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## True Nations and Half People: Rewriting Nationalism in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* David Leishman

Over the past two decades it has become something of a commonplace to refer to Scotland in the plural. Indicative of this trend are the 2004 collection of poetry entitled *Scotlands: Poets and the Nation*<sup>1</sup> and the Scottish cultural journal, *Scotlands*, which ran from 1994-1998, and whose 1997 volume encouraged the representation of varied visions of national experience and identity as reflecting the multiplicity of the nation itself: 'new views of Scotland, new Scotlands'. This purported coexistence of manifold Scotlands feeds into a postmodernist paradigm of identity, by, for example, playing on the sense of ontological uncertainty thrown up by Brian McHale's description of postmodernist fiction opening up a 'multitude of possible worlds'.<sup>2</sup> The plurality of vision in such statements also shows up a dedoxifying impulse closer to the postmodernist agenda that Linda Hutcheon situates as the heritage of the 1960s counter-cultural movements.<sup>3</sup> It is indeed in Lyotardian terms that Susanne Hagemann defines the liberating significance of these multiple Scotlands: 'The meaning(s) of Scotland, and of Scottish fiction, cannot be contained by a finite number of grand narratives.'<sup>4</sup>

But we can wonder how this postmodernist cultural expression of the nation intersects with its political destiny. If the grand narrative of a definable canonic Scotland has come to be rejected in favour of one of shifting multiplicity, then should the many variant forms and expressions of Scotland and Scottishness not work to undermine the potency of Scottish nationalism at a political level? I would argue that political nationalism, despite its varying forms, at some basic level lends itself to a totalising logic, which pre-supposes the validity of the national polity and its concomitant national experience. Indeed, the postmodern has been seen by some as being 'deeply ambivalent' to traditional ideologies of nation and nationalism.<sup>5</sup>

Alasdair Gray, as Scotland's pre-eminent postmodernist author and one of the most outspoken advocates of Scottish nationalism from the 1970s onwards, is quite naturally tied up in the contradictions that accompany such a postulate. Gray himself 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, a multinational, world'.<sup>6</sup> While his fictional work has been described as being 'trapped' by the dialectics of contradiction that it revels in,<sup>7</sup> he has, as a politically engaged author, nevertheless sought to surpass the aporia of his fiction through political activism. In particular, he is well known as staunch advocate of Scottish nationalism<sup>8</sup> and produced in

<sup>1</sup> Alan Riach and Douglas Gifford, eds. *Scotlands: Poets and the Nation* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987) 27.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988) 8.

<sup>4</sup> Susanne Hagemann, 'Introduction', *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present* ed. Susanne Hagemann (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996) 14.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony D. Smith quoted in A.J.P. Thomson, 'Phrasing Scotland and the Postmodern', *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Literature* eds. Eleanor Bell and Susanne Hagemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004) 69.

<sup>6</sup> Joe McAvoy, 'An Old-Fashioned Modernist: Interview with Alasdair Gray' *Cencrastus* 61, n.d., 7-10.

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Odile Pittin Hédon, 'Alasdair Gray: Le piège de la dialectique' *Etudes écossaises* 8 (2002) 75-87.

<sup>8</sup> However, it has been noted that even Gray's nationalism is not exempt from knowing irony as he advocates a 'Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Republic', which appears to borrow its name from the retail establishment of the same name. See Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Culture, Nation, and the New Scottish Parliament*

1992 a pro-Independence pamphlet (revised with an updated title in 1997).<sup>9</sup> In 2004 he supported the Scottish Socialist Party's 'Declaration of Calton Hill' alongside fellow authors Iain Banks and James Kelman, which wished to counter the official Royal opening of the Scottish Parliament with a rival celebration dedicated to the establishment of an independent Socialist republic.<sup>10</sup> In late 2012 a media frenzy erupted when Gray was accused in the press of being anti-English,<sup>11</sup> following the publication of an essay entitled 'Settlers and Colonists' in which he criticised the domination of English administrators in the Scottish arts scene, whom he dubbed 'colonists' due to what he perceived as their insufficient involvement in promoting Scottish culture.<sup>12</sup> In the context of the run-up to the 2014 independence referendum, Gray, through his comments on the negative influence of an English cultural elite who 'depressed' rather than 'encouraged' art in Scotland, quickly became the focal point for claim and counter-claim about a latent bigotry at the heart of Scottish nationalism.<sup>13</sup>

In characteristic paradoxical manner, Gray as both novelist and polemicist embodies the inherent tensions that exist between political discourse with its totalising instincts and postmodernist metafiction which, through constant textual duplicity, undermines the ideologies it foregrounds. To return to Gray's fiction, it has been suggested that the deliberate strategy of ambiguity in such work ultimately leaves little room for the ideological beyond a constant reaffirmation of the power of the creative imagination.<sup>14</sup> This could be understood as an example of the mere aesthetic innovation and experimentation that Fredric Jameson postulates as the cultural counterpart of late capitalism's sterile drive for 'ever more novel-seeming goods'.<sup>15</sup> But does the textual play of the fictional worlds Gray creates then necessarily compromise the discourse of national identity and nationalism in his work?

### The Birth of Nations

It is certain that Gray's fiction contributed significantly to a fundamental reappraisal of Scottish national identity. As an inspiration for contemporary Scottish authors who chose to reject a monolithic vision of Scottishness and who instead began to 'imagine and disseminate

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(Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007) 243. We can note, however, that the term appears in Gray's work more fully as a 'Scottish *Socialist* Co-operative Wholesale Republic' (my italics). See Alasdair Gray, *Old Men In Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007) 259.

<sup>9</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland 1997* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Lorna Martin, 'Holyrood survives birth pains' *The Guardian* 10 October 2004, n. p., 10 September 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/oct/10/scotland.devolution>.

<sup>11</sup> See Allan Massie, 'Outburst exposes Gray as "cultural nationalist"' *The Scotsman* 19 December 2012, n. p., 4 January 2013 <http://www.scotsman.com/news/arts/allan-massie-outburst-exposes-author-as-cultural-nationalist-1-2698172>; Tom Peterkin, 'Alasdair Gray attacks English for "colonizing" arts' *The Scotsman* 16 December 2012, n. p., 4 January 2013 <http://www.scotsman.com/scotland-on-sunday/scotland/alasdair-gray-attacks-english-for-colonising-arts-1-2694368>; James Macmillan, 'We Scots should be ashamed of anti-English bullying' *The Telegraph* 20 December 2012, n. p., 4 January 2013 <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/jmacmillan/100067552/we-scots-should-be-ashamed-of-anti-english-bullying/>.

<sup>12</sup> Alasdair Gray, 'Settlers and Colonists' *Word Power Books* 20 December 2012, n. p., 3 January 2013 <http://www.word-power.co.uk/viewPlatform.php?id=610>.

<sup>13</sup> See Kevin Williamson, 'Spreading a despicable anti-English meme: the dirty war continues ...' *Bella Caledonia* 19 December 2012, n. p., 5 January 2013 <http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2012/12/19/spreading-a-despicable-anti-english-meme-the-dirty-war-continues/>; Kevin Williamson and Mike Small, 'Why Alasdair Gray matters (and why he must be smeared)' *Bella Caledonia* 17 December 2012, n. p., 5 January 2013 <http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2012/12/17/why-alasdair-gray-matters-and-why-he-must-be-smeared/>.

<sup>14</sup> Marie-Odile Pittin, 'A Strategy of Ambiguity' *Studies in Scottish Fiction* 214.

<sup>15</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) 4.  
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as many different ‘Scotlands’ as possible’, Ian A. Bell cites Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark*,<sup>16</sup> beginning with its celebrated statement concerning Glasgow’s need to be used by an artist to exist imaginatively for its inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> In *Poor Things*, Gray’s illustration in portrait form of the character Bella Baxter openly suggests the character can function as a national allegory.<sup>18</sup> This is not only, in typically self-deprecatory terms, due to the ‘pretentious nickname’ (110) of ‘Bella Caledonia’ which functions as a title for the Victorian-era portrait, but also due to its detailed background which reveals an anachronistic, fused panorama of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Scotland complete with a wealth of anomalous geographic details such as the cooling towers of the Grangemouth chemicals works. The blurring of chronology is significant, since Camille Manfredi sees the entire novel as announcing the birth of a new ‘Lady Scotland’, a nation which accepts its hybridity by turning to the future without renouncing its past.<sup>19</sup> A slightly adapted version of the same illustration, with a Glengarry replacing the more anglicised Gainsborough hat, was later created by Gray as the emblem of the independent Scottish web magazine *Bella Caledonia* edited by Mike Small and Kevin Williamson, itself also directly named after Gray’s character as an allusion to the ‘innocent, vigorous and insatiably curious’ intellectual movement the publication wishes to foster.<sup>20</sup> The web magazine, which promptly jumped to Gray’s defence in the anti-Englishness debate, openly supports the creation of an independent Scottish socialist republic of the sort that the author has advocated.

In light of such examples which reaffirm Gray’s interest in and contribution to national discourse, it would seem relevant to confront a number of the potential contradictions in seeking to determine a coherent ideological position from the fiction of a playful postmodernist whose tendency to use elusiveness, distancing effects and self-contradiction has been well-noted. At one level, Gray’s fiction embodies the postulate that all ideology is a heterogeneous collage and that the work of fiction, in particular, can never be reduced to a single ideological tenor due to the subjective, linguistic processes of what Pierre Macherey calls ‘figuration’.<sup>21</sup> However, at another level Gray’s work is a perfect example of the historiographic metafiction that Linda Hutcheon discusses as a key mode of literary postmodernism,<sup>22</sup> a fictional form which reasserts its profoundly ideological tenor through its self-reflexive interplay between text and world, thus rejecting the notion of textual immanence unsullied by political, material or historical concerns.<sup>23</sup>

Gray’s novel *Poor Things* underlines, in one key passage, the connection between history, cultural production and national consciousness through the exchanges between Bella and a Russian acquaintance.

<sup>16</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), (London: Paladin, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Ian A. Bell, ‘Imagine Living There: Form and Ideology in Contemporary Scottish Fiction’ *Studies in Scottish Fiction* 221.

<sup>18</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things* (London: Penguin, 1992) 45. Further page references to this book will appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>19</sup> Camille Manfredi, ‘Ecosse, littérature et nationalisme culturel: le phantasme d’une nation?’ *Amnis: Revue de Civilisation Contemporaine Europe/Amérique* 2 (2002) 20 December 2011 <http://amnis.revues.org/110>.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Caledonia Dreaming’, *Bella Caledonia*, n.d., 24 March 2012 <http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/about/>.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Macherey, *Pour Une Théorie de la Production Littéraire* (1966), (Paris: François Maspero, Paris, 1971) 179-180.

<sup>22</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* 40.

<sup>23</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* 179.

He [the Russian Bella has just met] said Russia is as young a country as the U.S.A. because a nation is only as old as its literature.

‘Our literature began with Pushkin, a contemporary of your Walter Scott,’ he told me. ‘Before Pushkin Russia was not a true nation, it was an administered region. Our aristocracy spoke French, our bureaucracy was Prussian, and the only true Russians – the peasants – were despised by rulers and bureaucracy alike. Then Pushkin learned the folk-tales from his nursemaid, a woman of the people. His novellas and poems made us proud of our language and aware of our tragic past – our peculiar present – our enigmatic future. He made Russia a state of mind – made it real. Since then we have had Gogol who was as great as your Dickens and Turgénieff who is greater than your George Eliot and Tolstoï who is as great as your Shakespeare. But you had Shakespeare centuries before Walter Scott.’ ...

To stop him thinking Bell Baxter a total ignoramus I said Burns was a great Scottish poet who lived before Scott, and Shakespeare and Dickens et cetera were all English; but he could not grasp the difference between Scotland and England, though he is wise about other things. I also said most folk thought novels and poetry were idle pastimes – did he not take them too seriously?

‘People who care nothing for their country’s stories and songs,’ he said, ‘are like people without a past – without a memory – they are half people.’ (115-6)

On the one hand this passage illustrates Anne-Marie Thiesse’s comments on the coterminous rise of the novel and the nation,<sup>24</sup> and this passage has been summed up by Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon as indicating that, for Gray ‘history is the story of the imaginary works by which it is created, or *fabricated*’.<sup>25</sup> But does this reflection on cultural nationalism and nation-building not also necessarily compromise the validity of the nation thus created by reinforcing Gellner’s arguments about its inherent artificiality? From this perspective, works like *Poor Things*, but also *Lanark* and *A History Maker*,<sup>26</sup> could appear to merely exemplify Fredric Jameson’s view of a ‘dehistoricized and dehistoricizing’ postmodernism which seeks to abandon the very concept of truth.<sup>27</sup>

Alternatively, could we consider that the nation and nationalism represent particular forms of metanarrative that are more impervious to postmodernist duality and doubt than others? Does Gray’s work present any insight into how these forces might be reconciled? Without wishing to deny the aporia inevitably associated with the postmodernist mode, Gray’s fiction, and *Poor Things* in particular, can offer a tentative resolution. In particular, by returning to the vision of the hybrid self as key stage in the construction of the nation it may be possible to go beyond Gray’s dialectics of contradiction and its rather unsatisfying conclusion of the primacy of imagination over politics, which otherwise would seem to confirm the criticism of a maddeningly elusive postmodernist trope where all is but ‘wheels within wheels, veneer beneath veneer’.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création des Identités Nationales: Europe XVIIIe – XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1999) 21.

<sup>25</sup> Pittin-Hédon, ‘Alasdair Gray: Le piège’ 87. My translation.

<sup>26</sup> Alasdair Gray, *A History Maker* (1994) (London: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Jameson 12.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase, coined by Thom Nairn, was used in particular to characterise the vertiginous playfulness of Iain Banks’s *The Bridge*. Thom Nairn, ‘Iain Banks and the Fiction Factory’ *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies* eds. Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh, University Press, 199), 131.



## Hybrid Selves and Half People

The front matter of *Poor Things* includes a *Harpers and Queens* review which describes the novel as a 'stitched together' entity which incarnates 'that "Frankenstein method" known as post-modernism' (n.p.). Similarly, the hybrid textual form of *Poor Things*, which, as has been amply noted, fuses multiple contradictory narratives, metadiegetic levels and paratextual addenda, mirrors the hybridity of the key characters themselves. This status is clear whether our considerations are onomastic (Bella Baxter / Victoria McCandless) or physiological (Bella is presented as a reanimated maternal corpse spliced with the brain of her own fetus; Godwin Baxter is also said in one contested account to owe his existence to the 'Frankenstein method' in the absence of a biological mother, (274). The symbol of Godwin's scientific prowess is again one of perfect hybridity: as a portent of his creation of Bella Baxter, Godwin first displays two black and white hermaphrodite rabbits created by his grafting together of two 'equal and opposite' animals: one black, one white; one male, one female (22-3). 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. This rejection of 'either / or' logic in favour of 'both / and' reasoning is characterised by Linda Hutcheon as a key trope of postmodernism,<sup>29</sup> while David Lodge sees the figure of the hermaphrodite as 'one of the most emotively powerful emblems of contradiction' typical of postmodernist writing since it 'affronts the most fundamental binary system'.<sup>30</sup> The textual and corporeal hybridity thus foregrounded in the novel have as their corollary the multi-layered mental states displayed throughout the novel as the main characters show themselves at various times, whether through infirmity, passion, disease or ambition, to be incoherent, insane, misinformed, delusionary, dishonest, or amnesic. Just as the narrative of the novel is dual, confused and contradictory, so are the discourses of the individual characters. Of course, the constant references to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, while firmly situating the hybrid nature of the characters in *Poor Things* at a physiological level, also place such multiplicity at a (meta-) textual level, by revealing the stitching and scar lines which holds the body of fiction together and by calling into question its 'natural' birth following the labors of a lone author. Ultimately the splits, contradictions and grafts of the hybrid characters are compounded by the unreliable master narrative provided by 'Alasdair Gray', as erratic as it is eclectic with its multiple metadiegetic levels, disputed narratives and irreconcilable paradoxes. The narrative and textual contradictions are therefore such an inherent part of the work that they delegitimise a problematic of wholeness and unity, which could have appeared to be the natural corollary to the figure of the hybrid. As a consequence, the ambiguous physical selves, reconstructed identities, dual narratives and split psyches of *Poor Things* appear as the norm rather than the exception.

If we accept this postulate whereby it is now improbable claims of wholeness, unity and purity which are discredited, the Pushkin quotation concerning national literature and nation-building reproduced above takes on a more ironic interpretation, since its injunction that a nation depends on its cultural production to exist insists on just such an axiology of veracity and completeness:

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<sup>29</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* 49.

<sup>30</sup> David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977) 229.

‘Before Pushkin Russia was not a *true* nation ... He made Russia a state of mind – made it *real* ... People who care nothing for their country’s stories and songs,’ he said, ‘are like people without a past – without a memory – they are *half people*.’ (115-6, my italics.)

Whereas *Poor Things* deploys great efforts to underline that all identities are contingencies, ever-partial constructions gleaned from contradictory sources and competing discourses, the Pushkin quotation purports to imagine the contrary: the unchallengeable *wholeness* of the nations and individuals who know their homeland’s culture. In the context of Gray’s novel we should not be too quick to accept such a presumptive statement as an unproblematic defense of cultural nationalism *à la* Herder.

For Linda Hutcheon, postmodernist hybridity and unreliable narration represent a loss of faith in liberal humanist values where the perceiving subject was seen as a ‘coherent, meaning-generating entity’.<sup>31</sup> Hutcheon situates this loss of faith in the wake of Lacan’s work on the deceptive nature of the ego and of the construction of the individual through language, but we should also point to the writing of Cairns Craig who has analyzed the themes of national hybridity and dialogic identity in relation to Scots philosopher John Macmurray. Indeed while Craig rails against certain uses of the theme of hybridity which rely on a straw man of purity / unicity to exist in opposition to, his key point is that the condition of hybridity (individual, national) is so pervasive as to be a *sine qua non* of human existence: ‘... if all cultures are grafted, crossed, mixed, then there is *nothing but* hybridity and the term itself becomes redundant’.<sup>32</sup> Returning to *Poor Things*, if Gray’s postmodernist hybrid forms disallow unity and coherence at the individual level it would follow that collective identities, such as nations, must also be tainted by that destabilisation, in direct contradiction to the purported national wholeness displayed in the quotation concerning Pushkin’s Russia. It is not then false nations that are composed of ‘half people’, but all nations, beginning with the Scotland of *Poor Things*, since they are predicated on a fundamental instability which in turn weakens nationalism’s claim to be a rational political ideology. In brief, why should we presume a unique coherence for the nation when duality, hybridity and instability are the norm for individual identity?

### Fictional Nations?

For Hutcheon, one positive consequence of a national vision which admits postmodernist hybridity would be a questioning of binary structures such as self / other in the construction of identities, leading to a consideration of ‘plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion’.<sup>33</sup> Despite Cairns Craig’s claims that much discussion of Scotland’s ‘mongrel identity’ since the 1960s has implied that ‘the fundamental weakness of Scotland’s cultural history is its hybrid formation’<sup>34</sup> it would seem that the phrase ‘mongrel nation’, oft repeated in Scottish politics, literature and social activism,<sup>35</sup> is commonly used as a badge of pride.

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<sup>31</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* 11.

<sup>32</sup> Cairns Craig, ‘Scotland and Hybridity’ *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature* eds. Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004) 247.

<sup>33</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* 61.

<sup>34</sup> Craig 233.

<sup>35</sup> David Leishman, “‘The Primordial Beginnings of the Race’ and all that Jazz: National Identity in Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet*’ *Ecosse: l’identité nationale en question* eds. Bernard Sellin, Annie Thiec, Pierre Carboni (Nantes: CRINI, 2009) 203.

Such a rejection of essentialist, exclusive and ethnico-religious identities represents a strong component of mainstream national discourse in Scotland,<sup>36</sup> to which *Poor Things*, with its foregrounding of cultural nationalism – ‘A nation is only as old as its literature’ (115) – certainly contributes. This focus on the cultural component of identity is of course intensified by the powerful denaturalising effect of the novel’s *Frankenstein* motifs which serve to draw attention to the contestable issues of generational continuity, ancestral origin and blood purity on which ethnic nationalism is premised.

At another level, however, the integration of postmodernist duplicity into a problematics of national identity, abetted by the *Frankenstein* motif, leads us closer to Gellner’s postulate that nations are not merely cultural conventions but are artificial constructs fashioned out of ‘patches and scraps’.<sup>37</sup> Taking the example of *A History Maker*, Gavin Miller discusses how a foregrounding of juxtaposition, in particular in association with ‘an endemic loss of temporality’ or ‘loss of historical experience’, can, to some degree, be assimilated with Fredric Jameson’s views of the postmodern,<sup>38</sup> where *parody* has given way to mere de-politicised *pastiche*.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, when Camille Manfredi underlines the role of novels and novelists in the construction of Scottish national identity and quotes Timothy Brennan’s conclusion that nations, as ‘imaginary constructs’, depend on ‘an apparatus of cultural fictions’,<sup>40</sup> this again shows up the contradiction contained within *Poor Things*’ Pushkin quotation. On the one hand we are meant to take the description of Pushkin’s peasant-nanny teaching the future author the folk tales of his homeland as an illustration of the precepts of Herder’s romantic cultural nationalism, whereby awareness of a people’s distinctive national spirit may be gained through the rediscovery of lost organic folk repertoires. On the other hand, the quotation leads us back to the inauthenticity of Gellner’s ‘patches and scraps’ or Jameson’s description of a debased historicism, characterised by ‘the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past’.<sup>41</sup> It is, of course, highly problematic that Herder, the ‘father of cultural nationalism’, was inspired to his conclusions by the artifice and collation of James Macpherson’s fabricated Celtic epic Ossian cycle.<sup>42</sup>

Commentators have noted another particularly Scottish dimension to the simultaneous development of the nation and the novel by highlighting the importance of Sir Walter Scott and the rise of the historical novel, since it is this form which gives narrative continuity to the disparate events of history.<sup>43</sup> For Cairns Craig, the nineteenth-century novel, ‘whose emplotment enmeshes their multiplicity of characters into a single, overarching narrative trajectory’, mimics the attempts to form bonds between the individual and the national

<sup>36</sup> It can be noted, albeit at an anecdotal level, that the anti-Islamist English Defence League has not spawned a comparably successful movement in Scotland. At the time of writing (January 2013) both websites (<http://www.scottishdefenceleague.moonfruit.com/>; <http://scottishdefenceleague.webs.com>) claiming to host the Scottish Defence League’s webpage were inoperational, a situation in notable contrast to the apparently thriving site belonging to the English Defence League which boasts regional divisions, members’ forum, news updates, merchandising etc. <http://englishdefenceleague.org/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1983) 56.

<sup>38</sup> Gavin Miller, *Alasdair Gray: The Fiction of Communion* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005) 118-9.

<sup>39</sup> Jameson 17.

<sup>40</sup> Manfredi, ‘Ecosse, littérature et nationalisme culturel’, n. p.

<sup>41</sup> Jameson 18.

<sup>42</sup> See John Bealle, ‘Homer and Ossian, by Johann Gottfried Herder, 1795, translated and annotated by John Bealle’ *The Folklore historian: Journal of the Folklore and History Section of the American Folklore Society* 20 (2003) 3-5.

<sup>43</sup> Thiesse 134.



group.<sup>44</sup> However, what impact on national consciousness might be presumed for late twentieth-century postmodernist fiction which replaces such a 'single, overarching narrative' with multiple, conflicting narratives?

One such impact will be brought about by the irreconcilable nature of the parodic voices of postmodernist fiction, where multiple, resolutely ambiguous narratives foreground historiographic and epistemological concerns of truth, reality and referentiality. Contrary to Jameson, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernist theory does not necessarily lead to a handicapping depthlessness or relativism; rather than reject a sense of the historical real, postmodernism simply reaffirms the inevitable mediation of discourse in our search for that real, thus underlining the power of the voices and texts by which we make sense of the world.<sup>45</sup> The distancing effects in *Poor Things* (aporia, irony, duality, pastiche, self-reflexivity) problematise the relationship between the ontological spheres of fact and fiction. They whet our appetite for order and truth while drawing our attention to the paradox of searching for veracity, unicity and authenticity in a work of fiction. The front matter of *Poor Things* makes this point plainly by allowing a spurious *erratum* (which feigns to ensure factual accuracy) to partially mask the reprint of a series of (also occasionally spurious) journalistic reviews, many of which continue this interplay between fact and fiction: 'Although it is pointless to accuse a novelist of getting his facts wrong... The Times' (n.p.); "'You need not believe this...'" This phrase echoes around the entire edifice, for in the novel every assertion is contradicted, every argument challenged ...' (n.p.). The paratextual apparatus continues in this paradoxical vein in 'INTRODUCTION by Alasdair Gray' where the local historian and the literary author swap roles (XIII), the McCandless story being defended by the latter as a 'complete tissue of *facts*' (XIV, my italics).

How can we take seriously, then, the lament that those nations which are forgetful of their culture – their folk authenticity, their peasant soul, their organic literature – are 'not true nations'? The discursive trickery of *Poor Things*, as we have seen, does not allow the affirmation of simple truths any more than it allows the simple denial of falsehood. We also know that such binary oppositions are in any case undone throughout the novel. Thus cultural integrity cannot be admitted as a benchmark against which some nations can be judged as authentic or complete. Rather than being a simple affirmation of adherence to the principles of cultural nationalism, the 'true nations' quotation must be read ironically in light of the epistemological instability that the novel projects. Indeed, the quotation is undermined by the very narrative within which it is presented: a fine example of postmodernist aporia. Ultimately then, the 'true nations' passage short-circuits the precepts of cultural nationalism, leaving us with another, more profound, question: how can a (national) truth be constructed from fiction? And where does such a conclusion leave Alasdair Gray's defence of nationalism in the extra-literary real?

### Nationalism and Beyond: Aporia and Political Discourse

In its evocation of the extra-literary socio-political context, *Poor Things* makes prodigious use of historical 'realemes': historically coherent and verifiable references and representations (lithographs, prints, biographic details, the evocation of historical characters such as Hugh MacDiarmid). While these purportedly serve to inscribe the fictional work within the historical realm and vice versa, Marie-Odile Pittin Hédon notes that this further

<sup>44</sup> Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) 9.

<sup>45</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* 128.

layer of metaleptic complexity leads to greater ontological destabilisation.<sup>46</sup> In a simultaneous movement, historical veracity is built up (suggesting if not a teleological world view, at least a humanist faith in referentiality and causality) and then undermined by the novel's contradictory structure and narrative conceits. If we accept the metafictional import of *Poor Things*, all histories, identities and narratives – whether individual or national – are messy, unstable constructs. All this sits uneasily with the ideology of nationalism which relies on a minimum of coherence in the narratives that make sense of the nation's historical past and of its present-day shared sense of self: the twin components of Renan's 'national soul'.

Without wishing to minimise such manifest paradoxes, there are several reasons to argue that the novel represents a politicised form of postmodernist writing: Jameson himself, although remaining highly suspicious of the existence of such writing, admits that such a form of 'new political art' may just be possible if it allows individual and collective subjects to 'regain a capacity to act and struggle' by giving them awareness of their positioning within the confused spatial and social dimensions of the global capitalist system.<sup>47</sup> Thus, as Aaron Kelly notes, by confounding postmodernism's tendency to close off knowledge about the late capitalist system by retreating into 'jaded ... circuitous reworkings', Gray may be seen as what Randall Stevenson terms a 'post-postmodernist'.<sup>48</sup> More specifically, we would assert that the contradiction and hybridity of *Poor Things* remain not only politically engaged, but compatible with the ideology of political nationalism. Linda Hutcheon, for whom postmodernism is at all times 'resolutely historical, inescapably political',<sup>49</sup> argues the multiple narratives of postmodernist writing allow the previously silenced voices of History to break out in the face of the traditional dominance of a hegemonic, centralised discourse.<sup>50</sup>

If we consider the liberation of marginal discourses that challenge the *doxa* in ethnic, cultural or geographic terms, it is plain to see that nationalism can be a logical companion of postmodernism. Of course, much writing on postmodernism argues the opposite position by insisting that postmodernism is emasculated by its complicity with Western capitalism. At the same time, the nation, in the postmodern age, is at prey to new transnational forces, thus weakening further the relevance of national claims.<sup>51</sup> For Aaron Kelly, the situation is worse still, in that the postmodern mode and its play of difference 'ramfeezles' our political consciousness: its narrative multiplicity obfuscates political counter-narratives rather than unleashing them.<sup>52</sup> Certainly, if we take Lyotard's description of a suspicion of grand narratives as the defining characteristic of the postmodern mode,<sup>53</sup> then we may conclude that nationalism is just one further example of a grand narrative that postmodernism is set to rail against. However, I would argue that it is Hutcheon's interpretation which provides a more satisfactory reading to *Poor Things*, since in the novel the Scottish nation is not presented as an isolated metanarrative that one could challenge and overthrow to reveal a potential absence of nationalism. In the Pushkin example or in the book's Scottish setting there is no

<sup>46</sup> Marie-Odile Pittin Hédon, *Alasdair Gray: marges et effets de miroirs* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 2004) 305.

<sup>47</sup> Jameson 54.

<sup>48</sup> Aaron Kelly, 'Farewell to the Single-End?: Alasdair Gray, Scotland and Postmodernism' *Etudes Ecossaises* 9 (2003-2004) 435.

<sup>49</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* 4.

<sup>50</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) 51.

<sup>51</sup> Eleanor Bell 'Postmodernism, Nationalism and the Question of Tradition' *Scotland in Theory* 85.

<sup>52</sup> Kelly 433.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-François Lyotard *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979).

national neutral position; nationalist forces are always in effect, in one form or another. For Scotland in particular, if we search for the 'default setting' whereby the metanarrative of nationalism is successfully challenged and the political validity of a distinct Scottish nation disallowed, we do not arrive at the absence of *all* nationalism, but the implicit reversion to a nationalism of a higher order, i.e. where the political / cultural unit to be defended becomes that of the Anglo-British imperial polity. Thus while Mathew Wickman notes that in *A History Maker* Gray offers an indictment of postmodernism's place in history as the cultural production of an epoch where the forces of capitalism feel they have ended history and secured their domination like 'owners of earlier empires',<sup>54</sup> it is precisely issues of historiography in a context of Empire-building which dominate the narrative project of *Poor Things*, while Camille Manfredi remarks a similar critique of world empires in Gray's *1982 Janine, Something Leather* and *A History Maker*.<sup>55</sup>

We are specifically reminded of this by several elements of the text which carefully situate the main narrative at the cusp of the nineteenth-and twentieth-centuries, thus coinciding with the historical dominance of the Victorian / Edwardian British state over a vast colonial empire. The character of General Blessington, with his associated stories of imperial military forces subjugating the native peoples in Africa and Asia, incarnates this era of a triumphant British Empire-state (206-7, 297-99) in which Scotland and the Scots were to play a key supporting role. As Wedderburn succumbs to madness he assimilates the British Empire with the Babylon of biblical prophecy, but he takes pains to situate Glasgow as the heart of this empire, an image which suggests both Scotland's strategic importance and functional subordination (96-7). Respecting the same hierarchy, Bella Baxter describes herself as 'citizen of Glasgow native of Scotland subject of the British Empire' (47). The nineteenth-century with its rise of British expansionism is precisely the period when Scottish nationalism, in modern terms of a parliamentary political movement demanding independence, shines by its absence, as has been noted by the likes of Christopher Harvie.<sup>56</sup> Instead, conforming to the Unionist / Imperialist paradigm offered by Blessington, Wedderburn and Bella, the Scottish nationalism of the mid nineteenth-century was, in Graeme Morton's phrase, 'Unionist-Nationalism', a celebration of independent Scottish character and history which was seen as having resulted in a successful Union of equals.<sup>57</sup>

Cairns Craig makes a similar point about imperialism when he describes *Poor Things* as an illustration of how Scotland's lack of coherent national narrative in the nineteenth-century is tied to the spilling over into different territories and cultures that the novel's imperial strands display.<sup>58</sup> Due to this overarching presence of an Anglo-British imperial identity in the novel, the destabilising of the grand narrative of 'minority' nationalism does

<sup>54</sup> Alasdair Gray quoted in Matthew Wickman, 'Alba Newton and Alasdair Gray' *Scotland as Science Fiction* ed. Caroline McCracken-Flesher (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012) 171.

<sup>55</sup> Camille Manfredi, *Alasdair Gray: Le faiseur d'Ecosse* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012) 64.

<sup>56</sup> 'After 1815 semi-independent Scotland had been absorbed effortlessly into 'British' expansion. Scottish nationalism was pre-empted by British liberalism. Later on, as the second wave of 'peasant' nationalism broke on Europe, imperialism created a further identity, compensating for the weakening of the national institutions.' Christopher Harvie, *Scotland & Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics 1707-1994 (Second Edition)* (London: Routledge, 1994) 72.

<sup>57</sup> Morton does note, however, that this Unionist-Nationalism was already in decline by the 1860s, to be replaced by a growing focus on parliamentary nationalism through the campaign for Home Rule. Graeme Morton, *Unionist-Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland 1830-1860* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999) 188.

<sup>58</sup> Craig, *Modern Scottish Novel* 237.

not represent mere postmodernist *ramfeezlement*, but serves to better reveal the hegemonic discourses against which it competes on unequal terms.

### The Rise of Sham-Gothic: Memory and Memorial

One of the other facets of the 'true nations' passage is that it underlines the power of a national depository of culture and literature to shape experience and history. In the passage in question this relates to the folktales Pushkin is said to have learned from his nursemaid, whereas the whole of Gray's fictional world is subsumed within a metaleptic narrative concerning the purported finding of McCandless's memoirs by Michael Donnelly, the assistant of Elspeth King, who was at the time curator of Glasgow's social history museum, the People's Palace. This key narrative, which forms the introduction, describes how the discovery, preservation and transmission of cultural artefacts depends on the existence of a fragile infrastructure of memorialisation including museums, art galleries, universities and libraries, all of which have a role to play in maintaining and diffusing the images and texts which Gray claims are the basis of his story.<sup>59</sup> We can note that the People's Palace, which has a particular prominence in the introduction and which is situated on Glasgow Green,<sup>60</sup> was opened in 1898, and is therefore an institution dating from the same high-water mark of British imperialism as the main events in the novel (albeit centred on the 1880s).

The process of memorialisation, so important to the formation of national narratives, can also of course involve the establishment of monuments. It is not only a way by which the historical figure can be durably inscribed into the collective memory, it can also be a means to canonise and actualise a nation's cultural and literary sources: the fictional word literally becoming part of the material fabric of the nation.<sup>61</sup> *Poor Things* shows a keen awareness of

<sup>59</sup> The introduction, which mentions King and Donnelly by name several times, highlights the institutional dimension to this fragility through allusions to the cost of staging exhibitions, the lack of funding for social history and Michael Donnelly's departure from the People's Palace as part of the controversy surrounding Glasgow's year as European City of Culture in 1990. The cultural debates of 1990 were also concerned with the decision of Glasgow's Director of Museums and Galleries Julian Spalding not to appoint Elspeth King as keeper of social history in Glasgow, despite her 16 years as curator of the People's Palace. This led to a media furore about the state of arts administration in Glasgow involving claims of prejudice targeting King's gender, class and Scottishness. In this sense it was an early example of the issues that prompted and surrounded Gray's 'Settlers and Colonists' essay. See James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks: Essay Cultural & Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992) 33, 47); John Weyers, 'Why Elspeth King paid the price for a palace revolution' *The Herald*, 29 May 1990, n. p., 10 May 2013 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/why-elspeth-king-paid-the-price-of-a-palace-revolution-1.575009>.

<sup>60</sup> In *Poor Things*, Glasgow Green is given as the location of the home of George Geddes whose 'job is to fish human bodies out of the Clyde' (32). It is thus to Glasgow Green, future site of the People's Palace, that Bella Baxter's body is conveyed for autopsy before her resuscitation. This connection reinforces the significance of the People's Palace in the novel.

<sup>61</sup> Such processes continue in post-Devolution Scotland with a quotation by Alasdair Gray appearing on the Canongate Wall of the new Scottish Parliament: 'Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation'. (Scottish Parliament Website. Visit and Learn page 14 October 2011 <http://parlamaid-alba.org/visitandlearn/21012.aspx>). Yet the canonisation of Gray's knowing fiction could not have given rise to a more complex network of referentiality as the verb is worked into the very matter of the nation and its political establishment. In particular, the stone plaque cites not 'Alasdair' but 'Alisdair' Gray beneath the lines of prose, leaving us with the canonisation, not of an author but of a phantasm. In any case, Gray himself denies authorship of the lines and has attributed them on more than one occasion to a 'Dennis Leigh' who is in fact Canadian poet Dennis Lee; see the essay written by Gray which takes the phrase as its title: Alasdair Gray, 'Work as if You Live in the Early Days of a Better Nation: an Essay' *The Herald* 5 May 2007, n. pag., 12 September 2011 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/work-as-if-you-live-in-the-early-days-of-a-better-nation-1.827519>; Dennis Lee, *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (1968), (Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 1994). Various



this process, notably in the chapter 'By the Fountain' which revolves around the 'Loch Katrine memorial fountain' (44) which since 1872 has stood in Glasgow's Kelvingrove Park (overlooked by Godwin's home in Park Circus). This celebration of municipal water engineering (it is thanks to an aqueduct and tunnel system that Loch Katrine provides Glasgow with fresh drinking water) is also closely tied to the figure of Sir Walter Scott since atop the fountain can be found a personification of Scott's 'The Lady of the Lake' which was itself inspired by Loch Katrine. Scott, situated in the 'true nations' passage as the contemporary of Pushkin, is, by analogy as well as by association, presented in the novel as a key vector of national consciousness himself. However, we should remember that this is the period when Victorian Scotland erected monuments which sought to celebrate 'Scottish' icons such as Scott (1844) or Wallace (1869) while presenting them as the guarantors of Unionism.<sup>62</sup> Since a strong Union was reliant on a narrative which celebrated the coming together of the Home Nations, both Scotland and England were shown to be confident of their distinctive past, history and national character, with figures such as William Wallace re-evaluated in a manner supportive of such a British / Unionist perspective. According to this interpretation, only by securing Scottish independence in the fourteenth-century could Scotland and England enter the 1707 Union as equal partners. Thus Wallace was promoted as a key figure of Unionism and, through Burns's *Scots Whae Hae*, was feted as the inspiration for Scottish regiments now proudly fighting alongside English forces within the British army.<sup>63</sup> Such nineteenth-century visions of Wallace specifically countered the anti-English sentiment of the key text of Wallace mythography, Blind Harry's fifteenth-century epic poem.<sup>64</sup>

The Loch Katrine memorial fountain is also introduced in *Poor Things* through the prism of social injustice, as Archibald McCandless evokes problems of sanitation and hygiene linked to Glasgow's water supply (44). So too is the Scott Monument which Victoria McCandless decries as another example of British 'sham gothic' architecture, exemplified by 'Glasgow University, St. Pancras Station and the Houses of Parliament' (275),<sup>65</sup> since its 'useless over-ornamentation' is built on 'needlessly high profits: profits squeezed from the stunted lives of children, women and men working more than twelve hours a day, six days a week in NEEDLESSLY filthy factories ...' (275). While Victoria rails against the 'Victorianism' of the text which has attributed an origin to her individual identity only by deforming and 'ornamenting' the truth, she also extends her attack to the process of memorialisation at work in Victorian Britain where the loci of power, learning, culture and transport all materialise imperial dominance through obscene pomp, while simultaneously masking the human costs of the industrial economy.

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critics have retraced the complex intertextuality of the variants of the motto in Gray's work (see Stephen Bernstein, *Alasdair Gray* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999), 173; Dimitris Vardoulakis, *The Doppelgänger: Literature's Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 294), and its slapdash memorialisation and complex referencing merely serve to highlight how problematic it is to institutionalise malleable cultural discourses.

<sup>62</sup> Morton 155-188.

<sup>63</sup> Morton 173, 176.

<sup>64</sup> T. M. Devine, 'In Bed with an Elephant: Almost Three Hundred Years of the Anglo-Scottish Union' *Scottish Affairs* 57 (Autumn 2006), n. p., 12 October 2011 [http://www.scottishaffairs.org/onlinepub/sa/devine\\_sa57\\_aut06.html](http://www.scottishaffairs.org/onlinepub/sa/devine_sa57_aut06.html).

<sup>65</sup> See also the illustrations where the fountain (presented under its alternative name of 'The Stewart Memorial Fountain'), Glasgow University and The Midland Hotel (St. Pancras) all appear (295).



Thus Scottish nationalism is in no way an overarching metanarrative which the paradoxes and ironies of the text combine to disrupt and destabilise. Rather in the novel it is but an example of one minority narrative competing for prominence alongside other, more powerful narratives, such as British imperialism, British Unionism, British Labourism or the forces of capitalist enterprise. Indeed, it is only through the novel's processes of narrative destabilisation that Scottish nationalism manages to break through the fissures in the dominant discourses which tend to keep it in check. For example, the closing pages of the novel take the form of a letter sent by an optimistic Victoria McCandless to Christopher Murray Grieve on Britain's socialist future following Attlee's victory in the 1945 general election: 'A workers' co-operative nation will be created from London, without an independent Scotland showing the way.' (316). This closing passage underlines yet again the cacophony of competing discourses through its political irony as well as through its complex paratextual positioning which appears to offer narrative resolution while simultaneously denying this.<sup>66</sup> Of course, with the benefit of hindsight the reader is prompted to view Victoria's political certainties about the successes of the future workers' co-operative as rather naive and is thus enjoined to reconsider the competing discourse of an 'independent Scotland' which she dismisses as an unnecessary stage in History. Thus a conclusion which appears to reject Scottish nationalism is, in effect, an invitation to reconsider it.

### Rewriting the Nation

Through such examples it can be argued that *Poor Things*, for all its postmodernist contradiction and complex ontologies, has a mimetic function. It is not a novel which purports to hold a mirror to base reality but rather to the competing, irreconcilable discourses by which we attempt to make sense of this reality. Through the novel's layering of discourses, a dominating nineteenth-century British imperialism competes with a twentieth-century progressive left wing Unionism, which competes in turn with International socialism and minority nationalism. This confirms Bakhtin's view that the hybrid constructions of the polyphonic novel are not merely abstract semantic or rhetorical constructions, but have a social function, incarnating the clash of different representations of the world.<sup>67</sup> These ideas are picked up by Marc Angenot for whom the disparate collages, the ambiguity and duality of the modern novel, represent the 'cacophonous rumour of global social discourse with its discordant voices, its undecidable legitimacy, its echoes and its parodies'.<sup>68</sup> As such, the novel's function is not normative, to determine right from wrong or to judge Scottish nationalism superior to British Unionism, but to draw our attention to the rhetorical framework that structures our world and to remind us of its inherent artifice, its sensitivity to perspective, its limitations and contradictions.

The archetext of *Poor Things* is *Frankenstein*, which provides us with a central figure of hybridity and ambivalence: the composite body is both self and other, it is both alive and dead. The composite textual entity that is *Poor Things* with its severed and sutured plots can be seen as foregrounding an ambivalent fascination for the totalising grand narrative which is

<sup>66</sup> This final fictional letter, which appears as a quasi-postscript, is presented as a historical document within a spurious annex of 'Notes critical and historical / Notes historical and critical' which accompany (and sometimes supplant) the various competing fictional accounts of the same events and characters.

<sup>67</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Esthétique et théorie du roman* (1975) (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) 177.

<sup>68</sup> Marc Angenot, 'Que Peut La Littérature ? Sociocritique Littéraire et Critique du Discours Social' *La Politique du Texte: Enjeux Sociocritiques* eds. Jacques Neefs and Marie-Claire Ropars (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1992) 18. My translation.

both rejected and reaffirmed, as we attempt to order experience by fusing the cacophonous discourses and scattered incidents of existence into a congruent, intelligible history. This ambivalence is an example of what Hutcheon calls the contradictory postmodernist response to emplotment<sup>69</sup> which clearly illustrates a wider critique of social discourse. This is certainly relevant when it comes to the rhetoric of national identity, which, in the light of *Poor Things*, can be seen as an incomplete, contradictory process of subjective ‘searching for meaning’ rather than an objective, verifiable ideology conferring an unchallengeable finality.

Furthermore, to think in terms of the nation involves ascribing a common identity and a historical narrative to a country-wide collective of disparate persons, each with their own idiosyncrasies and paradoxes, who, in addition, have lived through different historical periods, each with only imperfect knowledge of themselves, their fellow countrymen, their institutions, their culture. This wild collection of individual destinies can only be presented in a coherent manner as the trajectory of a unified nation by the acts of framing, editing, compiling, foregrounding, erasing, simplifying and revising – the very authorial processes which lie at the heart of *Poor Things*’ narrative complexity. On the one hand, we can think of the essentialising tendencies of certain Scottish cultural critics who have offered up unsubstantiated affirmations of ‘the typical Scot’ defined by his ‘inferiority complex’,<sup>70</sup> or whose atavistic character is determined by his ‘ancestral tradition’ as a Gael.<sup>71</sup> From a more progressive perspective *Poor Things* underlines the historiographic tensions evident in the periodic re-appraisal of historical events, traditions and figures by successive eras, just as Tom Devine charted the varied trajectories of Wallace before and during the Union.<sup>72</sup> More recently, the heated debate about Alasdair Gray’s purported anti-Englishness perfectly epitomises the same narrative impulses we see at work in *Poor Things*: how was an initial act of discourse (Gray’s ‘Settlers and Colonists’ essay) stripped down, recalibrated, interpreted, put into new contexts, condemned, defended? Which individuals were considered (or considered themselves) legitimate commentators on Gray’s position or on the nation as a whole (we can note the strong presence of literary figures on both sides, such as Allan Massie or Kevin Williamson)? What could one ultimately conclude from the contradictory positions vocally argued in a stramash of articles if not the fact that Scottish national identity (as all others) is not a coherent objective truth but a skein of rival narratives? Just as Gray’s novel cannot be reduced to the primacy of one viewpoint over another, so the nation is never the resolution of the debate, but the very act of debating.

So the conception of the nation as cultural phenomenon and as a product of competing discourses ties back into *Poor Things*’ own self-aware problematics of identity which centres on this same paradox: how does one represent a single, coherent narrative from multiple, contradictory sources? The novel’s key concern, easily transposed to that of national identity, is again one of narrative authority: who has a right to speak on behalf of others? Who determines which narratives should be saved for posterity? Which narratives will be considered a valid historical record? Which are to be judged inauthentic? If, in the interests of plurality, we allow multiple narratives to co-exist then what further texts are needed to justify their mutual (in-)compatibility, their hierarchical positioning, their

<sup>69</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics* 68.

<sup>70</sup> Alan Bold, ‘An Open Letter on the Closed Mind’ *Chapman*, 35-36, vol. VII (1983) 3. Although Bold was writing in 1983, such tendencies still abound in the popular press and pop psychology. See, for example, Carol Craig, *The Scots’ Crisis of Confidence* (Glasgow: Big Thinking, 2003).

<sup>71</sup> Kurt, Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1958) 337.

<sup>72</sup> Devine, ‘In Bed with an Elephant’, n. p.

contextualisation. If we paraphrase Roland Barthes, to represent the nation is to constitute the nation. The paradox of the nation is that it can only exist as anything edging towards a knowable entity when it is being described by a single, totalising, voice. The problems of authorship and authority *tout court*, are indissociable from this approach whose ideological inconsistency is all too commonly finessed. To reduce the multiplicity of the nation to a unifying, unproblematic national narrative would be to give in to the reactionary totalising tendencies which confer necessary order but which in doing so silence marginal voices and unorthodox narratives. On the contrary, Ian Bell gives a salutary reminder of how ‘Scottishness’ is a cultural concept that only exists through the multiple, contradictory definitions given by any number of novelists, historians, politicians, pundits and so on:

We must remember that, no matter what they may say to the contrary, none of these various commentators can ever legitimately claim to be disinterested or to speak authoritatively on behalf of everyone involved.<sup>73</sup>

*Poor Things* literalises these very issues: that of the hybrid construct whose vitality is born of contradiction and that of the presumption of ‘speaking authoritatively’ on behalf of others.

## Conclusion

The ‘Lady Scotland’ whose trajectory to awareness is documented in *Poor Things* may be taken as a symbol of the nation, but only if we take her as a representation of Nairn’s modern Janus as quoted by Bhabha:<sup>74</sup> the incarnation of a hybrid nation which is two-faced, irreconcilably drawn between past and present, fact and fiction, biology and culture, nature and artifice, agent of change and passive object. Philippe Hamon talks of how the distancing effects of irony and parody problematise a work’s ideological tenor, moving normative values and meaning-generation away from a totalising author and back to the subjective reader.<sup>75</sup> With *Poor Things*’ discourse on nations presented within a thematics of hybridity and nourished with a keen sense of postmodernist artifice and aporia, individual readers are left little choice but to play an active role in determining meaning. By being forced to unpack the paradoxical construct of the nation, they are forced to engage with their own participative role in shaping the individual discourses, values, histories and narratives by which they collectively wish to be represented. Thus the duality and hybridity of *Poor Things* do not discredit nationalism, despite having furthered the sense of manifold Scotlands, each containing within themselves competing discourses and populated by unstable and unknowable individual identities. On the contrary, the novel can be seen as promoting a new form of self-reflexive national rhetoric, a postmodernist nationalism aware of the tensions, contradictions and dangers that political nationalism carries within itself. Following David McCrone, Gavin Miller describes Gray as promoting a form of *post-* or *neo-*nationalism.<sup>76</sup> In its rejection of essentialism and unicity, Gray’s work presages a nation which is only true in that it freely admits its duplicity, which is only unique in that it is the contingent product of multiple, shifting variables. By highlighting the seductive appeal of the grand narratives

<sup>73</sup> Bell 202.

<sup>74</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Introduction: Narrating the Nation’ *Nation and Narration* ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990) 2.

<sup>75</sup> Philippe Hamon, *Texte et Idéologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984) 226.

<sup>76</sup> Gavin Miller, *Alasdair Gray: The Fiction of Communion* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005) 131.

which structure political thought and social belonging, it admits its filiation with such narratives. While the national metanarrative is destabilised to the extent that it can no longer claim natural supremacy over any of the other constructs or discourses with which it competes, the postmodernist national identity is aware of its being grounded in history, rhetoric and culture. It is thus extremely suspicious of the reactionary tendencies, the essentialist mythologies and unitary truths of an earlier age of nationalism. As such it is a fitting nationalism for the Scotlands of the twenty-first century.

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