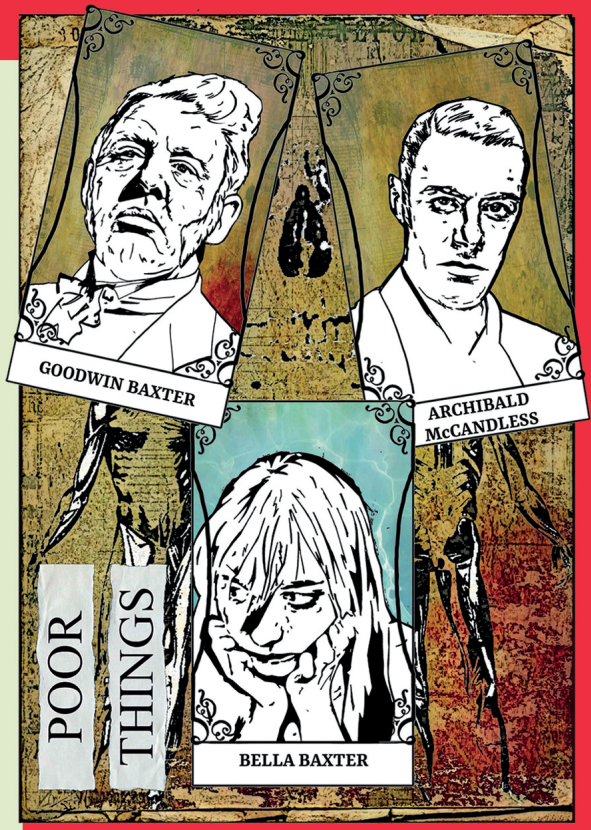
What we have here, then, can be read as a case study in the neurodivergent personhood and reclaiming one's embodied identity. Bella's character is designed around disruption and assertion and defined, like Thaw, by an absence of traditional norms in the manner of the autistic deficit (see *Lanark,* p. 18-21). Archie's Bella disrupts 'moralist' ideas whilst asserting a

political, sexual, and feminine identity which effectively counteracts patriarchal society's attempts to suppress and define embodied female identity. Naturally, this mirrors the neurodivergent struggle for personhood against endless othering and psychological effects of neuronormative standards. Furthermore, the above specifically mirrors the female experience of neurodivergence: the struggle against gender-based othering, against the suppression of embodied identity and autistic behaviour deemed 'un-feminine', and against the lack of proper diagnostic care and support for autistic women.

So, as before with *Lanark*, I'd like you to take a look at the *Poor Things* script with everything we've explored in mind. There are no storyboards or artwork pieces this time, so pay close attention to the character descriptions:

- What is notable about how Bella is introduced and described?
- How does Gray treat her body and physical cadence?
- How do Archie and Godwin see Bella?
- What/how does all of the above make you feel?

**Whenever you're ready, please move on and ask your guide to direct you to the painting *Faust in his Study*.**




SCAN HERE
For *Poor Things* illustrations by artist Ash Loydon


Faust in his Study
The Cigarette Cards

# 5.08 MAP

## Faust in his Study

Alasdair's *Faust in his Study* (c. 1958) is a lithograph version of Rembrandt's original work of the same name (c. 1652) that shows an elderly scholar transfixed by an orb of light in which is contained a secret code.

## The Cigarette Cards

A complete set of Wills' Cigarette Picture-Cards (42mm by 82mm collectible novelties), an illustrative example of the sets Alasdair owned. Purchased on behalf of AGA by David Lothian.


28
FAUST IN
HIS STUDY

Welcome to room number two of the Archive! By now, you should find yourself in the annex recreating Alasdair's voluminous personal library, my favourite area of AGA and one that I have a deep personal connection to (we'll get to that later). In front of you is the visually-stunning *Faust in his Study* (c.1958), depicting the famous magician hard at work in the endless (and ultimately fatal) pursuit of worldly knowledge. This is **the fourth stop on our journey**. Before we begin, if you're willing, I'd like to play a little game.

**Ready? Simple: see if you can find Faust.**

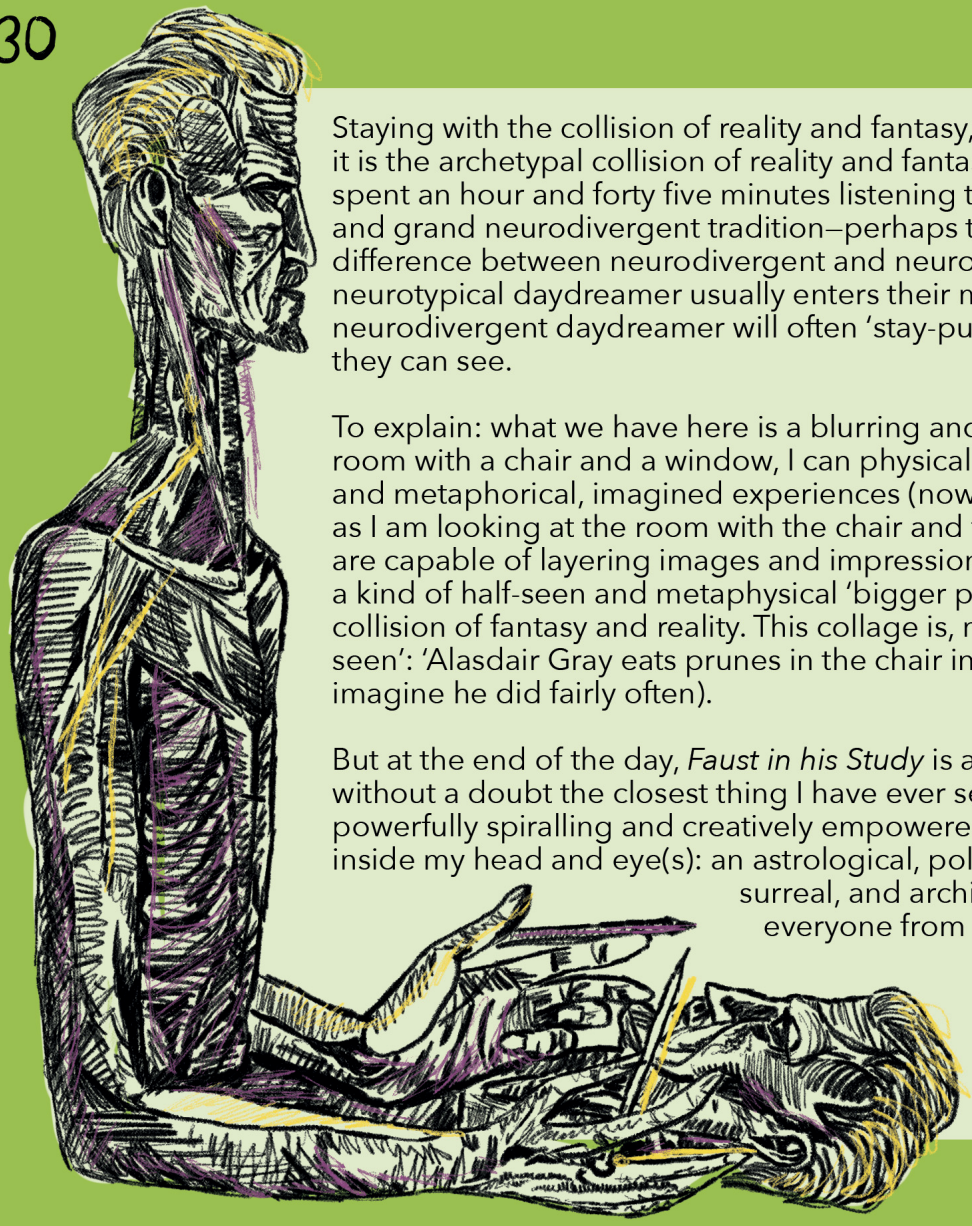
**Are you done? Good! How many tries did it take?**

**No, be honest now—how many?**

In all seriousness, I think we can agree that the task I gave you is not as simple as you'd imagine; Gray's wild and wholly original composition lends itself more to emotive power than ease of viewing.

*Faust in his Study* is an excellent example of one of the unifying themes and devices in Gray's work, the collision of reality and fantasy. Often, his prose narratives will depend on this collision for their meaning and power (such as the collision of the two major narratives on Bella's life in *Poor Things*, one fantastical and one real). Alasdair's visual art is just the same, frequently combining biblical, historical, and fictional people, landscapes, architecture, and leitmotifs with real locations and situations, usually based in Glasgow. The result is a unique sense of vision and majesty and an intimate, vivid reflection of Gray's subjectivity, hinting at how he saw the world.

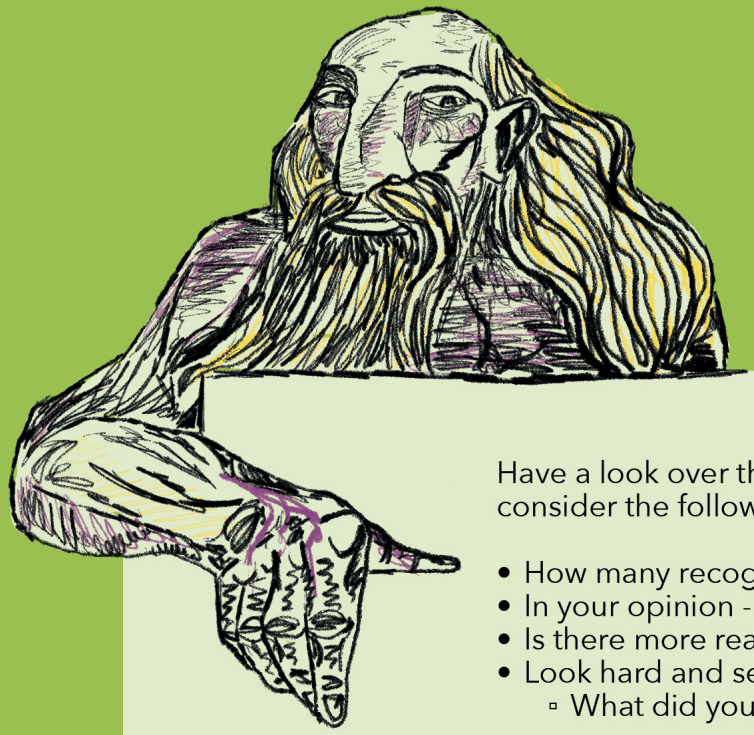
We'll explore some prompts on examining the painting later, but for now, have a quick look at the way Gray uses the circular composition to layer and play with the literal and metaphorical figures, buildings, ideas, and notions. There is a slightly disorientating sense that we are in the presence of both the real and unreal... but that the boundaries (literal/physical, psychological/impressionistic) are very much blurred.



Staying with the collision of reality and fantasy, I want to talk briefly about daydreaming. Truly, it is the archetypal collision of reality and fantasy common to almost everyone who has ever spent an hour and forty five minutes listening to a less than stimulating lecture. It is also a great and grand neurodivergent tradition—perhaps the greatest and grandest. The fundamental difference between neurodivergent and neurotypical daydreaming is that, where the neurotypical daydreamer usually enters their mind's eye and forgets where they are, the neurodivergent daydreamer will often 'stay-put' and simply layer their daydreams over what they can see.

To explain: what we have here is a blurring and blending of literal, visual experiences (I am in a room with a chair and a window, I can physically see the window and the chair in front of me) and metaphorical, imagined experiences (now I'm thinking about Alasdair Gray eating prunes as I am looking at the room with the chair and the window). In a neurodivergent daydream, we are capable of layering images and impressions from the physical eye and the mind's eye into a kind of half-seen and metaphysical 'bigger picture' or experiential collage. In other words, a collision of fantasy and reality. This collage is, now, both 'there' and 'not there', 'seen' and 'not seen': 'Alasdair Gray eats prunes in the chair in the room with the window' (something I imagine he did fairly often).

But at the end of the day, *Faust in his Study* is a lot more fun than any prune-related antics. It is, without a doubt the closest thing I have ever seen to an actual concrete document of what a powerfully spiralling and creatively empowered neurodivergent daydream actually looks like inside my head and eye(s): an astrological, political and comic whirlpool of gothic, romantic, surreal, and architectural theatre played out by a cast including everyone from a self portrait of Gray composing an anatomical mirror image of himself, to Greek gods, Glaswegian buildings, and an elephant creature(?) so eloquently bizarre that it would have Hieronymus Bosch nodding in mildly-disturbed approval.



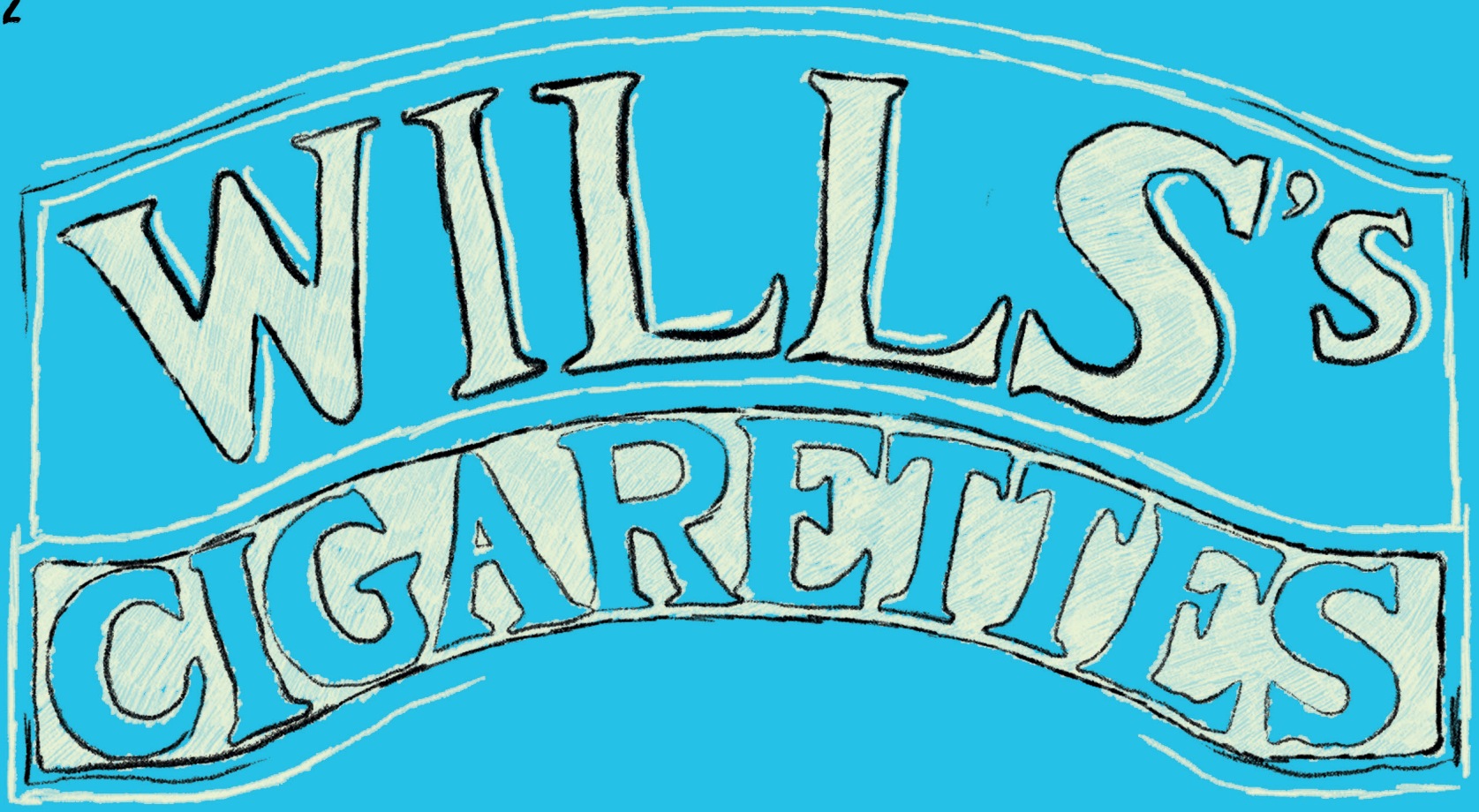
Have a look over the painting with your neurodivergent goggles on and consider the following:

- How many recogniseable people/creatures/buildings can you identify?
- In your opinion - where does the composition 'begin' and 'end'?
- Is there more reality than fantasy?
- Look hard and see if you can conjure up any daydreams.
    - What did you experience?

Learn more about *Faust in his Study* by reading Polina Szwedowa's report on the piece, written during her placement at the Alasdair Gray Archive as part of her Masters in Art History at The University of Edinburgh in 2024.

Scan the QR code to read:

**Whenever you're ready, please move on and ask your guide to see the Cigarette Cards.**




# THE CIGARETTE CARDS

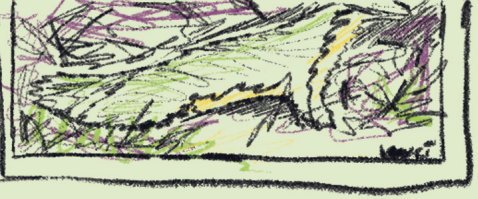
# "WILD WOODBINE"

**Stop five** should find you standing in front of a commemorative wooden frame containing a complete set of 'Wills's Cigarette Picture-Cards': 42mm by 82mm collectible novelties given away with 10-packs of Woodbine cigarettes. If you are keen to explore more then ask to see the 'Cigarette Cards' archival box. I am proud to say that I helped purchase both of these for the Archive in January 2025 in order to extend the collection to include formative objects which were dear to Alasdair. Of course, these aren't the actual cards collected by Alasdair, only illustrative examples of two complete sets that he owned.

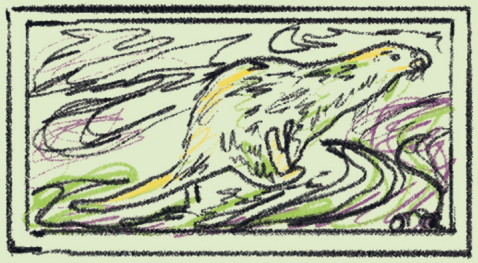
To begin at the beginning: Gray's father smoked a pipe, not woodbines, so it's rather amusing to consider the agreement through which cigarettes were bought with the express purpose of collecting these cards for the young Gray. For Alasdair, the cards provided both a "similar but more complex pleasure" as the joys of the *Harmsworth*, and acted as "windows into places where weather was always a bright afternoon and everything was in best condition" (Gray: 2019, 42-43). Each series catalogued a different aspect of life, covering everything from animals to wildflowers to railway equipment; rendering their subjects in jolly little colour portraits on one side and contextualising the background(s) in a short paragraph on the reverse. Gray references collecting nine sets with the help of his father, and was lucky enough to mount some of them into "slim little pale grey albums" to be perused at his leisure.

Funnily enough, he also acknowledges a kind of longevity in the card sets, quipping that both encyclopaedias and cigarette cards are "still a source of information and imagery" (Ibid) for him, even in old age. When something is in, as Gray puts it, 'the best condition' it becomes easier to understand. We might say that you can learn more from a picture of a factory fresh car than a rusting, engineless example.













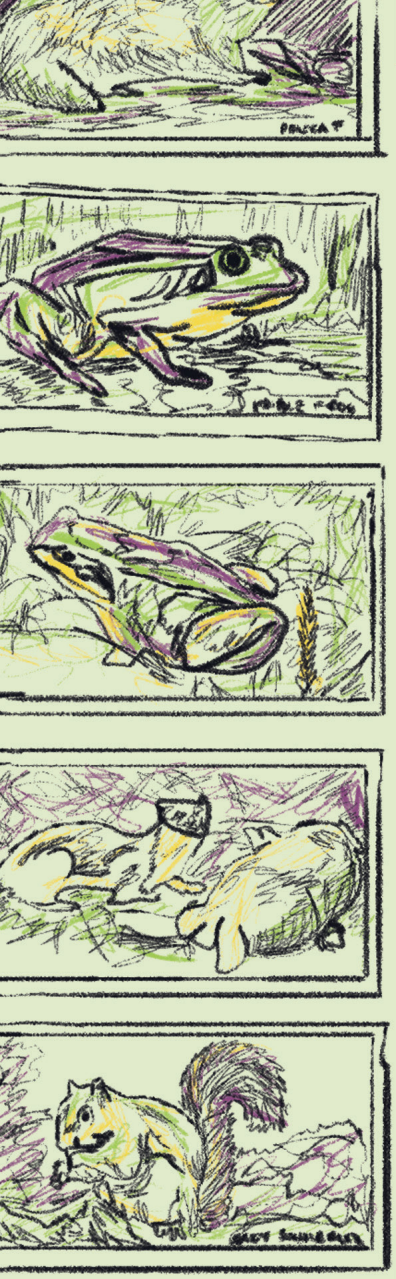
Furthermore, there is something oddly democratic and socialist about learning the wide world's complexities from an object intended to be disposable.

Very Gray.

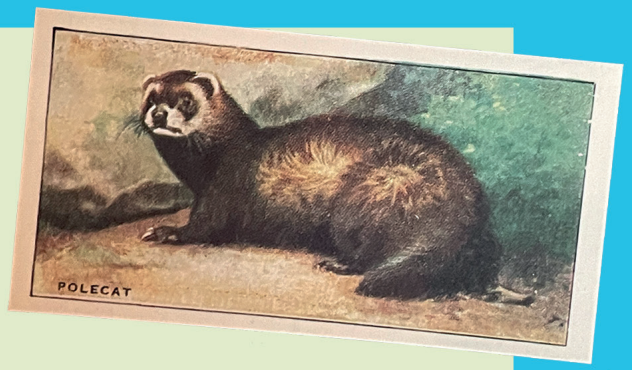
By collecting the cards, Gray was able to reduce abstract and distant concepts (some crucial to understanding the world, others representing more specialised corners of worldly knowledge) to a series of simple, singular, and attractively detailed portraits. Also, the aspect of collecting, collating, and mapping these cards added an addictive edge to his self-education and presented a physical end product to pore over; in search of the pleasure derived from the crisp little images and the potential for travelling imaginatively (without moving) beyond Riddrie.

Looking at these cards, I can easily see what Gray meant. They truly are a collection of 'bright afternoons'—portals leading directly to the rosy pre-war glamour of 1920s and 1930s Britain in which the pastoral pride of the naturalist exists side by side with the clanging, droning might of industry and military. Stuffy fighter planes keep company with adorable bluebells, and puckish pine martens watch middle class cyclists purr along on status symbol bikes. Physically, their upright shape already invites comparison with windows, but for Gray, that's exactly what the cards would have been: portals into new ways of understanding the world by travelling beyond the confines of his home.





For me, the linkage with neurodivergence lies here within both the treatment of images, and the impulse to collect. As with the *Harmsworth*, the magnetic pull of physicalised knowledge motivates a deeper understanding of worldly concepts. And in the case of the cigarette cards, with their crisp imagery and mini biographies, every individual concept, item, and facet of the series' wider subject is depicted as equally important and actively constituting a bigger whole (Socialism rears its head once again!).







And now, for the last time, using and adopting the mindset and ideas we've covered so far, have a think about:

- The subject of the card series: can we still learn from them today?
- How are the subjects of each card staged and rendered?
- Do they make you feel any physical sensations?
- Can you use the cards as portals - where are they taking you?

**Whenever you're ready, please turn around and face the workbench opposite *Faust in his Study*.**

# JOURNEY'S END

So, why are we looking at this workbench, eh? Well, funnily enough: it's my desk! Or, rather, was my desk. I'm a great believer in a good old fashioned 'circular ending', and the proximity of the table at which most of this guide was designed and constructed to the Faust painting was an utterly irresistible chance to bring the whole project full circle. **Welcome to the sixth and final stop on our journey.**

Despite the reliance of this guide upon my own subjectivity and worldview, my major hope is that at least some of what has been said and detailed here resonates with you, whether you're neurodivergent or neurotypical. I do hope you've enjoyed the tour. If you've learned more about Gray, that's excellent. If you've learned more about yourself, that's amazing. And if you've learned more about how we neurodivergent folk see the world, that's my job done.

Before you go, I'd like to encourage you to revisit any of our previous stops which really intrigued you (I often find there's nothing quite as invigorating as a second look), to ask your guide as many questions as you can possibly think of, and to take a quick, silent moment to reflect on what we've seen and explored. How is it all sitting with you? Has your view on Gray as an author and creative changed? Are you inspired? Overwhelmed? Happy? Regardless, we've reached the end of the journey and it's now time for me to bow out and leave you to your thoughts. Remember to exit through the giftshop and support the vital work of the archive.

Thanks for joining me,

David

Written and researched by David Lothian, 2025
Illustrated and designed by Abby Carter
Introduced by Sorcha Dallas
Edited by Evie Glen

Photographs by Alan Dimmick (page 10, 28)
Excerpts of AGA.3.4.(293-300) Wills' Cigarette Picture-Cards (p.35-37)

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# GOODBYE

**Join postgraduate researcher David Lothian for a walk through The Alasdair Gray Archive.**

**This guide offers both a tour of the AGA collection and a 'neurodivergent reading' of it. As you move through AGA, you'll encounter some of Alasdair Gray's best-known art and writing alongsdide more personal items, all seen through a fresh and alternative lens.**

Research and text: David Lothian, 2025
Illustration and design: Abby Carter, 2026
Introduction: Sorcha Dallas, 2026

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