
Spring 2015

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF (PARA)TEXT IN ALASDAIR GRAY'S POOR THINGS

Lila Ibrahim

John Carroll University, librahim16@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ibrahim, Lila, "THE DECONSTRUCTION OF (PARA)TEXT IN ALASDAIR GRAY'S POOR THINGS" (2015).
Masters Essays. 4.
<https://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays/4>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Essays at Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Essays by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact mchercourt@jcu.edu.

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF (PARA)TEXT IN
ALASDAIR GRAY'S *POOR THINGS*

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Lila Ibrahim
2015

In “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” Jacques Derrida asserts that the archive is the place “where things *commence*” and “where men and gods *command*,” the place “where authority [and] social order are exercised” (9). Alasdair Gray’s *Poor Things* commences with the fictional discovery of potential archival matter and a desire to “preserve evidence of local culture that was being hustled into the past” (Gray vii).¹ Wisam Mansour observes that “for ages the archive has been regarded as the major distinguishing feature for the construction of history, especially for those who work in the academic arena” (41). In the fictitious world of *Poor Things*, Michael Donnelly, a fictional character but also a real-life historian friend of the author Gray, discovers a text by Dr. Archibald McCandless (Archie) that at first appears to be a historical (‘factual’) document, but that he later concludes is fictional. However, for the editor of *Poor Things*, also named Alasdair Gray, the McCandless document serves as impetus to reconstruct himself as historian and put forth the text as history.²

In Mansour’s Derrida-informed view, “the past, as engraved in the archive, is constantly reverted to, reread, reassessed, revised, and rewritten. In this respect, the archive becomes the place from which the past ‘commences’” (42). Archie’s wife, Victoria McCandless, Donnelly, and ‘Gray’ reread Archie’s text, and, in their reassessment, find it to be “a cunning lie,” “a blackly humorous fiction,” or “a loving portrait,” respectively (Gray 274, xi). As a result of their conclusions, Victoria rewrites

¹ All quotations from and references to *Poor Things* in this paper come from the 2001 Dalkey edition, unless otherwise noted.

² I will hereby refer to the editor as ‘Gray’ to differentiate him from Gray as author, as Rhind does in *Alasdair Gray and the Postmodern*.

Archie's narrative and 'Gray' revises it, while Donnelly seeks to have it published with "no changes" (xi).³

Derrida also describes the archive as the place "from which order is given" (9); Archie's text, archival in the sense that it houses various letters, documents and images, influences the order of the paratextual frames which surround it. Within that archive, 'Gray,' Archie, and Godwin Baxter, who is often called 'God' in the narrative, are the "men and gods [who] command" a singular interpretation of Victoria as monster. This postmodern treatment of the archive in *Poor Things* is echoed in the deconstruction of the opposition between the text and paratext.⁴

Readers often privilege the text over its paratext, and even Gérard Genette, in his paratext (introduction) to *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, claims: "Whatever aesthetic or ideological investment the author makes in a paratextual element (a "lovely title" or a preface-manifesto), whatever coquettishness or paradoxical reversal he puts into it, the paratextual element is always subordinate to 'its' text" (12). Such a claim may partially stem from the recognition that introductions, notes, and other paratextual material change from one edition to another, simultaneously implying that while such alterations can better support the text, they are neither as ontologically significant nor as epistemologically sound as the central text, which tends to remain relatively constant. The paratext or margins of a text are often thought to require a revisionary temporal evolution to ensure that readers receive the valued text properly, while the center is considered too sacred to alter significantly. Genette points out that "The ways and means

³ In reality, Gray worked with Donnelly at the People's Palace during the 1970s, when Elspeth King hired Gray as Artist-Recorder (*A Life* 173-74). The Donnelly who seeks to publish Archie's text is a fictional creation based on the real figure.

⁴ On Gray's relationship to the postmodern, see Rhind and McMunnigal.

of the paratext change continually, depending on period, culture, genre, author, work, and edition” (3). From the 19th century onwards, according to Daisy Turrer, the paratext evolved into a more layered structure that served as “a fortified city around the text, strengthening and giving evidence to the author” (27). By the 20th century, writers like Derrida and Foucault, among others, “recover the place of the margin” and complicate the seeming “boundaries” between the margin and center (Turrer 27).⁵ This complication applies to Gray’s work in *Poor Things* and, as I shall argue, the book performs its own deconstruction of the traditional binary opposition by defamiliarizing the relationship between the text and the paratext.

Critics have not yet addressed the deconstruction of the paratextual material in *Poor Things*, focusing instead, and more generally, on the text’s relation to postmodernism or to Scottish national identity and politics. For example, Christie March uses Bakhtin’s ideas of the carnivalesque grotesquerie to argue that *Poor Things* “suggest[s] meaningful foundations for [Scottish] identity making” (324). Similarly, Donald Kaczvinsky asserts that “an identification between Bella and Scotland is at the very heart of Gray’s novel” (776). Dimitris Vardoulakis identifies a deconstruction of cosmopolitanism in the novel, arguing that *Poor Things* “allows for two different extrapolations of the relation between autonomy and automaticity—two different extrapolations of cosmopolitanism—neither of which can ultimately be privileged” (137). In another discussion on Scottish nationalism, David Leishman points out that:

[A]s a portent of his creation of Bella Baxter [Victoria McCandless],
Godwin first displays two black and white hermaphrodite rabbits created

⁵ Turrer specifically lists Maurice Blanchot and Antoine Compagnon in addition to Derrida and Foucault.

by his grafting together of two ‘equal and opposite’ animals: one black, one white; one male, one female. Their new existence as stitched-together sexual opposites, and their subsequent disinterest in procreation, point to a disruption of the ‘natural’ orders of gender and biology and also to a wider rejection of binary oppositions. (5)

Leishman recognizes that *Poor Things* rejects binary oppositions, in keeping with postmodernism, although he admits that Gray “rejects the term postmodernism, preferring to describe himself as ‘an old-fashioned modernist’ albeit one who is preoccupied with the possibility for communal existence within a ‘corporation governed, [...] multinational, world’” (1). Leishman then applies the rejection of binary oppositions to “national literature and nation-building” (5). Thus, while most critics working with *Poor Things* overlook the text’s deconstructive tendencies, those who recognize it devote little discussion to how the text performs its own deconstruction by way of the framing paratext.

Critics admit that the paratextual material in *Poor Things* serves to undermine the various voices found within the book, but rarely pursue in any detail the relationship between the paratext and its text. Specifically, Neil Rhind acknowledges in *Poor Things* a concern with interpretation and states that “the ensuing discrepancies [between Archie and Victoria’s tales] are readily reducible to differences in characters’ interpretations of events” (“Portrait” 1). He writes that the book’s “concern with the process of reading history spills over into that of reading itself” (“Portrait” 1). Yet, Rhind does not pursue this train of thought any further, choosing instead to focus on the Bella Caledonia portrait within *Poor Things*, although he extends these ideas somewhat in his PhD dissertation,

where he discusses Gray's work in relation to postmodernism. Lynne Diamond-Nigh argues that through the "use of the visual arts," Gray "exposes the underlying pretense of any enterprise that attempts to communicate truth as an objective reality" (178).

Diamond-Nigh's article explores how the graphic in *Poor Things* deconstructs the opposition between words and images, whereas I shall focus specifically on the rhetorical moves in 'Gray's' introduction as a deconstruction of the privileged center.

Gray organizes *Poor Things* in a seemingly conventional manner (introduction, narrative, letter, notes), yet the performance of the paratexts "fundamentally disturb the narrative conventions of the book" (Macksey xii). The first sign of disturbance occurs when the cover page declares the book's author as Alasdair Gray, whereas the title page claims the text is merely edited by Gray, and announces Archie as the real author. As Nick Bentley notes, "The title page is unreliable in that it presents 'Poor Things' as an autobiographical work produced by one Archibald McCandless M.D. who is in fact a fictional character within the novel" (44). This disturbance is an indication of the unreliability of the text as a whole, which is further emphasized in the framing paratexts. The editor 'Gray' explains in his introduction that he grants the privileged center to Archie's narrative, which describes the creation and life of Bella Baxter, a monster created in the tradition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; Bella also happens to be Archie's wife. A letter written by Dr. Victoria McCandless, also known as Bella Baxter, in which she refutes Archie's tale follows. After this letter, 'Gray' provides "Chapter Notes, Historical and Critical," in which he attempts to further substantiate Archie's story. Moreover, the 2002 UK edition of *Poor Things* includes a page of reviews, some of which are fake, as well as short biographies for both Archie and 'Gray,' creating yet

another paratextual frame.⁶ The events of *Poor Things* as described by Archie take place during the Victorian period, whereas Victoria's letter is written at the start of the twentieth century, since she outlives her husband. The introduction and notes by 'Gray' are written sometime after 1990. The period is significant because Bella Baxter's character, described as an independent, intelligent "erotomaniac," is far from the angel in the house ideal of the Victorians (Gray back cover 2001). Thus, even without Godwin bringing Bella back from the dead, after a brain transplant from the unborn child in her womb, she would still be considered monstrous by Victorian standards. Bentley concurs that Bella's empowerment over men might appear "unnatural" to hegemonic "Victorian gender ideology" and perhaps explains, to a certain extent, "why Archie has decided to represent her as a 'monstrous' figure, one that transcends the natural order of things in both her creation and her subsequent dealings with men" (49). Gray defamiliarizes or makes Bella strange for the male characters inside the book, and for the readers outside, especially those who are aware of Victorian conventions, supplying a motive for the creation of Archie's text and weakening the authority Archie would otherwise gain from his centralized and privileged position within the book.⁷

The introduction also includes a publication timeline that conflates 'Gray' as editor with Gray as author. Gray first published *Poor Things* in 1992, and 'Gray's' description of how his edited book came to be published would also put it around 1992. Differentiating between Gray and 'Gray' or reading the author and editor as two separate

⁶ The fake reviews are mixed among real reviews and it is not always clear which are written by Gray and which actually come from reviewers. This page may serve as a signal to the reader of the mix between fact and fiction to come.

⁷ The Russian word for Victor Shklovsky's defamiliarization (*ostraneniye*) means literally "making strange" (Lemon and Reis 4).

entities, as most critics do and as Gray seems to encourage with his title page, introduces another binary opposition in the text that invites deconstruction. When the author and editor are two different people, readers might reasonably think of the two as working together, because the editor assists the author in getting the text to the readers. However, this collaboration does not abolish the hierarchical structure in which the author—even one deceased, perhaps long ago—is traditionally privileged over the editor. As an insider, the author holds more authority to comment on the text that was her own creation than an editor, who lies on the outside of a work. But the author's work, for which an editor might provide an editorial introduction and ancillary paratextual materials, could conceivably benefit from such service, especially when the passage of time has changed certain attributes of the audience that the author may have taken for granted.⁸ Thus, the temporal contingencies of a text might prevent it from standing on its own, which might in turn imply that the author's authority is incomplete without the editor. The editor's authority becomes a necessary supplement for the dissemination of the author's work, and the hierarchical structure can be reversed. At the same time, the need for the editor and his work would not exist without the author's text. Hence, one can see how authority oscillates between the two, leaving them in a state of play.

The opening sentence of the introduction to *Poor Things* establishes the need to supplement Archie's text and the readers' knowledge. 'Gray' notes that "The doctor who wrote this account of his early experiences died in 1911, and readers who know nothing about the daringly experimental history of Scottish medicine will perhaps mistake it for a grotesque fiction" (vii). The death of the author (Archie) prevents him from introducing

⁸ See Derrida's discussion of the need for supplement in *The Truth in Painting*.

the text himself and readers may lack the knowledge necessary to receive the text accurately—hence the need for the framing paratext and ‘Gray’s’ editorial work.⁹ Archie’s biographical blurb presents another purpose for the editor: “[Archie’s] wife suppressed the first edition of his greatest work, the autobiographical *Poor Things*” (Gray, 2002). ‘Gray’s’ role as editor includes bringing to light a text that Victoria McCandless concealed. In this way, ‘Gray’ assists Archie in ensuring the availability and reception of his book. The ostensible reasons for ‘Gray’s’ paratextual work are unsurprisingly commonplace, but the rhetorical moves within those paratexts are distinctive, although not entirely without some precedent. In other words, ‘Gray’s’ concern with genre categorization of the central text is one readers may have seen before. For example, the foreword to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, written by the fictional Dr. John Ray, Jr., presents Humbert Humbert’s text as “memoir [...] ‘true’ story [...] and case history” (3-5). However, where Nabokov’s work conclusively establishes Humbert Humbert as an unreliable narrator, Gray’s work in the paratexts leaves the reader in a more uncertain position. Philip Hobsbaum argues that this extended ambiguity distinguishes Gray’s book from comparable works:

Unlike its paradigms, *Poor Things* is able to render each of its alternative narrators convincing in their different ways. There is, in other words, no element that will necessarily sow suspicion in the reader's mind. Further, there is no evidence in either narrative to allow complicity between either one of the narrators and the reader. Consequently, no preference for the

⁹ Roland Barthes, in “The Death of the Author,” argues against the idea of the author as “part of his own book” (314). However, *Poor Things* contains deliberate biographical matter connecting the author Gray to his literary creation ‘Gray.’

one narrator over the other can be established. This circumstance opens the door to a sub-genre of novel whose 'centre' is not implied by any evidence suggested in the text. Notwithstanding its antecedents, we are looking at a book which may well anticipate an unexpected phase in the convoluted history of prose fiction. (n.pag.)

For Hobsbaum, the deliberate ambiguity of *Poor Things* is unique, and—I would add—a form of defamiliarization, since previous novels have trained readers to use textual evidence in order to reach the 'truth.' In addition, 'Gray' and Archie exist in a state of deconstructed authority, with the authorial Gray, the creator of both, seemingly on the outside. While this view may be seen as its own binary opposition, in reality, both 'Gray' and Archie share similarities with the author Gray, as I shall discuss later, blurring the line between inside and outside. By separating the two Grays, we can see the play between editor and author more clearly, in keeping with the performance of deconstruction in the book as a whole.

The addition of paratextual material to Archie's text transforms it into what Genette thinks of as a book, an entity somehow more substantial than just a text: "The paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (1). Prior to this paratextual addition, Archie's narrative is a legal document, part of the estate of Victoria McCandless, and thereafter it languishes: first in the trash then in Donnelly's pile of "material to be concentrated on when he had time" (Gray x). With the creation of a paratext, Archie's narrative becomes the central or main text of a book, or as 'Gray' puts it, "the biggest part of the book,"

based both on its relative position in the middle, and its length of 248 pages (Gray vii). The paratexts comment on Archie's work, which comes first temporally; the framing paratexts exist because of the seeming need to respond to Archie's story, and in this sense they are secondary. Derrida discusses the function of the frame in his essay "The Parergon." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines parergon as something subordinate, secondary or supplementary to the main subject. However, for Derrida, the frame is anything but secondary. He argues that the frame does not take its place on the outside in a subordinate position to the work, but that the frame also takes place on the inside, making it part of and essential to the work (Derrida 57). The implication here is that 'Gray's' introduction is a crucially active part of Gray's text and by extension Archie's text in that it deliberately works to affect the way readers receive and interact with the narrative. Both the title and frame of a work are often taken for granted, as mere supplements or ornaments, and that is precisely how 'Gray' treats Archie's titles, as I shall discuss later; yet both the title and frame collaborate with and operate on a composition according to Derrida. If Archie's text is primary and the title and frame secondary or supplementary, the removal of the framing paratext should not affect the work, provided it is whole and not lacking.¹⁰ However, it is clear that the framing pieces play an important rhetorical role, not only because their removal would result in privileging Archie's text and silencing Victoria's voice. "The hilarious tale of love and scandal that ensues would be 'the whole story'" should removal of the frame occur, at which point Archie's tale may be dismissed as fiction (Gray back cover 2001). 'Gray's' desire to have readers receive the text as historically accurate or factual, and his

¹⁰For more on this topic, see Derrida's discussion of Kant in his essay "The Parergon" from *The Truth in Painting*.

subsequent framing additions, indicates that Archie's narrative lacks sufficient authority to establish itself as non-fiction without intervention. Beyond the internal world of the book, the removal of the paratexts, if they were in fact subordinate or secondary, would completely change the readers' experience. Genette advises the following: "To indicate what is at stake, we can ask one simple question as an example: limited to the text alone and without a guiding set of directions [i.e. paratexts], how would we read [a text]?" (2). *Poor Things* depends heavily on its conflicting and seemingly malfunctioning paratexts to carry part of the story, which defamiliarizes the formulaic structure and the conventional relationship between text and paratext. The framing paratext also raises interesting questions of authority, such as who has the expertise to comment on and authenticate Archie's narrative and who is telling the truth: 'Gray' or Donnelly, Archie or Victoria?

'Gray' attempts to set up a binary opposition between history and story, and between truth and fiction, in the paratextual supplements. Mansour points out that, for Foucault, "History's primary task is no longer the interpretation of the document and its expressive value, nor the attempt to decide if it is telling the truth—contemporary history's task is to work on the document from within and develop it" (42). 'Gray' both interprets and assigns value to Archie's narrative, agreeing with Donnelly that it is "a lost masterpiece" (among other assessments), and he decides that Archie tells the truth (Gray x). At the same time, Archie works from within the center while 'Gray' develops the narrative further with end notes. *Poor Things* implies that contemporary history can and will interpret and assign value to documents, including an evaluation of veracity. Both Archie and 'Gray' exert linguistic and structural force as well, to push the text's assertion

of Victoria as monster and ‘Gray’s’ claim that Archie’s narrative is history. Linda Hutcheon points out that the combination:

of an aggressive assertion of the historical [with the] social particularity of the fictive [draws attention] not to what *fits* the master narrative, but instead to the ex-centric, the marginal, the borderline—all those things that threaten the (illusory but comforting) security of the centered, totalizing, masterly discourses of our culture. (82-3)

In its deconstruction of the privileged center, *Poor Things* draws the reader’s attention both to the margins and to the marginalized voices of Donnelly and Victoria. Structurally, the organization of the book relegates Victoria’s letter to a relatively harmless position in the back, but follows it with notes by ‘Gray’ so as not to give her the last word. ‘Gray’ provides the first and last word and places Archie’s narrative in “pride of place” (Gray xiv), leaving Victoria’s voice in a marginalized position. Linguistically, ‘Gray’ and Archie’s voices dominate the text in sheer number of words, and ‘Gray’s’ rhetorical moves in the frame also attempt to undermine Victoria’s authority. It is important to note, however, that Gray as author undermines the authority of the editor ‘Gray,’ in what can best be described as dramatic irony. In the first paragraph of the introduction, the editor makes clear his stance on the veracity of Archie’s narrative, and introduces readers to Donnelly, who disagrees with ‘Gray,’ believing Archie’s narrative to be fiction (vii). ‘Gray’ later comments that Donnelly “thinks it a blackly humorous fiction into which some real experiences and historical facts have been cunningly woven [...] I think it [...] a loving portrait of an astonishingly good, stout, intelligent, eccentric man recorded by a

friend with a memory for dialogue” (Gray xi). This method of introduction functions on two different levels: for the editor, it creates an opening that will allow ‘Gray’ to build support for his reading of Archie’s narrative as non-fictional history; for the audience, it serves as a way of indicating that the authority of the main text is questionable.

Furthermore, the introduction sets up an opposition between ‘Gray’s’ reading on the one hand, and Donnelly’s and Victoria’s on the other, between history and story. Although ‘Gray’ privileges history over fiction, and Victoria uses the label of fiction to minimize the importance of Archie’s work, the inconclusiveness of *Poor Things* as a whole fails to support the superiority of history over fiction, blurring the line between the two. Genette confirms, “What one paratextual element gives, another paratextual element, later or simultaneous, may always take away; and here as elsewhere, the reader must put it all together and try (it’s not always so simple) to figure out what the whole adds up to” (183). Rather than the paratext serving to enlighten the reader regarding Archie’s story, the paratext instead increases confusion so that, by the end, the reader is unsure whether he has read a history or a fiction (within the world of the text).

The introduction also reveals another opposition—this time between art and politics—when ‘Gray’ relates how Donnelly came to discover Archie’s text and Victoria’s letter. Readers are told that the political and economic changes in Glasgow almost result in the destruction of the text, but—simultaneously—lead to Donnelly gaining access where he might not have otherwise. Archie’s text and Victoria’s letter are found in an old law office’s files that have been placed out on the street for the “Cleansing Department to collect and destroy” (Gray viii). When Donnelly calls to get permission to remove the files to the museum where he works, the senior partner of the

law firm, a lawyer and politician, denies him. Political and economic changes in Glasgow oppose the archival collection of cultural and historical artifacts to such an extent that destruction is preferable. These circumstances create an opposition between the political/economic/progressive and the creative/artistic/historical, which *Poor Things* deconstructs by showing how the changes in Glasgow create the need for another archival collection to house items that are culturally important. The historical, in the traditional sense of bygone times, can only exist to the extent that time has in fact gone by; likewise, progress can only be measured in relation to the past. The historical and progressive feed into each other and, in *Poor Things*, result in freeing Archie's text and Victoria's letter from the archive of the law office, where they had been previously protected as legal documents; now, the documents transform into potential historical artifacts. While political and legal constraints operate in an ineffectual attempt to destroy the text, the authority attached to the name of Victoria McCandless leads to its preservation. 'Gray' tells us that Donnelly "saw the name of the first woman doctor to graduate from Glasgow University, a name only known to historians of the suffragette movement nowadays, though she had once written a Fabian pamphlet on public health," and decides to take the boxes away (Gray viii). When he is denied permission, Donnelly only takes "a small item" (viii). At this point, readers are not told that the first woman doctor is Victoria McCandless or that the text Donnelly takes deals with the first woman doctor, although it is clear that what Donnelly retrieves follows the introduction. 'Gray' deliberately avoids clarity here so as not to contribute to Victoria's authority, while simultaneously undermining Donnelly's.

Since Donnelly believes Archie's narrative to be a fiction and 'Gray' disagrees with him, 'Gray' attempts to undermine Donnelly's authority in a number of ways throughout the introduction. He first introduces Donnelly as a local historian, yet a few lines later refers to him as "helper" to the curator of the "local history museum," rather than as an assistant, which would imply a higher level of professionalism (vii). Then 'Gray' states that the name on the papers that catch Donnelly's attention would only be known to "historians of the suffragette movement," implying that Donnelly's expertise is narrow, and, once readers realize Victoria is the first woman doctor, possibly biased (viii). Although Donnelly asks for permission before taking what is ostensibly trash, and 'Gray' says he "left the heap as it was—except for a small item he had casually pocketed before learning this was a crime," he later refers to Donnelly as "the arch-thief" (viii-ix). This continual linguistic abasement of Donnelly's professional position serves to destabilize his authority, and, because he is aligned with Victoria, her authority as well—if the reader believes 'Gray.'

'Gray's' attempts to establish his expertise and authority as superior to those of Donnelly are, however, constantly undermined by the author Gray. From the start of the paratextual materials surrounding Archie's narrative in the 2002 Bloomsbury UK edition, only Archie and 'Gray' are permitted biographical blurbs, not Donnelly who is the real-life historian. He is granted one short phrase in Archie's blurb which does not even provide his full name: "Recently rediscovered by the Glasgow local historian, Mike Donnelly" (Gray, 2002). Ironically, 'Gray's' biographical gloss, which accurately describes the author Gray, deliberately malfunctions in the traditional sense of establishing the editor's authority: "Alasdair Gray, the editor, was born in Riddrie,

Glasgow, 1934, the son of a cardboard-box manufacturer and part-time hill guide. He obtained a Scottish Education Department Diploma in Design and Mural Painting and is now a fat, balding, asthmatic, married pedestrian who lives by writing and designing things” (Gray, 2002). The description for the editor fails to develop an ethos sufficient to warrant readers’ trust, as there is nothing in the statement that speaks to editing or even scholarly experience. Aside from the reference to Gray as editor, the remaining information is factually accurate.¹¹

Likewise, Archie’s biographical gloss combines fact and fiction. As a fictional character, Archie’s biography matches that gleaned from his narrative in *Poor Things*:

Dr. Archibald McCandless (1862-1911) was born in Whauphill, Galloway, the illegitimate son of a prosperous tenant farmer. He studied medicine at Glasgow University, worked briefly as a house surgeon and public health officer, then devoted himself to literature and the education of his sons. His once famous epic, *The Testament of Sawney Bean*, has long been unfairly neglected and his wife suppressed the first edition of his greatest work, the autobiographical *Poor Things*. (Gray, 2002)

Everything written about Archie thus far is confirmed by Archie’s narrative, Victoria’s letter, or ‘Gray’s’ Notes. However, the last sentence of Archie’s gloss plays with fact and fiction: “Recently rediscovered by the Glasgow local historian, Mike Donnelly, this weird narrative is as gripping as Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and in 1992

¹¹ For more on Alasdair Gray’s life, see his autobiography *A Life in Pictures*.

received both the Whitbread Award and the *Guardian Prize*” (Gray, 2002).¹² The fictional discovery of *Poor Things*, which is structured similarly to Hogg’s text, by the real-life Glasgow local historian Donnelly, did indeed receive these awards; the recipient, however, was (of course) Gray and not his fictional creation Archie. Thus, both blurbs contain information that applies to Gray, although Gray has more in common with the editor than Archie; more importantly, the blurbs struggle unsuccessfully to establish authority for fictional creations (Archie and ‘Gray’), while undermining the actual authority of real figures (Donnelly and Gray). Bentley notes that “in undermining the reliability of the voice that normally carries the greatest authority in a book—the author—Gray alerts us of the slipperiness of all claims to truth” (45). I would add that the factual and fictional are here blurred to such an extent that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to fix or freeze the binary opposition between truth and fiction. In this way, *Poor Things* maintains a state of epistemological play.

In keeping with the state of play in *Poor Things*, the introduction attempts to justify the order of the paratext while inadvertently undermining its own argument. After describing what led Donnelly to the text, ‘Gray’ explains that an envelope labeled with Victoria’s name contained Archie’s text and Victoria’s letter. He also points out that “the letter was crumpled, not folded,” as though to emphasize the insignificance of its contents (Gray ix). In addition, ‘Gray’ defends his decision as to where to position Victoria’s letter: “I print the letter by the lady who calls herself ‘Victoria’ McCandless as an epilogue to the book” (xi). In placing quotation marks around her name and using the

¹² Gray received the Whitbread Award, now called Costa Book Award, for *Poor Things* in 1992; that same year, he also earned the *Guardian Fiction Prize*, since replaced with the *Guardian First Book Award*, for *Poor Things*.

phrase “calls herself,” ‘Gray’ implies that the name thus singled out is somehow fraudulent. Given that Victoria’s letter is shorter than Archie’s narrative, and because it might shed light on the contents of Archie’s text, one might join Donnelly in expecting to find the letter next, or at least a discussion of its contents, but ‘Gray’ deliberately chooses to discuss Archie’s book, privileging it and his own stance over that of the marginalized Donnelly and Victoria. He states: “Michael [Donnelly] would prefer [the letter] as an introduction, but if read before the main text it will prejudice readers against” accepting Archie’s text as non-fiction. On the other hand, if the letter were read afterward, according to ‘Gray’ we shall “easily see it is the letter of a disturbed woman who wants to hide the truth about her start in life” (Gray xi). In this way, the paratextual frame attempts to affect how readers think about the two texts that will follow the introduction. Even as these machinations play themselves out, Gray also undermines the editor by having him explain that the original title of Archie’s narrative implies its similarity to “shallow, gossipy books” and, because it is self-published, that it must therefore be “duller than those [books] for which the publisher paid the author” (ix). Yet again the introduction works on two levels: ‘Gray’ attempts to weaken Victoria’s stance (inadvertently weakening Archie’s text), in order to later justify his title change. In ‘Gray’s’ desire not to prejudice the reader against Archie’s text, he slants the reader against Victoria, both by the spatial positioning of her letter and his labeling of her as “disturbed” (xi). Of course for ‘Gray’ the truth lies in Archie’s text, not Victoria’s. Another problem with Victoria’s letter (from ‘Gray’s’ perspective) is that the letter could serve as competition for his own introduction, but as he points out “no book needs two introductions and I am writing this one” (xi). Although the introduction acts here as a

traditional framing device where the editor justifies the choices he made, it also allows critical readers to analyze both the editor's reasons behind those decisions, and the bearing those choices have on the way we read. The humor of the introduction, which comes across so clearly in this example, also assists readers; in working so intensely to establish his authority as a professional scholarly editor, and failing terribly at it, 'Gray' paradoxically exposes his lack of expertise.

The introduction continuously raises questions about 'Gray's' authority as editor, so that no stable hierarchy between the paratext and text can be established. As author of two paratexts (introduction and notes), 'Gray' has the opportunity to create an authoritative persona that could subvert both Archie and Victoria's voices, but Gray does not allow him to succeed. Instead, the introduction contains information that deliberately calls 'Gray's' authority into question. Readers learn from the introduction that 'Gray' was an "artist-recorder," working under Elspeth King (another real-life figure), who was also Donnelly's boss (Gray x).¹³ The position of artist-recorder involved painting various scenes and people from Glasgow, which does not add to 'Gray's' authority as editor. This revelation also indicates that Donnelly was 'Gray's' co-worker, if not his superior. 'Gray' is now a "self-employed writer," a phrase that aligns him more closely with Archie, who had to self-publish his book (x). As editor, 'Gray' informs readers that the only changes he made to Archie's text are to the chapter headings and the title of the book. Despite Gray's attempt to make the changes seem insignificant, made purely for aesthetic reasons, the importance of framing material, including titles, should not be

¹³ 'Gray's' previous work experience as revealed in the introduction to *Poor Things* matches that of the real Gray. In his autobiography, *A Life in Pictures*, Gray explains that he was employed by King as artist-recorder for the People's Palace in Glasgow, where he completed 33 paintings (173-197).

underestimated.¹⁴ Archie's original chapter headings are fragmented and their meaning only becomes clear after reading the chapter. Yet 'Gray's' simplified chapter headings, while certainly clearer, are not entirely true to the original. For example, he titles Chapter Three "The Quarrel," and since Archie does offend his friend in the chapter, such a term might apply. But Archie's headings for the same chapter do not indicate a quarrel of any kind: "Sir Colin's discovery—arresting a life—"What use is it?"—the queer rabbits—"How did you do it?"—useless cleverness and what the Greeks knew—"Good-bye"—Baxter's bulldog—a horrible hand" (xi). 'Gray's' title changes create a discrepancy between the author Archie and the editor 'Gray.' A traditional goal for editors is to remain true to the original work while increasing clarity for the present day reader, but 'Gray' says he aimed for "snappier titles" (vi). Genette notes that "intertitles [chapter headings] are by no means absolutely required," so 'Gray' could have merely numbered each chapter without an additional label (294). 'Gray's' decision to provide his own chapter headings intrudes on the central text, further deconstructing the idea of a clear division between inside and outside. Another function of the paratext is "to account for the title, something that is all the more necessary when the title, long or short, is allusive, indeed, enigmatic" (Genette 213). Such is the case with a title like *Poor Things*. 'Gray' renames the book *Poor Things* because "things are often mentioned in the story and every single character [...] is called *poor* or call themselves that" (Gray xi). In fairness to 'Gray,' Archie's original title, *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer*, is lengthy, which could make publicity challenging, and perhaps even outdated, since a period of 83 years has passed between the initial printing and 'Gray's'

¹⁴ For more on titles, see Brian Macaskill's "Titular Space in J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*: A Maquette for a Portrait, or a Self-Portrait, of the Artist Finding His Feet."

publication; but ‘Gray’ does not provide these common and sensible reasons for the revisions.¹⁵ Stephen Bernstein points out another “editorial problem”: “the footnotes refer to a poem by McCandless in chapter 7 that actually appears in chapter 8. This [...] could simply be a misprint, but who can say?” (109-10). ‘Gray’s’ errors and reasoning for the changes he made, changes far removed from Archie’s original text, appear specious, calling into question his authority as editor. The paratext ensures that ‘Gray,’ despite his best intentions, does not overpower Archie or Victoria, so that by the end of the book, a state of play remains between the three voices.

The paratext also presents a deconstruction of genre categories in its attempt to situate *Poor Things* among other works. In addition, the accuracy of Donnelly and ‘Gray’s’ respective categorization of Archie’s book provides another example of their authority and knowledge. For Donnelly, Archie’s text is “fiction into which some real experiences and historical facts have been cunningly woven,” and that accurately describes *Poor Things* as a whole (Gray xi). Two examples of historical fact from the introduction that stand out are the references to the first woman doctor and the artist William Strang. The first female doctor to graduate from Glasgow University, Dr. Marion Gilchrist, was actually a leading activist in the women's suffrage movement in Scotland. The illustrations found in Archie’s narrative are supposedly done by Strang (actually executed by Gray); the short description of Strang as “a Scottish artist born in Dumbarton, who studied under Legros at the Slade School of Art” is also accurate (ix).

¹⁵ Genette notes that “an irresistible tendency toward reduction [of titles] is evident,” with “the long-synopsis-titles characteristic of the classical period and perhaps especially of the eighteenth century” giving way to shorter titles in the early nineteenth century (71-72). Gray is playing with this tendency to shorten titles, and Genette confirms that “during the rest of the nineteenth and even in the twentieth century such [long] titles reemerged from time to time as pastiches” (71).

As a result of the combination of fact and fiction, Donnelly likens Archie's book to Walter Scott's *Old Mortality* which uses a fictional editor and also mixes fact with fiction, and James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* which narrates the same events twice from two different perspectives and is arranged similarly to *Poor Things*. 'Gray', on the other hand, likens the text to James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, arguing that Archie presents "a loving portrait" of Godwin Baxter (Bella's supposed creator). And while Boswell's biography is well-known, critics disagree as to how accurate or biographical it actually is. In his attempt to validate Archie's text by associating it with non-fiction, 'Gray' draws attention to the permeability of the boundary between fact and fiction, and raises questions about the accuracy of descriptive genre labels, like 'non-fiction.' As with so many other binary oppositions set up in *Poor Things*, this one also ends without a clear resolution, with neither label achieving dominance over the other.

The end of the introductory paratext continues to play with traditional rhetorical moves, further defamiliarizing the relationship between the text and paratext. 'Gray' informs readers that he decides to become a historian in order to prove that Donnelly is wrong and that Archie's text is authentic. In deciding to become a historian for this reason, 'Gray' tacitly admits that only a historian can authenticate a text, but he claims that after merely six months of research, he is now a historian. Thus, in the world of *Poor Things*, while only a historian can authenticate a text, becoming a historian requires the simple ability to read documents in archives (xii). Furthermore, in those six months, 'Gray' claims to have "collected enough evidence to prove the McCandless story a complete tissue of facts," overlooking the delicate nature of the word "tissue" (xii). The

phrase “tissue of facts” echoes Roland Barthes: “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (qtd. in Bentley 46). For Bentley, “This produces a radical notion of a text as a multi-dimensional space made up of quotations from and allusions to other writings and cultural discourses” (46). Such a description appositely applies to *Poor Things*, in which Victoria McCandless declares: “What morbid Victorian fantasy has he NOT filched from? I find traces of The Coming Race, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Dracula, Trilby, Rider Haggard’s She, The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes and, alas, Alice Through the Looking-Glass; He has even plagiarized [...] G.B. Shaw’s Pygmalion and [...] Herbert George Wells” (Gray 273). ‘Gray’ and Victoria both refer specifically to Archie’s narrative, and not *Poor Things* as a whole; however, the intertextuality of *Poor Things* suits the word “tissue.” *Poor Things* is a tissue of both fact and fiction, quotation and allusion. ‘Gray’ then follows this statement with a timeline for “professional doubters” (xii). The timeline is meant to augment ‘Gray’s’ authority, showing that he has Time on his side. However, the timeline is followed by an admission that ‘Gray’ has not “obtained official copies” of the documents that would substantiate it, because “if my readers trust me I do not care what an ‘expert’ thinks” (xiv). Despite the admission of rather shoddy research work, ‘Gray’ casts aspersions on Donnelly by placing quotations around the word expert. ‘Gray’ also manages to lose Archie’s original text, which results in a falling out with Donnelly. ‘Gray’s’ botched attempts at establishing his authority over that of Donnelly and Victoria are both humorous and illuminating; they show how a paratextual frame works to mediate our reception of a text, sometimes more successfully than others, and often in imperceptible ways in the hands of a skilled editor.

Although the power of the paratext may often be overlooked, it cannot be underestimated. *Poor Things* challenges Genette's claim from 1987: "Whatever aesthetic or ideological investment the author makes in a paratextual element (a 'lovely title' or a preface-manifesto), whatever coquettishness or paradoxical reversal he puts into it, the paratextual element is always subordinate to 'its' text" (12). The investment Gray puts into his paratext pays peculiar dividends, and the story remains incomplete without 'Gray's' introduction and notes, and without Victoria's letter. The paratextual element in *Poor Things* is defamiliarized to such an extent that it does not remain subordinate to 'its' text, and furthermore, it mediates the power of the ostensible center. Because Archie's text is archival (housing various documents and images), it is also "where authority, [and] social order are exercised," as Derrida asserts (9). Archie's narrative attempts to restore social order by defining and condemning Victoria's independence as abnormal or monstrous. The paratext, however, intercedes and facilitates a different reading, one in which a larger archive (that of the paratexts) exercises authority and social order over an artifact (Archie's text), so that one can imagine a series of archives similar to that of Russian nesting dolls, with no origin, intervening in the previous archive's authority.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*.
Ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood. Trans. Geoff Bennington. New York: Pearson
Longman, 2008. 313-316. Print.
- Bentley, Nick. *Contemporary British Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008. 44-52.
Print.
- Bernstein, Stephen. *Alasdair Gray*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1999. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." Trans. Eric Prenowitz.
Diacritics 25.2 (1995): 9-63. Print.
- . *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: U of
Chicago P, 1987. Print.
- Diamond-Nigh, Lynne. "Gray's Anatomy: When Words and Images Collide." *The Review
of Contemporary Fiction* 15.2 (1995): 178-183. Print.
- Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.
- Gray, Alasdair. *A Life in Pictures*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010. Print.

—. *Poor Things: Episodes From The Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D., Scottish Public Health Officer*. Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001. Print.

—. *Poor Things: Episodes From The Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D., Scottish Public Health Officer*. London: Bloomsbury, 2002. Print.

Hobsbaum, Philip. "Unreliable Narrators: Poor Things and its Paradigms." *The Glasgow Review* 3 (1995): n. pag. Web. 30 Jan. 2015.

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.

Kaczvinsky, Donald P. "'Making Up for Lost Time': Scotland, Stories, and the Self in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*." *Contemporary Literature* 4.2 (2001): 775-799. Print.

Leishman, David. "True Nations and Half People: Rewriting Nationalism in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*." *Transnational Literature* 6.1 (2013): 1-16. Print.

Lemon, Lee T., and Marion J. Reis. *Russian Formalist Criticism; Four Essays*. Ed. Paul A. Olson. Trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965. Print.

Macaskill, Brian. "Titular Space in J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*: A Maquette for a Portrait, or a Self-Portrait, of the Artist Finding His Feet." *MediaTropes eJournal* 4.2 (2014): 114-143. Web. 7 Feb. 2015.

Macksey, Richard. Foreword. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. By Gérard Genette. 1987. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. xi-xxii. Print.

Mansour, Wisam. "The Violence of the Archive." *English Language Notes* 45.1 (2007):

41-44. Print.

March, Christie. "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): 323-346. Print.

McMunnigal, Alan. "Alasdair Gray and Postmodernism." *Studies in Scottish Literature*

33.1 (2004): 335-348. Print.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Random House, 1997. Print.

Rhind, Neil James. *Alasdair Gray and the Postmodern*. Diss. U of Edinburgh, 2009.

Edinburgh: U of Edinburgh, 2009. Web.

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

Things." *International Journal of Scottish Literature* 8 (2011): 1-15. Print.

Turrer, Daisy. "A Study on the Paratextual Space in Artists' Books." *Journal of Artists'*

Books 29 (2011): 27-31. Print.

Vardoulakis, Dimitris. "The 'Poor Thing' The Cosmopolitan in Alasdair Gray's *Poor*

Things." *Sub-Stance* 37.3 (2008): 137-151. Print.

