

A Portrait of Bella Caledonia: Reading National Allegory in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*

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Commentary on Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* has long recognised the central role reserved for processes of interpretation. An early review by Edwin Morgan noted that the novel is 'set up in such a way that the reader's delight in documentary and pseudo-documentary devices is almost taken for granted, since the actual narrative line is relatively thin'.^[1] Such mixed praise may suggest these devices are mere compensation or camouflage for the novel's lack of substance; on the contrary, the metafictional techniques of *Poor Things* are the necessary formal realisation of its thematic centring upon the interpretative. The substance of the narrative lies less in the thin events of its diegetic world than in the far denser network of interpretation erected around them. While the novel's central aporia concerns the competing ontologies implied by the accounts of McCandless and Victoria — each refutes the other — the central paradox of *Poor Things* rests upon wildly different representations of Bella/Victoria *within* these accounts, generated by intradiegetic narrators' differing conceptions and interpretations of events. The novel's true complexity operates via narrative disagreements less fundamental than the twinned and incommensurate accounts of Bella and Victoria, in which characters in less privileged narrative positions offer contradictory representations of their shared world; the ensuing discrepancies are readily reducible to differences in characters' interpretations of events. The accounts of Bella's life given by Grimes, by Blessington's lawyer and in Wedderburn's letter are acts of representation which contradict McCandless' own, yet are safely undermined through being subsumed within his narrative. Their further representations of Bella may be approached not as ontological but as epistemological problems. Outwith McCandless' narrative the process of reading enacted on the novel, and that enacted *within* the novel, become closer still. Victoria's account is not only her self-representation, but an interpretation of her husband's narrative, a process continued by 'Gray' in further paratexts. As both textualized interpretation and 'historical' artefact, *Poor Things* concern with the process of reading history spills over into that of reading itself.

Non-verbal signs are especially prominent in the various hermeneutic dilemmas presented *within* the diegetic world of *Poor Things*. Thus Bell's cranial scar is given a series of incommensurate origins: in Victoria's Dickensian narrative, it results from her father's violence; for McCandless, it marks Bell's brain-transplant; Wedderburn describes it as '*the mark of Cain*'.^[2] An objective physical trace doubling as a textual reference, Bella's scar evokes Randall Stevenson's observation that 'Gray has restored to Scottish writing a sense of the book as significant object, and of the potential for integral – or sometimes almost ironic – relations between verbal and visual'.^[3] While this may help to draw *Poor Things*' illustrations into its network of signification, Stevenson goes on to repeat Morgan's criticism, adding the 'possibility that extravagant presentation may be less an enhancement of the text than compensation for lack of imagination or substance in the written word' (44). Where the strength of the written word lies in the network of re-interpretation existing between narratives, the integration of visual elements into similar intertextual relationships must represent its enhancement rather than mere compensation. The degree to which this integration is achieved can best be judged by exploring the role of a single visual element within this network: the portrait of the central character.

There are at least four features within Bella's portrait which mark it as unique among Strang's engravings (45). The first of these is the suggestion of non-realist signification within the picture itself. Where the other portraits depict their subjects in costumes readily associated with their presumed appearance, Bella's clothing is explicitly unlike that of her textual representation; she herself urges the reader to 'ignore the Gainsborough hat' (251), among other features. While it is possible to read a metaphorical element into even the more realist portraits – note the prominence of Blessington's medals and sword-hilt (209) – here such an element is more obvious, and more obviously an effect of the artist. Tellingly, the hat which Victoria would ignore – more accurately, its crowning thistles - feeds, along with the plaid over her shoulder, into a strongly metaphorical reading.

A more obvious alteration is the landscape against which Bella is foregrounded, as against the featureless shading surrounding the other subjects. As Dorothy McMillan has observed, this panorama combines a diversity of Scottish landmarks, including 'the Forth Bridge, the Wallace Monument, the Edinburgh Observatory, industrial installations, sea and hills'.^[4] Moreover, this evocation of the Scottish landscape not only frames Bella but, as Kirsten Stirling suggests, implies even closer association, in that '[t]he composition of the portrait is such that the lines of Bella's body seem to be a continuation of the landscape behind her'.^[5] This linkage serves to introduce a metaphorical model of a woman as symbolic of a nation. It is Bella's portrait which leads McMillan to hail her as 'the spirit of Scotland' (87), while Stirling, although finding substantial textual evidence, again locates the 'initial stimulus' (269) for this reading of the character with this illustration. Similarly, Johanna Tiitinen notes that the portrait 'is an illustration

that leads to *further* interpretations of the novel'[6], as if holding these pictorially-stimulated interpretations separate from those originating solely in response to the text.

This dual reference, whereby the portrait serves to represent and interpret Bella both as a diegetically real character and as a metaphorical textual representation, is echoed in the third difference between this and the other portraits in *Poor Things*. As with the more realist portraits, the import of Bella's picture depends on reference to a caption, a further paratext. With the other portraits these captions suggest a simple correspondence between image and text, the same 'thing' represented in different media. Bella's caption adds an epithet which transforms her into 'Bella Caledonia'. Again, this works to assert a metaphorical reading of Bella, in both pictorial and textual forms. As if to reinforce this reliance on mutual interpretation, where the strips on which captions are written are effectively divided from the other portraits, Bella's hands lie over this edge. As well as openly engaging with the text in this way, the position of her arms also suggests that she is leaning on the border between picture and paratext; this metaphorical figure quite literally imposes herself on her text, or else rests upon her caption.

Any exploration of the significance of this visual artefact as interpretive filter to the text must trace its metaphor within the text itself. Dietmar Böhnke questions the validity of such a reading on the grounds that 'this interpretation certainly has its limits (and there are too many contradictions in the novel to make it really convincing)'. [7] In effect, Böhnke seizes upon as a flaw in this reading qualities which *Poor Things*' contradiction-strewn intertextual network posits as flaws in *all* reading. Gray has written that '[m]etaphor is one of thought's most essential tools. It illuminates what would otherwise be totally obscure. But the illumination is sometimes so bright that it dazzles instead of revealing'. [8] Partly for this reason, Gray's figures often alternate between realist and allegorical interpretative contexts at different moments. Within the purely metaphorical mode similar shifts occur between different, often contradictory, supportable readings, a condition which Fredric Jameson suggests as endemic to the mode. 'If allegory has once again become somehow congenial to us today', he writes, '...it is because the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysema of the dream'. [9] It is in terms of such discontinuity that the individual elements of any reading of Bella Caledonia must be understood.

The natural beginning for a reading of Bella Caledonia is clearly the origin of Bella herself, though this is neither natural nor clear. With each interpretation laid onto the character her origins are multiplied, yet all are united in their artificiality. Hiding Bella's status as 'surgical fabrication' (35), Godwin gives her 'extinct, respectable...[parents who] will be better than none' (35). This alibi doubles her fabricated origins / origin in fabrication, later supplemented by Wedderburn's supernatural suggestion that Bella is perhaps spawned by 'Lucifer Baxter' (94), 'the Father of All

Lies' (95). This particular 'lie', however, is fathered not by Baxter but by Wedderburn. In ascribing to her this newly fabricated origin, he in fact fabricates a further Bella unlike that appearing elsewhere in the text. Similarly, the origin of Bella offered by Blessington's staff takes 'Bella' as a false identity assumed by Lady Blessington, and so created linguistically rather than physically. Victoria's narrative partially legitimates this origin by confirming the co-identity of Bella and Blessington's wife, but does so by rendering McCandless' suggestion of her origin a double fabrication; here the Frankenstein method is 'a cunning lie' (274).

This emphasis on Bella's hyper-constructedness has led some interpreters of 'Bella Caledonia' to carry across the novel's concern with the problems of the narrative process into problems with the narrative's subject. Stirling, drawing attention to Bella's artificial construction, be it physically by Godwin or textually by McCandless, notes that '[i]n either case, Bella functions as the incarnation of men's fantasies' (272). In terms of a national allegory, however, Stirling also suggests that national and narratological concerns may be separable, offering a possible interpretation which describes not a feature of narrative but of Scotland: 'her internal construction...representing a monstrous state' (273). McMillan's reading, meanwhile, partially relocates Bella's artificiality as the artificiality of Scotland, observing that 'it is a nation that has to be invented, it will not simply evolve in the natural way of things' (87). Tiitinen, evoking the union of nation and narration which has become common critical currency after Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community', extends this aspect of Scottish identity to become a necessary dimension of all nations.[10] Here the origin(s) in fabrication ascribed to Bella becomes a means by which Gray reveals 'his awareness of nations as artificial constructs' (Tiitinen, p. 166).

There is a case to be made for understanding Bella's origins in each of these contexts. Beginning with the last observation, it is clear from the novel's concern with the (re)construction of the past that Gray is aware of the narrative form in which history becomes comprehensible. *Poor Things'* Russian, explaining to Bella that 'a nation is only as old as its literature' (114), might perhaps be seen to prize the importance of narratives as artefacts, a notion echoing Gray's claim that '[g]reat literature is the most important part of history'.[11] Gray has also offered an implicit valorisation of the role of history in fashioning national identity by basing much of his argument in *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* around Scotland's history. Narrating Scotland's history from Pictland to the present, and beyond to 2020, Gray attempts to unite Scots within a single narrative. Suggesting the same function on a spatial, rather than temporal axis, he similarly hopes that identification with and in narrative will, via the precursors his story provides, 'persuade incomers to think of themselves as Scots'.[12] The Russian repeats in theory what Gray here shows in practice. Pushkin, in taking Russia as a literary subject, 'made Russia a state of mind – made it real' (116). As with Gray's attempt to forge a Scottish identity, this act unifies a people through co-identification, where before '[o]ur aristocracy spoke French, our bureaucracy was Prussian and

the only true Russians – the peasants – were despised by rulers and bureaucracy alike' (116). Similarly, the temporal dimension of narrative is crucial to both the imaginative formation of Russia and the identification of its inhabitants with this, making them 'aware of our tragic past – our peculiar present – our enigmatic future' (116).

In this context Bella Caledonia's construction is far from monstrous. Since the only means of making a nation 'real' are artificial, she cannot be set in opposition to an 'authentic' organic identity, which is itself illusory. Here the Russian's identification of Walter Scott as Pushkin's contemporary recalls Scott's development of the historical novel, a form in which, as Cairns Craig has commented, 'the accidental boundaries of the nation were formed into those symbolic systems which would provide readers with a sense of the fundamental unity and purpose of their social world'.^[13] Yet if Scott stands as Scotland's localised manifestation of this function, other comments within this episode undermine Bella's situation as an exemplar of all nations. Firstly, literature's ability to construct national identity is not here the function of a single work, but of a national tradition. To the Russian, both Scott and Pushkin operate within national literary traditions which continue with Dickens and Eliot for the former, Gogol and Tolstoi for the latter. Yet, adding Shakespeare to this first list, the Russian asserts that, unlike Pushkin, Scott does not originate his tradition; correcting his comparison between Shakespeare and Tolstoi, he tells Bella 'you had Shakespeare centuries before Walter Scott' (116).

The Russian's conception of national identity, then, signals towards not only the historical novel, but to something like Eliot's organic tradition. That he openly asserts this as Bella's property is clearly problematic. Bella realises this herself, disclaiming ownership not only personally — 'I had read none of them!' (116) — but in terms of national identity, explaining that 'Burns was a great Scottish poet who lived before Scott, and Shakespeare and Dickens et cetera were all English' (116). This is to no avail, for 'he could not grasp the difference between Scotland and England' (117). Yet, if Bella vocally resists such absorption, on the metaphorical level she hints at compliance. Shifting the question of a national literary identity to its realisation in the mind of the individual, the Russian explains that 'people who care nothing for their country's stories and songs...are like people without a past – without a memory – they are half people' (116). Ignorant of the writers mentioned, Bella might be correct to see here a reflection of her own amnesia. By this identification, however, she transfers her place in this problem back from that of an individual reader to that of a nation, wondering if 'perhaps, like Russia, I am making up for lost time' (116). With a Scottish literary tradition going unrecognised by the Russian, and metaphorically lost with Bella's memories, it would appear that Scotland has been not only constructed, but erased.

In considering Bella's lack of memory there is a tension between interpreting this in the terms in which it is represented to and by Bella, and the terms by which it is known to McCandless;

between reading it as the loss of memory or as the absence of a past. Introducing his own account of the Scottish literary tradition, Gray engages with, and to an extent accepts, the critical tropes of both erasure and disjuncture. Announcing his project as necessary because 'after Arnold the teaching of literature in British universities allocated most Scottish writing to a footnote or ignored it', Gray suggests the failure to endow the Scottish tradition with cultural representation.[14] The system of values through which the 'British' canon has been constructed is explicitly noted as an English one, no matter that this goes unrecognised by its enforcers, 'English nationalists who did not know their limitations' (*Short Survey*, xi). The ill education of 'Bell Baxter [the] total ignoramus' (*Poor Things*, 116) is located in the cultural amnesia of Bella Caledonia.

Gray's account of the formation of a British literary tradition shows many similarities with other critical writing on this topic. Identifying the construction of the British canon with implicit English nationalism, he parallels Craig's conclusion that this project was aimed at bolstering the self-image of Britain's core culture to the detriment of its peripheries. Indeed, for Craig the popular adoption of Eliot's organic model was achieved precisely through its ability to do this, its message being 'what the core wanted to know of itself – that it was, *by definition*, the only whole and complete culture'. [15] Further, the establishment of this core rests in part upon its absorption of other traditions, 'taking to themselves all significant achievements in the periphery that can be accommodated without too great a stress' (19), as Gray has British universities accommodate Scott ('accepted as an honorary Englishman because his influence throughout Europe could not be ignored' (*Short Survey*, x)). Those left behind in this shifting canonical focus thus fall into the amnesiac abyss where a Scottish tradition might be. The appreciation of Scottish culture as absence receives more direct comment in *Lanark*. Here combining the functions of both Bella and the Russian, Thaw explains to McAlpin that '[i]maginatively Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves' (243). Like the Russian, Thaw links an area's identity to cultural production: 'if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively' (ibid). Like Bella, Thaw is in a sense amnesiac, unaware of previous representations. How far this represents an absence of Glaswegian culture, and how much its non-availability, is debatable. Douglas Gifford, while insistent that 'we must beware of interpreting Gray's satirical treatment of his protagonist as Gray's own view', is nevertheless tempted to implicate Gray in the discourse of amnesia.[16] His principal evidence here is *Lanark's* index of plagiarisms. While references abound for both contemporary Scottish writers and international writers of all times, Gifford notes, 'Burns, Douglas Brown, Carlyle, Hume and MacDonald...are the only reference to Scottish literature before the twentieth century' (34). Yet the tentativeness with which Gifford applies this reading recalls several uncertainties in approaching *Lanark's* often playfully self-undermining index. Further, Gifford's suggested cause for this amnesia, that Scottish culture 'fails to transmit the information

regarding its past achievements' (34), clearly repeats Gray's own concerns. Ultimately, then, the picture he develops of Gray as one of 'a long line of Scottish writers who believed their work spoke of their author's lonely creative isolation' (34), bears a potential to be read as an identity self-consciously assumed by Gray in order to represent, and perhaps question, this common trope.

If the displacement of a Scottish literary tradition by an 'organic' English canon represents one means by which Bella's amnesia may be approached, another is the failure of this tradition, its self-erasure by disjuncture. Mentioning several precursors for his literary survey, Gray explicitly identifies this critical trope, commenting that '[t]hese surveys often presented Scots literature as a growth stunted by catastrophe, a grim view got by comparing Scotland's literary history, not with that of Germany, Poland, or other nations that had suffered equal or worse turmoils, but by comparing it with England' (*Short Survey*, xi). This point again chimes with Craig, who questions the validity of adopting Britain's core culture as template for its peripheries since 'core cultures are not normal...cores are few and peripheries many' (*Out of History*, 116). In place of this template, Craig lays emphasis on polyvalent and contradictory influences within a 'single' tradition. Similarly, the political and economic 'turmoils' which Gray locates as a key difference between the Scottish and English traditions appear, not as calamitous 'events now beyond human control' responsible for the 'demise' of Scottish culture, but as aspects of the forces shaping that culture (*Short Survey*, xii). These may even take on a positive slant, historical forms of the impetus behind the process by which 'poets and narrators peacefully reinvented Scots culture from early times to the Twentieth Century' (ibid). Yet, if this realisation of Scotland-as-reinvention recalls Bella-as-reinvention, each new life remains similarly dependent on the death of the old, and creates an identity self-diagnosed as half a person. Gray, although accepting the actual occurrence of these turmoils in Scottish history, is reluctant to make them scapegoats for the demise of Scottish identity. At the same time his commitment to engaging with previous reconceptions of Scottish identity entails the incorporation of narratives which have encoded these incidents with just this signification. *Bella Caledonia* is both a narrative and a purposively inclusive metanarrative of Scottish history, with all the interpretative problems this entails.

One key moment of national disjuncture which might be expected to receive an ambiguous reception in the novel is the Act of Union. *Poor Things'* evocation of this theme consists of repeated, fragmentary suggestions which highlight the union as a focus within the novel without elaborating a coherent response to the event itself. The means by which these suggestions are raised again show Gray's engagement with previous narratives, recalling common tropes from the discourse of the union. These tropes range widely in both their obvious relevance to the union and their presence in the novel, from Blessington's incarceration of Bella – recalling, perhaps, such English attitudes as '[w]e have catcht Scotland and will keep her fast' (*Why Scots Should*

Rule Scotland, 46) – to an extended system of correspondences centring upon Bella's orphanhood, a feature common to all accounts of her genesis. In the Frankenstein hypothesis Bella has no natural parents, and both her 'mother' and her 'self' must die before she is born, while the alibi which conceals this fact gives her parents both fictional and dead. Victoria, although she loses only her mother, effectively orphans herself in abandoning her family. Reinforcing this theme, the novel surrounds Bella with further orphans, from Godwin to the motherless baby who sparks her social conscience.

To Alan Riach, the trope of the orphan in Scottish literature can be traced to the situation which the union engendered, where 'Scotland flourishes, culturally distinct, but...is also an absent political entity in search of its own statehood...orphaned from itself and travelling in a world without closure'.^[17] As this search suggests, the aspect of self-identity from which Scotland is orphaned is, for Riach, its political autonomy, clearly useful in approaching the novel's concern with the act of union. Yet, in describing a 'flourishing' Scottish culture simultaneously 'orphaned from itself', Riach's terminology also invites a model of orphanhood conceived in terms of cultural disjuncture. That this may be of particular relevance for *Poor Things* can be seen in the sense in which orphanhood proceeds not only from parental demise, but from their being forgotten. Of Baxter's mother we are told '[n]othing definite was known' (15); he himself claims to 'have no memory of her' (18). The illegitimate McCandless buries his mother unmemorialised until 'nobody remembered the position of the grave' (9). Neither of his parents are named in the text. Godwin gives us his father's name, but does not give him the name father. His mother, too, may be misrecognised, if we follow the gossip that 'Sir Colin kept her as his maidservant...silently passing plates' (15). Victoria's father explains how 'you are queer Vicky, and the fact that you cannot remember your own dad proves it' (224).

A second trope by which Bella Caledonia recalls the act of union is marriage. As Donald Kaczvinski has suggested, the close identification of Blessington with the British Empire might suggest their marriage as an allegorical condemnation of the union.^[18] That this marriage predates Bella's creation – and thus that the union somehow predates Scotland – need not militate against such a reading, for Gray suggests elsewhere that it was the anxiety of their position within Britain which prompted the 'elegiac patriotism' by which Scots recreated their identity (*Short Survey*, xii). However it is not this marriage but Bella's couplings with Wedderburn which are referred to as her 'Acts of Union' (83). That these acts may be equated with marriage is suggested in Bella's name for him, Wedder, and the frequency with which she 'calls fornication wedding' (308). In any case, her ambiguous feelings towards bigamy – talking 'as if her engagement to marry [McCandless] and her elopement with Wedderburn were simultaneous' (70) and wondering '[w]hy should I *not* have a spare military husband somewhere' (89) – suggest that Bella's 'marriages' to Blessington and Wedderburn may be considered in parallel. If so, the fitness

of Wedderburn as figure of the Empire almost matches that of his predecessor, for although Scottish he is clearly an imperial beneficiary. Indeed, to Wedderburn, the Empire was 'invented in Glasgow' (95), through the industrial application of scientific advancements. Wedderburn's Empire is therefore, unlike Blessington's, neither a patriotic nor a military concept, but an economic one, and one which recalls a second dimension to the union of which Gray is aware, that '[m]any Scots, of course, were junior partners in England's imperial business venture. It enriched them' (*Short Survey*, xii).

Wedderburn's own attitudes to 'wedding' are suggestive in this regard. Unlike his previous philandering, Wedderburn desires a more lasting union with Bella. As it transpires their relationship lasts only for as long as they travel, strengthening the link between this union and foreign adventures in a way Bella recognises, this being 'our wedding trip' (124). At the same time, this union is also intertwined with economic considerations, Wedderburn admitting that he expects a 'few thousand per annum' from their marriage (82). The real economic danger involved, however, is identified by McCandless when he asserts that British law will never recognize a married woman's property rights, hinting here towards Scotland's curious position as both junior partner in Empire and powerless stateless nation, enriched by a 'marriage' which robs her of her rights to riches (67). As events proceed, it is the more positive aspect of this relationship which is highlighted, for it is not Wedderburn but Bella who profits from their trip. As the title given to her letters suggests, this evocation of Scotland's involvement in Empire is represented as an educational process forming the nation's character. It provides the means of encountering the self, seen in her conversation with the Russian, and of encountering the Empire, in the persons of the 'Missionaries', Hooker and Astley (127). With the latter pair this didactic dimension is foregrounded, as are two very different conceptions of the imperial project. Hooker, a literal missionary, expounds upon imperialism conceived in terms of education; employed to 'teach the natives of Peking the language and faith of the Christian Bible' (131), he justifies empire in terms of an innate Anglo-Saxon superiority which might nevertheless be transmitted to others, Britain and America 'like teachers in a playground of children who do not want to know that the school exists' (139). Astley, meanwhile, is not a missionary in such a conventional sense, his own reasons for travelling purely economic ('forging trade links with the Russian Bear' (137)). His faith is nevertheless as central to his vision of empire as Hooker's, with the inevitability of inequality asserted by his 'Malthusiasm' (132) justifying Britain's imperial expansion as surely as Hooker's Christianity. Without Hooker's divine sanction the British Empire no longer the product of a superior race, only the latest of the many peoples to 'have had their turn' (161). Gone too is the attendant notion of imperial responsibility.

For all that Astley claims to 'have no wish to spread [my faith]' (133), this, in a series of lectures delivered to Bell, is exactly what he attempts. That Astley may be taken as another representative

of the British Empire is clear, and like those previously encountered he invites Bella to join him in matrimony, a proposal which both precedes these lectures and returns as their conclusion. Having failed to accept the lectures' amoral worldview, Bella is offered in marriage the possibility of acting morally within this framework. What Astley offers, in effect, is partnership in a microcosm of empire, an estate with a 'farm on it and a whole village – think of the power you will have' (163). Yet Bella's would be a subsidiary control, effective only through the centre, 'bully[ing Astley] into improving the drains and lowering the rents of a whole community' (ibid). By installing Bella in power on behalf of Astley's tenants, rather than ceding power to them, this offer may also subtly recall Hooker's imperial myth. Accordingly, she recognises this situation for what it is, an appeal to self-interest masked as altruism, 'a cunning inducement to lead a totally selfish life' (164), and not only rejects it but resolves to become a socialist. It is not so curious, then, that Astley suggests the circular scar which Bell leaves in anger on his hand as their 'engagement ring' (153), partnership in exploitation and the development of conscience here somehow combined.

Mapping Bella's relationship with Astley onto the British Empire is problematic in two ways. First, that Scotland is here figured as the Empire's conscience, inherently more progressive than her partner-nation, is a common self-congratulatory myth expounded by the Scottish Left, reflected in the relative positions of Astley and Bella. This may again represent Gray's recognition of previous meta-narratives. It may also be taken as proscriptive, encouraging modern-day Scots to embody this value system regardless of its historical accuracy. This is a notion implied in McMillan's suggestion that Gray's recurrent slogan 'work as if you live in the early days of a better nation' – embossed upon the novel's cover – is one of the 'unmistakeable ways readers are invited to think of Bella in terms of national allegory' (86). This temporal bilocation of allegorical reference, whereby Gray's models refer simultaneously to Scotland's historical past and desired present would also help to negotiate the second, more basic problem represented by Bella's response to Astley: her rejection of his proposal. The repeated rejection of union within the British Empire which Bella enacts clearly stands in contrast to historical reality. This failure is resolved by projecting this rejection onto the future. Something of the inter-relationship between Bella Caledonia's potential temporal foci can be traced in Wedderburn's cashing in his *Scottish Widows and Orphans* shares to pay for their increasingly expensive trip (88). In recalling the company's post-Crimean origins, this detail suggests Scotland's position in underwriting the human costs of the Empire, as well as invoking further post-union orphans. Mention of the name also allows Gray to comment upon the present, noting that as part of 'Conservative publicity preceding a General Election, the chairman of *Scottish Widows* announced that if Scotland achieved an independent parliament the company's head office would move to England' (286). In highlighting the potential cost of independence, however, this point also suggests a significance to the specified Scottishness of the 'Clydesdale and North of Scotland banknotes' (178) with which Bella

purchases her independence through paying for Wedderburn's return. To Bella independence is worth this cost, since she 'would now earn what [she] needed by working for a living' (179). The clear echo of Gray's sloganeering on work contained in Bella's subsequent pride that she is 'no longer a parasite' (180) is however problematized by the fact that her 'work' is, at least initially, prostitution. That the money by which Caledonia supports herself also supports an English madam 'who looked like Queen Victoria' (171) reminds us of the historical, as well as proleptic, nature of her metaphor.

If Bella's relationship to Astley offers commentary on various realisations of a romanticised socialist Scotland with reference to multiple historical periods, her adventures with Wedderburn show a similar function with regard to a less positively realised ideal. Wedderburn's 'bastard bairns', 'put to good domestic agricultural use on the expanding frontier of our Empire' (80), again associate the cultural erasure of orphanhood as described by Alan Riach and embodied by Bella with Scotland's economy. He also engages, through use of such a 'Scoticism' for its 'truer human warmth than *babies* or *children*' (ibid); in the sentimentalisation of Scottish culture which Gray locates as an effect of imperial involvement. This theme recurs in Wedderburn's letter in association with union-implying sexual intercourse, be it with Bella herself, post-coitally transformed into Mary Queen of Scots, or his previous conquests, conducted within 'the moral code enjoyed, preached and practised by Scotland's National Bard' (ibid). In the context of this sentimentalisation, the Russian's positioning of Scott within the question of Scotland's cultural disjuncture finds a further level of meaning, Scott himself often being held to have 'invented a Scotland which displaced the real Scotland in favour of his romantic illusions' (Craig, *Modern Scottish Novel*, 117). Gray's elaboration of a purposefully inclusive metanarrative again leaves room for Scott-land as a potentially valid formulation of Scottish identity. The evocation of such associations in Bella's portrait are, after all, one means by which Gray's national metaphor is established.

Yet already Victoria's own comments on this aspect of her portrait – her own self-image closer to the myth of Clydesidism – work to question its validity. McCandless' description on the page opposite the portrait of 'churned effluent from the upstream paper-mill' appearing as 'heaps of filthy green froth, each the size and shape of a lady's bonnet' (44) does the same, juxtaposing this romanticised portrait with Scotland's industrial reality. Again, the novel's engagement is not solely with the past, and neither is Scott the sole target of such criticism. A further target is suggested by Martinez, who sees in Bella's unnatural grandfather, Colin Baxter, a premonition of his twentieth-century photographer namesake, whose 'romantic depictions of both Highland and urban scenes transformed the Scottish postcard industry'.^[19] More generally, Martinez suggests that *Poor Things* stages a broader engagement with respect to the refashioning of Glaswegian history and identity undertaken in its year as European City of Culture. In this Gray was not alone, with many

Glaswegian writers voicing criticism of events surrounding this title, both individually and within the loose collective of the 'Worker's City' protest group. A typical criticism can be seen in Farquahar McLay's foreword to the *Workers City* anthology, where he questions the image promulgated of vibrant Glaswegian culture. 'Looking at the social, cultural and economic deprivation in working-class areas of Glasgow' he writes, 'and thinking about the rigours of the new Social Fund and Poll Tax to come, [the Culture City title] sounded like blatant and cynical mockery'.^[20] The Workers City group is of particular relevance to *Poor Things*, in part because of their overt questioning of the City of Culture vision of the 'Merchant's City'. Their highlighting, in the words of James Kelman, of 'the grossness of the fallacy that Glasgow somehow exists because of the tireless efforts of a tiny patriotic coalition of fearless eighteenth century entrepreneurs and far-sighted politicians', finds many echoes in the novel.^[21] Gray's history both repeats this image of enlightened philanthropy and undermines it, drawing out the realities of working class Victorian life in a city whose 'useless over-ornamentation was paid for out of ... profits squeezed from stunted lives of children, women and men' (*Poor Things*, 275).

A more immediately practical impetus for the group's formation was the attempt to oust Elspeth King from control of the People's Palace, helping both she and her colleague Michael Donnelly in a fight 'not for their careers, but to safeguard the place itself, along with its tremendous collection of socio-historical relics'.^[22] These sympathies are shared by Gray, who has suggested possible political motivations behind the council's rejection of King, as '[s]he dislikes the sale of public property to private companies, and the leaders of the district council wish to sell Glasgow Green near the Palace to English companies who will turn it into a vast commercial leisure centre'.^[23] Both of these forms in which history may be excluded – be it re-written or devalued – are combined in Godwin's message to Victoria, which is also Gray's message to Scotland: 'Forget nothing...your worst experiences...will enlarge your mind if you remember them with intelligent interest' (*Poor Things*, 262). Yet if Bella's life expresses the history of Scotland, this history centres around its own amnesiac disjuncture. In the context of the Culture City establishment, this amnesia becomes not only an aspect of Scottish identity, but an effort to memorialise official forgetting. The deadpan irony of Gray's introduction suggests a conflict between official recreations of identity and his own, observing that Donnelly only had time to read the McCandless narrative when '[h]e left the People's Palace in 1990 when Glasgow had been declared the official Culture Capital of Europe by Margaret Thatcher's Minister of Arts' (x).

The trans-world incursion of Donnelly into the novel represents more than a ludic instance of ontological play, for all that it evokes the delight which Morgan finds in *Poor Things*' pseudo-documentary conceits. In highlighting the permeable boundaries between history and fiction in this way, Donnelly's inclusion may be read, in postmodern terms, as suggesting history's innate fictionality. From another perspective, informed more by the role played by such incursions in

nineteenth-century literature, his appearance might be approached as an attempt to persuade the reader of the historical veracity of the fictional construct in which he has been embedded. A response more in keeping with *Poor Things*' meditation on fiction and history would be to regard Donnelly's appearance as a further recollection of the novel's insistence on the shared narrative form of these seemingly opposed concepts. Just as the real-world Donnelly was responsible for the rescue and preservation of historical artefacts relating to Scottish life, so does he function here with regard to a text which is doubly representative of Scottish history, in its actual identity as recreation and assumed identity as artefact. It is through his role as reader that the historical reality of the hitherto suppressed McCandless account is resurrected. In this regard it is important to note that Donnelly achieves this despite his subscription to the competing narrative offered by Victoria. It is through his recollection of something akin to her account that the manuscript initially incites his interest. Having passed both accounts on to Gray, Donnelly's role as reader continues, and his related role as author of narrative is introduced, in the various comments which Gray records as further asserting the reality of one account over the other. The awareness of historical reality is thus shown, as it is throughout the novel, as the result of the reader's negotiation between a number of competing narrativized accounts, a negotiation which may include the persistence of contradiction.

Bella's emphatic artificiality performs a particularly interesting function in this regard. Working to represent within the allegory of Scotland the very processes by which such representations are created, this theme may lend support, as Tiitinen suggests, to the assertion that Scotland is in this regard similar to all nations. While this may undermine readings which identify this monstrosity as distinctively Scottish, such as those provided by McMillan and Stirling, the same tropes of artificiality and attendant amnesia nonetheless also function as exactly such characteristics, at least insofar as they represent recurrent features of previous accounts of Scottish identity. The extent to which Gray himself holds these common tropes of Scottish identity to be true is debatable, and perhaps irrelevant. If Scotland's identity has indeed been subject to historical forces which result in its disjuncture and erasure, this may well be the specific burden of one nation, or, more likely, of all shifting, polyvalent nations throughout history. The notion that the former is the case has however attained this status of unique national characteristic through the very degree to which it has been diagnosed in Scotland's self-representations. This is true regardless of the extent to which Scottish cultural traditions can be seen to persist and develop across time, as when Michael Donnelly's role as trans-world incursion and textual conduit recalls Charles Baxter's appearance in *The Master of Ballantrae*, a move which Stevenson himself thought 'a little too like Scott'.^[24] It is even true to the extent that the denial of a coherent Scottish identity and tradition would seem just such a tradition itself. Further, as the events surrounding the City of Culture show, self-alienation and disjuncture can also be a very real threat if Scotland does not take care to follow the example of Donnelly, who 'worked overtime to acquire and

preserve evidence of a local culture that was being hustled into the past' (*Poor Things*, vii). In acquiring and preserving various narratives of Scottish identity, of historical past, present events and future possibilities, *Poor Things* does just this. Offering them to the reader through a series of paratexts which compete with and re-interpret each other, the novel enacts the process by which such identities are constructed, and invites the reader to do the same, an invitation present even in a single illustration such as that of Bella Caledonia. After all, in saving McCandless' text from oblivion, '[w]hat most interested Michael Donnelly were the Strang illustrations, all portraits' (ix).

NOTES

- [1] See Edwin Morgan, 'A Misunderstood Monster?' *Chapman* 72. Spring 1993: 89-90, 90.
- [2] Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things: Episodes From The Early Life Of Archibald McCandless, M.D., Scottish Public Health Officer*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992, 89.
- [3] Randall Stevenson, 'Mavis Belfrage: A Romantic Novel With Five Shorter Tales.' *Scottish Literary Journal Supplement* 46 (Spring 1997): 44-46, 44.
- [4] Dorothy McMillan, "Constructed Out of Bewilderment: Stories of Scotland". *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction*. Ed. Ian A. Bell. Cardiff. University of Wales Press, 1995. 80-99, 87.
- [5] Kirsten Stirling, 'Imagined Bodies and the Landscape of Home: Woman as Nation in the Fiction of Alasdair Gray.' *Terranglian Territories: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Literature of Region and Nation*. Ed. Susanne Hagemann. Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang, 2000. 269-276, 271.
- [6] Johanna Tiitinen, 'Work As If You Live In The Early Days Of A Better Nation': *History and Politics in the works of Alasdair Gray*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Printing House, 2004, 124. My emphasis.
- [7] Dietmar Böhnke, *Shades of Gray: Science Fiction, History and the Problem of Postmodernism in the Work of Alasdair Gray*. Glienicke/Berlin: Galda & Wilch Verlag, 2004, 209.
- [8] Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*. London: Macmillan, 1994, 30.
- [9] Fredric Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.' *The Jameson Reader*. Ed. Micheal Hardt & Kathi Weeks. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 315-339, 324.
- [10] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- [11] Alasdair Gray, *The Book Of Prefaces*. London: Bloomsbury, 2000, 9.
- [12] Alasdair Gray, *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997, 4.
- [13] Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, 9.

- [14] Alasdair Gray, *A Short Survey of Classic Scottish Writing*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001, x.
- [15] Cairns Craig, *Out of History*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996, 25.
- [16] Douglas Gifford, 'Re-Mapping Renaissance in Modern Scottish Literature'. *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth Century Scottish Literature*. Ed. Gerard Carruthers, David Golde and Alistair Renfrew. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004. 17-37, 33.
- [17] Alan Riach, 'Orphans and their Ancestors in Popular Scottish Fiction after 1945'. *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present*. Ed. Susanne Hageman. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996. 51-83, 80.
- [18] Donald P Kaczvinsky, "'Making Up For Lost Time" Scotland, Stories and the Self in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*'. *Contemporary Literature* XLII.4 (2001): 775-799, 787.
- [19] Mario Diaz Martinez, 'Dissecting Glasgow: Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*'. *Revista Canaria De Estudios Ingleses* 41 (2000): 117-131, 120.
- [20] Farquhar McLay, Introduction. *Worker's City: The Real Glasgow Stands Up*. Ed. Farquhar McLay. Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 1988. 1-4, 1.
- [21] James Kelman. 'Foreword'. *Some Recent Attacks*. Stirling: AK Press, 1992. 1-4, 1-2.
- [22] James Kelman, 'Harry McShane's Centenary'. *Some Recent Attacks*. Stirling: AK Press, 1992. 46-52, 47.
- [23] Alasdair Gray. 'A Friend Unfairly Treated'. *The Reckoning*. Ed. Farquhar McLay. Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 1990. 54-6, 56.
- [24] R.L. Stevenson qtd. in Adrian Poole . 'Notes'. *The Master of Ballantrae*. Ed. Adrian Poole. London: Penguin, 1996. 229-246, 229.