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SCOTLAND AS A SPACE OF THE *IMAGI-NATION* IN ALASDAIR GRAY'S *POOR THINGS*

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine Alasdair Gray's vision of Scotland as a space of a nation that imagines itself, relying on literary creations of its history instead of embracing its actual past. In *Poor Things* (1992), Gray depicts his country as a narrative construct (a place constructed of narratives), where history has been falsified and replaced by fictionalised versions of the Scottish past. This concept is explored both on the level of content and form, as the novel's structural and formal diversity serves to further undermine the notion of historical truth and examine the tensions between history, memory, identity and literature. This paper will analyse the idea of Scotland as a palimpsestic reality that is constructed of different narratives of the past, show how and why the author creates such a literary space, and discuss its implications for modern Scottish identity.

Key words

Scotland; Scottish history; national identity; New Scottish Renaissance; Alasdair Gray

In his book *Understanding Scotland*, sociologist David McCrone refers to Scotland as “a land out of time” and then follows this statement with a question: “What if Scotland only exists in the imagination? – if its potent imagery has overpowered a puny reality?” (1992: 127). This is an interesting notion, and one that does not seem unfounded. It is obvious that the present identity of every society is largely determined by its past national history. It could be claimed, however, that the case of Scotland is unique in this respect, as it appears that the past is where this country mostly belongs. As McCrone explains,

the ‘dominant modes’ of understanding Scotland have been the historical and the cultural, both focused upon Scotland as ‘past’. This is not difficult to comprehend because ‘Scotland’ as an object of study seems to belong there [...]. Many argue that Scotland is particularly prone to myths and legends about itself, because it lacks the formal political institutions of state autonomy. (qtd. in Punter 1999: 102)

The late eighteenth century saw a shift in the notion of “Scotland” – previously defined as a land of wilderness, it was transformed into a country of large industrial cities. As a result, the idea of Scotland as a place, like Scottish national history and consciousness, became characterised by a certain fragmentation, a split into two visions – a romantic, natural landscape of picturesque forests and hills, and a thoroughly modern gloomy urban expanse encompassing Scotland’s major industrial centres. However, it is this former primal image that began to function as the ‘real’ country, when increasing industrialisation likened the lowlands to all urban regions. This Scotland of the past, the *real* Scotland, appears to have evolved into an almost mythical lost space of romantic lakes and sublime mountains, which bore witness to the heroic events depicted by Sir Walter Scott in his historical novels.

In fact, however, the nostalgic vision of a romantic land of wilderness and Highland culture is essentially a fabrication, achieved through the preservation of such distorted images in literature and art. As A. L. Kennedy states, “literary Scotland once was what ‘people who don’t know Scotland think’: ‘it’s got lots of hills, it’s very green, it’s very pretty’, and people would write about it ‘as if that almost existed’” (qtd. in March 2002: 1).

McCrone illustrates this notion with an interesting example of eighteenth-century engravings by an English artist, Paul Sandby, whose “view in Strathay in Scotland showed a marked increase in the elevation of the mountains between 1747 and 1780 to conform to expectations of what mountains should be like” (1992: 38). What this rather amusing case demonstrates is that for Scots, Scotland may be argued to constitute an essentially ‘imaginary homeland’ – a homeland which is both a product of the imagination and preserved in images.

Moreover, the history for which this mythologised landscape constituted a setting became subject to even greater fictionalisation, as following the loss of formal political independence “the symbols, myths and tartans of the Highlands were appropriated by lowland Scots, notably Sir Walter Scott, in a bid for some distinct culture” (McCrone 1992: 39). Literature’s treatment of the Scottish past seems to have transformed the country’s history from a continuous narrative into a collection of separate myths. Among the most enduring of these legends were the Wars of Scottish Independence, today associated mostly with the name of William Wallace, and the first Jacobite rebellion of 1689 organized by Viscount Dundee, nowadays remembered as Bonnie Dundee. Then came the Union of 1707, which marked the end of a unified collective consciousness of the nation and the beginning of its long struggle for a new Scottish identity, and was later

followed by the tragic Lowland and Highland Clearances. In the words of novelist William McIlvanney,

Moments of history isolated in this way from the qualifying detail of context can be made to mean whatever we want them to mean. [...] We see our past as a series of gestures rather than a sequence of actions. It's like looking in a massively cracked mirror. We identify our Scottishness in wilful fragments. (McCrone 1992: 128)

Thus, it could be argued that in the process of the fictionalisation of national history, Scots have become an *imagi*-nation – a nation which imagines itself relying on literary versions of its history, instead of embracing its actual past.

This issue was widely addressed in the 1980s and 1990s, which brought about a sudden flowering of Scottish literature in the form of the New Scottish Renaissance. With this Renaissance came the re-evaluation of Scottish past and present national history. The representatives of the movement – especially its founding father, Alasdair Gray – embarked on a search for a new Scottish identity, and in the process explored and boldly commented on the falsification of the country's history, its displacement and replacement with literary fabrications, and the implications of this process for modern Scottish consciousness. Gray and his colleagues exposed the “phoney” character of these narratives of the past which were based upon fantasy rather than reality and over time had become empty, devoid of meaning. The writers determined that Scotland remains suspended in dream-time and thus, “experiences history at a distance” (Craig 1999: 120). This conclusion has given rise to a powerful desire “for the return of history, for the reintroduction of historical dynamic into the suspended world of modern Scotland” (Craig 1999: 125), a need which resounds strongly through the body of modern Scottish fiction.

Gray's preoccupation with the fictionalisation of Scottish history and its implications for the nation is evident throughout his work. It is extensively explored in his debut, and magnum opus, *Lanark: A Life on Four Books* (1981), but takes perhaps the most interesting shape in *Poor Things* (1992), where, drawing on numerous literary texts (especially Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), and writing back to them, allows Gray to explore the dynamics between history and memory, the past and national identity. The novel tells the story of 25-year-old Victoria, who, unhappy in her marriage to a despotic English General, commits suicide, but is revived by an eccentric scientist, Godwin Baxter. He replaces her brain with that of her unborn child and renames her Bella, thus erasing her previous existence. As a consequence, the heroine needs to acquire her identity anew and in order to do so, she travels around the world to gain new experiences – at first with her maker and then with her lover, Duncan Wedderburn. The creation and development of Bella parallels the birth of modern Scotland. The allegorical dimension of the character is clearly established through the inclusion of Bella's portrait, captioned “Bella Caledonia”. Thus, the woman's individual story becomes the history of the nation.

It is no coincidence that Gray uses as a starting point perhaps the most powerful creation myth in literature – and one that gives birth to a construct, a creature stitched up from several different elements. What Gray suggests then is that, like his heroine, Scotland exists as an artificial hybrid – Bella herself admits that she is “only half a woman [...], less than half having had no childhood” (1993: 61). As a result of having a tabula rasa mind and a 25-year-old body, the heroine “lives in two different phases of history” (Craig 1999: 238), a condition parallel to that of Scotland – a nation living in the present, divorced from the past, to which it at the same time belongs. To fill his creation’s mental void, Baxter provides her with a new, fictional account of her previous existence. When Bella, deprived of her past (or, as Baxter argues, freed from it), is “brooding upon the mysteries of her origin” (Gray 1993: 51), she is told an untrue story about her parents, since the scientist believes that “An extinct, respectable couple will be better than none. It would cast a shadow upon her life to learn she is a surgical fabrication” (Gray 1993: 35). Thus, Gray establishes another clear link between his heroine and his country, addressing the point made by Cairns Craig about “the falsification of Scotland’s history initiated by Walter Scott” (1999: 117) and its implications for the modern Scottish identity.

According to many twentieth-century Scottish writers, critics and sociologists, Scott “carries the burden of having invented a Scotland which displaced the real Scotland in favour of his romantic illusions” (Craig 1999: 117). This accusation refers not only to his romanticised literary renditions of the country’s past and present. The writer went further, beyond the world of fiction, and in 1822, orchestrated a pageantry of reinvented Scottish traditions for King George IV’s visit to Edinburgh. The great festivity created a new ‘tartanised’ vision of Scotland’s history and made the kilt the national Scottish dress. Thus, fiction entered – and began to shape – reality, as it does in the case of Bella, who perceives her new existence in literary terms, treating fiction as a reliable source of factual historical knowledge. For instance, at one point she announces: “I have read *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Wuthering Heights* so know that history is full of nastiness [...]

(Gray 1993: 134). Furthermore, upon hearing that McCandless grew up on a farm, she reacts: “You grew up on a farm! Was your dad a frugal swain tending his flocks on the Grampian hills or a ploughman homeward plodding his weary way?” (Gray 1993: 50). This response clearly indicates that the heroine’s notion of living on a farm is determined by and limited to its depiction in the ballad *Norval on the Grampian Hills*, and Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751).

Gray himself notes the ambiguous and dialectical relationship between literature and history in the introduction to McCandless’s narrative, citing a debate he claims to have had with his real-life friend Michael Donnelly about the potential historical value of the text: “I also told Donnelly that I had written enough fiction to know history when I read it. He said he had written enough history to recognise fiction” (1993: xiii). Furthermore, the merging of fact and fiction is clearly pointed to when, upon meeting General Blessington, a real historical figure, Mc-

Candless grows excited, thinking that his “love-life might be *entering history* [emphasis mine] as the love-lives of Rizzio and Bothwell had done” (1993: 207).

Finally, Bella also states at one point:

I have not read *Beauty and the Beast* or Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* or Dumas' *Hunchback of Notre-Dame* or is it Hugo's [...] from start to finish, but I have been told enough about these mighty epics of our race to know most folk think God and me a very gothic couple. (1993: 51)

This last comment is particularly interesting, since it points to a highly potent concept of literature entering the common consciousness, acquiring an existence of its own – after all, Bella admits that she has not read those texts, but is familiar enough with them to know the “truth” that they carry.

As the heroine builds her new identity from fiction, so does Gray, or – as he claims – his narrator, construct his text from various pieces of nineteenth-century novels. Glasgow is rendered by McCandless just as one would imagine an industrial city of the period to be, a faithful reconstruction of a space well known from the works of popular Victorian writers. Gray's bleak imagery, evoking a pervading sense of corruption, and drastic matter-of-fact depictions of human misery comply with the gritty vision of urban Scotland, as opposed to the lost mythical rural idyll. Baxter's house is constructed through minute descriptions traditionally encountered in Victorian texts, with long catalogues of objects that can be found in each interior. These typically realist passages are countered by Victoria's Letter to Posterity, juxtaposed with the modern tone of Gray's introduction and Notes Critical and Historical, and intertwined with Wedderburn's romantic mock-visionary ravings.

This deliberate use of particular modes of writing is very thoroughly exploited by Gray, as the structures and language employed allow him to further play with the concept of historical truth and explore the tensions between history and fiction. Stylistically speaking, the novel, again like its heroine, constitutes a hybrid creation. The characters speak in ways typical of different literary forms, acting out the roles assigned to them by the narrative(s). At the same time, however, they repeatedly note their own artificiality, thus undermining the very literary space they construct and inhabit. Hence, McCandless, a respectable Victorian gentleman, likens the imagination to the appendix, claiming that: “inherited from a primitive epoch when it aided the survival of our species, [...] in modern scientific industrial nations it is mainly a source of disease” (Gray 1993: 55), and yet admits that “after unexpectedly meeting [his] only friend, future wife and first decanter of port [he] raved in the language of novels [he] knew to be trash, and only read to relax [his] brain before sleeping” (1993: 37).

Duncan Wedderburn, in turn, a quintessential romantic villain and Bella's lover, “The worst man possible – a smooth, handsome, well-groomed, plausible, unscrupulous, lecherous lawyer who specialised [...] in seducing women of the servant class” (Gray 1993: 57), upon meeting the heroine, “indulged in an orgy

of confession” which, in her opinion, “was as good as a book” (1993: 59). In one of his passionate letters, he calls Godwin “GOD-SWINE BOSH, BACK-STAIR BEAST OF THE BOTTOMLESS PIT” (1993: 94), but then proves to be perfectly aware of how lofty and grandiloquent his manner is, as he urges Baxter to “examine the proofs” of Bella’s devilishness which he “will now present coldly and logically, without using a lot of capital letters, except at the start” (1993: 95). Another example of this ironic self-referentiality can be found in Baxter’s critical comment on Wedderburn’s style of writing, when he reads out the villain’s letter to McCandless:

I saw receding aisles of mighty pillars like avenues of titanic stone trees upholding an overarching dimness; I heard a glorious blast of Honestly, McCandless, his style is so sickeningly derivative that I will summarize what follows. (Gray 1993: 91)

It is evident that what Gray is playing with here, self-reflexively, is precisely the idea that one might accuse his novel of being “sickeningly derivative”.

This point is further reinforced in Victoria’s letter where she sums up the literary inclinations of her second husband. The heroine exposes McCandless’s journal as a compilation of various famous Victorian texts, stating that:

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 Alan Poe. What morbid fantasy had 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* [...]. (Gray 1993: 273)

Then, Gray himself extends this list, noting in one of his interviews that:

[the novel] contained no original devices at all. The editor’s introduction of long lost narrative was in *The Master of Ballantrae*. That book, as well as *The Moonstone* and *Frankenstein*, is told by a narrator who quotes long narratives by other people, many of them letters. [...] (Axelrod 1995)

What is thus achieved is an intertextual construct so artificial and self-mocking that it disrupts the narrative, pushing it beyond the point where any integrity is possible.

Finally, in terms of its structure, Gray’s novel constitutes just as much of a textual “monstrosity”, forming a palimpsestic maze with no apparent way out. This labyrinth encompasses a variety of narratives – McCandless’s journal, Victoria’s letter, the editor’s preface and notes containing (among others) fragments of newspaper articles, maps, pieces of information on the topography of Glasgow, photographs and drawings pretending to validate different points of McCand-

less's text. This conjunction of different literary and artistic forms, open fantasy and a pretence of realism, reinforces the post-modern notion of the novel as a construct. Gray takes this idea to the extreme, as even the reviews printed at the beginning of the book are partly fake – the (possibly) real opinions from *The Scotsman*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and others are intertwined with Gray's fabrications, such as a 'quote' from *Times Literary Implemment* and the rather amusing contribution from Private Nose, who (somewhat randomly) describes the British Labour Party as "a gang of weirdos who kept hugging and dropping the woolly socialism of their founders until Margaret Thatcher made them drop it forever" (1993).

The division of the text into the narratives of the "editor", Alasdair Gray, the "author", Archibald McCandless, and Victoria McCandless is obviously primarily based on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). However, apart from being simply a Gothic convention, this structural fragmentation serves Gray to introduce mutually defeating narrators, whose undermining of one another's claims concerning the true version of the described events renders any kind of narrative coherence impossible. Hence, McCandless's side of the story is later confronted and refuted by Victoria, who denounces it as a "*morbid Victorian fantasy*" (Gray 1993: 272), filled with lies about herself. According to the heroine's version, she is "a plain, sensible woman, not the naïve Lucrezia Borgia and La Belle Dame Sans Merci described in the text" (1993: 251), and, most importantly, never had her brain been replaced with that of her child. The fact that Gray finally settles the question of Bella's identity – and ultimately subverts the whole story – only on the very margin of the novel (at the very end of "Notes Critical and Historical"), may be read as an indication of the truth's actual irrelevance and insignificance.

Thus, this post-modern structural constructedness of the narrative space serves to further emphasise the claim that Bella, her identity, and consequently Scottish history are essentially fabrications. In the end, what Gray does is prove right Archibald McCandless, who recalls in one of his first chapters (bearing a rather meaningful title "A Fascinating Stranger"): "As I sipped the dark ruby syrup I suddenly felt that Baxter, his household, Miss Bell, yes and me, and Glasgow, and rural Galloway, and all Scotland were equally unlikely and absurd" (Gray 1993: 31).

To conclude, one might be tempted to reduce this bold literary venture to an exercise in historiographic metafiction. After all, *Poor Things* is a text bearing all the traits of post-modernism, where "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs [...] is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon 1988: 5). Moreover, as it sets out to subvert literary conventions from within, it clearly displays what Hutcheon defines as the "inherent contradictoriness of historiographic metafiction" (1988: 5). However, this could be an oversimplification of the matter. Gray's work appears too personal, too specific in its interests to be safely labelled in any broad universal terms. This fictional space and the space of fiction that the writer ends up with are meant to carry a meaningful message for and about the Scottish

imagi-nation. The novel is not a commentary on the general literary, historical, historiographical tendencies of the modern world but a focused meditation on a particular society in a particular moment of its history. Although a seemingly slight exercise in literary pastiche, the narrative clearly inscribes itself into, and constitutes an integral part of, the body of the writer's pre-devolution artistic work dedicated to the cultural and political liberation of Scotland. And while in and with this text Gray bluntly exposes what he seems to regard as a fundamental deception underlying modern Scottish identity, he does so with playfulness rather than bitterness. As a result, *Poor Things* is not an exorcism; it is a celebration.

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