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History Will Eat Itself: Rory Mullarkey's *Cannibals* and the Terrors of End-Narratives

Abstract: Rory Mullarkey's *Cannibals* (2013), an odyssey from post-Soviet Ukraine to contemporary Britain, catalogues the destructive power of teleological historical narratives through the eyes of a protagonist "mutilated in acts of spectacular terror" (Gray 205). This article aligns Mullarkey's play with the anti-narrative political philosophy of John Gray, criticizing their approaches as implicitly valorising the very philosophies they purport to oppose. Offering an alternative reading of *Cannibals* through the lens of Alain Badiou's *Rebirth of History* (2012), I contend that the play opens up a space of resistance against the totalizing impulses of the present, one in which "the power of an Idea may take root" (Badiou 15).

DOI 10.1515/jcde-2014-0025

The end is everywhere the chief thing.
(Aristotle 2321)

1 Exhausting End-Narratives

Cannibals, the debut play by Rory Mullarkey, premiered in April 2013 at the Royal Exchange theatre in Manchester. The play follows Lizaveta, a peasant farmer from the USSR, who is dragged from placid surroundings, brutalised through civil war and economic deprivation before being sold into slavery and trafficked to twenty-first century Manchester. In this brief outline, an allegorical quality to the text emerges, as its central character bears witness to the collapse of Soviet Communism and is then consumed by the discourses of Western Capitalism. In *Cannibals*, Mullarkey thus situates an examination of competing historical narratives. The overriding conclusion of his examination, as I will demonstrate, is that any philosophy which sees history as teleological – a process with a *direction* and an *end* – is innately destructive. The only alternative he is ostensibly able to offer, however, is a space in which these teleological philosophies – or end narratives –

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are exhausted. But, unless this space can be reconfigured as a site for the potential *rebirth* of history in the manner proposed by Alain Badiou, I suggest that Mullarkey's argument pushes towards a self-perpetuating nihilism that actually validates the teleological philosophies it aims to oppose.

2 Narratives in *Cannibals*

When we first meet Lizaveta she is the uncomfortable ward of her doting husband, Marek. His voice dominates the opening scene, as he garlands his wife with admiration for the way that she performs her duties – “When I say I love you... [I mean] the way you walk, [...] the way you hold a knife [...] the way you wipe blood from your face when you're skinning a sheep” (3). Abruptly, an unnamed soldier arrives and executes Marek with a gunshot to the head. The execution of her husband prompts Lizaveta's first active reaction. Commanded by her husband's killer to move closer towards him, she kneels down, pulls a knife from her boot and stabs the man in the heart. In the immediate aftermath, she puts on the dead soldier's boots, cap and belt, and takes up his pistol. When a second soldier arrives to investigate the commotion, the following exchange occurs:

Matvey	What's going on here?
Lizaveta	This man [Marek] killed this soldier so I shot him in the head.
Matvey	And who are you?
Lizaveta	I'm with you. (5)

The choice that Lizaveta makes is to obscure her own past in order to ensure her present survival. In doing so, she allows herself to be overwritten in a new and unfamiliar guise. Each stage of her journey will see the same process occur – the inscription of a new identity follows or precipitates the violent destruction of the old. After spending a night with Matvey, she escapes and takes refuge in the house of an Old Woman. Subsequently, the Old Woman disarms Lizaveta at the point of a shotgun, and pressgangs her into becoming an unpaid labourer. After befriend- ing a troubled young man named Josef, Lizaveta travels into the village and meets Vitalik, a painter of religious icons. When she returns, the Old Woman tries to drown her, so Lizaveta resolves to flee. During her farewell to Vitalik, she models for one of his paintings and tells him her life story. As she speaks, Matvey returns and kills Vitalik, taking Lizaveta prisoner and selling her to a woman named Nina. Reconfigured as a commodity, Lizaveta is shipped to Manchester, where she is sold to a man named Tim, and the play concludes with her serving as Tim's 'wife.'

Lizaveta is thus forever being defined from an exterior perspective, and these definitions are primarily a question of *function*. As the play continues, she is

transformed from wife, to soldier, to servant, to muse, to commodity and eventually back to a grotesque parody of ‘wife’ again. Yet through all of these redefinitions, she exhibits an almost inhuman lack of resistance. This is a character whose only apparent drive is to *react* to situations – a creature devoid of an inner life (*innenwelt*) whose existence is a reflection of her surroundings (*umwelt*) (Lacan 4). In other words, she is a character upon whom events are inscribed. *Cannibals* is a play that is deeply interested in the construction of history, and as history is ultimately a process of inscription, Lizaveta’s mutability makes sense. But, in a twist that complicates the critique of historical narratives in the play, Lizaveta’s essential blankness ultimately serves to highlight the strengths of those narratives. Initially, having no *innenwelt* enables her to embody successive incarnations that have no discernible connection to one another. She is not a *palimpsest*, in other words – she inhabits no incremental trajectory, or narrative. She is a creature of the present, one who abandons the past in order to survive the contemporary. But whilst this malleability initially proves the key to her survival, it eventually becomes the instrument of her destruction. Without a narrative, she is able to remould herself to fit the demands of the present, but has no protection against that present’s totalising impulses. Her interior and exterior identities are perpetually, violently destroyed and rebuilt to serve the interests of a successive range of ideologies until there is apparently nowhere else for her to go, and she is abandoned to her ultimate function as a commodity.

In order to suggest why I believe Lizaveta been drawn in this fashion, it is necessary to look in more detail at the broader incredulity towards end-narratives that is demonstrated in the play. For this, I turn to John Gray’s *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Politics and the Death of Utopia* (2007), a book that offers a relentless criticism of end-narratives, and their application in real-world contexts.

3 Incredulities towards the End

Considering the concept of history as a *process*, and the implications of using this concept to create a political ideology, Gray writes:

Those who are crushed or broken in order to create a higher humanity, who are killed or mutilated in acts of spectacular terror or ravaged in wars for universal freedom may have ideas about their place in the world altogether different from those they are assigned in the dramas that are being enacted. If universal narratives create meaning for those who live by them, they also destroy it in the lives of others. (205)

Thus the very notion of “universal narratives,” the view that all human activities are linked together in a definable trajectory, is opposed. He argues that if you

consider human activity as a process, then that process must have a direction. This introduces a variable of quality – the process can be one of advance, or one of decline. If you believe that all human activity is a process with the capability to advance or decline, your only *ethical* option is to work towards its advancement. But how do you define advancement? Inevitably, advancement is defined according to the philosophy that produced the notion of history as a process in the first place. And unsurprisingly, that philosophy will also have very clear ideas about the ideal *destination* or end-point of human activity.

Gray gives various historical examples of such philosophies. For the eighteenth-century Jacobins, the end-point was the abolition of social distinction; for Marx and Engels it was universal collectivism; for the Nazis it was the ascendance of the racially superior *Volk*; and for George Bush Jr and Tony Blair it was the global assimilation of liberal democracy and its capitalist base. Gray condemns these ideas as what he calls utopian social programming, by turning our attention to the counterbalances outweighing such activities. In other words, if you work to ‘advance’ human society towards an ideologically determined ‘end-point,’ sooner or later you will be faced by some or other section of humanity that resists the principles laid down by your ideology. When this happens, you must either change (and therefore destabilise) your ideology, or else you must try to change humanity. From the Great Terror to the Soviet Gulag, from the Nazi death camps to the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, Gray charts a catalogue of historical attempts to change humanity to fit the principles of teleological philosophies. Each attempt resulted in acts of unconscionable violence, and ultimately failed to achieve its objective. Gray’s conclusion is that teleological philosophies are as impossible to realise as they are disastrous to undertake. Considering human activity as a unified trajectory with a definable end-point must therefore be avoided at all costs.

Initially, Gray’s hypothesis provides a solid theoretical corollary to the argument developed by Mullarkey in *Cannibals*. A play that witnesses the death throes of Soviet Communism and the apparently unstoppable insidiousness of Western capitalism through the eyes of a protagonist “mutilated in acts of spectacular terror,” *Cannibals* shares Gray’s dismay at the destructive power of end-narratives. At another level, however, the play uncovers an arena that tests the limitations of Gray’s hypothesis. This arena is definable through the various crises developing in our present moment, crises that appear as existential threats to the human world. From global warming to the proliferation of nuclear arms, ruptures arising from polarised social divisions and the breakdown of governmental organisations to what Slavoj Žižek has called the biogenetic revolution, the *possibility* of the ‘end,’ at least to the way that we live now, is pressing in on us with increasing plausibility and rapidly escalating urgency. It is in this arena of crises that Gray’s

incredulity towards the end is exhausted – not because of an ideology that *desires* or *predicts* a utopian plateau of human activity, but because denying the possibility of the ‘end’ has become just as dangerous as believing in it. Reviewing *Living in the End Times*, Žižek’s contribution to apocalyptic thinking, J. Jesse Ramirez has pointed out that in the 1960s Frank Kermode identified apocalyptic ideas as a natural consequence of an uncertain humanity seeking to consolidate its own position in a world it did not understand. Ramirez, however, illustrates the growing incongruity of Kermode’s position (and Gray’s, although Gray never makes his debt to Kermode explicit) to a world in which “the species-level crises of the age of globalization demand a thorough reconsideration of these categories [of incredulity]” (Ramirez). There is a conflict, in other words, between Gray’s denunciation of end-narratives and the real dangers posed to our contemporary situation. In order to flesh out a sense of how this conflict operates, I want to come back to Mullarkey’s play, and the question of Lizaveta’s anti-narrative survival tactics.

4 End-Narratives as Cannibalistic

As previously mentioned, perhaps Lizaveta’s most striking quality is her total reliance upon the *umwelt*, her capacity to be remodelled within the requirements of any given situation. In discussion with the Old Woman, she offers a defence of this pliability:

Lizaveta A few days ago I was a farmer’s wife then the day after that I was a widow then the day after that I was a soldier and today I’m sweeping the steps. I think things can be okay as long as there’s something to do. (19)

The key word here is “okay,” which becomes something of a dramatic irony as the play progresses. In Lizaveta’s mind, “okay” appears to be synonymous with ‘not dying,’ and thus is redefined through a series of horrific experiences before she is commoditized and sold to Tim. Since she eschews all frames of reference, she is unable to rationalise (and therefore potentially *resist*) the totalising impulses of the presents into which she is assimilated. It is rather left to the audience, then, to observe the contradiction in Lizaveta’s statement. Her only real attempt at self-definition, and the only time she demonstrates an awareness of her own past, comes a little later, when she sits for Vitalik, and is recast in the role of St. Catherine:

Lizaveta So who am I to be, then?
Vitalik I think St Catherine. She was martyred in the early fourth century.
He puts a thin piece of cedar wood on the easel and starts to arrange his brushes.

It'll be a hagiographic icon [...] The scenes will show us some of the things she did, but the portrait will tell us who she really was. [...]
 Tell me about your life. If I understand your life, it will help me to understand you, and I can try and put it in the painting.

Pause

Anything. Just start with the smallest things. (41–42)

Until this point, Lizaveta has kept aspects of her personal life and history a secret from all around her. At Vitalik's invitation, however, she pours out a lengthy speech in which she divests painfully personal information concerning her miscarriage in order that Vitalik can capture her essence and put it in the service of – tellingly – another teleological philosophy, this time a religious one. Lizaveta's submission to the complete repossessing of her identity, such as it is, is framed as abandonment rather than capitulation, since in the previous scene she has been described as “free” by her deceptively guileless friend Josef. The attempt fails, however – Vitalik does not finish the painting before his execution, but enough time has elapsed for Lizaveta to sacrifice her remaining privacy. Her absolute vulnerability then enables her to be rewritten one final time, into a commodity fit for consumption. In donating both her appearance and her life story to Vitalik so that they can be used to serve a religious narrative, Lizaveta hopes to divest herself of suffering:

Lizaveta I can't wait to see it. I hope you've made her bear it all for me. (46)

Lizaveta's desire for the exterior narrative to act as a kind of punishment-avatar is obviously mistaken, according to the logic of Mullarkey's anti-narrative argument. Consequently, Vitalik is executed by the returning Matvey before he can finish the painting, a situation that leaves Lizaveta distraught and is compounded by Matvey examining the painting and offhandedly declaring “I don't see the likeness” (47). The collapse of one narrative is replaced with the institution of another. The battle-hardened Matvey declares his revised capitalist philosophy in stark terms:

Matvey The world's not overflowing, you know. There isn't enough, woman. It's dog eat dog, and living means taking from others. (48)

This assertion forms part of a grisly joke. Matvey has cooked some meat and offers it to Lizaveta – when she asks what it is, he replies “horse.” He lights a cigarette, and she wonders where he obtained it, since “all of the shops are closed.” He replies with exactly the same response as Josef had, when she had asked him the same question in an earlier scene. Repulsed, Lizaveta realises that Matvey has

killed Josef and cooked his flesh for them both to eat – at the same time, the bloodied ghost of Josef enters:

The ghost sits down next to her. He looks at her, as if about to say something. He takes a bite out of his own arm. He takes another. He swallows his arm. He swallows his other arm. He swallows his legs. He eats himself away, and disappears. (49)

The extravagant, Kane-esque dramaturgy of the stage direction was interpreted in Michael Longhurst's production through the introduction of slabs of meat, plummeting from the ceiling on metal chains under the flickering blue light of an abattoir. There is a twofold significance to the abattoir here – at once terminal and genitive, the abattoir is a place where life is destroyed in order to create products that will fuel consumption. When coupled with the striking image of a ghost eating itself, there emerges a narrative of perpetual exploitation. At one level, this is a fairly desolate satire on the endless appetites for growth and expansion of capitalist dogma, but the validation of that image in both text and performance indicates a move away from the critique of teleological philosophies, and a submission to an inescapable – and therefore *final* – point in an evolutionary arc. Once capitalism is implemented, in short, there is nowhere else to go, and the violence that has saturated the illustration of end-narratives in the play up to this point is directed inward; it becomes cannibalistic.

This shift in analytic perspective has a strongly nihilistic flavour, but I believe there is an aspect of the play that offers a potential escape from such self-defeating pessimism. This aspect is uncovered if the exhaustion of end-narratives is reconsidered as a space in which an alternative solution to the crises of modern times may be sought. To achieve this, I want to pick up on an equivalent limitation of Gray's analysis in theorising the 'end' of end narratives, and counteract this limitation with some ideas put forward by Alain Badiou.

5 After the End...

Having argued that *all* teleological philosophies are destructive because they seek to force humanity into a unified direction that it cannot obey, Gray is left with the problem of alternatives. As he puts it, "The effect of seeking refuge in an imaginary future harmony is to bind us to the conflicts of the past" (206). Following Gray's argument, what is needed is therefore a political philosophy capable of responding to the demands of the present without recourse to a programmatic ideal that will, he believes, lead towards the catastrophe of utopian thinking. Thus:

At its best, politics is not a vehicle for universal projects but the art of responding to the flux of circumstances. This requires no grand vision of human advance, only the courage to cope with recurring evils. (210)

There are two immediate problems with this statement. The first is that, in order to truly respond to the “flux of circumstances,” *any* and *every* method of response must be opened up *in potentia*, which includes, as a matter of course, responses that offer teleological perspectives. Insisting that the “best” political perspectives respond to “the flux of circumstances” whilst simultaneously shutting off the *possibility* of a “grand vision of human advance” is actually paradoxical. The second problem is that, for Gray, the “recurring evils” (domestic and international conflicts, ethnic cleansing, terrorism and insurgency) are direct consequences of what he calls “secular religious” belief structures that have informed local and international politics over the past two centuries. These “evils” would be lessened if people could be persuaded to stop pursuing campaigns to push humanity towards some utopian idea of an “end-point,” and instead remain rooted in what he calls a “politics of realism;” an “Occam’s Razor that works to minimize radical choices among evils” (Gray 194). But the plateaus from which he proposes such a politics would be launched are not the objective, non-ideological zones of “realism” that he would have us believe. As Derrida took pains to argue when he assessed the legacy of Communism in *Specters of Marx*, no such place exists (Derrida 69). What Gray actually proposes, though he tries to avoid the comparison, is broadly the same trans-historical ideal that Francis Fukuyama joyfully declared as the “End of History.” For Fukuyama, the dissolution of Communism heralded the end of the teleological philosophies that had defined (and ravaged) the 20th Century – in their place we had the stable, neutral plateau of liberal capitalism, a “trans-historical standard” against which everything else could be objectively and efficiently judged (Fukuyama 139). As Gray himself points out, however, Fukuyama’s supposed plateau was itself teleological – and as it underpinned the Middle-Eastern adventures of Bush and Blair, it proved just as disastrous as those it had replaced (Gray 5). The flaw in Gray’s argument, then, is that instead of recognizing the inescapable entrenchment of *all* ideological perspectives within their discursive contexts, he proposes his own version of a ‘trans-historical standard.’ In attempting to destabilise the principles of teleological history by exposing the danger of end-narratives, in other words, Gray actually produces an end-narrative of his own.

This contradiction is mirrored in Mullarkey’s own argument, though the victory of liberal capitalism as the status quo is significantly less positive in *Cannibals* than it is in *Black Mass*. In a linguistic inversion, the English speaking Lizaveta escapes her prison dressed in a ball gown and runs through a terrifying

carnival of tawdry excesses in a Russian speaking Manchester, complete with football hooligans, hen parties and – tellingly – “*a man slapping the Bible and preaching the apocalypse*” (64). Unlike previous incarnations, however, there is nowhere for her to go – her identity is not destroyed in an act of violence to be replaced by some new and distinct ‘function.’ She is passed to the police who return her to her ‘husband’ Tim. Ultimately then, Mullarkey’s message is the gloomy counterpart to Gray and Fukuyama: we have exhausted end-narratives and arrived in the final phase of our evolution. From this perspective, *Cannibals* could be read as a diagnosis of a world without hope of change. There is, however, a less pessimistic conclusion that can be drawn from the play, one which I will attempt to illuminate by turning to Alain Badiou’s polemic *The Rebirth of History*.

Badiou has, it must be admitted, long pursued his own rather controversial notions of Communism, but I am not seeking to valorise or condemn his political perspectives here. Instead I simply want to draw our attention to his insistence that the concept of the universal always be identified for what it is – the product of a historical moment. In this way, Badiou argues, a *rebirth* of history can be initiated from our current state in which end-narratives have been exhausted, one that does not try to press-gang humanity into systems of predetermined ideals which, as Gray argues, will always lead to violence, but rather seeks to create historical progression through the participation of individual subjects in response to contemporary requirements. Thus Badiou defines the ‘rebirth’ of history as:

[T]he capacity, at once destructive and creative, whose aim is to make a genuine exit from the established order. In this sense, Fukuyama was not wrong: the modern world, having arrived at its complete development and conscious that it is bound to die – if only (which is plausible, alas) in suicidal violence – no longer has anything to think about but ‘the end of History’ [...] If there is to be a rebirth of History, it will not come from the barbaric conservatism of capitalism and the determination of all state apparatuses to maintain its demented pattern. The only possible reawakening is the popular initiative in which the power of an Idea will take root. (15)

Badiou has been criticised for the intangibility of this “Idea” which is supposed to take root, but for now I will counter only that allowing for the *possibility* of an “Idea” that enables an exit from the established order is far less destructive than celebrating the hegemony *of* that order, particularly when it is so visibly falling to pieces. It is for this reason that I am proposing the last moments of *Cannibals* as an implicit shift from the ‘end narrative’ otherwise depicted in the inescapability of capitalism, where a final element of doubt is uncovered. This doubt, I believe, ushers in a space of uncertainty in which the possibility of change may be harboured, and thus the power of an “Idea” has the potential to take root. Having

returned to the prison cell/bedroom (elegantly articulated as a simulacrum by Longhurst's production, where all items of furniture were encased in storage wrapping), Tim and Lizaveta face each other:

Tim I love you.
Silence. He sits down at the table with her. A very long time passes.
Lizaveta Why?
Pause. She looks at him.
Tim I don't know.
They sit for a while. (72)

The interaction is deceptively complex. Tim's declaration is framed as a travesty – he has bought, enslaved and overwritten the identity of this woman, a stranger about whom he knows nothing. He desires her as a product of his own *innenwelt*, thus his 'love' never interacts with her-self at all. This is consistent with Lizaveta's anti-narrative function, and given her complete dependence upon the *umwelt*, perhaps it is the only way that she *could* be 'loved.' Yet her response, and the sudden aligning of their languages, destabilises Tim's fiction and shifts the terrain of their relationship. Suddenly she possesses both the wherewithal and the drive to challenge him, re-instating some part of her *innenwelt*; individual, separate and potentially resistant. What is most peculiar is that her challenge also implies a potential validation; he is invited *by her* to defend his declaration on *her terms*. The motivations underpinning her challenge are oblique, left in large part to the decision of the production, which is itself significant: Lizaveta's very last utterance in the play is a matter of *choice*, a final reconnection with the *innenwelt* at the point of exhaustion for the end-narratives that have otherwise driven the text, and the *umwelt* to which she has unreservedly sacrificed herself. Faced with this challenge, and the oblique possibilities that it represents, Tim is thrown into crisis. His inadequate protestation does nothing to alter their situation and they remain together, facing the all-encompassing uncertainty of their collective future. The *doubt* at the core of this moment, I propose, offers a frontier of resistance against the end-narratives besieging Mullarkey's narrative. In Badiou's vocabulary, the name for this frontier is "*event*."

6 ...the Event.

In *The Rebirth of History*, Badiou's appreciation of the event is: "a break in time, in which the in-existent is made existent" (70). This statement occurs at the culmination of an exhaustive study in which he defines the "in-existent" as all people "who are present in the world but absent from its meaning and deci-

sions” (56). The parallels with Mullarkey’s text are quite clearly apparent, as we witness the partial restoration of a character who has, up to this point, assiduously colluded with the conditions of her own annihilation. What Mullarkey shows in microcosm, Badiou argues at the level of societal upheaval – the active participation of those who were previously “inexistent” creates the possibility for social change on a grand scale. The event is thus equivalent to an “uprising,” the manifestation of which Badiou terms a “historical riot” (56). For Badiou, the event is a “minoritarian but localised” response on the part of a defined body – all who are *present* – to a given stimulus in a unified fashion in which they then obtain the status of “being in existence” (60); not because they are identified as such, but because they identify themselves. He develops his argument further:

I shall call what occurs in them [events], for which ‘expression of the general will’ is Rousseau’s term, by a different philosophical name: it is the *emergence of a truth* – in this particular case, of a political truth. This truth concerns the very being of the people, what people are capable of as regards action and ideas. It emerges – this truth – on the edge of a historical riot, which extricates it from the laws of the world (in our case, from the pressure of the desire for the West) in the form of a new, previously unknown possibility. (60)

Whilst this kind of radical uprising is perhaps intimated in the narrative of Mullarkey’s play, it should be made clear that I am not suggesting *Cannibals* as a text capable of creating a real-world ‘event,’ nor am I claiming that theatre in general has the capacity to do this. As I will demonstrate, there is in fact an important distinction between the *theatrical* and the *historical* event, under Badiou’s logic. Instead, my intention is merely to argue a discrete potential for *Cannibals* to productively *reflect*, and indicate the *possibility of an ‘event.’* In other words, I contend that the last moments of *Cannibals* offer a point of resistance to the seemingly irresistible operation of end-narratives; a point accessible at the level of performance.

The divergence between the theatrical event and Badiou’s event may be expressed in their separate relationships to the historical. The theatrical event is one that *comes from* and *engages with* history – it consists of what Timothy Wiles calls “particular, unrepeatable interactions between the original creator’s work and each of its new recipients, a transaction which leaves neither party unchanged” (Wiles 2). Theatrical events occur within simultaneous and incremental trajectories, and whilst they may never be repeated, they rely upon a principle of iterability, to coin Derrida’s term, in order to function. Badiou’s event, on the other hand, is in itself *historical*, comprising what he calls a “political truth” that alters the very conditions of its own materialization, and is therefore by definition non-iterable. But whilst the two kinds of events do not bisect, the latter can be

indicated by the former in the moment of performance. This is what I believe is present in the closing moments of *Cannibals* – a space of doubt that points towards an “unknown possibility,” offering a space of resistance to the irresistible power of the end-narratives that have dominated the text up to that point. As a theatrical text, *Cannibals* is then able to capitalise upon theatre’s essential iterability to offer a way of *repeating* this space of resistance in subsequent performances – projecting the possibility of an event into the unknowable discourses of the future.

7 Finally, the Future.

In concluding this article I want to briefly turn to the question of the future, and how it might interact with the arguments I have constructed here about teleological and evental histories. In doing so, it seems fitting that I return to my initial point of critical departure – *Black Mass*.

Towards the end of the book, it becomes clear that concept of ‘the future’ poses a rather thorny problem for Gray. On the one hand, he is obliged to preserve a sense of the future’s essential unknowability since this is precisely the quality that end-narratives try to control, and where the seeds of their self-destructive violence will always flourish. And yet, he cannot conceive of a *totally* unknowable future, one that constitutes an “absolute break from normality,” because this vision of the future *also* permits the kind of apocalyptic chaos that he is dedicated to opposing (Critchley 5). Viewed in this manner, Gray’s task is unenviably tough – he must circumscribe the potential conditions of the future without asserting any ideological framework that would make such circumscriptions possible. Again, his answer is to rely upon an assumed cyclical nature to human existence in order to defend the capacity for his “politics of realism” to cope with the “recurring evils” that perpetually besiege humanity (204). I have already laid out my objections to this assumption, but I turn back to Gray here because, in the book’s final moments, he makes one last attempt to secure his position by championing an unlikely group of people:

The need for narrative can be a burden, and if we want to be rid of it we should seek the company of mystics, poets and pleasure-lovers rather than utopian dreamers. Though they look to the future these dreamers nearly always recall an idealized period of innocence – Marx’s primitive communism, or the lost world of bourgeois virtue cherished by neo-conservatives. As the writer and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has written, ‘Clearly, apocalyptic thinking is nostalgia at its very worst.’ The effect of seeking refuge in an imaginary future harmony is to bind us to the conflicts of the past. (206)

The valorisation of these bohemian figures may initially seem peculiar for somebody concerned with a “politics of realism,” but Gray’s motives relate, perhaps quite sensibly, to the common privileging by “mystics, poets and pleasure-lovers” of the *present* over an assumed, imagined or (worst of all) *aspired* past or future. It is investment in the present, for Gray, that secures the conditions for a rational political philosophy. Yet, whilst my argument supports the view that our political consciousness cannot be exclusively located in an exterior temporal zone (either past or present), annexing these zones in order to prioritise the present is equally dangerous. As I have argued through my analysis of *Cannibals*, at the level of the individual, the temporally annexed subject is left defenceless against the vicissitudes of their contemporary context, without recourse to an exterior discourse by which they might both consolidate their identity and resist the totalizing impulses of the present. Further, I have endeavoured to argue that Mullarkey’s text offers a miniaturised exemplar of the conclusion to this ‘presentist’ logic – instead of escaping the machinations of harmful end-narratives, the annexed subject is entirely contingent upon them until each have been exhausted. At which point, if the subject is not to be assimilated into a nightmarish, cyclical view of society and social interactions where change and agency are permanently eradicated, a space of resistance must be uncovered. I have sought to identify this space as illustrating a “break in time, in which the inexistent is made existent” – an indication of the possibility of Badiou’s “event.”

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