

Contact and Contamination Modes:  
An Analysis of Intertextual and Paratextual Elements  
in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992)

Alberta Boschi

Parthenope University of Naples  
(alberta.boschi@uniparthenope.it)

**Abstract**

The delineation of Scottish National identity has been largely investigated in literature together with the issue of the language: writing in English has been conceived for long by most Scottish authors as writing “in a ‘foreign’ language that does not adequately convey the Scottish way of thinking and thereby undermines Scotland’s sense of identity” (Kaczvinsky 2001). This is particularly true for Scottish authors of prose fiction since the post-Act of Union cultural revival involved almost entirely poetry production. A sort of in-betweenness derived from the contact – and contrast – of two opposing cultures and languages emerges in many postmodernist Scottish authors whose works are permeated by that ‘contrair spirit’ that G. Gregory Smith first called “Caledonian Antisyzygy” (1919). In this connection, the proposed paper focuses on Alasdair Gray’s novel *Poor Things* (1992) where split, divided selves distinguish most of its characters: Bella Baxter – a Frankenstein-like creature – ends up in personifying both Scotland and England in a “patchwork-like” construction of her opposing selves (Kirsten Stirling 2008). The same can be said about the whole novel in which intertextual and paratextual intrusions intertwine in a surprisingly new work of art. In particular, the paper aims at showing how overt and covert textual allusions operate as contaminating agents in a journey across a multitude of texts, genres, and voices. At the same time, several illustrations – the result of a reproduction by the author/artist – represent an opportunity of contamination across modes, the latter acquiring even more relevance in the author’s self-adaptation for the screen where artistic hints are wisely integrated in the scene set to convey specific meanings.

---

**1. Introduction**

As early as 1919, in *Scottish Literature. Character & Influence* G. Gregory Smith strives to outline what in his words is “the character or habit of Scottish Literature” (1919: V) in a critical attempt to confute the stereotypical features associated with Scottish culture and then extended to Scottish literature. As a matter of fact, according to Alan Riach, after the Jacobite risings in the first half of the eighteenth century, bagpipes, kilt, and Gaelic became symbols of an oppressed culture, as

well as clichés of Scottish identity that endured in the collective imagination even in the following centuries (Riach 2009: 5-6).

The struggle for the re-affirmation of a distinctive culture and literature has represented a starting point for the twentieth-century 'Scottish Renaissance' of which Smith's *Scottish Literature. Character & Influence* forms its "prologue" (Craig 2007: 42): in his work, Smith deals with two main 'moods' resulting, from a thorough analysis, in the antithetical features of cohesion and division leading him to affirm that "the literature is remarkably varied, and that it becomes, under the stress of foreign influence and native division and reaction, almost a zigzag of contradictions" (Smith 1919: 4).

In such wise, Smith introduces the concept of 'Caledonian Antisyzygy', namely the idea of a 'contrair spirit' that permeates the works of most post-modernist Scottish authors and that generates a kind of in-betweenness derived from the contact – and contrast – of two opposing cultures and languages. In other words, fragmentation, contradiction, and duality are all expressions of the complicated construction of Scottish national identity soundly affected by the persistent controversial relationship with England perceived as a colonising power.

The 1707 union between England and Scotland is generally acknowledged as being a watershed that shaped modern Scotland both culturally and politically; however, the way in which it affected the delineation of Scottish national identity remains an ongoing debate predominantly focused on whether it had beneficial or adverse cultural effects (Manning 2007: 45). According to Kaczvinsky, the 1707 union was a political, economic, and cultural 'wedding' that generated "the crisis of national identity that is played out thematically in Scottish literature" (Kaczvinsky 2001: 781). Consequently, in the eighteenth century, Scottish writers felt somehow uncomfortable in using dialects in prose fiction, and "Scottish novelists would either write in an adopted English or write works using Scottish dialects in dialogue and Standard English for the rest of the narrative" (Kaczvinsky 2001: 782). In other words, "The major problem facing Scottish writers is that they must write in a 'foreign' language that does not adequately convey the Scottish way of thinking and thereby undermines Scotland's sense of identity" (Kaczvinsky 2001: 782).

The contact – or maybe contrast – between these two cultures and their languages generated contradictory feelings and standpoints that emerged vividly in twentieth-century Scottish writers such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir: while the former claims the need to write in Scots in order to revitalise Scottish literature, the latter is a strong supporter of the adoption of English as the most suitable language to revive Scottish national literature (Craig 2007: 42). MacDiarmid's perspective catalysed the so-called Scottish Literary Renaissance in the 1920s and his ideals regained ground in the last two decades of the twentieth century, when a new generation of Scottish writers tried to recover in Riach's words the ideal of self-determination (Riach 2009: 15).

Alasdair Gray is considered one amongst these new-generation writers whose works are permeated with a strong sense of nationalism: even though the author has always shown a certain reluctance in labelling himself as a postmodernist, his novel *Lanark* (1981) is generally acknowledged as being remarkably postmodern<sup>1</sup>. Anyway, if we agree with the assumption that

---

<sup>1</sup> In "(Scottish) Critic Fodder: On Why Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* isn't a Nationalist or a Postmodernist Text, Mostly" (2019) G.W. Churchman goes against the grain and proposes an alternative interpretation of Gray's novel in an attempt to invert a "critical habit". She does not deny the postmodern and nationalist reading of Gray's *Lanark*, but she underlines the need to broaden the critical approach to this work: in her words, "[I] propose an alternative Gray – a Gray who is both far more equivocal about Scottish nationalism, and far more closely aligned with a socialist humanist understanding of selfhood than previous readings have acknowledged. [...] However, as Gray himself has pointed out (often in a somewhat exasperated fashion), to read his work solely in this vein pointedly ignores many of what I argue here are the most important aspects of

heterogeneity and indeterminacy are primary features of postmodernist writing (Polopoli 2014: 664), we cannot but consider Gray's works as deeply postmodernist.

According to Polopoli, one of the most strikingly postmodernist features of *Lanark* is its 'ontological heterogeneity', that is "the theoretical description of a plurality of universes or worlds which are placed in conflict, violating their boundaries" (Polopoli 2014: 664). The ideas of 'plurality of worlds' and 'violation of boundaries' acquire new shape in *Poor Things* (1992), a novel about the creation of a female Frankenstein-like creature in search of a personal identity who ends up in personifying both Scotland and England in a "patchwork-like" construction of her opposing selves (Kirsten Stirling 2008). The devising of a complex narrative frame, as well as the use of different levels of narration and standpoints, result in a series of parallelisms – and antiparallelisms – where many voices partake in a narrative constantly in-between facts and fantasy, past and present, words and pictures. The purpose of the present paper is to evidence how, in this eclectic literary rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Alasdair Gray uses intertextual and paratextual connections as key features in order to invite the reader on a journey across a multitude of texts, genres, and voices following the process of construction of the protagonist's self. The narrative develops both textually and visually: the written text intertwines with the illustrations made – or rather reproduced – by the author/artist himself accounting for a deep 'contamination' across modes that often acquires a parodic dimension. Moreover, a television script of *Poor Things* – obviously written by Gray – followed the novel and appeared in a collection of writings published in 2009: this process of self-rewriting, or more properly of self-adaptation, contributes to extending once more the 'lives' of a text that emerges as a multimodal product where 'creation' becomes, to some extent, a synonym for 'duplication' and 'imitation', which occur at different levels and modes.

## 2. *Poor Things*: intergenerational intertextuality and paratextuality

*Poor Things* was first published in 1992 and immediately received noteworthy reviews: while Mick Imlah (*Independent*) defined it as Gray's first "historical fiction" referring especially to the accurate depiction of the nineteenth-century society<sup>2</sup>, Geoff Ryman (*New York Times*) underlined the somehow contrasting nature of the book affirming that "*Poor Things* is a political book. It is also witty and delightfully written [...]. Attention to Victorian Glasgow with its civic fountains, domestic interiors and medical schools gives the book texture. It is the characters, and strangely enough its phantasmagoria, that gives it life<sup>3</sup>." We also read that "A master of pastiche and collage in words and pictures, Gray has found a way to perfectly evoke a cracked, slightly out-of-balance sense of our reality<sup>4</sup>." The diverse standpoints towards this novel mirror its versatile nature: this brilliant rewriting of Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) showcases the potential of artistic contamination through a web of intertwining verbal and visual texts that contribute to create blurred boundaries among literary genres and modes.

---

his work, in particular his ambivalence regarding the nature of creativity, and his representation of how this is linked with the desire for political power" (Churchman 2019: 76).

<sup>2</sup> Imlah M., BOOK REVIEW / Anatomy of versatile grotesques: 'Poor Things' - Alasdair Gray (29 August 1992). *The Independent*, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review-anatomy-of-versatile-grotesques-poor-things-alsadair-gray-bloomsbury-14-99-pounds-1543359.html>, last accessed 6 September 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ryman G., And Godwin Created Woman (28 March 1993). *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/28/books/and-godwin-created-woman.html>, last accessed 3 September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> A Victorian Highland Fling (21 March 1993). *Newsweek*, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/victorian-highland-fling-190852>, last accessed 6 September 2021.

The novel is set in Victorian Glasgow and deals with the story of a university research assistant, Godwin Baxter, who revives a pregnant woman who drowned herself. In February 1881 at 18 Park Circus, Glasgow, a woman was fished out of the River Clyde and brought successfully back to life thanks to an unusual surgical experiment: the transplant of the brain of her nine-months foetus. The new-born creature— called after her creator Bella Baxter—is kind of a ‘wee bairn’ in the body of a 25-year-old woman with no memory of her past. Consequently, she must learn everything from the beginning and the reader follows her in a quite unconventional *Bildungsroman*.

The plot unwinds in an elaborate narrative frame illustrated by Gray himself in the introduction to the novel. Michael Donnelly<sup>5</sup>, the assistant to the curator of People’s Palace, finds a small volume on a pavement in the city centre of Glasgow entitled *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer*: the book is, seemingly, an autobiography written by Archibald McCandless narrating the story of his friendship with an eccentric surgeon, Godwin Baxter. Michael Donnelly pockets the volume and delivers it to Alasdair Gray to have it arranged for publishing. Alasdair Gray features as the editor of the whole work: in the introduction to the final volume, he confesses that he had made but a few changes to the original text, such as renaming “the lengthy chapter headings with snappier titles of my own” (Gray 2002: XIII), adding an introduction, an epilogue, and the *Notes Critical and Historical* concluding section. Remarkably, the epilogue consists in a letter dated 1914 written by Victoria McCandless, the author’s wife, who strongly denies the events narrated in the book accusing her deceased husband of having created a fictional work brimming with lies and nonsense. The woman is none other than Bella Baxter, the Frankenstein-like creature whose ‘adventures’ the reader is minutely informed of through the novel. The *Notes Critical and Historical* section following the epilogue, instead, is a declared attempt by the editor to prove through material evidence that the story is “a complete tissue of facts” (Gray 2002: XIV): as a consequence, readers waver between certainty and uncertainty in a narration where real characters merge with fictional ones, and facts intertwine with fantasy. Therefore, the text can be seen in different ways depending on each ‘character’s’ point of view: a “cunning lie” for the woman, a “blackly humorous fiction” (Gray 2002: XIII) for Donnelly, and “a loving portrait” (Gray 2002: XIII) for the editor.

Apparently, the plot has little to share with its pre-text: the only manifest point of contact with Shelley’s *Frankenstein* appears to be the “skilfully manipulated resurrection” (Gray 2002: 27) operated by Godwin Baxter. The circumstances are, indeed, nothing alike: the surgical experiment, a brain transplant from a nearly born baby to his/her mother, preannounces a grotesque scenario and, simultaneously, paves the way to a dystopian interpretation of the events that follow. According to Gray, the allusion to the brain transplant did not entice him at first but he could not find any other possible solution: “It was Bernard [MacLaverty] who suggested my heroine be revived by receiving the brain of her own unborn baby: I at once rejected this creepy idea, before seeing it was the only new brain she could logically receive” (Gray 2009: 229).

Alasdair Gray openly declares some details of his creative process in the colophon of the novel where he includes acknowledgments to “friends and books from whom [he] got ideas or words” (Gray 2019). Further confessions are either disseminated across his work or included in *A Gray Playbook* (2009), a collection of plays acted between 1956 and 2009 that also comprises a film script of *Poor Things*. The author presents a brief account of the ‘moment of creation’ in his short two-pages introduction to the script:

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael Donnelly was assistant curator of the People’s Palace Museum in Glasgow from 1972 to 1990. He is one of the historical ‘characters’ Gray includes in his novel – rather in the narrative frame – probably in order to enhance the parallelism between fictional and real in an attempt to instill a sense of verisimilitude.

Sometimes an original idea was suggested by something I read or heard about or dreamed. [...] I woke one morning remembering a dream. In a dim back room of a Glasgow tenement I watched a young woman who sat before a window, staring out at children playing in a back green. Someone beside me said, "She won't be able to think until she remembers enough things to think with." And I knew the young woman had the brain of a newly-born baby. (Gray 2009: 228)

Whether it is the genuine disclosure of artistic creation, or a clever fictional device played out years after the publishing of the novel, this evocative confession recalls a familiar episode, namely the one narrated by Mary Shelley in her preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* where she illustrates the first 'encounter' with her creature. In Shelley's revelation it is indeed a nightmare awakening her and giving birth to a frightening tale: Gray's dream, instead, announces more of a wonder than a series of terrifying events. Wherever the truth lies, the parallelism – or rather antiparallelism – is remarkable and it might be functionally constructed to enhance the blurring effect between real and fantastic, historical and fictional that surrounds Gray's novel. As a matter of fact, the 'confession' contained in the collection published in 2009 represents what Gerard Genette has defined as 'paratext' (Genette 1979) and it is part of and contributes to the process of meaning-making in the main text.

The list of acknowledgements in *Poor Things* colophon functions like a series of clues in the investigation of the many intertextual references the novel has been built upon. An excerpt follows beneath:

THE AUTHOR THANKS BERNARD MacLavery for hearing the book as it was written and giving ideas that helped it grow; and Scott Pearson for typing and research into period detail; and Dr. Bruce Charlton for correcting the medical parts; and Angela Mullane for correcting the legal parts; [...] and Michael Roschlau for the gift of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* (published in 1894 by MacLehose & Son, Glasgow, for the translator William Jacks, illustrated with etchings by William Strang), which suggested the form (not content) of the McCandless volume; [...] Other ideas were got from *Ariel Like a Harpy*, Christopher Small's study of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and from Liz Lochhead's *Blood and Ice*, a play on the same subject. (Gray 2002: IV)

The first lines prove Gray's endeavours in providing the reader with some accurate account of historical, medical, and legal aspects of the Glaswegian society in the Victorian Age in a novel the author admits being his "only attempt at a historical tale" (Gray 2019). More interestingly, Alasdair Gray mentions Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* to which *Poor Things* is likely to owe "the form (not content)" (Gray 2002): the 'form' presumably refers to the etchings by the Scottish artist William Strang (1859-1921) included in Lessing's work. William Strang was a printmaker, a portraitist, and a painter: he practiced as a printmaker during the first twenty years of his career and worked predominantly in etching producing many narrative illustrations and portraits. His subjects ranged from the real to the fantastic and he was also known for being the illustrator of Rudyard Kipling's works, as well as for having realized portraits of various literary sitters such as Thomas Hardy and Robert Louis Stevenson<sup>6</sup>. Just as Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, the volume fictionally published by McCandless contains some etchings openly credited – in the introduction of the novel – to William Strang, but in fact realised and revisited by Alasdair Gray. The use of artistic cross-references implies a contact between the literary form and the artistic form,

---

<sup>6</sup> All the historical information about William Strang is taken from the website of the National Gallery of Scotland. Supplementary details are available at <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/william-strang>, last accessed 16 September 2021.

constituting, at the same time, a means by which reality contaminates fiction. As a matter of fact, from the second half of the nineteenth century on to the first half of the twentieth, the form of etching in printmaking took on new life launching the so-called ‘etching revival’: it was adopted as the main form of literary illustration thus defining connections and interchanges between artists and writers. By recreating this ‘relationship’ in his novel – McCandless’s volume reflects the common practice of the writers of his times by including some etchings – Alasdair Gray both emphasises the ‘hybridity’ of his work and seeks to corroborate the trustworthiness of the narrated events and the presumed reliability of the fictional author.

Concerning the intertextual connections suggested by Gray’s acknowledgements, some ‘etched’ portraits in *Poor Things* represent a means of intermedial rewriting: among them, the one depicting Duncan Wedderburn (2002: 76) strikingly resembles Strang’s portrait of Alec Jaffray, an etching on paper realised in 1883<sup>7</sup>. The book illustration is densely covered with horizontal black lines in the background as if mimicking and recalling the etching effect: at the bottom-right, the initials “W.S.” fictionally credit the authorship of the picture to William Strang. This ‘rewriting’ of a paratextual element may correspond to a process of de-construction and re-construction that intensifies the dual nature of both the narrative and the characters. As a matter of fact, duality and hybridity are key features connoting all the characters in the novel, being, sometimes, peculiarities the characters become aware of and confess in the course of the narrative, as in Duncan Wedderburn’s case who discloses his sensations in a letter:

*Did you see the great Henry Irving’s production of Goethe’s Faust at the Glasgow Theatre Royal? I did. I was deeply moved. I recognized myself in that tormented hero, that respectable member of the professional middle class who enlists the King of Hell to help him seduce a woman of the servant class. Yes, Goethe and Irving knew that Modern Man—that Duncan Wedderburn—is essentially **double**: a noble soul fully instructed in what is wise and lawful, yet also a fiend who loves beauty only to drag it down and degrade it.*<sup>8</sup> (Gray 2002: 77)

By comparing his own life, mostly spent in seducing beautiful young women belonging to the servant class, to Goethe’s *Faust*, Duncan Wedderburn establishes a parallelism that reveals his ‘double’ nature and makes him feel “a kind of monster” (Gray 2002: 79).

Similarly, the book cover of McCandless’s volume, which is supposed to represent Bella Baxter, is likely to be a revisited version of Strang’s etching *Grotesque*, whose title might be intended as a suggestion about how to read the “construction” of Bella’s identity. Starting from Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque body and its socially subversive power, Christie March analyses the way Gray plays with this concept in his novel underlining that grotesque bodies “offer new avenues for identity making” (March 2002: 324). Bakhtin defines the grotesque body as “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (Bakhtin 1984:317), a definition that implies some sort of metamorphosis and that somehow mirrors Bella’s in-betweenness across the whole novel. Bella’s hybridity involves both her body and her self: she has the brain of a ‘bairn’ and the body of a twenty-five-year-old woman; Duncan Wedderburn defines her not only as a “gorgeous monster” but even as a “Hour<sup>9</sup>”, “a lemur, vampire, succubus and thing unclean” (Gray 2002: 89); she is

<sup>7</sup> A digital reproduction of Strang’s etching is displayed on the official website of the National Gallery of Scotland at the following URL: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/32322/alec-jaffray>, last accessed 20 August 2021.

<sup>8</sup> The quote derives from Duncan Wedderburn’s letter that is completely written in italics in the novel. The bold, instead, is mine.

<sup>9</sup> According to the online etymology dictionary a ‘hour<sup>9</sup>’ is “a nymph of Muslim paradise, [...] from Arabic *haura*” “to be beautifully dark-eyed, like a gazelle”. Online Etymology Dictionary, available at <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=hour>, last accessed 22 September 2021.

good-looking and seductive, but her unrestrained behaviour makes her some sort of an aberration compared to other Victorian women. This 'unconventional being' might be related to the subversive nature of her grotesque body as stated by C. March:

[...] Gray's 1992 novel, *Poor Things*, introduces and centers [...] on a female character who most embodies the socially resistant power of the grotesque. By virtue of her unique physiology and the consequences it has on her development, Bella Baxter circumvents the stifling culturally constructed confines of her "proper" Victorian comportment. Her body becomes the site for a grotesque interplay between bodily and social conventions that unsettles the cultural perceptions of those men with whom she interacts and who have come to expect and rely on naive and socially nonresistant women. (March 2002: 338)

Bella's grotesque nature results in a "gender-role reversal" that materializes in the relationship she establishes with Duncan Wedderburn during their elopement: she refuses to conform to social rules that expected her to marry him and, instead, she treats Wedderburn as her sexual object (March 2002: 340). This sort of 'crisis' of identity manifests as well in Bella's resistance to Godwin's desires. In a conversation with Archibald McCandless, Godwin explains the reason why he decided to revive Bella instead of trying to save her baby, which is the need for a companion completely devoted to him: "I needed to admire a woman who needed and admired me" (Gray 2002: 39). Ironically, even though she is perfectly aware of Godwin's love for her, she confesses she cannot satisfy his "appetites": she eventually marries McCandless and becomes the respectable Victoria McCandless. Such metamorphosis of the self denotes the connection between the creator and his unbridled creature, and, at the same time, it might parallel the controversial process of union between England and Scotland. As a matter of fact, Gray includes a portrait of Bella Baxter in his novel with a caption beneath reading 'Bella Caledonia', the name of a female figure used to represent the Scottish Nation. Thus, the inscription invites us to consider Bella Baxter as a metaphor for the nation by recalling the traditional "romantic woman-as-nation figure" (Stirling 2008: 88). Moreover, in dealing with the theme of Scottish national identity in *Poor Things*, Kaczvinsky illustrates the metaphor of the political wedding between Scotland and England observing that: "[...] The wedding of the two nations was an arranged marriage, out of political convenience rather than any genuine love or affection. But England found Scotland an unruly and rebellious partner, who refused to accept the strictures and restraints imposed by her spouse" (Kaczvinsky 2001: 786). The "unruly" and "rebellious" partner of this political union resembles Bella even in her decision to marry McCandless given in the moment of their engagement: "I am marrying Candle because I can treat him how I like" (Gray 2002: 53).

As far as what we might define as 'literary loans' are concerned, another relevant source is Christopher Small's *Ariel like a Harpy: Shelley, Mary and Frankenstein* (1972). Chapter five of Small's study contains an analysis of the analogies between Victor Frankenstein and Percy Bysshe Shelley, thus between a fictional character and an existing person on whom the first is likely to have been modelled (Small, 1972: 102). Proceeding from the premise that Gray's novel is a rewriting of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Small's comparison may help us establish some connections among the characters in the two novels. Small states that "Shelley, like Victor Frankenstein, had an early passion to learn 'the secrets of heaven and earth'" (Small 1972: 104) and for what at those times were considered as occult sciences. He then adds: "when Frankenstein describes his compulsion to penetrate the secrets both of the material and immaterial world [...] it might be Shelley speaking" (Small 1972: 104). This fascination with the supernatural risen in Victor Frankenstein's and Shelley's youth is echoed in Godwin Baxter's words when telling the truth about the 'making' of Bella, his "resurrection" story: "My childhood hopes, and boyhood dreams, my education and adult researches had prepared me for this moment" (Gray 2002: 33). This

sentence may account for an intertextual allusion and, at the same time, positions Gray's novel within a clear literary heritage. Similarly, when Baxter confesses the outcome of his research to McCandless, his words recall Victor's in the very moment his creature comes into being, as shown in the following sentences:

For years I had been planning to take a discarded body and discarded brain from our social midden heap and unite them in a new life. (Gray 2002: 34)

I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. (Shelley 2018: 71)

The presumptive 'legacy' among fictional characters and historical ones may sound far more plausible when considering Baxter's complete name, which is to say Godwin Bysshe Baxter. As Kirsten Stirling points out, "[it] not only has the convenient abbreviation 'God', but is also stitched together from parts of William Godwin, [Mary Shelley's] father, Percy Bysshe Shelley, her husband, and William Baxter (less obviously perhaps), the father of the family in Dundee with whom Mary Shelley was sent to stay at the age of fifteen" (Stirling 2008: 92). Moreover, since Christopher Small in *Ariel Like a Harpy* mentions William Baxter as the addressee of a letter by William Godwin and the work is a declared inspirational source for Gray's novel, we may agree with Stirling and attest the intergenerational bond that positions *Poor Things* as a monstrous progeny somehow preannounced by Victor Frankenstein in his farewell to Walton: "Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed<sup>10</sup>" (Shelley 2018: 326).

Besides the overt contaminations shortly discussed above, in the last part of Gray's novel Victoria McCandless insinuates some less obvious 'contaminations' in her *Letter to Posterity*; she not only affirms that "*to my nostrils, the book stinks of Victorianism*" but she also defines it as a "*sham-gothic*" product (Gray 2002: 275). Moreover, describing the work written by her deceased husband, she states further: "*He has made a sufficiently strange story stranger still by stirring into it episodes and phrases to be found in Hogg's 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?*"<sup>11</sup>" (Gray 2002: 272-273). Interestingly, according to the Etymology Dictionary<sup>12</sup>, the word *ghouleries* derives from the Arabic *ghul*, which was first used in 1786 in the English translation of William Beckford's novel *Vathek*. A *ghul* in the Arabic tradition is an evil spirit that steals from graves and feeds on corpses: meaningfully, Victoria McCandless uses the term alluding to the way her husband had 'created' his biography and, at the same time, the reader can easily establish a parallelism with her own 'creation.' As a matter of fact, her dead body was fished from the Clyde and then secretly and illegally revived by the implantation of the brain of her foetus; such a dynamic intertextually links *Poor Things* to its hypotext – namely to the genesis of Victor Frankenstein's creature – accounting for a subtle contamination.

### 3. Contamination across modes

In his collection of works *A Gray Playbook* published in 2009, Alasdair Gray confesses that:

---

<sup>10</sup> The italic is mine.

<sup>11</sup> The quote derives from Victoria McCandless's letter that is completely written in italics in the novel. The bold, instead, is mine.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Harper, Online Etymology Dictionary, available at <https://www.etymonline.com/>, last accessed 25 September 2021.



When writing *Poor Things* I was SURE this story would start my career as a big screen film writer. Weird gothic and Frankenstein films had been popular before soundtracks were invented and grown more popular since. So had films with lavish 19<sup>th</sup> century settings and costumes. When sending the finished manuscript to Bloomsbury Publishing I [...] sent copies to Iain Brown and Sandy Johnson. [...] Iain at once paid me for the film rights and paid Sandy and me to write a shooting script. (Gray 2009: 229)

It is apparent that in the mind of its 'creator' the novel was potentially destined to live beyond the pages of a printed book, just like it had already happened to Shelley's creature.

The television script represents a brilliant exercise of self-rewriting as well as a further opportunity to analyse some of the mechanisms that were enacted by the author and that reinforce the intergenerational bond with Shelley's novel. After deciding the way 'his creature' should be revived, Alasdair Gray links his own 'act of creation' to its 'predecessor':

I decided that the surgeon who achieved this miracle should live before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, halfway between the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818 and my birth in 1934. He must be a medical genius so obscure that his discoveries were even now unknown to science, and it would be easiest to introduce him through reminiscences of a friend as obscure as himself. (Gray 2009: 228-229)

Broadly speaking, the television script is rather faithful to the novel, except for few features. The most meaningful one is the replacement of Duncan Wedderburn's letter with a visit of Godwin Baxter and Archibald McCandless to the lunatic asylum where Wedderburn had been admitted once he came back home. In the novel Godwin receives Wedderburn's letter which consists in a minute narration of what happened from the night of his elopement with Bella to the last days he spent with her in Paris (2002: 77-98). The tone of the letter makes it more like a delirium of a deranged man accusing Godwin of being an Antichrist, calling him "Mephisto Baxter" (2002: 79) and announcing his intention to make vow of chastity and withdraw in a cloister (Gray 2002: 98). On the other hand, in the television script the letter is replaced by a telegram from the superintendent of Glasgow Royal Lunatic Asylum to Godwin asking him for medical advice on a new inmate, Duncan Wedderburn. Subsequently, Godwin and McCandless decide to go to the asylum where Wedderburn recounts the events – mostly as a narrating voice over – from his private room (scenes 60 to 89).

An analysis of scene 62 is key to illustrate how art – appearing as props on the set – has been used as a means of contamination across modes and, at the same time, as a functional device with the intentional purpose of conveying specific meanings through symbolism. According to the description line in the screenplay, Alasdair Gray decided to place "a framed reproduction of Holman Hunt's *Scapegoat*<sup>13</sup>" (Gray 2009: 245) on Wedderburn's private room wall in the Victorian asylum. The original painting, exhibited in the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight (Liverpool), displays scriptural texts upon the frame:

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. (Isaiah 53:4)

And the Goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a Land not inhabited. (Leviticus 16:22)

---

<sup>13</sup> A reproduction of Hunt's painting is available at <https://victorianweb.org/painting/whh/replete/scapegoat.html>, last accessed 22 September 2021.

In *Replete with meaning: William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism* (1979), G.P. Landow explains that Hunt started to add “appended texts” to his paintings inspired by the Scriptures in order to better inform the observers about their intended meaning; moreover, since that showed not to be enough, he began to accompany them by key-plates and commentaries (Landow 2015: 44). According to Landow, the quote from Isaiah is conventionally acknowledged as a prophecy referring to Christ. By pairing the quote from Isaiah with the mention of the scapegoat in the Leviticus, Hunt suggests that the scapegoat may represent both Christ’s suffering to redeem mankind – namely expiation – and the ritual sacrifice needed for the Day of Atonement described in the Leviticus (Landow 2015: 104).

As far as the Scapegoat is concerned, Landow further clarifies that Hunt decided to include a long explanation of its meaning to the ancient Judaism:

After pointing out that he had painted the picture ‘at Osdoom, on the margin of the salt-encrusted shallows of the Dead Sea’, [W.H. Hunt] explained that two goats were chosen as part of the old Levitical ritual for the Day of Atonement. One was offered to God as a propitiation for men’s sins. [...] The red fillet which he depicted bound about the animal’s horns was placed there, he adds, because of the belief that if God accepted the propitiation ‘the scarlet would become white (in accordance with the promise in Isaiah: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow: though they be red as crimson, they shall be as wool”)’ This description of the ritual expiation makes quite clear the elaborate parallels between the prophecy in Isaiah and the levitical type - just as it also makes clear the way this ritual tormenting of the goat prefigures the Passion. (Landow 2015: 105)

Alasdair Gray recreated the parallelism by simply placing a painting on the wall: by doing so, he suggests that Wedderburn’s sufferings are a means of expiation for a life spent in seducing women and treating them as objects. As a matter of fact, he confesses his sins in his letter to Godwin Baxter by depicting himself as a “villain of the blackest dye” and a “a guilty reckless libertine who had ravished a beautiful young woman from her respectable home and loving guardian” (Gray 2002: 77), but, at the same time, he realises the gender-role reversal operated by Bella Baxter for which he blames Godwin “Mephisto Baxter” (Gray 2002: 79). Such mechanism of reversal becomes functional to instilling the doubt that Wedderburn is paying for someone else’s sins – or rather unrestrained behaviour – thus taking on himself the role of the tragic hero.

#### 4. Conclusion

Alasdair Gray masterfully displays the potential and power of artistic contamination, which operates in his novel through intertextual and paratextual connections. A contamination that acts both across modes and genres. *Poor Things* can be considered as a patchwork of ‘voices’ gathering many different themes and genres: it is a pastiche, in the sense that it intentionally merges various genres; it’s a gothic novel offering glimpses of the uncanny and the double through most of its characters; it’s a fantastic novel in Todorov’s definition of a genre oscillating between certain and uncertain; it’s a representation of the grotesque body in Bella’s construction of her self; as many critics have already underlined, it’s a political satire dealing with the crucial issue of Scottish national identity. The illustrations realised by Gray himself may also represent a point of contact between factual and fictional and, together with other historical references the author includes in the novel, they help us understand Gray’s statement according to which *Poor Things* “[was his] only attempt at a historical tale” (Gray; 2014). Moreover, it’s certainly a rewriting and a celebration of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and, in the film script, an adaptation as well.

Thus, Gray’s *Poor Things* can be considered as a novel in-between: in between familiar and unfamiliar, factual and fictional, artistic and literary, resulting in an amazing hybridization of

genres and modes. Its being a completely new work of art and, at the same time, a rewriting and adaptation of a literary milestone accounts for a successful intergenerational contagion offering the possibility to explore genres, themes, and literary works by enhancing their ability to develop and survive over time.

### References

- Bakhtin M., *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Cairns C., "The Criticism of Scottish Literature: Tradition, Decline and Renovation", in I. Brown (ed.), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature. Volume Three: Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 42-52.
- Churchman G.W., "(Scottish) Critic Fodder: On Why Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* Isn't a Nationalist or a Postmodernist Text, Mostly", *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 55 (1), 2019, pp. 75-89.
- Davis L., McLane M.N., "Orality and Public Poetry", in I. Brown (edited by), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature. Volume Two: Enlightenment, Britain and Empire (1707–1918)*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 125-132.
- Genette G., *Introduction à l'Architexte*, Paris, Seuil, 1979.
- Gray A., *Poor Things*, London – New Delhi – New York – Sydney, Bloomsbury, 2002.
- Gray A., *A Gray Playbook*, Edinburgh, Luath Press, 2009.
- Gray A., *Of Me and Others*, Edinburgh, Canongate Books, 2019.
- Kaczvinsky D.P., "'Making up for Lost Time': Scotland, Stories, and the Self in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*", *Contemporary Literature*, 42 (4), Winter, 2001, pp. 775-799.
- Landow G.P., *William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism*, New York, Routledge, 2015.
- Manning S., "Post-Union Scotland and the Scottish Idiom of Britishness", in I. Brown (edited by), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature. Volume Two: Enlightenment, Britain and Empire (1707–1918)*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 45-70.
- March C., "Bella and the Beast (and a Few Dragons, Too): Alasdair Gray and the Social Resistance of the Grotesque", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 43 (4), 2002, pp. 323-346.
- Polopoli V., "Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* and (Post-?) Postmodernism", *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, 4, 2014, pp. 663-675.
- Riach A., *What is Scottish Literature?* Glasgow, ASLS, 2009.
- Shelley M., *Frankenstein*, London, Penguin Books, 2018.
- Small C., *Ariel like a Harpy: Shelley, Mary and Frankenstein*, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1972.
- Smith G.G., *Scottish Literature. Character & Influence*, London, MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1919.
- Stirling K., *Bella Caledonia. Woman, Nation, Text*, Amsterdam – New York, Rodopi, 2008.

### Web References

- A Victorian Highland Fling* (21 March 1993). Newsweek, <https://www.newsweek.com/victorian-highland-fling-190852>, last accessed 6 September 2021.
- Douglas Harper, Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/>, last accessed 25 September 2021.
- Imlah M., BOOK REVIEW / *Anatomy of versatile grotesques: 'Poor Things' - Alasdair Gray* (29 August 1992). The Independent, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review-anatomy-of-versatile-grotesques-poor-things-alsadair-gray-bloomsbury-14-99-pounds-1543359.html>, last accessed 6 September 2021.
- National Galleries of Scotland, *William Strang*, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/william-strang>, last accessed 16 September 2021.

Alberta Boschi

Ryman G., *And Godwin Created Woman* (28 March 1993). The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/28/books/and-godwin-created-woman.html>, last accessed 3 September 2021.

Victorian Web, *The Scapegoat*, <https://victorianweb.org/painting/whh/replete/scapegoat.html>, last accessed 22 September 2021.