

WARNING

This essay begins with a "spoiler" and carries on through many more after that. If you have not read the titles in the box here, and like to read a text like you live your life, in blissful ignorance of the next plot-point, then put this down and repair with all due alacrity, to your nearest library/comic shop/book shop/amazon browser tab.

Come back when you're done.

Graphic Novels by Grant Morrison:

Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery (with Frank Quitely)

The Invisibles (with various artists)

The Filth (Chris Weston and Gary Erskine)

All Star Superman, (with Frank Quitely and Jamie Grant)

Graphically Novels by Alasdair Gray:

Lanark

1982 Janine

Poor Things

A History Maker

Old Men in Love

And also...

At Swim Two Birds, by Flann O'Brien

Watchmen, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

IF FULL STOP

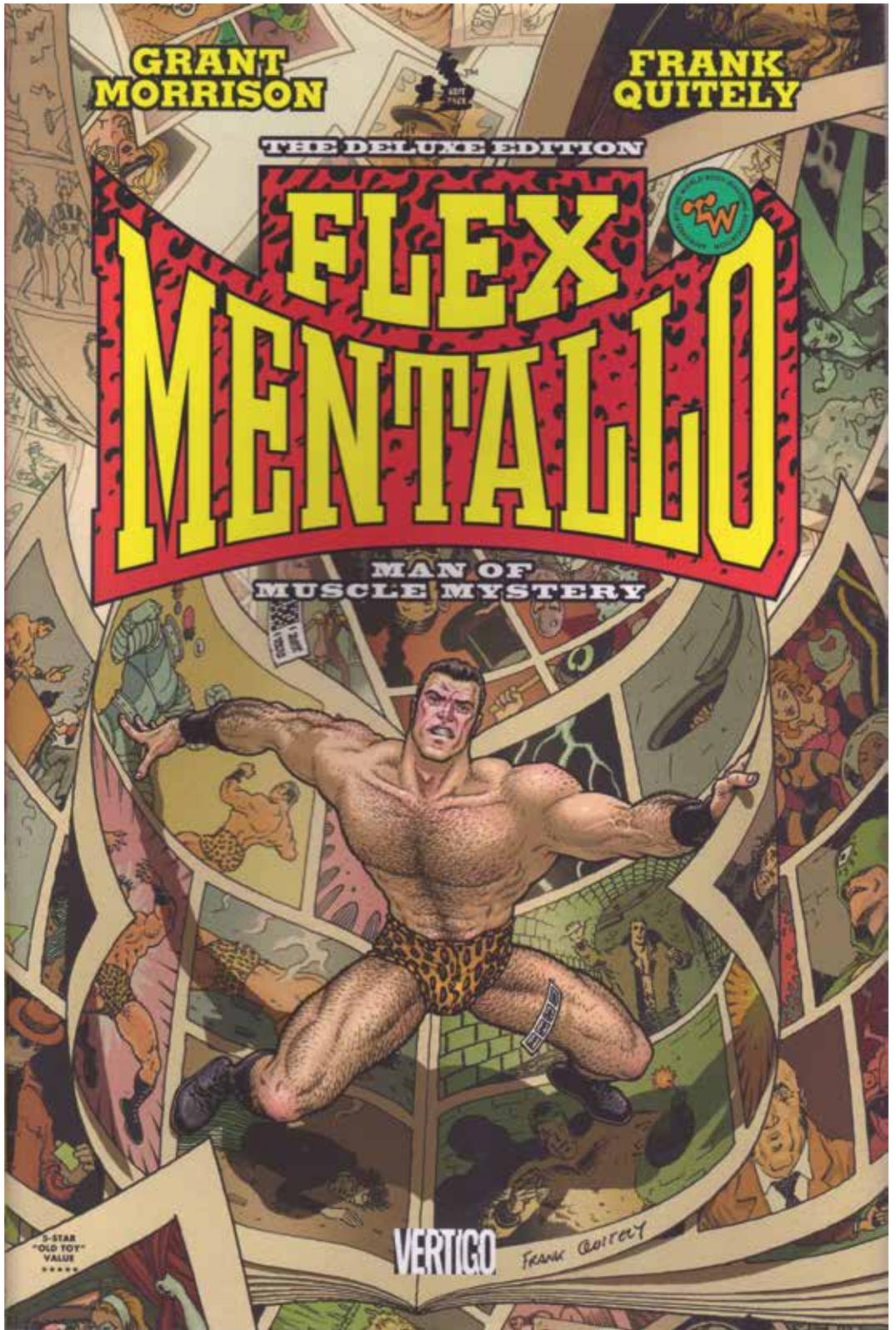
Grant Morrison Alasdair Gray & the Politics of ScottishMagickalRealism.

At the end of Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *Flex Mentallo: Man of Muscle Mystery*, the titular character (a superhero so muscularly developed just flexing his lats and 'ceps and maximi alters reality), confronts Wally Sage, the drug addled, suicidal, scared eternal teenager who dreamed him up. Backed into a corner, his pitch towards self-destruction halted, Wally sneers;

WALLY: Pathetic fucking power fantasies for lonely wankers who've had so much sand kicked into their faces they look like the opening credits of "Lawrence of Arabia!" (At Flex, as he advances on him, arms open) Look at you! A half-naked muscleman in trunks. What's THAT supposed to signify? What are you? Do you KNOW what you are?

FLEX: Sure. I'm a SUPERHERO. Being clever's a fine thing, but sometimes a boy just needs to get out of the house and meet some girls.

The climax to *Flex Mentallo* is the perfect primer for those wishing to engage with the work of Grant Morrison. Its signature use of fractal realities, militant levels of reflexivity, and chaos magick would suffuse *The Invisibles*, *The Filth* and *All Star Superman* and countless of his other interventions into the comics medium. It was his first major collaboration with fellow Scot Frank Quitely, whose beautifully clear lines channel classic 19th century book illustration via Dudley D. Watkins, the perfect compliment to its fractious, self-referential and multi-layered narrative (as Morrison noted in his *Supergods*, "The idea of Watkins-style American superheroes appealed to be me greatly.'). Part hero's journey, part apocalypse, part reflexive analysis, the four issues of *Flex Mentallo* are engineered to tap into the comic collector's deepest desire to save their prizes from the moral panics, bedroom clearances and disposable culture that made "Golden" and "Silver" age comics sovaluable, and manufactured the insane comic-collecting bubble of the nineties. Indeed, retaining your four issues and turning those pages again, and again, is the only way to comprehend what you have just read.



fictional construct, a place for the heroes to hide until the Absolute could be overcome. Once we understand that the Absolute is in fact a manifestation of our own negative, self-destructive forces – of Wally's teenage self - it is defeated. Wally re-evaluates his life, contacts his estranged lover and consequently, the superheroes – which for Morrison are primarily ideas of our potential to be better, wiser, stronger – come back.

The story seems simple enough, but like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, or Hogg's *Confessions of Justified Sinner*, a relatively straight narrative line is kinked and twisted by multiple perspectives, disputed documentation and unreliable narration. We readers – us Wallies – do what we can to fill in the gaps ourselves, but a Morrison plot is a UFO (Undulating Fictional Objection) and as his occult adventure story *The Invisibles* reveals, these are really four-dimensional beings invading our flatland. We can only see parts, and extrapolate from there.

So what can the flatlanders grasp? We begin with fried eggs and with Flex, a superhero who takes us back to the very origins of the archetype, even down to the leopard skin pants its inventors in the Golden Age of superhero comics borrowed from Circus strongmen. Flex lives in the 'real world', but not the same 'real world' of Wally, the washed up, suicidal rock star mentioned above, but the 'real world' of the Dark Age of superhero comics heralded by Alan Moore's celebrated *Watchmen* or Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* (graphic novels routinely praised by literary critics for the ways in which said critics feel they are not like comics at all).

Those who read Morrison's seminal run on *Doom Patrol* know Flex to be an interloper across comic book continuities, the grown up version of the nerdy loser from Charles Atlas' famous adverts for his fitness programme, (advertised through comic strips). Whereas his past self famously overpowered the beach bully, Flex is a remarkably non-violent hero – we do not see him punch anybody (being able to depict this in an impressive, affecting manner is a must for the superhero draughtsman, though none ever matched the theatrical muscularity of Jack Kirby). Rather, the action he takes is to be consistently and doggedly *himself* – he flexes, because his is an old fashioned "Indian" name.

He seems too good to be true, but we find his ludicrously muscled, leopard skin bulk relaxing in a seedy airport café. Quietly paints it in greasy browns and scuffed greys to be so grimy it must be real – the sort of plausible, shop-soiled fictional world that Flann O'Brien invented to couch the absurdities of *At Swim Two Birds*. Flex is Morrison's own Pooka McPhellimy, the former is unfailingly, fabulously (pun intended) courteous and correct, Flex almost comically (see previous) positive, hearty, "hail-well-met", excited by the simple pleasures of fried eggs. His happy moment is interrupted by a scream. The panel moves to a scene of panic and a cartoon bomb, dropped on the forecourt. We see it in close up, its function helpfully written across it in bright red letters, its contours breaking out of the comic panel, hinting its destructive power is greater than we can imagine.

The crowd flees but Flex leaves his eggs to run towards the danger, as is his calling, but the bomb is a fake. It transpires from a later (obligatory) conference with a policeman that a number of these devices have *not* been blowing up a number of public places and government installations. The only hint is a 'Fact-Card', the signature of The Fact who has gained Flex's attention by counting coup on the establishment.

Flex realises that these devices are not bombs at all, but a key that will allow him to traverse the various diegetic spaces whose collision drives the narrative – the 'real' world of Flex, the adult world of Wally, the lair/prison his teenage self is trapped in, the textual reality of his childhood comics, the reality created by his memories and the dying superhero continuity of the Legion of Legions. The key here is that Wally's self-annihilation will take all of these worlds with him; he is thus villain and victim of the piece, the one who must be stopped and empowered. What saves him is his recollection of childhood comics, and his honest, unaffected love for them. He made Flex up because he needed an idea like him to grow, and to avert disaster when he had all but forgotten;

WALLY: When you're a kid you just do it. You don't even think about it. It's pure. It's totally pure.

Flex Mentallo is at heart, a comic that speaks to, and is about other comics. Each of the four issues corresponds to four ages of comic book superheroes – Golden, Silver, Dark and the Future. Chronologically, the story places us in the 'Dark' age of cynical, fucked up superheroes ushered in (unintentionally) by the socially conscious comics pioneered by the likes of Neal Adams in the 1970s and the hero-killing graphic novels of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. Morrison's intention is to move us beyond into the 'first ultra-post-futurist comic'. To do this we must recognise ourselves in Wally, a working class boy who has taken the swagger-walk of the Gallaghers and Daltreys into the music business and a resultant dead end. His creativity is numbed into mere processes, he is exhausted by the shallowness of his life and his inability to (like Flex) fit words to appropriate action;

GIRLFRIEND: You *talk* about love, you *write* about love, you *sing* about love. **ANYTHING TO AVOID ACTUALLY FEELING IT!**

Having achieved the perfect parting shot, the girlfriend departs. Wally's response is to note that he might be able to get a song out of it. 'No matter how shitty things are, you can always get a song out of it.' This incident however, sparks something – a question – that will take up a large chunk of Flex Mentallo. What fucked him up?

As the drunk-man-looking-at-the-thistle reverie continues, Wally assesses his life through the quality of his fantasies, the stories he has used to create himself. It is an admission from Morrison, that the ideas that comics inject are not always good. The first time Wally reads the word 'oblivion', his caption box tells us, is in an "adult" comic. This is superimposed over Wally's teenage hands as they draw two busty women of impossible proportions, framing an adolescence of titillation and terror;



his talent for drawing allows him to make his own tools for gratification. He becomes what every unsympathetic observer of comics fans imagines them to be, part of the darker, seedier, sadder end of comics culture, the siren call that lures so many of the awkward outsiders who tend to love it, into crippling inertia, and fear of the authentic;

But Morrison's problem is not with fantasy per se, but the intentions to which it is put, and our ability to identify what is actually authentic. Just as Orwell was of the vaunted 'realism' of crime novels such as *No Flowers for Miss Blandish*, Morrison is sceptical of equating 'realism' with nihilism, the victory of the strong over the weak and out identification with these 'morally complex' characters.

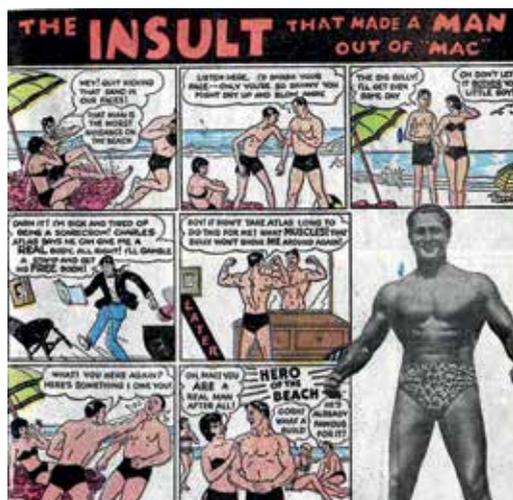
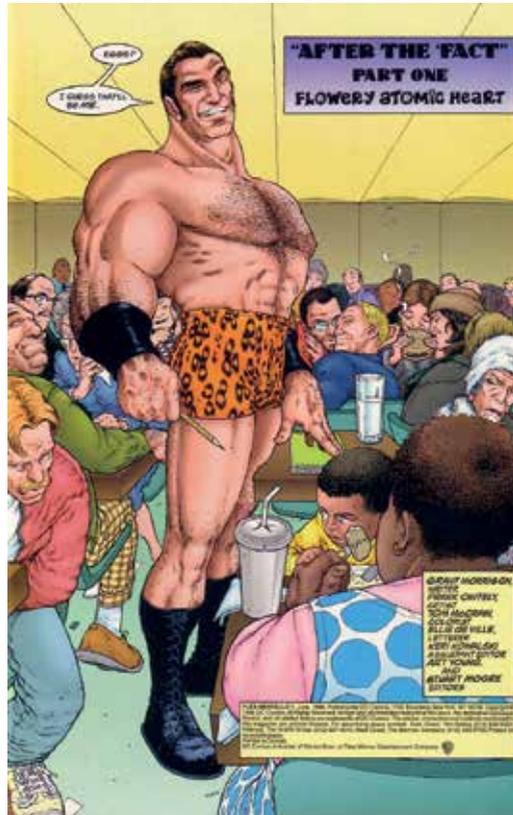


WALLY: Now the superheroes are as fucked-up as the fucking rejects who write about them and draw them and read about them. All the heroes are in therapy and there's no one left to care about us.

To understand how this happened, we have to look beyond Quitely's panels to wider trends in American mainstream comic books, and the Dark turn of the 80s and 90s. Specifically, we need to understand that Alan Moore famously attempted to kill the superhero by hatching out the poisons in the mud that created them, the Freudian subtexts, cognitive dissonance, revenge fantasies and kinkiness that had went largely unexamined until *Watchmen* appeared. Flex Mentallo is an answer to *Watchmen's* apparently devastating critique on a thematic, narrative and satirical level.

Take for example, the way in which Morrison and Quitely replace the hateful inner monologue of costumed psychopath Rorschach with a blend of the honest, good-hearted Flex and Wally. We instead, lend an ear to a lost boy and a man we would rather be. Then there is the reveal that the "villain" who perpetrates a massive, Machiavellian act of terrorism is actually the superhero Ozymandias, acting out of the highest of motives. In *Flex Mentallo*, it is revealed that Wally is The Absolute plotting to destroy the world because he has forgotten that he possesses, and cherishes these higher motives. Whereas in Moore's universe the Machiavellian hoax counterfeits a new global consciousness through perpetrating mass-murder at the hands of a specially manufactured alien threat, in Morrison's the change is hard-wired into the substance of the universe itself, unlocked by the magic word SHAMAN, hidden in a newspaper crossword¹.

It would be remiss in such a collaborative endeavour, to ignore the other partners in this exchange. *Watchmen's* Dave Gibbons adopted several restrictions, such as a repeating nine panel grid on each page and a limited colour palette. This created a feel of a coherent universe where costumed heroes existed. Like Gibbons, Quitely came to the superhero genre as something of an outsider, and follows few of the established conventions. He imposes a five to six panel a page grid and unifies his colours over two page spreads. His most distinctive technique is to overlay narrative panels over a page-sized image that bleeds to the edges. These perform the simple function of establishing where we are (it typically changes over no more than two pages) and less simply, juxtaposition of micro and macroscosms and different levels of reality. Quitely's layouts anticipate how narrative realities will continue to bleed into each other over the course of the storyline.



But there is another writer whose work bears close comparison with Morrison's. *Flex Mentallo's* climax comes as an invigorating shock to the system that reaches all parts, including those that manage kneejerk comparative literature functions. Alasdair Gray's second novel *1982 Janine*, should be read by everyone who reads *Flex Mentallo*, (and vice versa).

As with *Flex Mentallo* and *At Swim Two Birds*, a realist fiction cups several other more fantastical fictions, created by characters within the first fictional universe. As with *Flex*, *1982 Janine* is structured within a single night of pained, addled reverie. Jock McLeish is heading for 50, alcoholic and divorced. He does not know where he is (his hotel room could be in Greenock, but also Selkirk, or Peebles). Aided by sips of whisky he sets about main constructing an intricate pornographic fantasy in which several imaginary women are subjected to sadomasochistic practices. These escapes are interrupted by remembrances of ex-wives, past lovers, dead friends and his unacknowledged father. The invasion of the past gets altogether too much and he takes some pills. This suicide attempt initiates a typographic explosion, culminating in vomiting ("BOAK BOAK BOAK"). God appears, and slowly, surely, Jock's pornographic fantasies give way to more honest reflection, and as the morning call comes, a reawakening of Jock's imagination and a commitment to make the world better.

1982 Janine was published in 1984, *Flex Mentallo* in 1996. I am not suggesting that Morrison copied Gray and am not even sure if he reads his work, but that we have an example of convergent evolution within the Scottish literary ecosystem. Centred around lost souls and their re-gathering of themselves through a refocusing of their imaginations, and what they might do with them, the narrative parallels are hopefully obvious. Of course one is regarded (through virtue of a plain statement of the facts) as a Scottish novel, while the other is generally placed in a wider, transatlantic context. There are decent grounds for revising that point of view, which we will come to later.

It should be noted though, that while both Morrison and Gray have a penchant for emblematic characters, including (perhaps even especially) those who inhabit their more realist treatments – Archibald McCandless, Duncan Thaw and John Tunnock – are all limited men who represent something of Scotland (and of course, the literary novel) in respectively, the nineteenth century, the postwar era and post-devolution. As Will Self notes in his introduction to the 2003 Canongate edition, Jock McLeish represents its traumatic 1980s, an entire nation diminished into a series of pathetic alter egos, as articulated by McLeish:

The truth is that we are a nation of arselickers, though we disguise it with surfaces, a surface of generous, open-handed manliness, a surface of dour practical integrity, a surface of futile, maudlin defiance like when we break goalposts and windows after football matches on foreign soil...

Whatever the truth of it, this is something of a projection, a whole country condemned after the failings of a single man who declares 'society is to blame' from a falsely external position. The alter ego, the false substance in which we invest so much of ourselves, forms the dark-matter structural integrity of a great deal of Scottish literature. The living character of James Boswell in the *Life of Johnson*, or Hogg's *Justified Sinner* damned by his need to sustain the surface of divinity, or the paper-thin London that barely conceals Edinburgh and entraps Dr Jekyll in the pseudo-plot of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* represent something of its range and durability. As part of this tradition, Wally/Jock have each invested overmuch in the surfaces they mistake for their true selves, and struggle to rediscover their substance, the texture of their lost Scottish childhoods.

A Thatcherite through self-defence as much as belief, Jock once dreamed of engineering a better world, but he is now a dependable shill for a security firm. As with Wally, Jock's psyche undergoes a series of shocks to the system – a disastrous break up with perhaps the only girl who truly loved him, the death of a friend (who is a little too good to seem true), the emptiness of easy celebrity and divorce take their toll. What he retains, is Janine, a thought-form moulded after the actress Jane Russell (who also haunts John Tunnock in Gray's *Old Men in Love* – and one suspects, the author himself). Like *Flex*, Janine possesses bulges potent enough to form an entire universe around her, but when we meet her she is not free, or aware – yet.

A major objection to any serious comparisons between these two novels is that one is constructed from seedy pornographic fantasies, and the other is 1982 Janine... Bad punchlines aside, the theme of comics, pornography and nascent male sexuality is treated so similarly in the work of both writers, it is tempting to draw a more direct, deliberate connection between them.

We know already that Wally's pornographic urges were forged in adult comic strips, whereas, Jock's pornographic imagination (and a very rich one it is too – whatever you think of it) was moulded by Jane Russell in the film 'the Outlaw'. Outside of *1982 Janine/Flex Mentallo* we find further, stronger correlations that touch upon the autobiographies of these authors. In *Old Men in Love* the pubescent John Tunnock makes an explicit connection between comic strips and pornography, buying both illicitly out of sight of his maiden aunts as his sexuality develops between twin poles of sex and violence. Morrison's later work, *The Filth* is probably one of the deepest, most comprehensive explorations of how the pornographic, the dirty, the obscene and the scatological shape our imaginations. We join Greg Feeley (another middle-aged loser) in buying cat litter (for the love of his cat) and a pornographic magazine (to satisfy his urges) in a newsagents. It is a very Jock McLeish sort of situation.

Pitched somewhere between Flex and Wally (a Wally who becomes Flex, a.k.a Special Agent Ned Slade) Feeley is another character who discovers he is just a surface, a 'para-personality' apparently constructed by a surrealist special organisation that uses subconscious sexual desire as both camouflage and martial art. The relationship between comics and porn is not one many advocates of sequential art cherish, but is nevertheless, important to admit. Writing in *Pep!* Magazine, comic critic David Allison notes how *the Filth's* universe references the modus operandi of the cartoonist and the pornographer. Both grossly simplify our world in bold, strident lines in a fashion that resembles it just enough to mean something to us. And they were both, at least traditionally, distributed through newsprint.

But back to Jock, and his Janine. She is of course subjected to humiliations and tribulations amenable to the lonely wanker. As he sip-sips himself to death, he comforts himself with the familiar sexual fantasies he is able to conjure and hold within his own mind. Intent on suicide, Jock spends the first half of the novel building an intricate 'continuity' and re-placing Janine in a number of pornographic situations, interrupted by recollections of a life wasted, and a self thoroughly, honestly hared;

Thinking is a pain because it joins everything together until my mother father Mad Hislop Jane Russell mushroomcloud miniskirt tight neans Janine dead friend Helen Superb Sontage editor sad lesbian police Big Momma and the whore under the bridge surround me all proving that I am a bad man, I am what is wrong with the world, I am a tyrant, I am a weakling, I never gave what they wanted, I grabbed all I could get.

As above, so below, and here in microcosm, we have a statement of all Jock's problems. His suicidal plunge into a whisky bottle and pills triggers, as in Wally's case, a redux of the imagination, a consideration of where it all came from. What follows is explosive, convulsive boaking, (Wally also wishes, at one point, he could just puke all his darkness up and out) expressed through some of the most avant-garde typography ever attempted in a novel.



Jock survives and arguably finds himself in even worse trouble; he must now try to comprehend himself honestly, without self-deception, or the excuses that self-loathing permits. But his comforting, arousing fantasies continue to tempt him away from these explorations. And then what Gray terms a 'non-transcendent God' interjects;

I INSIST THAT YOU HEAR ME, DID WE RIDE THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH JUST TO LET YOU TICKLE YOURSELF INTO ANOTHER WANK?

Jock makes more excuses;

Dear God, you know I need these absurd elaborations to fool myself into believing I can once again clasp the body of a woman. DID WE BREAK OUT OF THE DUNGEON OF DESPAIR JUST TO LET YOU TICKLE YOURSELF INTO ANOTHER WANK?

His excuse is the selfsame plea made by the conservative businessmen and magnates to justify inertia and cold-blooded indifference.

I cannot change things overnight, God. WRONG. WRONG. WRONG.

The non-transcendent God – that is, a being who belongs in, and presides over Jock's own private, self-contained universe, is emphatic and interjects before the excuse can go any further. It is not an external wisdom that saves Jock's life, but one native to him. Like Wally, he just needs to put the words out there in order to heal himself.

Nevertheless, Jock remains with Janine until, during his reverie, Janine becomes self-aware, and understands she is a character in a story. It is at this point where his lived reality, and his fantasy worlds reach a point of crisis; they simply cannot go on as they had before. Jock remembers a perfect moment of courage, where he confronted his putative father (the teacher Hislop) but simultaneously defended another boy, Anderson, from a beating. This moment allows both he and his classmates to transcend their limitations and find real fellowship and common cause. After school they follow Jock home;

A lot of them, yes girls too [...] I had not become their leader in any way, they just liked being near me and were glad I existed. They felt safer and stronger because I was one of them. They liked being near me because they were glad I existed. I was thirteen or twelve, maybe. I would like to make other people glad I exist before I die.

And while Jock's ultimate destiny may not necessarily be to herald an age of superheroes, he still joins with Wally in seeking to reorient his imaginative universe towards better, kinder, wiser and stronger selfhood;

Dry this tearwet face on the corner of flannel sheet. Thus I feel different. A new man? Not exactly the same man anyway. What is this queer slight bright fluttering sensation as if a thing weighted down for a long time was released and starting, a little, to stir?

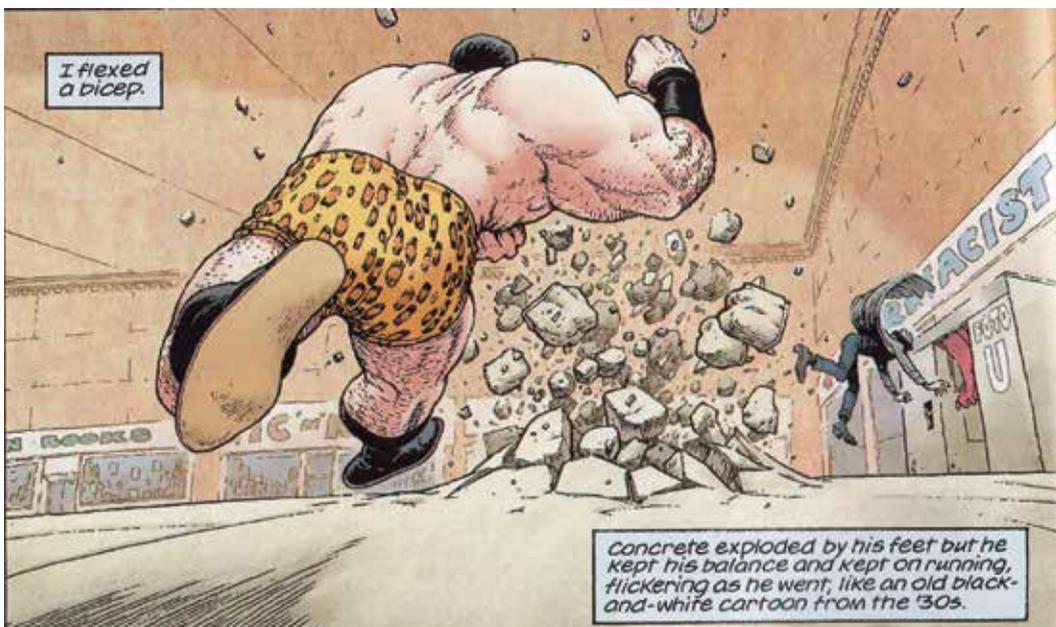
This moment of hope and self-redemption is terrifying, yet fragile – so fragile, Jock is almost scared to name it. His magic word goes unsaid – it is enough to know it exists.

The pacific nature of Gray's work might discourage us from pursuing his connections to Morrison too far. As well as hyper-reality, hyper violence saturates the pages of these comics, but we should no more mistake this for 'fan service' than we should 1982 Janine for serviceable pornography. As mentioned before, Flex is a fundamentally non-violent superhero.

He is attacked and confronted (most especially in the hellish nightclub of modern superheroes) but still achieves his goals by persuasion, through leading by example. Even as he conforms to the expectations of the traditional superhero, he rather stealthily moves away from it.

Other Morrisonian "Heroes" such as King Mob of *the Invisibles*, or Superman, are increasingly drawn away from violent acts of courage and unilateral interventions, towards deeper consideration of their effect on society. Like the Nietzschean wit Rupert Cadell in Hitchcock's *Rope*, they turn aside from the licence of the ubermensch and let society in. In *All Star Superman*, Superman's parting gift to the world before he goes to wrestle the sun is to offer his brain, heart and blood to science and medicine, to allow the world to progress without him and indeed, to ultimately replace him. In so doing, Morrison takes his character back to what he argues were the old fashioned utopian socialist roots of 1930s Superman, social reformer as well as avenger. This type of action embodies a particular existential choice, shown to us here by Flex;

He doesn't need to punch The Fact, just warp common sense reality so the ground buckles the earth under him so he falls over. Flex is literally a human and humane form that changes the world around him. We can all be glad he existed.



I would contend that Gray has spent rather a large portion of his life trying to draw the same, in line and lines of text. He often tries to chivvy his characters into becoming something like Flex, heroes who can teach, as well as sate desires. Janine, we think, and hope, may escape the limitations imposed by her wicked demiurge as she kicks off the various props that he generally, prefers to manhandle from her;

Standing easily astride she strips off her shirt and drops it, strips off her skirt and drops it, kicks off her shoes and stands naked but for her net stockings. I need the stockings. A wholly naked woman is too dazzling so she stands nakled but for fishnet stockings, hands on hops and feeling an excited melting warmth between her thighs. She is ready for anything.

It is ambivalent, but what gives us hope of Janine's ultimate rescue is the overall trajectory of Jock's thinking and Janine's very Flex-like reality hop from the pages of this novel to Something Leather. Even more ambivalent is the predicament of Wat Dryhope, the non-hero of a History Maker is a victim of his father Craig-Jardine's game-playing, and finds the world reshaping around him in spite of what his superego may want. The most heroic contribution he can make is to disappear.

My own extensive [Google] re[search] has confirmed that only one other observer has noticed the Morrison-Gray connection. In 2011 the Dublin-based freelance writer Emmet O'Cuana wrote a fine (much more succinct) blog noting the similarity between Morrison's appearance in his own work (Animal Man) and Gray's similar modus operandi (Lanark). O'Cuana is absolutely correct in drawing this inference, but the links between Gray and Morrison are deeper, and much more textured than even this. For one thing, both are sons of parents who tried to spirit them away from a doomed planet.

VOICE ON TV: I knew it was over for mankind when I first heard those weird rumblings in the earth's core. They're getting louder every day.

VOICE ON TV: This World is doomed. I'm a Dad and I'm afraid for my little **baby** here. Who wouldn't be.

(We see the speaker is a bearded American farmer, cradling a baby and pointing to a home-made rocket in his barn)

FARMER: That's why I built me this **rocketship**. Gonna send my boy into **space**, give him a chance on some other planet out there. They call me crazy now, but soon it...

Sound Effect: KLIK!

In the west coast of Scotland, a boy is born to educated socialists of working class origins. They give him a good, solid, unmistakably Scottish name and conscientiously build a happy, comfortable home around him. Unfortunately, the world around him is unstable. It is dominated by fear of the bomb. As socialists, realists and materialists, the boys parents are bound to school their son in such material realities. The pamphlets and magazines, the eschatological headlines and vivid illustrations of atomic blitzes speak of one inescapable reality; a world timed for self-destruction.

The Bomb, always the Bomb, a frim and looming, raincoated lodger, liable to go off at any minute, killing everybody and everything. His bastard minstrels were gloomy existentialist folkies whining horn-rimmed dirges about the "Hard Rain: and the "All on That Day" while I trembled in the corner, awaiting bony-fingered judgment and the extinction of all terrestrial life.

This boy was Grant Morrison, who found in super-heroes a bigger, better idea to drown out the terrible idea that was the bomb. It was also in a sense the Scottish novelist Alasdair Gray, for whom potential annihilation came courtesy of Hitler and was, through the first World War, a living memory to his father's generation. Morrison describes the terror inspired by trips to political bookshops in the sixties and seventies with his father through his proxy in Flex Mentallo;

WALLY: Those terrible ban-the-bombzines; when you're a kid they look just like comics at first but they're NOT. It's all screaming Hiroshima faces, burning cities. I used to imagine God was a SKELETON and the thunder was the sound of his big, black iron train. War, Apocalypse...

It is now that we must mention the demonstrable *Scottishness* of Wally. The industrial town his teenage self walks through is clearly a west coast township, and convinces because it is drawn by Quitely, who knows what these places look like and whose line is as sympathetic to their contours as Watkins' was to Dundee. But the clearest – yet most subtle – reference to where Wally has come from is in this panel here;



The colours of the front room, the bodies, the banner, the shapes of the faces – anyone who has been a child on Hogmanay knows it, instinctively, doesn't even need the bottle of Irn Bru in the foreground or the Tennents can with a "Lager Lovely" to tell them where they are. Quite famously, draws largely from memory, rather than models or reference photographs, which is probably why the Bru bottle is so chunky and proportionate to a child's eye view. This is the nucleus of everything we are reading. A lot of things begin from modest Scottish front rooms.

Wally is Morrison garbed in what he calls his 'fiction suit', which he has donned to engage directly with the ink-based universes of the comic book continuities he has either created or, in the case of *All Star Superman*, inherited. Readers of *Lanark* will of course, recognise immediately the shared authorial technique in the at times rueful, manifestation of Gray as demiurge in his own work, sometimes as a passive, near unseen presence in *Poor Things* and *Old Men in Love*, and of course more actively, as the 'king' of Provan who Lanark encounters (and finds most unsatisfying).

This essay cannot be an exhaustive treatment of all the possible parallels between Morrison and Gray. Like one of their readers, you must content yourself with only a glimpse of the four-dee fragments. I cannot really interrogate how Gray's solid, sculptural lines in prose and image link his graphically novel books to Morrison's graphic novels. Nor do I have the space to get into Will Self's intriguing assertion that all of Gray's works put together, form a sort of hyper-comic strip that stretch across multiple narratives. If I pull you further into a discussion of the subtle differences in how they receive and deal with hero figures (we will be here all day. I am distraught that I won't have time to talk about their ambivalent scepticism of the Enlightenment, how *Poor Things* can be compared to the *Invisibles* or how everything in the works of both writers, is effectively a retelling of the *Numskulls* comic strip from the *Beezer*. All I can do is make promises for the future.

I will leave you then, with just a few more passing thoughts that hopefully confirm Morrison's links to Scottish culture are more solid than many might suppose. The first, that should be a little more obvious by now, is that scholars of Scottish literature should probably be paying more attention to Grant Morrison as a product (but not a prisoner) of his country's literary traditions. Marc Singer, an academic who knows his Morrison well, is nevertheless wrong to suppose that Morrison's reluctance to set stories in Scotland indicates an 'antipathy' to writing about Scotland. Like the superhero universe unlocked in wandering Scot Wally in *Flex Mentallo*, the motherland is hard wired into the underlying chemistry of Morrison's work.

Nor would he be the first writer to seek the space to deal with the place, at a remove. Boswell expressed his more radical feelings about Scotland through the *Account of Corsica*, and often from the safe distance of London. Conan Doyle expressed Caledonian antiszygy through Holmes and Watson. Stevenson and Scott often clothed Scotland in other places and in terms of literary technique, Morrison owes something to these two particular forebears in the way he uses, intervenes in, and warps genre to craft his stories. Like them he brews with the formula of genre to make a new mix, rather than trying to win points and book sales by showing he can stick to it as well as the next man. Besides, some credit is due to Morrison for cleverly engineering a situation where the first and most primal American superhero can be inflected with Dudley D. Watkins. Recasting the character as a contemporary solar god, *All-Star Superman* was not only made by three men living within the SPT Zonecard catchment area, it also contains one of the most interesting 'bleedings' of Scottishness into what should be a very American matter. Returning from temporary imprisonment on 'Bizarro' world, Superman returns to Earth to find two exiled Kryptonians Bar El and Lilo, holding the fort in his absence. Attempting to wrest back his role as Earth's champion, they berate him for doing little to improve conditions on earth and merely 'going native'. They respond in kind;



Even before 'Wee' makes its appearances, any Scottish English speaker can recognise the cadence and rhythm of their language, the headbut is practically cliché, and the name Bar El a joke aimed solely at those familiar with Scottish jails and their colloquial designations (and indeed, both characters end up as wardens in the Phantom Zone, Superman's cosmic jail for the very worse Kryptonians). Superman's fall breaks the moon, and so Bar El and Lilo they rip up the Forth Rail Bridge (among others around the world) to stitch it back together. Like the filmmaker Bill Douglas, and in the manner of countless Scottish writers in standard English, Morrison knows the shock power of a voice from home when he wants to introduce a ruthless hard nose (and forehead of steel) into the proceedings. When you question the rule of realism, it perhaps pays to keep the place that is most real to you far away and subliminal, until you need, like the non-transcendent God, to get a little rough.

Finally, I need to point out to you that Grant Morrison is a chaos magician. And so is Alasdair Gray.

In the case of the former, this is well known; Morrison practices magical workings and has confirmed that Flex Mentallo, The Invisibles and The Filth form a 'hypersigil' trilogy. Reading a hypersigil such as Flex Mentallo is a form of spell-casting that imposes intent upon the universe and changes how that reader sees reality. His intention is that the reader of these books will actually alter reality by consuming them 'a dynamic miniature model of the magician's universe, a hologram, microcosm, or "voodoo doll" which can be manipulated in real time to produce changes in the macrocosmic environment of "real" life.'

As a good-willed chaos magician, Morrison is using his output to make reality better. This is what Alasdair Gray, described accurately by Will Self as an old fashioned utopian socialist who believes society should conform to the visions he puts out in his book, also clearly believes he is doing – is Jock McLeish the only person involved in the serial event known as 'reading 1982 Janine' meant to make the world glad he existed? Probably not. Furthermore, are the images he creates in tandem and tension with his words, not also part of this process, engaged as they are in a process of creating new civic fictions of a better Glasgow/nation/world? Certainly Gray and Morrison share a love for throwing out magical phrases (some of them pinched from others);

Work as if you were in the early days of a better nation.

Being clever's a fine thing, but sometimes a boy just needs to get out of the house and meet some girls.

Make other people glad you existed.

Gamble a Stamp. I can show you how to be a real man!

So Gray may also be a chaos magician, though whether he thinks he is, it is impossible to say. I would bet that certainly, many of his readers have subliminally assumed this. Rightly or wrongly, Gray has long been cherished as a benevolent wizardly figure in Scottish public life, the sweetness of his utopianism at times, distracting from the spiky, acerbic undercurrents of his work. Was it perhaps the dispelling of comforting notions of the avuncular Gray in the controversies over his 'settlers and colonists' essay of Christmas 2012 that made it so shocking to so many people?

Will is a remarkable, empowering thing, but it can leave you rather lonely, as one can never be sure others see things as you do. If you look for convergence you will perhaps, inevitably, find it, and I am enough of a cold-hearted materialist to worry about confirmation bias. Is it just wilful to draw, at this last gasp, an analogy between the conception of words in Morrison and Gray's universes as objective things, as real, constant and entropic as mathematics? Am I merely altering reality in accordance with intent?

Probably. But words do play much the same role in either body of supercalihypersigilistic work. When Lanark, chosen delegate of Unthank travels to Provan he hears God constantly, and tyrannically, speaking the world into existence;

There was a sound like remote thunder or the breathings of wind in the ear. "Is... is ... is ... " it said.

Only to "hear" what may be a typographer's slip

"Is...if...is"

The implications of this shocks and electrifies the Demiurge of Lanark's world (but as it is Gray himself, we can only chide him for not checking his own text properly). It has the same potency as the magic word hidden in the crossword Wally finds in Flex Mentallo because it suddenly opens up the boundaries of the comic strip panels into something more expansive – more hyper. In the last few panels of *the Invisibles*, Jack Frost, who has like Lanark, come into hearing distance of the divine, sums up everything that has happened in the preceding 1,400 pages (and a good many other comics besides that);

JACK FROST: *"We made Gods and Jailers because we felt small and ashamed and alone," he said. "We let them try us and judge us and, like sheep to slaughter, we allowed ourselves to be...sentenced. "See! Now! Our Sentence is up*

In the last panel, Quitely adds a full stop – indeed, it gets a panel all of its own. It places the reader irrevocably, like it or not, at a point of decision. It is not an ellipsis a-la-Kipling, a prelude to more and more instruction, conditioning in the guise of education. It is Gray's 'if' expanded and expounded.

Note how Gray separates his out from his sequence of ellipses. It is an independent moment, rather than a preamble, sand in the Vaseline, the hidden message, the leap of tentative faith or whatever other paradox you care to favour... Another typographical explosion, resonating in two universes, between two writers. In either multiverse, words create the spaces through which 'we' can escape, exist and if we're very lucky, evolve.

OUR SENTENCE IS UP

¹ Seasoned comics nerd familiar with Billy Batson, a boy who transforms magically into Captain Marvel would be expecting the word to be SHAZAM! The words is an acronym made from the first letters of famous mythical heroes – Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles and Mercury.

