AUTHOR(ITY), REWRITING, AND POSTMODERN REALISM IN ALASDAIR GRAY'S *POOR THINGS**

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Abstract

Alasdair Gray's novel *Poor Things* is a rich text as it offers a variety of readings: it can be read as a fantasy novel, a science-fiction text, a fictionalized history/historicized fiction, and an autobiography, just to name a few. However, these readings provide but a limited insight, and the richness of the text can be best understood when it is examined within the frame of postmodern realism. Postmodern realism uses certain conventions such as characterization and attention to detail, yet it is painfully aware of the limitations of such conventions. In other words, postmodern realism uses the realist conventions only to point at their problematic nature, acknowledging the inevitability of the embeddedness of these conventions within the novel genre.In this respect, this paper argues that Gray's *Poor Things* uses both realist and postmodern modes of writing, and that its employ of authorial intrusions as well as its rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* makes it one of the best examples of postmodern realism.

Key words: *Alasdair Gray, Poor Things, rewriting, Postmodern realism*.

ALASDAIR GRAY'İN *ZAVALLI ŞEYLER* ADLI ROMANINDA OTORİTE, YENİDEN YAZIM VE POSTMODERN GERÇEKÇİLİK

Özet

Alasdair Gray'in *Zavallı Şeyler* adlı romanı birçok okumaya imkan vermesi nedeniyle zengin bir metindir: fantazi romanı olarak, bilim-kurgu metni olarak, kurgusallaştırılmış tarih/tarihselleştirilmiş kurgu olarak ve otobiyografi olarak okunabilir. Ancak, bu okumalar kısıtlı bir bakış sağlamaktadır; metnin zenginliği en iyi olarak metin postmodern gerçekçilik çerçevesinde incelenirse anlaşılacaktır. Postmodern gerçekçilik karakterizasyon ve detaylara dikkat etme gibi gelenekleri kullanır, ancak bunların kısıtlılıklarının da oldukça farkındadır. Diğer bir değişle, postmodern gerçekçilik, gerçekçi gelenekleri bunların problemli doğalarına işaret etmek için kullanır, bu geleneklerin roman türü içindeki varlıklarının kaçınılmazlığını da kabul eder. Bu bağlamda bu makalede Gray'in *Zavallı Şeyler* adlı romanının hem gerçekçi hem de postmodern yazım modları kullandığını, metindeki yazar müdahalelerin ve metnin Mary Shelley'nin *Frankenstein* romanını yeniden yazmasının kendisini postmodern gerçekçiliğin en iyi örneklerinden biri yaptığını söylemektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Alasdair Gray, Poor Things, Yeniden yazım, Postmodern gerçekçilik*.

In his "Personal Curriculum Vitae," Alasdair Gray defines himself as "a self-employed verbal and pictorial artist" (2002: 38). Stephen Bernstein, one of the most noted critics of Alasdair Gray, cites him as "one of the most important living writers in English" (1999: 17). An accomplished artist, playwright, literary critic, political polemist, editor, and poet, Gray's entrance into the literary scene as a novelist, however, is rather late. It was in 1981, when he was forty-seven years old that his first novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* was published. It is this highly-acclaimed and widely-read novel which opened the path for Gray, and earned him a preeminent and secure place as a novelist within literature written in English.

Although not as internationally acclaimed as *Lanark,* the experimental and innovative style which is evident in *Lanark* can be also found in *Poor Things*, albeit in a slightly different mode. *Poor Things* is Gray's fourth novel and the winner of Whitbread Prize for Best Novel as well as *The Guardian* Fiction Prize. It is a playful postmodern text, yet it is also rooted in realist conventions. In a similar mode to *Lanark,* the authorial position is subjected to the contestation of various characters within the novel as well as a deliberate refusal of giving the sole ownership of the book to the author in *Poor Things.* It uses both realist and postmodern modes of writing. Indeed, this paper argues that *Poor Things* constitutes one of the best examples of postmodern realism with its rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* its employment of authorial intrusions throughout the text,. According to Stephen Bernstein,

> The power of *Poor Things* derives from the reality/fantasy mixture of its narratives and from the variety of its concerns, as it draws Gray's characteristic preoccupations together into a new departure for his prose. Like his other novels, *Poor Things* addresses questions of power, sexuality, duality, and perspective, while as a thoroughgoing historical novel this "Scottish socialist's love letter to the Victorian period" fully explores an interest in the nineteenth century that Gray had earlier exhibited only piecemeal. (1999: 109)

Poor Things is a rich novel as it engages itself with a variety of topics from gender issues to politics, from questions of reality to authorial authority. Alasdair Gray is an active participant and voice in the political climate related especially to the relationship between Scotland and England, and his work is very much informed by his political views. Several critics have already noted and focused on this political edge in Gray's fiction. The inscription of the political into the fictional underlines how Gray's work should be considered within the conceptual framework of postmodern realism. It features predominantly here as Gray uses Scotland as the setting of the novel. Cristie March argues that

> The term parochial speaks to the troubling positioning of Scotland within an international matrix and points to the inefficiency of defining terms like marginal, minority, parochial, regional, and even national and postcolonial in relation to the Scottish situation. Scotland is all and none of those terms, existing instead in the liminal spaces between them. This "a-positioning" complicates our very sense of these terms. (2002: 344)

This definition of Scotland, in fact, overlaps with what postmodern realism aims to capture: a mode of narrative which mingles realist conventions with postmodern elements. Thus, Scotland provides that perfect canvas to play within the conventions of literary realism, and it enables Gray to go beyond the restrains of such conventions as well. Donald Kaczvisnky argues that "*Poor Things* presents a postmodern metanarrative that explores the notion of selfhood" (2001: 775). Yet, the novel dwells on a number of other issues, especially those related to the formal qualities of the novel genre, i.e. the representation of reality, the problematics of authorship and story-telling. It is about creation, – artistic and literal – rewriting, and *experimenting* with the technical possibilities which the novel genre offers. It is in this context that *Poor Things* should be considered within postmodern realism which is most evident in this novel in its employment of rewriting as a strategy that problematizes the notion of authenticity and the representation of reality, and in its use of visual aids such as insertion of different typography, etchings, and drawings, which enhance the idea of constructedness of the written world. Amy J. Elias contends that "postmodern Realism might be understood as *mimesis* with an ontological dominant. In postmodern Realism, the world has become textualized. Postmodern Realism records the multiple worlds/texts within contemporary culture" (1993: 12). Thus, postmodern realism enables authors to play within a crisis of representation; the authors acknowledge the shortcomings of representation within fiction while at the same time employing a realist mode in a subversive and playful manner. Hence, realism always intertwines with metafiction to create the distinct postmodern realist approach in the novel.

The novel constantly draws attention to its constructedness by deliberately creating confusion about the authenticity of the written word. The title page of the book, for example, contends that *Poor Things* is the autobiographical work of a Scottish public health officer called Archibald McCandless, and that it is edited by Alasdair Gray. Although not available in the 1992 hardcover edition, in the 2002 paperback edition of the book this title page is followed by "a page of quotations from fictional reviews such as the one from the *Shiberreen Eagle*" (Bentley, 2008: 44). The same incident is also noted by Simon Malpas who suggests that "[n]othing in this book is as it seems: the reviews printed before the title page are a mixture of largely positive quotations from 'real' papers such as *The Scotsman, The Independent* and *The Sunday Telegraph,* and rather damning ones from a number of strange fictitious publications including *Private Nose* and *Times Literary Implement*" (2005: 23-4). Moreover, the biographical information on Alasdair Gray – that he is "a fat, balding, asthmatic, married pedestrian who lives by writing and designing things," which is also available in the 2002 paperback edition, "comically disrupts the conventional way of presenting the author to the reading public" (Bentley, 2008: 44). Thus, the blurring of fact and fiction begins even before the reader reads the very first page of the novel, and any possibility of a trustworthy narrator is disrupted from the very beginning. This disruption is also noted by Simon Malpas as follows:

> We are never certain what to take as true or untrue, as the seeming plausibility of Victoria's narrative is continually challenged by the fact that Archibald's is so much more interesting and enticing and has the support of the novel's narrator who, traditionally, might be expected to be at least vaguely trustworthy. Even the reviews printed before the title page produce a bizarre movement between the "real world" and its fictional counterpart that unsettles any firm or fixed boundaries one might wish to erect between the two. (2005: 24-5)

In addition to the defamiliarization of the notions of authorship and reliable narrators, the novel is nurtured by several different literary and non-literary texts all of which underscore that originality and authenticity have become problematic issues. *Poor Things* resembles a Chinese box because it contains three different layers all of which are attributed to different authors. The opening and closing sections are supposedly written by "an editor" called Alasdair Gray; "the main text" is an autobiography of a man called Archibald McCandless, and there is an accompanying letter written by a woman called Victoria Baxter, the wife of McCandless. These sections are in dialogue with one another as the authors of each contest the claims of the other in their respective texts. Therefore, it is a multilayered novel, and each layer brings forth a different and often confusing angle to the storyline.

In the section entitled "Introduction," the novel's "real" author Alasdair Gray casts himself as the "editor" of the book, and he provides a detailed account of how he has come into possession of Archibald McCandless' book and Victoria McCandless' letter. Archibald McCandless' book follows this introduction, and Gray claims that he has made almost no alterations in the "original" text. With this "original" text, the reader is invited into the "authentic" account of McCandless, which narrates how Archibald McCandless, a man of poor origins, has ended up at the Medical School as a student, and how he has become friends with Godwin Baxter, the son of a prominent doctor, who is an outcast due to his almost grotesque appearance and his weird voice. Through his friendship with Baxter, McCandless meets Victoria Baxter, also known as Bella, who, according to Godwin Baxter, is a unique human being because she is a creation of Baxter through scientific experimentation. Baxter gives an account of how he has found a dead woman in the morgue who was eight-months pregnant, and how he has revived her back by changing the brain of her baby with that of the mother so that the mother could live. The result is Bella Baxter, who looks like a woman in her twenties with the brain and thought-process of a new-born baby. McCandless is fascinated with this woman, and so is Bella with McCandless. They are engaged, much to the chagrin of Baxter. Before the marriage takes place, however, Bella elopes with Baxter's lawyer, a man called Duncan Wedderburn. McCandless does get his happy ending eventually and concludes his autobiography on a happy note though the whole text is dedicated to his wife's adventures rather than anything truly his own:

> This record of our early struggles is dedicated to my wife, though I dare not show it to her since it tells of things neither she nor medical science dare yet believe. But scientific progress accelerates from year to year. In a short time the discovery may be made which Sir Colin Baxter communicated only to his son, and which will prove the factual ground of all I have written here. (Gray, 1992: 244)

It is immediately followed by Victoria McCandless's letter written for her great grandchild. While McCandless claims that his book is an autobiography which depicts his life with Bella and Godwin Baxter, Bella claims that the book is full of lies and delusions, and her letter tries to undermine the truth-claims of McCandless' book.

The last section of the book is entitled "Notes Critical and Historical." It is comprised of Alasdair Gray's explanatory remarks on the references in Archibald McCandless' book as well as in Victoria McCandless' letter. There are also photographs, drawings, and paintings, complete with commentary notes by Gray the editor. Thus, this section is full of references, both written and visual, both fictional and factual. Distinguishing the fact from the fictive is rather confusing since they are elaborately and deliberately mingled.

Poor Things offers a journey to the nineteenth-century Scotland and Europe, but this journey is not presented as a seamless whole. Rather, it is cut short by interruptions and commentaries, and the reader is constantly made aware of the problematic nature of representation as well as of autobiographical writing in portraying an objective account of life. All these render *Poor Things* a postmodern realist text. In this novel, postmodern realism is achieved especially through a rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as well as through an explicitly problematized authorial status both in the case of the "real" author who poses as a "mere" editor, and in the case of the characters in the novel who assume the role of an author in several incidents. The constant presence of multiple authors flaunts the authorial position.

Rewriting is another strategy that underscores the postmodern realist quality of *Poor Things*. The text creates a fake nineteenth-century reality which is mingled with factual additions. It is an ironic re-reading of the past since although Bella and McCandless talk about the same set of events, the conclusions they draw out of this past and the way they perceive of the events differ drastically from one another. Moreover, its acts of rewriting, both through a reworking of *Frankenstein* and through the meticulously juxtaposed narratives of the characters, almost all of whom assume the authorial position, problematizes closure. The postponed closure marks the problematization of the triangular relationship among the text, the author, and the reader. Jerry Varsava remarks that such an act is an intrinsic quality in postmodernism. He maintains that postmodernism's "ongoing attempt to destroy the paradigms of fiction, its own included, destabilizes the once fixed relationship between *reader* and *word,* between *text* and *world*" (1990: 17-8). Gray's novel is a very explicit elucidator of such claim in that the once stable relationship between the authority of the author and the observant/passive position of the reader is turned into a continuous game of chess in *Poor Things* where any stable and secure positioning is rendered impossible.

This instability is reinforced by the novel's its overt Victorian setting. According to Philip Hobsbaum, "*Poor Things* A [McCandless' text] is a piece of science fiction ingeniously set in the Victorian era. Indeed, its imitation of Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, George du Maurier, Bram Stoker and Rider Haggard (of which the book itself takes note), and its persistent echoing of Stevenson, McCandless' narrative could almost be called a Victorian fantasy in its own right" (2010: n.pag.). Hence, *Poor Things* not only uses a distinctively Victorian setting but it also draws upon famous Victorian texts, thereby presenting an all-round Victorian picture. Likewise, Dietmar Böhnke suggests, "Gray can be seen as using the Victorian setting as a convenient background for his own contemporary concerns, investigating the past to illuminate the present" (2004: 204). The personal histories of Bella, Archibald and Godwin are interwoven with a thoroughly Victorian background both through references to nineteenth-century texts such as *Wuthering Heights* and Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* and through the socio-political issues and debates of the age such as the marriage law (Gray, 1992: 67), the exclusion of women from medical practice (Gray, 1992: 66), and the rapid change in social structure due to technological and scientific developments (Gray, 1992: 68). In this regard, Gray rewrites not only *Frankenstein* but also numerous other famous literary texts in his reconstruction of a nineteenth-century reality. Moreover, he inserts significant nineteenth-century issues into the narrative so as to increase the authenticity of such a reality.

In addition to the explicitly Victorian references within the body text of McCandless' book, there are rather bold claims as to the existence of an almost science-fictional creation of Bella Baxter in the hands of Godwin Baxter in the Introduction by Alasdair Gray, the editor: "[t]hose who examine the proofs given at the end of this introduction will not doubt that in the final week of February 1881, at Park Circus, Glasgow, a surgical genius used human remains to create a twenty-five-year-old woman" (Gray, 1992: vii). With this obvious nod to *Frankenstein*, Gray turns the fictive into the real with his claims of authenticity. A similar attitude can be observed in his introduction of Bella Baxter in which he supports his claims by means of referring to the research of Michael Donnelly: "Michael saw the name of the first woman doctor to graduate from Glasgow University, a name only

known to historians of the suffragette movement nowadays, though she had once written a Fabian pamphlet on public health" (Gray, 1992: viii). In fact, the real historical data suggests that it was Marion Gilchrist (1864-1952) who gained a medical degree from the Glasgow University, not Victoria Baxter. This blending of fact and fiction continues in the body text of McCandless' narrative, too: "Baxter told us there where only four women doctors in Britain just now, all with degrees from foreign universities, but the Enabling Bill of 1876 and the work of Sophia Jex-Blake had resulted in Dublin University opening its doors to women medical students and Scottish universities must soon do the same" (Gray, 1992: 197). In other words, McCandless con-fuses fact and fiction, and the result is a mélange of both, which underscores the postmodern realist mode of the novel.

The Victorian background is also presented in Bella's letter to Baxter in which Mr. Astley, who is one of the many lively characters Bella meets during her journey with Wedderburn, assumes the role of a historian and provides a condensed history of (colonial) Britain for Bella. His comments on history are noteworthy especially because they reveal history as a grand narrative written by the victors:

> HISTORY – *"Big nations are created by successful plundering raids, and since most history is written by friends of the conquerors history usually suggests that the plundered were improved by their loss and should be grateful for it. Plundering happens inside countries too. King Henry the Eight plundered the English monasteries, the only institution in those days which provided hospitals, schools and shelter for the poor. English historians agree King Henry was greedy, hasty and violent, but did a lot of good. They belonged to a class which was enriched by the church lands."* (Gray, 1992: 157)

Such an understanding of history – history as a biased or subjective documentation of the past due to the fact that it is written by the victors, or from the viewpoint of the victorious – does not necessarily deem history as less important or less relevant. A similar argument is made by Böhnke who suggests that "the complicated nature of history/historiography does not mean that it is rendered superfluous or meaningless. On the contrary, it is necessary today more than ever, but it has to be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be constantly questioned and revised to prevent its instrumentalization by the powerful of society against the 'poor things'" (2004: 216). What should be kept in mind about history is that it is but a politically-charged narrative, instead of an objective or unbiased representation.

> Indeed, history is highly important for the characters in the novel. It functions as a way of maintaining a bridge between the past and the present. Godwin Baxter warns Bella to remember every experience from her past, even when they are negative or painful to do so: "[f]orget nothing... if you cannot" (Gray, 1992: 262). Likewise, as Böhnke suggests, "[t]o 'remember' history, but 'with intelligent interest' in this sense seems to be, for Gray at least, the middle way between ideological instrumentalization of history and unabashed relativism and constructivism" (Gray, 1992: 216).

This remembrance of history is done on two levels. First of all, the novel concentrates on the personal histories of the characters, and secondly, it interweaves the nineteenth century into these histories. Indeed, as Rennison suggests, "*Poor Things* mingles pastiche of Victorian popular fiction – there are echoes of other writers beyond the obvious parallels with Mary Shelley and Robert Louis Stevenson and McCandless admits to having 'raved in the language of novels I knew to be trash, and only read to relax before sleeping' – with twentieth-century satire" (2005: 64). In doing that, *Poor Things* borrows heavily from literary texts of the past, which is most evident in its thematic and technical use of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.* It should be said that *Poor Things* is both a rewriting of and a departure from *Frankenstein*:

> Set in the nineteenth-century Scotland, *Poor Things* is a parodic rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which the male monster is replaced by a sexually voracious woman created by a doctor, Godwin Bysshe Baxter, who places the brain of a fetus within the body of its drowned mother to save the lives of both. Baxter, whose full name evokes both Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin, and her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, is himself a strangely inhuman, mechanical presence, and with his huge size, high-pitched voice, bizarre eating habits and needs for sustaining medicines is much more the monster than she. What seems to be the central narrative of the novel charts their relationship through to her marriage and his death. (Malpas, 2005: 23)

The book draws not only thematically but also technically from *Frankenstein*. On a more crucial note, its very construction can be compared to that of the monster's in that "[t]his manner of 'construction' can thus be extended to encompass the book itself, stitched together in the Frankenstein-method from fact, history and literature: the remnants of 'dead' texts and tales" (Phillip, 2010: 26). It should be noted that although *Poor Things* rewrites *Frankenstein,* it "writes back to rather than imitates" (Procter, 2017: n.pag.) Mary Shelley's novel. It uses the thematic concept of "creating" a "monster," but the "monstrosity" of Bella lies not in her physical distortion but the overabundance of her physical beauty. While the monster of Victor Frankenstein is a nameless creature, Bella, by contrast, is both given shelter and name, thus acquiring a proper place in humanity. Yet, her gender and unconventional ways cause her to be considered abnormal in the very least. Thus, Gray's exposition of *Frankenstein* is a thematic subversion. More importantly for a discussion of postmodern realism, Gray does not only borrow thematically from *Frankenstein* but also makes allusions to the people who are important figures in Mary Shelley's personal life. Godwin Bysshe is a combination of her father's name – William Godwin – and her husband's name – Percy Bysshe Shelley. Moreover, Baxter's name is used as an explicit allusion to God in the novel; Bella Baxter constantly shortens Godwin's name to God, thus alluding to the similarity of his status next to God on her part, while at the same time acknowledging that he is not God:

"Forgive me Bella, forgive me for making you like this."

She opened her eyes and said faintly, "What's that supposed to mean? You aren't our father which art in heaven, God." (52)

Interestingly, though, Duncan Wedderburn refers to Godwin Baxter as Lucifer: "[*l*]*ittle did I know that in THIS melodrama I would play the part of the innocent, trusting Gretchen, that your overwhelming niece was cast as Faust, and that YOU! YES, YOU, Godwin Bysshe Baxter, are SATAN Himself!"* (Gray, 1992: 78), because he thinks that his misadventure with Bella is a terrible plot of his. There is even a chapter entitled "God Answers" in which it is, in fact, Bella who does the explanation and replying instead of God(win).

According to Kaczvinsky, "Gray's point, in both his documentary evidence and his visual artistry, is not to provide, as in the eighteenth-century novel, verisimilitude, but, by applying them to an outrageous tale like the creation of a female Frankenstein […] an odd conjoining of romance and realism, fiction and fact" (2001: 792). The act of implanting the brain of Bella's baby into her skull does not merely signify an à la *Frankenstein* gothic element. It also disrupts the natural order of things, because where the mother should be the central figure, the baby assumes the position of authority; where the mother should be the source of life, the baby becomes the riding force. The mother is turned into a mere vessel, while the baby (or rather her brain) assumes the central position/authority. Cristie March suggests that "[t]his transplantation creates a confounding of upper and lower strata – the contents of the womb transferred to the skull" (2002: 338). More importantly, this transplantation points at a subversion of the conventional order of things, which can be taken as a symbolic act through which Gray also subverts several conventions of novel writing throughout *Poor Things.*

Using Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a point of departure as well as a point of reference, then, Gray writes what one can call an "inbred" novel in which several allusions to well-known texts and personae are present. The inclusion of real-life people within the novel is another postmodern rendition of problematic realism. *Poor Things* rests on the tension between what is fact and what is fiction, both on a metaphorical and a literal level. Gray further complicates the issue with his claims of originality and authenticity of the accounts of such characters both in the Introduction and the Notes, and within the so-called autobiographical account of Archibald McCandless. *Poor Things,* then, promotes a thematization of the "dubious" position of the author as the owner of his book, thus contesting aesthetic originality and textual closure all at once. In this respect, the novel, as Rennison contends, "takes the form of a spoof memoir complete with scholarly annotations by its supposed editor, Alasdair Gray himself" (2005: 63). The "editorial" intrusions both at the beginning and at the end of the book function as a catalyst for providing an air of documentary to the text while a close examination reveals that this is a fake documentary.

In the section entitled "Notes Critical and Historical," Gray provides fake documents and references for the dates and personae in McCandless' account. Ian Phillip suggests that "Gray's familiar mix of close-up realist detail, opinionated polemic, and wildly creative fiction are intermingled to such a degree within these notes as to render what should be a clarifying appendix all the more baffling" (2010: 24). Thus, instead of clarifying and explaining, these notes further complicate the text.

The biographical background of Godwin Baxter and Sir Colin Baxter, for example, is said to be supported via Gervaise Thring's *The Royal Doctors*, yet there is, in fact, no such book in existence or no such author:

> In his history *The Royal Doctors* (published by McMillan, 1963) Gervaise Thring gives most space to Godwin's progenitor, Sir Colin Baxter, but says: "Between 1864 and 1869 his less well-known yet equally gifted son was attendant consultant during the delivery of three princes and a princess royal, and probably saved the life of the Duke of Clarence. For reasons perhaps connected with his precarious health Godwin Baxter withdrew into private life and died in obscurity a few years later. (Gray, 1992: 279)

These fictional texts are interwoven with references to real historical figures such as Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893), who is famous for his application of "the method of observation and methodical description borrowed from neurology" (Degroseiller, 2010: n.pag.) to hysteria. There are also maps, drawings, and portraits of various sorts, some of which are real, and some of which are fabricated. The drawing on King Prempeh's humiliation in this section, for example, is taken from the "29th February 1896 issue of *The Graphic*" (O'Connor, 2008: n.pag.), while Gray cites his source for the drawing, the claimed relationship between the life of General Blessington and the story relayed in its caption is purely fabricated.

In a similar fashion, the opening of the Introduction provides a detailed account of how Alasdair Gray has got into possession of McCandless' text, as well as a detailed list of "proofs" as to the accountability of this text. Throughout pages x-xi, Gray narrates how he has come to know Michael Donnelly, and how he ended up being the editor of this book. He also talks about the alterations he has made in the book. It turns out that during the 70s, Michael Donnelly discovers the book "during the period of wholesale restructuring of huge parts of the city" (Böhnke, 2004: 211). He gives his findings to Gray, and Gray starts working on the "history" behind the texts. Then, he gives a thorough list of "proofs" that support the plausibility of McCandless' account. The proofs provided in the Introduction include a mixture of fictionalized real-life characters and documented fictional data. The Elspeth King mentioned in the Introduction, for example, is not a fictive character but a real curator and a friend of Alasdair Gray's. Likewise, Michael Donnelly, who is said to be King's helper in the Introduction, is also Gray's real-life friend. Both Elspeth King and Michael Donnelly serve to create an air of authenticity to the novel and legitimacy to the found text of Archibald McCandless. Moreover, Gray reinforces the air of authenticity by adding allegedly documentary evidence that he has supposedly gathered from several institutions such as Glasgow University or the Scottish National Library; thus the text has, as Kaczvinsky notes, the "look of a well-researched historical document – factual, unadorned, precise in its details" (2001: 792): After six months of research among the archives of Glasgow University, the Mitchell Library's Old Glasgow Room, the Scottish National Library, Register House in Edinburgh, Somerset House in London and the National Newspaper Archive of the British Library at Colindale I have collected enough material evidence to prove the McCandless story a complete tissue of facts (Gray, 1992: xii). Then, Gray provides a whole documentary with dates and "facts," imitating the style of a chronicle. He uses actual dates complete with short historical accounts related to those dates. For example, he describes minutely the recovery of the body of a pregnant woman from the river as follows: "18 FEBRUARY, 1881: The body of a pregnant woman is recovered from the Clyde. The police surgeon, Godwin Baxter (whose home is 18 Park Circus) certifies death by drowning, and describes her as 'about 25 years old, 5 feet 10 ¾ inches tall, dark brown curling hair, blue eyes, fair complexion and hand unused to rough work; well dressed'" (Gray, 1992: xii). These "facts" are backed up by the account of McCandless, which overlaps with Gray's findings. While there is nothing to alarm the reader in relation to the accountability of this data, what happened in June, 29 in 1882 is definitely refuted in Bella's letter to her great-grand child. Gray the editor claims that "[a]t sunset an extraordinary noise was heard throughout most of the Clyde basin, and though widely discussed in the local press during the following fortnight, no satisfactory explanation was ever founded for it" (Gray, 1992: xii). This incident refers to Baxter's experimental creation of Bella, locating it within an exact duration so as to increase the plausibility of the account. Yet, after reading Bella's letter, it is almost impossible to distinguish what is real and what is fictive in this section.

Interestingly, Gray dismisses any question of authenticity of the account of the found text or the credibility of the data within it by saying that the trust of his reader is enough for him to publish the piece even against the suggestions and objections of Michael Donnelly: "Michael Donnelly has told me he would find the above evidence more convincing if I had obtained official copies of the marriage and death certificates and photocopies of the newspaper reports, but if my readers trust me I do not care what an "expert" thinks" (Gray, 1992: xiii-xiv). However, this trust is not easy to give because the book is deliberately confusing. Böhnke argues that "Gray's

appeal for the trust of his readers is of course also ironic in light of the fact that the (hi)story that follows is far from convincing and coherent. It consists of a cacophony of different and differing voices telling their personal versions of a story which is itself truly bizarre and begs belief" (2004: 192). There is not only a single, unifying voice that narrates the story but also there is a deliberate mixture of the fake and the real, the fictive and the genuine.

Poor Things is nurtured by various different writing styles and genres from science fiction to gothic, from fairy tale to travel writing. This overabundance of stylistic differences is one of the reasons that gives the novel its uniqueness. Yet, the most overtly laid bare issue in the novel is the stance of the author, or rather, the plurality of authors and authorial positions.

As a postmodern realist text, *Poor Things* is a combination of contesting narratives. It is a text, in Richard Todd's words, "uttered by different voices whose authority cannot be determined, so that they resonate against each other internally, perpetually, and inconclusively" (1987: 130). The most overt problematic concerning the position of the author can be observed in the act of Alasdair Gray's situating himself as the editor of the book. It is important to note that Gray's insistence on his being the editor, not the author, is not necessarily a new strategy of writing. Literary history is full of author's claiming to be the editors of their own texts. This can be observed, for example, in the Editorial Notes, the Prefaces, and the Prologues in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders,* and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Gray claims to have "found" the text of Archibald McCandless and Victoria's letter. Found texts and merely "transmitting" them to the reading public has, again, a prevalent and long-established tradition in the history of the novel genre.1 However, rather than using it as a frame to tell his story, "Gray underscores how texts, like memory, can be lost through the accidents of history or the willful disregard of the power structure" (Kaczvinsky, 2001: 797) by structuring the novel within the frame of a lost and found text. Moreover, Gray goes one step further, and he adds his own commentary at the end of the book in the section entitled "Notes Critical and Historical" as well as in the Introduction: "[t]he doctor who wrote this account of his early experiences died in 1911, and readers who know nothing about the daringly experimental history of Scottish medicine will perhaps mistake it for a grotesque fiction" (Gray, 1992: vii). He also comments on the peculiarity of Victoria McCandless' letter: "[t]he accompanying letter was even more perplexing. It was from Victoria McCandless, M. D., widow of the author, telling the descendant who never existed that the book was full of lies" (Gray, 1992: ix). In addition to adding his comments and passing judgment on the text, Alasdair Gray numbers the Introduction with Roman numerals, setting it apart from the rest of the novel and giving, thus, an air of authenticity to the Introduction. In the section entitled "Notes Critical and Historical," Gray seems to be favoring and siding with McCandless's account, and he does it by providing fake documents, and creating an illusion of scientific or objective ground for the story of McCandless, which, ironically, is the account that sounds the most fantastical and improbable:

> Dr. Victoria McCandless was found dead of a cerebral stroke on 3rd December 1946. Reckoning from the birth of her brain in the Humane Society mortuary on Glasgow Green, 18th February 1880, she was exactly sixty-six years, forty weeks, and four days old. Reckoning from the birth of her body in a Manchester slum in 1854, she was ninety-two. (Gray, 1992: 317)

The same favoring can be found in the Introduction in which Gray argues, concerning the letter of Bella Baxter, that "we can easily see that it is the letter of a disturbed woman who wants to hide the truth about her start in life" (Gray, 1992: xi). Thus, Gray the editor evidently sides with McCandless' account while dismissing Bella's letter. This can be taken as a sign of siding with the fantastical as opposed to the more realistically plausible of the two accounts. It can even be related to the very meaning of the word "editor" which comes from the word "to edit" meaning "to select, to correct, and to arrange." Thus, the narratives that comprise the body text of *Poor Things* are edited, which suggests that reality of what happened in the lives of Bella, Baxter, and McCandless come to the reader in a corrected, selected, and arranged mode. The texts are not left to speak for themselves, but the editor cuts in to give proof to the accountability of them or their lack.

Not only the author but also the characters assume the role of an editor; they, too, comment on or criticize the written texts or one another: Bella's letters from Odessa and Gibraltar are read and commented upon by Baxter and McCandless, Wedderburn's letter was examined by Baxter, McCandless' so-called autobiography is assessed and refuted by Bella, and Bella's letter to her great grandchild is evaluated by Alasdair Gray the editor. These acts can be considered what Linda Hutcheon calls "narcissistic narratives." The text closes upon itself in the way the images reflected indefinitely by the mirrors put against each other. All sections of *Poor*

Things, including the Introduction and the "Notes Critical and Historical" by Alasdair Gray, echo one another. *Poor Things,* as such, uses the *mise-en-abyme* technique. According to Brian McHale, "*mise-en-abyme,* wherever it occurs, disturbs the orderly hierarchy of ontological level (worlds within worlds), in effect *short-circulating* the ontological structure, and thus foregrounding it" (1987: 14). The existence of clashing narratives within the same body of writing attests to this. The world created by McCandless is disrupted by the presence of Bella's letter since it claims to deduce a different story from the same set of events. In addition, the presence of an editor who liberally comments on and provides documents for the narrative of McCandless and for the authenticity of the existence of the characters further reinforces the ontological uncertainty.

As Simon Malpas argues,"*Poor Things* is irreducibly plural, made up as it is of a range of competing voices and styles, and fragmentary in that these voices do not form a coherent whole but continually contradict and undermine each other" (2005: 24). Godwin retells the extraordinary circumstances that resulted in the creation of Bella, and he adds that believing in this story is up to McCandless: "[b]ut you need not believe this if it disturbs you" (Gray, 1992: 42). This is an example of one of the many instances in which one character either questions or tries to justify the validity of a narrated event within the novel. Thus, *Poor Things* is both a self-conscious and a self-reflexive novel.

Malpas further suggests that "the conflict between the fantastical story told by McCandless and his wife's far more mundane account of the same events presented through the lens of nineteenth-century medicine, generates a range of questions about what is real and what might really be going on" (2005: 24). The intertextual and pla(y)giarist nature of McCandless' text is not only pointed out by Alasdair Gray the editor but also by Bella Baxter who accuses the text of being a dreadful combination of the texts of the Victorian age:

> You, dear reader, have now two accounts to choose between and there can be no doubt which is most probable. My second husband's story positively stinks of all that was morbid in that most morbid of centuries, the nineteenth. He has made a sufficiently strange story stranger still by stirring into it episodes and phrases to be found in Hoggs' Suicide's grave with additional ghouleries from the works of Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe. What morbid Victorian fantasy has he NOT filched from? I find traces of The Coming Race, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Dracula, Trilby, Rider Haggard's She, The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes, and, alas, Alice Through the Looking-Glass; a gloomier book than the sunlit Alice in Wonderland. He has even plagiarized work by two very dear friends: G.B. Shaw's Pygmalion and the scientific romances of Herbert George Wells. (Gray, 1992: 272-3)

Bella not only makes reference to the prominent nineteenth-century authors and texts, she also claims to be friends with two of them. By doing so, she contributes to the confusion of fact and fiction. As such, the text turns the factual into fictional and the fictional into factual.

Another example with regards to the self-conscious and self-reflexive mode of the novel can be observed in the intrusive voices, whichalmost constantly interrupt the narrative with their commentary on the nature of these accounts. Throughout his letter, for example, Wedderburn tries to justify his truth-claims by drawing a meticulous parallelism between Biblical prophecies and the life of Bella and Baxter. (Gray, 1992: 95-7). "Modern facts" are backed up by references to historically accurate data and personae such as Adam Smith, William Thomson, and Queen Elizabeth. Baxter comments on the claims of Wedderburn, passing judgment on them. His distinctive voice is distinguishable from the main body of the letter due to the use of a different typography. In an interview, Gray himself comments on his preference for various different typographies in his novels:

> I use a variety of typefaces where this makes the story clearer. Thus in *Poor Things* the letters of Bella and Wedderburn are printed in italic, a type based on handwriting rather than Roman chiseling. In *1892 Janine* – an interior monologue novel – the speaker has a nervous breakdown conveyed by three columns of different typefaces on the same pages, each a stream of thought or feelings at war with the rest. I do not know how else I could have done it. Since a lot of people buy these books I think they give more pleasure than pain. (Axelrod, 1995: 103)

Furthermore, the novel is full of drawings, which promote the mismatching of the factual with the fictional. Although drawn by Gray himselfthe portraits in the novel are attributed to William Strang (1859-1921). In order to reinforce the idea, the portraits have the initials "W.S." at the bottom-left, and sometimes at the bottom right. The other medical illustrations that can be found in McCandless' book are attributed to McCandless, though

they are, again, drawn by Gray himself. Additionally, the air of authenticity is maintained by the reference to the famous anatomy book, *Gray's Anatomy*: "I have illustrated the chapter notes with some nineteenth-century engravings, but it was McCandless who filled spaces in his books with illustrations from the first edition of *Gray's Anatomy*: probably because he and his friend Baxter learned the kindly art of healing from it. The grotesque design opposite is by Strang, and was stamped in silver upon the batters of the original volume" (Gray, 1992: xiv). Thus, there is a caricaturization of the drawings found in the original *Gray's Anatomy,* since these drawings, too, are made by Alasdair Gray. In an interview, Gray explains that these portraits are based on the faces of people around him, and, in the case of Jean Martin Charcot, on Montesquieu:

MA: On whom did you base your illustrations in *Poor Things?* Jean Martin Charcot appears to look a lot like Montesquieu. Were there models for these?

> AG: Charcot was indeed based on Boldini's portrait of Montesquieu. The portrait of McCandless was taken from Paul Currie, of Baxter from Bernard MacLaverty, of Bella from Moray McCalhine. The first two are friends, the third a friend and wife. […] The face of de la Pole Blessington and Blaydon Hattersley were inventions. (Axelrod, 1995: 104)

As these examples also indicate, *Poor Things* presents itself as a blending of fact and fiction, not only in the written text but also in the graphics, drawings, and etchings added by Alasdair Gray. Gray re-creates a nineteenth-century reality by freely inserting references to people who actually lived during those times and also by alluding to famous literary texts of the time within his fictional world. However, the presence of both the Introduction and the Notes Critical and Historical, disrupts the seamlessness of this construct. According to Rhind, "*Poor Things* flaunts its own textuality in multiple inter-related ways, foregrounding its status as both narrative and artifact. As part of this, it also highlights its sources, both the texts – real or fictitious – assumed within its diegetic reality and the real-world texts – historical or fictional – which Gray utilizes in its composition" (2008: 172). Thus, through the meta-commentaries, he exhibits a confusion of the ontological certainty the reader may get from the nineteenth-century atmosphere. All these are indicators of what postmodern realist texts do: there is a deliberate rootedness in the realist effect while this is exposed by the existence of clashing ontological levels, as well as by the novel's reconstruction of a world of conflicting narratives. Gray's novel goes then, beyond a mere rewriting and posits itself as a postmodern realist text, in its combination of realist conventions, such as attention to detail, thorough descriptions and characterization with overt postmodern techniques such as self-reflexivity, irony, and parody.

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