

Alasdair Gray's Anatomy: Art and Anatomy in Poor Things

Jelige: Grays Anatomy

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1. Introduction

1.1 Alasdair Gray and *Poor Things*

Monographers of Alasdair Gray tend to treat his two ‘professions’ separately, drawing a distinction between the visual artist and the writer according to the stakes of the appreciations. Yet, it is enough to open any of Gray's books to see that his works are just as much products of visual art as of literature and that he should be considered simply as an artist. Alasdair Gray (born 28 Dec. 1934, Riddrie, Glasgow) started his career as a painter after graduating at Glasgow School of Art with a specialization in Design and Mural Painting. Nevertheless, at this time he was already working on his ‘epic’ novel that was to bring him praise as a writer (Charlton 18-19). During the two decades following his graduation he not only earned fame and success as a painter, but he also wrote poetry, radio and television plays for BBC, and theatrical performances (Bernstein 19). It was in 1981 that he published the novel that had been in the making for such a long time under the title *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*. It was a huge success, bringing him praise from the likes of Anthony Burgess, who announced that Gray is “the best Scottish novelist since Walter Scott” (126). He became the central figure of the Scottish literary revival of the 1980s, with many other authors acknowledging his influence (Bernstein 17). *Poor Things: Episodes From the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D., Scottish Public Health Officer, Edited by Alasdair Gray* was published in 1992. It was claimed to be his best since *Lanark* (Bernstein 20), won two prestigious literary awards, Whitbread Novel Award and Guardian Fiction Prize, and was immediately grouped together with *Lanark* and *1982 Janine* (Bernstein 109). It is far from easy to label Gray's works. As Bernstein argues, Gray was greatly influenced by the tradition of Scottish literature that rejected the strict separation of reality and fiction (23). He uses “the novel as a laboratory for generic and modal mixture, creating a fascinating hybrid in the process” (22). Despite his experimental devices, Gray treats the label ‘postmodern’ with great suspicion (Stevenson 57), suggesting that the label ‘postmodern’ simply means ‘something new, fashionable’. Despite Gray's own suspicions and Bernstein's claim that the vacuous category of the postmodern is not helpful to better understand Gray's work (29), many of Gray's concerns – his feminist agenda, his interest in cultural discourses and in the politics of form, his emphasis on the materiality of the book – do make him a postmodern writer in a profound sense. The present paper, which will explore some aspects of the visual materials embedded in the narrative, will read Gray in the context of various postmodern or poststructuralist theories (those of Michel Foucault, Linda Hutcheon, Donna Haraway et al.). In order, however, to introduce the

argument, it is necessary to provide a brief outline of the plot and of the complex narrative layering of the novel. Like many of Gray's other works, the novel is grounded on the instability of the reality-fiction dualism, and gains its force by presenting ambiguous narrative layers, narrators, and points of view (Bernstein 109).

The first narrative frame is provided and written by the editor, "Alasdair Gray" who also claims to be the compiler of the notes at the end of the novel. He relates how the book of Archibald McCandless was found on top of a heap of rubbish in front of a lawyer's office, and was purloined without the lawyer's permission. Later it was passed on to Gray, who finally took the trouble to edit and publish it. This Alasdair Gray is the author's satiric alter ego, who, being a local historian, vindicates authority to decide the matter of the factuality of McCandless' narrative. He provides masses of historical evidence, dates, names, figures etc. in order to convince the reader that "in the final week of February 1881 [...] a surgical genius used human remains to create a twenty-five-year-old woman" (*PoorThings* ix).

The main body of the text is constituted by Archibald McCandless' story of becoming a doctor, and his friendship with Godwin Baxter, the surgical genius and fellow medical student. By means of a technique he inherited from his surgeon father, Godwin brings back the body of a suicidal pregnant woman to life, but, respecting her wish to die, he replaces her brain with that of the unborn baby. The child brain functions in a mature body that is introduced to society as Bella Baxter, the amnesic victim of an accident in which she lost her past and family. Archibald falls in love with her and they are engaged; however, before the marriage could take place Bella elopes with the rascal, Duncan Wedderburn. The events that follow (the European tour of Bella and Wedderburn) are narrated in letters by Bella and Wedderburn, who is driven mad by Bella's sexual appetite, and accuses Baxter of being the dark power behind the demonic femme fatale Bella. Archibald and Bella do get married, yet the wedding is interrupted by a military officer that claims Bella to be his wife and wants to take her away. Yet, after Bella humiliates him for being the notorious guest of the Parisian brothel, he kills himself, and the wedding can take place.

The narrative is then followed by a letter from Victoria McCandless, who claims to have been the actual wife of Archibald and discredits much of the main narrative, insisting that her husband's story is the "infernal parody of [her] life" (*PoorThings* 273). The book concludes with the notes of the editor, offering lots of pointless and irrelevant evidence in support of the factuality of Archibald's narrative. Thus, the very structure creates a diversity

of narrative voices and authorities the hierarchy among which cannot be decided. As a result, one main concern of the book is the impossibility of objective truth and reality (Hawley 175). It is this instability within which the questions of power, sexuality, duality, perspective (Bernstein 109) and identity arise.

The present paper addresses some of these issues starting out from the fact that the novels of Alasdair Gray are unique not only because of their narrative techniques but also because of the illustrations produced and designed by the author. Gray's "illustrations and overall designs for his books make them total works of art" (Bernstein 17) in which visual and textual cannot be separated from each other, just as Alasdair Gray the illustrator and Alasdair Gray the writer cannot be torn apart. This observation is especially true in the case of *Poor Things*, the illustrations of which depict mostly characters and certain unaccustomed aspects of human identity in a constant search for justification. Anatomical figures approach the physical, bodily existence of individuals, whilst artistic portraits and etchings are supposed to aim at extracting and displaying the essence of identity. Consequently, these two domains of knowledge clash within the book in and through the illustrations as well as in the text, rivaling for the authority of defining identity. In doing this, Gray also explores many aspects of Victorian culture, into which the story itself is embedded, inquiring into the cultural authority of science and art, and their possible risks. Nineteenth-century texts such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which is frequently compared with *Poor Things* (Bernstein 110), or H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* had already offered similar explorations of the Victorian concern of science and power. Gray, however, reassesses such problems retrospectively from a late 20th century perspective, creating a story that imitates the great classics and investigates them at the same time, thus creating a Neo-Victorian novel.

The objective of the present paper is to examine the way textual and visual domains complement, support, or undermine each other in the constant uncertainty of reality and fiction of *Poor Things*. While interpreting the pictures, it shall draw upon twentieth-century theories of subjectivity, art history, and medical sociology in an attempt to unpack their semantic potential. I shall pay particular attention to the questions of fictionality, reliability, and the interaction of the different domains. Following the logic of the text the illustrations demonstrate the impossibility of firmly grounded truth perceived as reality and that, like the different narrative voices, the domains of art and anatomy appear as equally unreliable alternatives of structuring human experience of subjectivity and identity.

2. The Interactions of Text and Picture

2.1. Classification of Illustrations and Authority Figures

The illustrations of *Poor Things*, with only a few exceptions, can be easily classified into at least three groups according to their style and acclaimed authorship. This classification is very important as it demonstrates ways of approaching and interpreting the different discourses evoked in the novel. The text calls attention to the different groups itself, the editor “Gray” closing the introduction with the following passage:

I have illustrated the chapter notes with some nineteenth century engravings, but it was McCandless who filled spaces in his book with illustrations from the first edition of *Gray’s Anatomy*: probably because he and his friend Baxter learned the kindly art of healing from it. The grotesque design opposite is by Strang, and was stamped in silver upon the batters of the original volume (*PoorThings* xvi).

The first sentence creates a paradoxical tension, highlighting one of the main concerns of the novel. Gray tells us about “nineteenth century engravings” and “illustrations” (XVI), contrasting them to the anatomical figures, whereas, in fact, the anatomy figures of *Gray’s Anatomy* were just as much nineteenth-century engravings as all the others. Thus, the question arises why he should make such a distinction. This point is exacerbated by the use of the ambiguous term ‘art’ which contains within itself the essence of the art-science-problem: does it refer to the practice of imaginative activities of self expression (what we mean by art today) or to the acquired skills and knowledge in a certain field of profession or science (that is, art as artifice or *techne*)? In this quandary, we may turn to two figures of authority: “Alasdair Gray,” the historian and Archibald McCandless, the public health officer – both contained in a book by Alasdair Gray, the author.

As mentioned earlier, Alasdair Gray’s alter-ego, the historian and editor of the book, is a fictitious character. In addition, the text is quite satirical about him. He himself claims that “I had to become a historian. I did so. I am one. After six months of research among the archives [...] I have enough material evidence to prove the McCandless story a complete tissue of facts” (xiii-xiv). Most probably it would be offensive to any historian to suggest that after a half year’s research and collecting materials anyone can become a professional of the field. Accordingly, Gray the editor is not a fully reliable character, and his authority can be

rightfully questioned. What is at stake at this point is not less than the distinction between reality and fiction. He explains his reasons for the research as “I also told Donnelly that I had written enough fiction to know history when I read it. He said he had written enough history to recognize fiction” (xiii). The editor historian, thus, functions as a judge of fictionality, working, by definition, with materials not produced but collected and sorted by himself. Gray's play with the authority of history is fully in line with postmodern and poststructuralist rethinkings of history as, instead of a field of objectivity and firmly grounded truth, a textual construct that reflects the attitudes and interests of the historian as much as 'what actually happened' (Hutcheon 125). As a result, the person of the historian, his point of view, his skills, his authority all can be questioned just as the ‘knowledge’ presented by him. The fifth subchapter deals with these questions in more detail, our conclusion here is that history is not equal with truth or reality.

The second, yet perhaps most crucial, figure of authority is Archibald McCandless, author, narrator, and character of the main story. He is entirely fictional, and his objectivity is questioned by his participation in the events described. Victoria McCandless points out in her letter, which is the strongest challenge to Archibald's story, that “he was a Glasgow municipal health officer for exactly eleven months” (*Poor Things* 251) and that he “was no lunatic. He knew his book was a cunning lie” (274). On the one hand, Archibald is thoroughly discredited by Victoria, who also presents an alternative story that is easier to accept as rational truth. On the other hand, Gray, the editor supports Archibald's narrative and argues insistently for his sake. It is also noteworthy that while Archibald's is the core narrative to which all others are related, and he is the supposed author of most of the text, in terms of visual materials he only uses second-hand illustrations: he inserts figures from Henry Gray's nineteenth-century anatomy book, and hires William Strang to illustrate the story with etchings and portraits of the characters.

William Strang is thus the third figure of authority marked by the text. Strang was an actual Scottish artist, working in the late 19th and the early 20th century, renowned mainly for his etchings. It is, in fact, his name and fame that is borrowed by Alasdair Gray, as the editor claims the etchings to be his works, yet we know they are not (Kaczvinsky 793). This technique might be a part of creating a credible period context, but it also demonstrates how misleading such contexts can be. It is interesting that the alleged authors of the visual materials are all historical and most definitely actual persons whose works are recycled and incorporated into a new context. The reader might have the impression that they are snatched

out of the narrative of history and forced into a different context that manages to establish a relationship between them. In both cases, they are used as supporting material, which suggests a special kind of relationship between text and pictures: whilst the former is used to weave the parts together, the latter provides material, a kind of justification for the narrative.

2.2. The Domain of Anatomy

Before examining the way anatomical illustrations are used in *Poor Things*, one must take a look at the context from which they were adapted. Surveying the chronology of anatomy and its development, at the beginning one finds the confusing situation in which it is difficult to decide which was first: the body or the text. Though it is true that the textual categories, theoretical and philosophical foundations were developed in accordance with bodily phenomena, often by superficial observations, certain traditional views of the body were hard to challenge even in the face of obvious evidence. In ancient Greece, certain bodily phenomena, such as bodily pleasures, got so deeply and firmly embedded into the political and social order that no logical experience or practical ways of testing could disprove them, and they remained prevalent throughout the centuries (Laqueur 87). This is why I argue that in many cases the textually defined and prescribed body – the body as discourse – was prior to the visual perception of the actual physical body. As a result, the early thinkers [it would be wrong to call them anatomists, as they seldom practiced any kind of activity related to the surgical examination of the body] put forward their claims in purely textual form. Even until as late as the 15th century it was rare that "anatomy books" were supported with illustrations, because the authority and credibility of the text was provided by the fame and name of the author (92).

It was only in the early 16th century that the situation started to change. With the rise of *anatomia sensibilis*, the close and naturalistic observation of the physical body started to provide credibility for works concerning human anatomy. Soon the illustrations replaced the examination of actual bodies, giving support for anatomists' claims (92). This emphasis on the corporeality of the human body contributed to the later break between mind and body (Williams 12), a duality which has been dominant in European thought since Descartes and which is constrained to the body's self-alienation (Barker vi). The other cultural effect of this split was that it placed the authority over the question of body, into the discourse of medicine and medical science, whilst subjectivity and identity remained linked to the discursive field of culture that was largely dominated by philosophy and art. The thus separated aspects of

human beings remained distant until the recent decades, when in post-modernity they appear to move closer together once again (Lupton 23).

The split was, however, very much present in 1858 when *Gray's Anatomy* was first published. Though its title suggests only one author, in fact it was the work of two men: Dr Henry Gray wrote the text while Dr Henry Vandyke Carter made the illustrations, and they received equal credit for the work. On the spine of the book "Gray Anatomy Carter" was printed (Richardson 3). Apart from these few pieces of basic information it is not the history of the book that is our primary concern, but rather its approach which is quite typical in anatomical works. Gray and Carter published their book after the dissection and examination of unclaimed bodies from workhouses and hospital mortuaries (2). This demonstrates a basic problem of early anatomy: doctors could only make inferences concerning the functioning and relationships of the living body on the basis of their observations of dead bodies. Godwin Baxter argues in accordance with this observation, saying

Morbidity is essential to training and research, but leads many doctors into thinking that life is an agitation in something essentially dead. [...] The smooth bedside manner we cultivate is seldom more than a cheap anaesthetic to make our patients as passive as the corpses we train upon (*PoorThings* 17).

The result of this practice is that subjectivity and personality had very little space in the surgery theatre. Human beings are reduced into a mass of flesh, stripped of most of the social and cultural meanings and metaphors. Accordingly, we can draw difference between two major approaches to human beings: biological reductionism, which treats the human as if it were only a body, and social constructionism, which rather ignores the corporeality of men and focuses on mind, and spirit (Williams 9). The abandonment of cultural categories does not, however, mean that anatomy is completely devoid of any meaning. On the contrary, it is embedded into its own system of references, relationships, that is, its own discourse which aims at the thorough description and classification (Williams 11) of the body, in which deviances are symptoms and signs referring to illness (Foucault 3-4). As a result of these efforts, we get to what Foucault calls the 'anatomical atlas' of the human body. This atlas, of course, does not exclusively contain visual material, but it also describes the grand narrative of the body. As discussed before, formerly it was this narrative that took the central role within anatomy books, and figures actually were used as means of justification and supporting material. Can we, after all, decide whether in our present day the texts or the visual

representations are more important from the view of anatomy? It might be a subjective choice of the anatomist, in accordance with his or her professional aims. This leads to another dilemma: to what extent is anatomy descriptive and to what extent prescriptive.



Figure 1. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) by Rembrandt

One interpretation of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* refers to the questions of anatomy's authority to provide a prescriptive and normative account and map the body. We can see that the figures at the back are looking towards the opened anatomy book that is placed in the foreground of the picture (Figure 1). This means that they ignore the corporeality of the human body, seeking description and justification not in the practice of autopsy but in the text. As a critic notes, "anatomies were done to verify what had already been rendered in texts, peculiarly rendering the body on display symbolically invisible" (O'Bryan 66). In this case, texts are works of fiction whose justification is to be found in the illustrations. My point here is that anatomy can be just as fictional and unstable in terms of credibility as any work of art: its object is created from a certain point of view which is "only one way-in all likelihood neither the first, nor the most fundamental-in which one spatializes

disease” (Foucault 3). It was this idea of Foucault's that first challenged the primacy of anatomy as the site of truth regarding the body and set the course for later theories (Lupton 20-21). His line of thought leads to the realization that the body has a history (21) and that “bodies, then, are not born: they are made” (Haraway 10). The human body is not, of course, purely discursive: in it the corporeal and the theoretical, or fictional mingle in complex structures (Lupton 22). The body as such becomes volatile, open to different interpretations, its reality can be questioned, its narrative and its history can be rendered as fiction, which altogether makes it possible to investigate it from a new point of view. It is in this context that we can fruitfully see Alasdair Gray's strategies of pointing at the body's instability and withdrawing it into a context of firm fictions and unstable realities where he playfully discredits the authority both of text and picture.

2.3. Readings of Anatomy Adapted

Alasdair Gray removes the anatomical illustrations from *Gray's Anatomy* and replaces them into a fairly different context in which they are opened to new kinds of reading and they problematize, as all illustrations do to a certain extent, the word-picture relationship. As J. Hillis Miller demonstrates, illustrations without the proper verbal labeling cannot be unambiguously placed into the stream of the narrative, and “the spectator vibrates back and forth among contradictory alternative stories” (62).



Figure 2. Left Lachrymal Bone, illustration
from *Poor Things* (page 52)

This is the case with Gray's anatomy pictures as the original headings and titles are omitted, and even if they were present, they would refer to a different kind of narrative. For example, if we replace the original label “Left Lachrymal Bone” to the illustration at page 52 (Figure 2), it does not help us to fit the picture into the narrative of the book, whilst in *Gray's Anatomy* we could immediately suppose that it belongs to the chapter in which parts of the

skull are analyzed. In order to fit it into *Poor Things* the reader might expect something like “The Lachrymal Bone of Archibald” or “Baxter’s First Anatomy Illustration Seen at the University”. Yet, even these titles could not fully resolve the problem of the seeming lack of any relationship between picture and text. What readings are then possible for the reader? Should one ignore the entire problem, and read them as they were read in their original context, or should they seek for symbolic meanings?

“Alasdair Gray,” the editor, suggests the first option, according to which the reader should ignore the problem. As he states in the introduction, Archibald McCandless used the illustrations to fill spaces in his book (*Poor Things* xvi), which implicitly suggests that there is no necessary relationship between the illustrations and the narrative. Furthermore, by this decorative function, anatomy pictures are placed into a position traditionally reserved for works of – non-representational – art. This calls attention to the question whether these figures are in any way related to aesthetics. Obviously, they were created according to other requirements that are now violated. What are these requirements?

As Thomas Laqueur describes, the illustrations of early anatomy books depicted men in symbolic postures, such as the image of a man having skinned himself, holding up his own skin, revealing his muscles and inner structure [from *Anatomia del Corpo Umano* by Juan de Valverde (1560)]. By this technique, they are presented as the agents of the revelation of their own corporeality (Laqueur 92-94). He also points out that in the former instance one can find intertextual references, as the figure resembles Michelangelo’s self-portrait from the painting *Last Judgment*. This visual quote was used to enhance the emotional response to the illustration (94). Later, especially after the 19th century’s renaissance of natural sciences and the rapid development of medical sciences, such techniques were left behind, as the objective approach came to be seen as proof of credibility; therefore theories and techniques were increasingly based on the best physical evidence available (William 12). With this shift, there came a change in the techniques of anatomical illustration. Today’s medical handbooks and atlases approach the body from a logical perspective. First of all, the organs are depicted from points of view in which doctors are likely to see them in the course of everyday medical practice. This explains why, for example, the heart is usually depicted from the front and not from the bottom, or why the aorta reveals its hollowness by looking towards the viewer or by showing its intersection. The anatomy books apply perspectives that best reveal the internal structure, functioning units of the organ, its position and orientation within the body etc. These basic rules are violated by Alasdair Gray, in many instances.

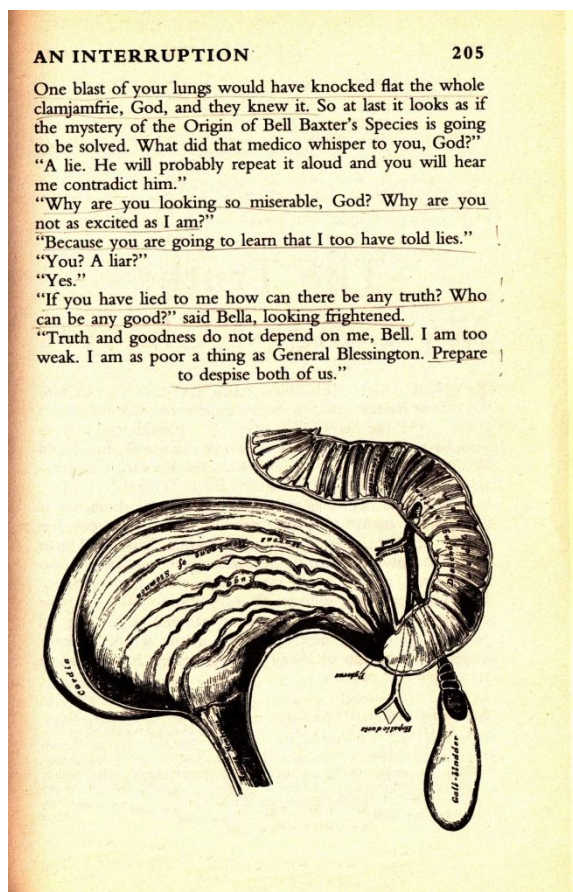


Figure 3. Illustration of digestive organs in *Poor Things* (page 205)

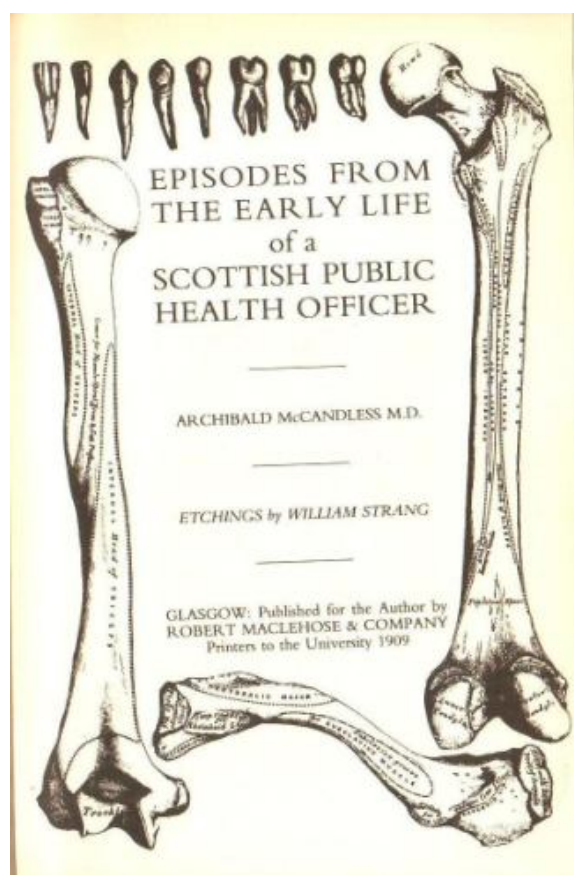


Figure 4. Frame composed of anatomy figures in *Poor Things* (page 3)

Figure 3 is one of the most striking examples of the freedom with which Alasdair Gray treats the anatomy illustrations. We see the mouth of the stomach pointing downwards, whilst the intestine continues upwards. One can see in many other examples (pages 2,3,64,74 etc.) that Gray rotates the figures by 90 or 180 degrees, cuts off parts of the pictures (pages 25, 71, 193 etc), violating basic rules of modern anatomical representation, this way suggesting that they do not serve medical objectives anymore. In Figure 4, he does not simply turn parts upside down, but he also composes them in such a way that they form a frame around the page's content. Accordingly, he uses material from the medical discourse for his own aims, which violation blurs the clear boundary between art and science. There are multiple clues in the text that make this reading possible, such as Archibald's claim that "medicine is as much an art as a science. But surely we come to the art in our fourth year when we enter hospitals?" (*Poor Things* 17), or his remark on the rabbits surgically re-fabricated by Baxter: "The little beasts were works of art, not nature" (23). In the first instance, art can still be interpreted as 'skill or knowledge', yet in the second it is more obvious that it is understood as a creative

activity. In fact, much as in other 'mad genius' stories, the act of creation is in the focus of the story. It becomes the shared element of the two discourses, usually coupled with the question of authority: does the artist have the right to do as s/he wishes with the body, or, as in our case, with the pictures that represent it? More generally, does the artist have the authority to interfere with the divine rights for creation? This question will be very important in the fourth subchapter of this essay, where identity and the creation of identity are discussed. Our conclusion for the reading strategy proposed by Gray, the editor, is that he deals with anatomical illustrations as with mere spectacles, and as such he reuses them in his own fabrications, thus blurring the boundary between art and science.

When dealing with illustrations of decorative function, be they anatomical images or anything else, there is another important point one needs to consider. Alasdair Gray is very much aware of the viscosity of texts. As J. Hillis Miller explains in relation with Ruskin "there is an element of picture in every letter, and an element of writing in every picture (77). This statement is clearly true in the case of Alasdair Gray, too. He not only composes the text in a way that the endings of the chapters narrow down like downward pointing arrows, sometimes complemented by the illustrations, but he also includes a picture (Figure 5) which strikingly calls attention to the viscosity of writing.

Between pages 145 and 150, we find a letter from Bella Baxter which is written through illustrations, and its main feature is its striking expressiveness via viscosity. The extremely intense feeling caused by an encounter with pain and injustice of the world strikes Bella so hard that the articulated (English) language is inadequate for expressing her emotions. "Her writing turns into a series of nearly indecipherable scrawls and splatters on the page" (Kaczvinsky 787).

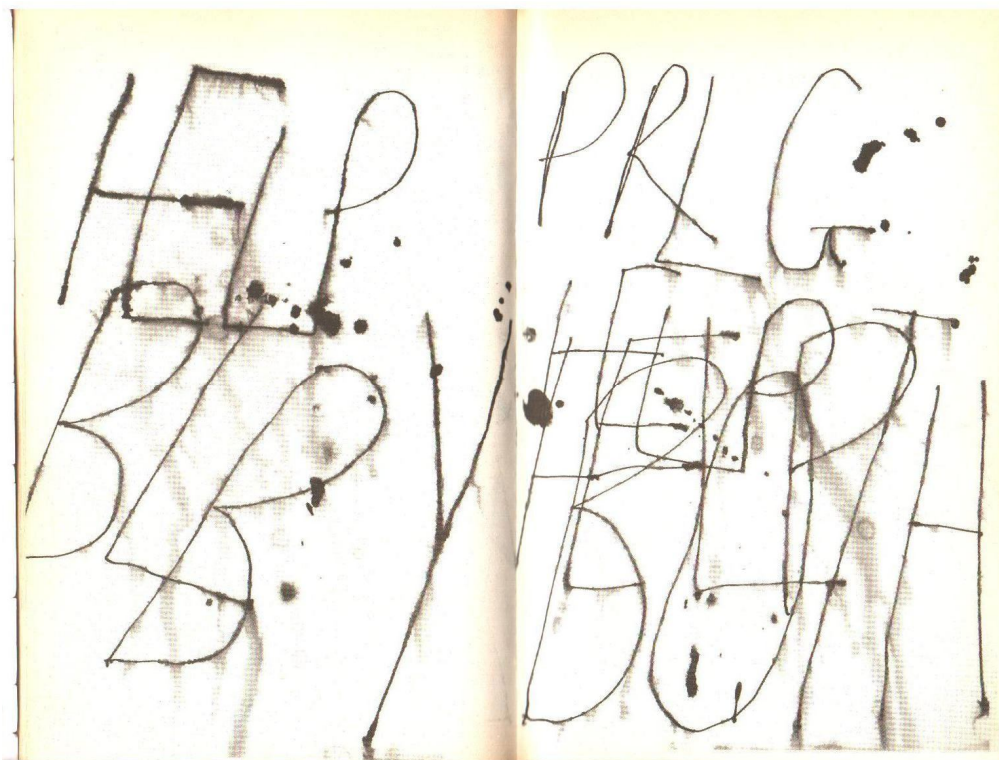


Figure 5. A letter from Bella, illustration from *Poor Things*, pages 146-147

This visual effect is then, further enhanced when Gray also provides its printed transcription (*Poor Things* 151). The two versions of the same text (printed letters and the photographic reproduction of Bella's tear-smudged scrawls) are strikingly far from each other in terms of effect, which calls attention to the importance of the form and shape of representation. Any representation bears upon itself its marks or stains of origin, revealing its approach, its concern, its method of investigation etc. Anatomy illustrations are no exception, which is the major point of Alasdair Gray, as well as of Foucault: anatomy cannot provide an objective summary of a human being because of its own reductive nature, and as such, it should not be treated as firmly grounded, unquestionable reality, or truth.

Another possible reading of the illustrations is to interpret the anatomical figures as body parts belonging to the actual characters. As Miller argues, readers always try to create a relationship between illustrations and narrative (61-63), and the aforementioned concretization may be the first, and most plausible method of deciphering pictures. In *Poor Things*, this reading might be said to be supported in a few instances, but generally the reader feels reluctant to think about anatomy illustrations as parts of the characters whom we get to know as persons in the course of the narrative. The question arises as to what prevents the making of this association. First of all, anatomy illustrations are alien material for the reader: they perceive that the figures do not represent particular individuals, but rather general ideas

of human corporeality. This alienation effect comes from the nature of representation, which always implicitly suggests the absence of the real thing (Miller 66). The self, the individual is not present in the generalizations of anatomy (Belting 102). It is part of the irony of the novel that Victoria Blessington (subsequently Bella), a suicide victim, could probably have ended up on the pages of an anatomy book, as they were written and illustrated on the basis of the dissection of unclaimed bodies (Richardson 2), and *Gray's Anatomy*, was no exception, either.

Yet not only death stood between the body and the self. Until recent decades the body as part of the Cartesian duality was ignored by social and political theories and scholarship (Lupton 20). Identity and subjectivity are matters of mind, spirit or intellect, thus discourse about them automatically belongs to the domain of art and culture, and in our everyday experience we do not think about ourselves as biological bodies, but rather as a conglomerate of culturally coded features. Even our most basic bodily parameters are normally identified by means of socially constructed categories, for instance our height is usually thought of in terms of an internalized standard of measure as short, tall, middle-height etc. instead of recalling the exact measure such as 185cm. The exact bodily parameters gain significance only in special contexts such as anatomy, medicine, forensic pathology etc. that do not settle for elusive categories like obese, plump, slim etc. As a result, our concept of identity is often strictly separated from the biological or anatomical view of our bodies. Metaphorically speaking, the biological body is the framework that bears its outer surface, its appearance as a kind of suit tailored according to artistic and culturally defined categories. These are the categories that form the basis for the public perception of identity. This is well exemplified in McCandless' initial problem with making himself a doctor. He explains that it is not enough to know the medical practice, and have all the skills, but he also needs to adopt the necessary social skills, "a touch of smooth lordliness or easy-going humour" (*Poor Things* 10), and the appearance, of course, in order to be accepted and acknowledged as a doctor. It is these signs that define the identity of an individual, and he is expected to display them. Yet, as the body's interiority seldom encounters the public sphere, it is quite normal that the anatomical structures are less socialized than its outer features. All in all, this reading of the anatomical engravings is a useful and provocative way of calling attention to the split between body and character, art and anatomy, identity and science. *Poor Things* is, of course, not the first work of literature to address the body-mind dualism, but, through the illustrations, Alasdair Gray's work gains an especially striking degree of consciousness: the visual domain expresses these dilemmas a

In this respect, certain body parts are more or less neutral, e.g. the toe or the thumb; whilst others are heavily charged with cultural and symbolic meanings, for instance the heart, the genitals, or the eyes. The fact that the sexual organs bear manifold symbolic messages is not accidental: as Freud pointed out, sex, or gender is the basic marker of identity with its own social values (Laqueur 87). This differentiation has been present since the beginning of civilization and though it underwent multiple historical phases, politically and culturally male and female bodies continue to be prescribed by culture, with such symbolic signs still inscribed on the body, and people are ready to read them according to the current trends. As a result, the reader is not as confused by the encounter with the anatomical depiction of a penis (Figure 6.) accompanying the title “Wedderburn’s Letter: Making a Maniac” (*Poor Things* 75), ready to make the predictable symbolic identification, and putting down Wedderburn as a typical ‘male.’ Similarly, the picture of the vulva and the title “Bella Baxter’s Letter: Making a Conscience” (103) are quite easy to deal with. Despite this relatively plausible association, the process behind it is quite complex: we start out from a culturally and politically formed theory about the body, get a scientific representation that aims at resolving this symbolism, then it is put into a context where its neutrality is blown by the association with a culturally meaningful narrative, thus it regains its cultural load, both in Victorian and in contemporary contexts. As such, these images are representations of representations, read in multiple contexts, poking fun at the facile manner of reading individuals exclusively in terms of their gender identities, while also emphasizing the facility of the identification between sex, anatomy, and gender. This also makes them, of course, the criticism of Victorian society and its relationship to gender roles.

It is also interesting that the title pages of these personal ‘gendered’ or ‘sexed’ narratives include decorative patterns that construct a frame around the genitals. The effect is manifold, but chiefly ironical: the decorative patterns force us to look at the genitals from an ‘aesthetic’ perspective, although the style and scientific detailedness of the pictures would refuse such approaches. However, they can be read as portraits that emphasize the central role of sexual organs in the identities of these two characters, and also their situational connectedness within the narrative as they are lovers of each other. This is a rather specific reading that is very much artistic, after all. As in the case of the other anatomical figures the features depicted can be read as decorations that do not add much to the whole point which is the presentation of the symbolic body parts. In these instances an artistic (rhetorical, figurative, poetic) technique can be recognized: synecdoche. By this the focus shifts towards

sexuality and the culturally coded sexual attributes of the two genders. In this we see two forces struggling against each other.

As Belting suggest, the more certain body parts are revealed, anatomized, the less apt they are for symbolism and metaphorical readings (102), because they lack that personification that is part of our cultural ideas about individualism. The self, or personhood, however, can regain its original locus as soon as it becomes embedded into a different context, in our case, into artistic discourse. These procedures are present throughout the book in the illustrations and in the text. In his conversation with McCandless, Godwin Baxter argues that "a portrait painter does not learn his art by scraping layers of varnish from a Rembrandt, then slicing off the impasto, dissolving the ground and finally separating the fibres of the canvas" (*PoorThings* 17). In this sentence we see the opposition of dissecting anatomy and constructive art, the former seen as emblemizing the reductive nature of medical practices, the latter as the textual background that gives meaning to individualism and personhood. This critique of the Victorian medical science is, however, resolved in 20th century theoretical approaches. Since Foucault, we have been aware of the fact that a strictly objective and neutral medical science does not exist, and as it was mentioned above, natural sciences also work by the laws of mythmaking (Belting 102). It is this mutual function of the two discourses that is in the focus of our investigation during the next section, in which the portraits of *Poor Things* and the artistic myth and personality making are set against the processes of anatomical depiction of the individual.

2.4. Portraits and Characters

The second group of illustrations contains nineteenth-century engravings depicting characters from the story, engravings claimed to be the works of William Strang (*PoorThings* xvi), an actual Scottish artist (1859-1921). The pictures, of course, are not his works, they were drawn by Gray himself (Kaczvinsky 793). Unlike in the case of anatomy illustrations, in artistic works the name of the author still has a great significance and counts a lot in deciding the authority and value of the pictures. As discussed above, this was similar in early anatomy, where the fame of the anatomist provided credit for his claims (Laqueur 92), so this important difference came into existence in the wake of 'modern' sciences and the supposition that there is objective reality independent from the identity of the observer. Strang's name, however, would only mean, if we accepted that he is the actual author of the illustrations, and that the story was written in the nineteenth century, then it would be e.g. gothic fiction instead of

postmodern or Neo-Victorian fiction. As a result, instead of its role as false clue, it is more important to see how it contributes to the questions of authorship.

First of all, in terms of illustrations, both Gray, the editor, and McCandless, the author, use works of others, whilst Strang the illustrator uses McCandless' narrative for his engravings. This kind of intertextuality gets tangled up in the same turmoil as anatomy, because both struggle with the problem of representation and the question which came first: word or picture? As discussed earlier, in anatomy, it was the word, or rather the verbal theories that were formed first, and pictures came later as a justification of them. Similarly, in art it is physical reality that provides a basis for forming our cultural concepts, ideals, and mental images that are presented in the form of language, and pictures come later as representations of these ideas. This reading is, of course, not the only possible interpretation, yet it demonstrates the problem of illustration, that is, most pictures are representations of representations. Accordingly, artists and anatomist are working with pre-given concepts, and therefore material whose authorship is not transparent reality and fiction are thus hard to separate in both discourses.

Within art, portrait painting is especially important and relevant in terms of the depiction of identity. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues, the portrait is a special endeavor aiming at the depiction of the absolute subject (220) which can be recognized by the individual as the self. The locus of this selfhood is the face, and the body remains invisible as an irrelevant scaffolding that functions as a holding structure for the face (223). This is also why the documents identifying the individual include a portrait (Belting 105). The question is, throughout *Poor Things*, why we perceive one representation as real, and another as fiction. This is problematized when Victoria McCandless in her letter explains about her portrait (Figure 8), saying that it "is copied from one in an illustrated newspaper of 1896, and strikes me as a good likeness" (*PoorThings* 251). How can she identify herself with a picture that aims not at realistic depiction but at artistic symbolization, what is more, doing it in a stylized, caricature-like style? In each portrait within *Poor Things* it is this stylization that evokes the problem of individuality.

If we consider the way in which characters of *Poor Things* define their own identities, we find a recurring motif. First of all, the narrative begins with the chapters "Making Me" (9) and "Making Godwin Baxter" (12) that provide the personal histories of the two characters. By this, implicitly, we accept that it is the continuity of a personal narrative which provides

identity. As such, the lack of personal history in the case of Bella is symbolically her lack of an initial personality, though her Northern British accent makes the question even more complex. The book itself provides three possible fictional histories for Bella's past, and the crucial question is which one of the three should Bella and which one should the reader accept as real. As Kaczvinsky argues, Scottish thinkers had broken away from the mainstream concepts of the British philosophers, such as John Locke, that saw the core of identity in the continuity of personal memories and experiences (777). David Hume suggested that "the continuity and unity of the self is a fiction, a creation of the imagination" (Kaczvinsky 778). It is this approach that was built into Scottish literary tradition, and Gray himself joins it. As a result, it is inevitable that Bella can only choose a fictional story for herself, and so can other characters.

Secondly, the characters are artistic fabrications of pre-existing concepts formed by other narratives, and many of them put this observation into words. When Bella Baxter explains to Archibald why she could not have sex with Godwin, she says

I have not read *Beauty and the Beast* or Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* or Dumas' *Hunchback of Notre-Dame* or is it Hugo's in the Tauchnitz limp covered English translation costing two shillings and sixpence from start to finish, but I have been told enough about these mighty epics of our race to know most folk think God and me a very gothic couple. They are wrong. At heart we are ordinary farmers like Cathy and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* by one of those Brontës (*PoorThings* 51).

In these few lines Bella gives examples from where she can gain knowledge concerning identity and human character, and she also assesses herself and Godwin in literary categories such as those provided by Gothic stories, and more specifically she identifies their relationship by comparing it to the protagonists' in *Wuthering Heights*.

In his letter, Duncan Wedderburn uses similar comparisons when he identifies Godwin, Bella, and himself with characters of Goethe's *Faust* (*PoorThings* 77), then describes his own situation in terms of another play, Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (79), and finally comes up with biblical symbolism (94-97). Through this, Gray's characters demonstrate the way art and literature function in our everyday lives: they provide those categories and define those attributes that are later identified in the characters, both in their bodies and in their inner personalities (Almási 43, Hankiss 253). From this perspective the

Russian gambler's opinion is especially important: "People who care nothing for their country's stories and songs [...] are like people without a past – without a memory – they are half people" (116). As art provides the basic elements of identity, the result of the ignorance of these pieces of information is the lack of self-knowledge. Such 'half people' do not know either themselves or their fellow human beings. It is this way art not only influences but defines identity and individuality. Yet, this defining force is not always present as pure art, but also as social, political, and cultural concepts that once might have started as works of art but then became rooted so deeply in tradition that their origin is seldom questioned. *Poor Things* includes a meta-fictional approach which explores and displays such constructions that under not only fiction but our everyday lives as well.

Another expression of art's identity forming function is the composition of the characters. To start with a specific example, one can analyze Godwin Baxter, about whom the text itself quite explicitly states that he is the archetype of the transgressing scientist aspiring to divine spheres. Duncan Wedderburn compares him to Goethe's Faust (*Poor Things* 77), whilst critics parallel him with Shelley's Victor Frankenstein (Kaczvinsky 775, March 338, Hawley 175). Godwin Baxter is a telling name that does not need much explanation.



Figure 7. The portrait of Godwin Baxter, illustration from *Poor Things* (page 13)

We can be sure that his character was composed to be the perfect example for the 'transgressing scientist' category, a category formed by many former narratives and characters, and its motifs and constituents had become well known parts of the cultural heritage of English and Scottish literature. As such, Godwin is a representation of representations, the summary of these ideals, yet it is not his appearance that defines this function for him but the narrative. As Miller argued, it is the label, his name that relates a character to the narrative (63), yet it is the story that gives him an identity: an identity that could not be any more artificial and artistically created. This also is suggested by his portrait (Figure 7) in which the caricature-like style highlights the distance between his character and reality. In addition, it is not his face that is in the center of attention, unlike in traditional portraits (Nancy 223): his body occupies a significant part of the picture. The result is that the body, that is the clothed, social display, and the face get an equal importance, which calls attention to the fact that the body is not an exclusive domain of identity.

When describing Baxter's appearance, the text uses several peculiar references. First he is described as dwarfish looking because of his "big face, stout body and thick limbs"

(*PoorThings* 12), then the narrator says he had an 'ogreish' body, finally he suggests that Baxter is more imaginable as a pantomime Turk (12). His appearance is thus described in accordance with obviously fictional characters borrowed from fairy tales. Yet these comparisons and the characters of the dwarf and the ogre are embedded into our culture and thinking so deeply that such comparisons do not seem to be weird at all. In fact, this is the only imaginable way of describing someone. The description leans on the possibly widely shared categories that were adapted to our thinking from tales, stories, and fictions (Almási 44-45). These are the concepts anatomy refuses. They have no place in medical discourse, and for this reason Baxter feels relieved by his anatomical corporeality. As he explains "I enjoyed these lessons. They taught me to admire my internal organization. This preserved my self-respect when I learned how most people feel about my appearance (*Poor Things* 19). Anatomy lets him escape from cultural categories, as it resists cultural symbolization (Belting 102). This demonstrates the problem of the human-body-picture triangle which cannot be broken up without significant losses (104). Culture and its fictions provide both Godwin's identity and his monstrosity. Though he partly refuses these fictions as he was brought up in a household where fiction and arts were "nonsense - 'unprovable blethers'" (*PoorThings* 19) the artistic categories apply to him as well as everyone else. He himself also applies such categories, for example, when he explains his motivations behind creating Bella he says "The woman I imagined stimulated me like that. I found her picture in Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*: a book that must have been left here by one of Sir Colin's patients" (*PoorThings* 39). Accordingly, in his dreams and desires Bella is to play the role of Ophelia as a caring and loving mate. As a result, anatomy and art are demonstrated to be two sides of human existence that cannot be separated, as a purely anatomical body cannot live, whilst without the body culture cannot exist.

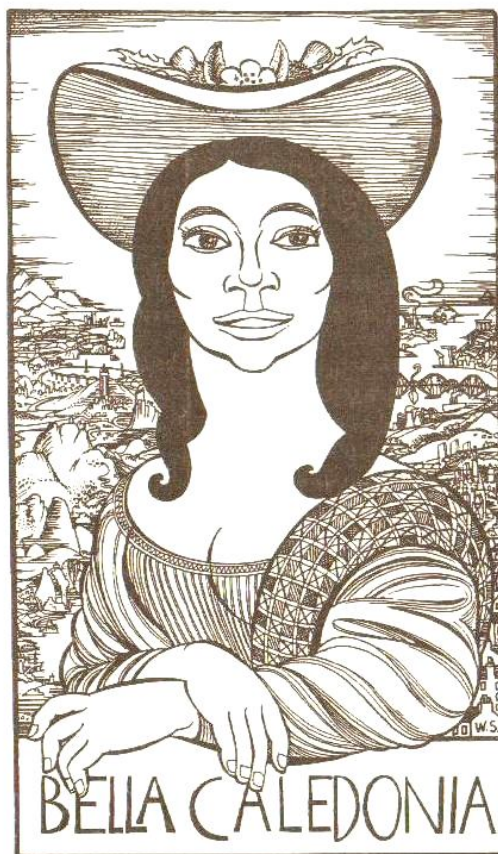


Figure 8. Bella Caledonia, illustration from *Poor Things*, page 45.

Similarly to Godwin, the other characters in *Poor Things* also are archetypes. The most interesting among them is the female protagonist, Bella Baxter, whose identity is the central concern of the narrative. As the story unfolds, however, the reader must recognize that her character is just an artistic fabrication and is designed specifically for certain readings. The most striking and most important of these interpretations is the one in which her story is the metaphorical history of modern Scotland. As she appears to be more and more apt for this symbolism, her fictionality becomes increasingly apparent. This leads to the conclusion that the heavy charge of social symbolism and medical corporeality mutually exclude each other (Belting 102). The narrative in which too much symbolism is present strikes the reader as fiction. A character as the embodiment of an entire nation is definitely something one's sense of reality cannot accept. This is partly what, in the end, drives the reader towards preferring the more rational (March 338) narrative of Victoria McCandless' letter as reality.

In spite of the fact that the text is not especially explicit about the reading of Bella's story as the allegorical reinterpretation of Scottish history there is one sign that makes this approach inevitable. Bella's portrait (Figure 8) forces all readers to take it into account. It is not the picture itself that is so special, but the label attached to it. Instead of Bella Baxter, one

finds Bella Caledonia inscribed under the portrait. As Caledonia is the Latin name of Scotland, the identification cannot be missed, and, together with Bella's identity crisis, the crisis of Scotland's identity becomes the central theme of the narrative (Kaczvinsky 776).

In Kaczvinsky's reading, the central questions of this identity are the unity of the self, the meaningful continuity of memories, and personal narrative (778). He also adds that the notion of the flawless unity of the self is no longer credible in contemporary culture when the artificial interferences into this continuity are commonplace in the forms of organ transplants, genetic engineering etc (779). In *Poor Things* two kinds of personality clash: the united self and the disunited self. This is demonstrated in the scene when the lawyer of Bella's former husband argues for the wife's belonging to his client.

"[...] Suppose that a sickly unpleasant fellow escapes from London after stealing my cash. Suppose that three years later the police arrest him in Glasgow, and are about to lock him up when a doctor cries 'Stop! I can prove this man is pleasanter and healthier since he stole your money, and has forgotten all about it.' The police would think that a quibble. Lady Blessington's erotomania made her a very miserable wife to the General, but neither he nor the laws of the land will allow her to commit bigamy and live happily ever after in a Scotch *ménage à trois*, simply because her happiness is sworn to by a horde of foreign brain doctors." (*Poor Things* 223).

The argument suggests that in legal and official matters it is the body that takes precedence as the basis of identification (Kaczvinsky 779). It is the body's continuity that provides the identity of a person, which is perfectly in accordance with Locke's theory about the jurisdiction over an amnesiac criminal (780). In the narrative this means that, even if she has no memory of her earlier life, Bella Baxter is still the wife of General Blessington no matter what. It is this notion Scottish fiction and Gray query. In terms of anatomy, we see that the unity and continuity of the body and of the self is mapped according to the dissection and dismembering of dead bodies (Laqueur 88). Yet the problem is that as the internal unity is only supposed from these procedures, even vivisection cannot avoid the fact that the working and functioning unity is only a fiction. The seemingly random, unorganized anatomy illustrations of the book demonstrate the need for a narrative that can bind the parts together. Accordingly both the body and identity are composed by and of fictions.

In relation with Bella's identity crisis, Kacvinsky argues that it primarily manifests itself in language (784). The problem with the English language is that it suppresses Scottish in a way that the result is linguistic Frankenstein, "a dialect of English peppered with Scottish phrases and regionalisms" (783). Accordingly, Scotland is a nation that does not have its own language. Bella's difficulties with her identity is expressed in the fact that with an adult body she speaks a "childlike form of English" (784). Yet, her origin is not entirely lost, as she speaks with a strong Yorkshire accent. Baxter explains it by

"The earliest habits we learn (and speech is one of them) must become instinct through the nerves and muscles of the whole body. We know instincts are not wholly seated in the brain, since a headless chicken can run yards before it drops. The muscles of Bella's throat, tongue and lips still move as they did in the first twenty-five years of their existence [...]" (*PoorThings* 34).

In his argument, Baxter states that instincts, that is, constituents of identity are inscribed not into the brain but into the anatomy of the body. According to this, we may suppose that the different personalities own different anatomies: the problem with our anatomy is that it overgeneralizes the body, ignoring those little differences that form the essence of identity. These differences remain invisible until they become pathological, yet beyond that point they are no longer differences but deviances. This is how identity becomes dispelled from anatomy, and the association of anatomy illustrations and the concrete characters become unacceptable. This may lead to the question why Dr. Tulp (Figure 1) dissects the arm of a thief. Does he expect to find something other than the figures of generalized anatomy or he tries to prove the two to be identical? This aspect problematizes the relationship of identity and anatomy, just as Alasdair Gray does in *Poor Things*. He investigates how art constitutes the fiction of personality, whilst medical science provides the fiction of corporeality, and in what ways can the two be compatible with and approximated to each other.

2.5. Etchings and History

The third major group of illustrations is the one that is claimed to be the collection of historical figures by Gray, the editor (*PoorThings* xvi). It is through them that Gray tries to prove the credibility of McCandless' narrative, using the self-definition of the science of history which claims itself to be objective and faithful to truth and reality. History "is nonetheless, as Hayden White has pointed out, a fictional construct. Myth was able to mix the

real and the imaginary, but history simply related what was supposedly already there without any human intervention" (Kaczvinsky 790). Accordingly, history is a very special kind of fiction, and thus gains a special treatment.

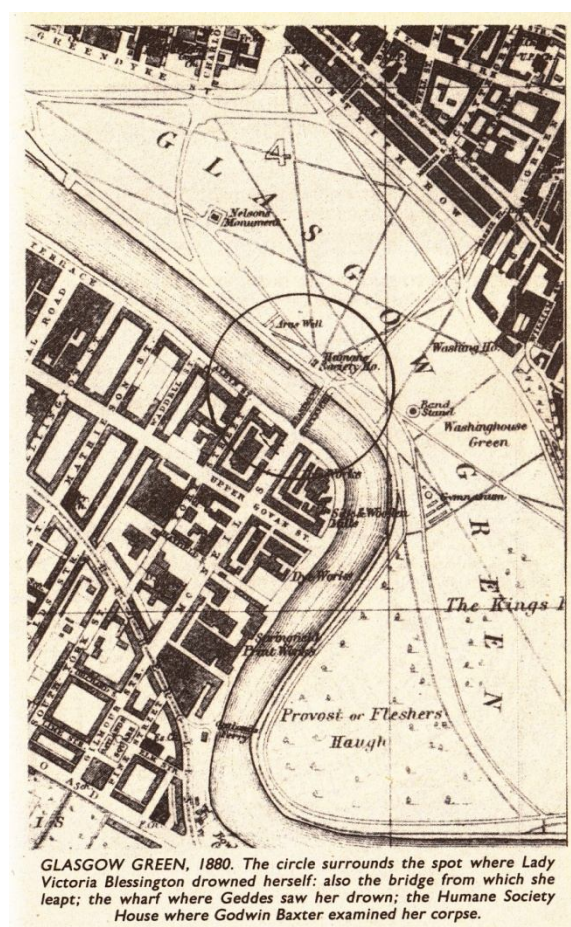


Figure 9. Map of Glasgow Green 1880, illustration from *Poor Things* (page 293)

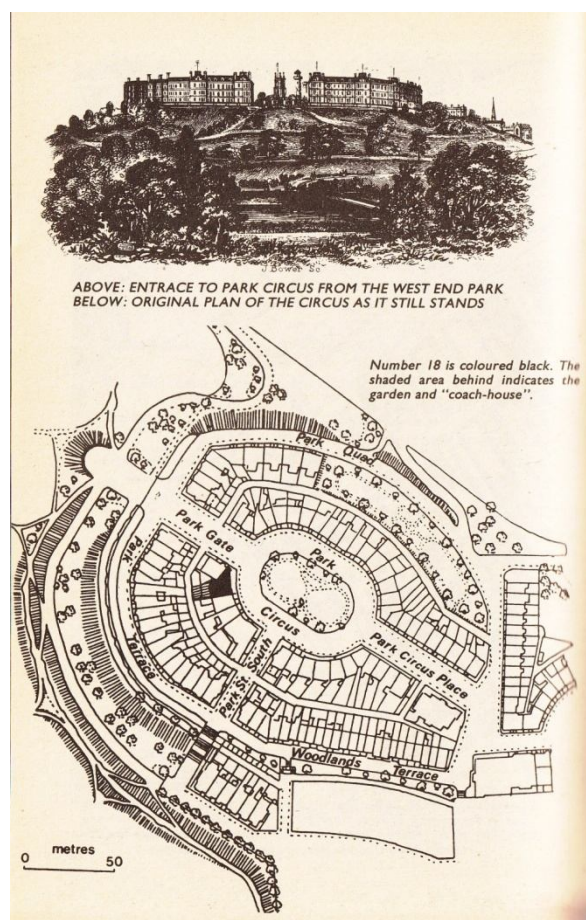


Figure 10. View and plan of the West End Park, illustration from *Poor Things* (page 294)

As one skims through these illustrations, one point instantly becomes apparent: they try to persuade the reader by providing exact details related to the story. Gray includes maps (Figure 9) and architectural plans (Figure 10) that suggest that by revealing the internal structure of Glasgow as a greater unit the historian gains an undisputable credibility. As the reader is not in the position to decide about their faithfulness and exactness, they are inclined to accept them as history only by the credit of the discourse and the context. In this way, they ignore the fact that the pictures presented as evidence are, in the first place, the products of an artist and then are filtered through the research of a historian, and as such they are in several respects objects of personal conviction and social fiction. Gray, the author, even adds a touch of irony to the work of his editor alter ego, undermining the credibility of his judgment (*Poor Things*

xiv) and parodying the sharp distinction of fiction and history (LaCapra 122). The reader might ask whether someone who was not specially trained to be a historian and did not spend years of practice of this profession could draw a faithful picture of 19th century Glasgow just after six months of library research. Does Gray, the editor have the authority to decide how exact and true his illustrations are? What is the process like by which he deduces his claims²?

At this point one can recognize an important resemblance between the procedures of early anatomy, such as Henry Gray's anatomy, and the orthodox means of researching history. Historians read themselves through a multitude of materials, recognizing shared references and pieces of information that support each other (LaCapra 46-48), then they draw a generalized picture of historical events by summarizing the congruent pieces of information and by dropping the clues that are deemed irrelevant. The anatomist works by a very similar process, dissecting many unique and different bodies, from which he later concludes the general phenomena and structures of the body (the healthy body) and ignores the little variances. In both cases, we see that the unity is a fiction produced by the observer himself (Hutcheon 125). Thus, scientists are as much artists as painters or writers. This is demonstrated by the fact that Gray produced historical evidence just to support his claim, and the fictional narrative certainly preceded evidence, just like in the case of early anatomy (Laqueur 92). For example, General Blessington's brief 'biography' is claimed to have been gleaned from "the 1883 edition of Who's Who - a 'real' book, though it was not published in an edition of that year" (Kaczvinsky 792). And even if one accepts him as an actual historical figure, there is no evidence that his personality was like the one described in McCandless' narrative.

In conclusion, the picture of human beings provided by scientific methods, either by historical or medical discourses, is far from being complete. They are constantly produced and complemented by fiction which is formed by the artists. As a result, the authority borders between art and science are kept blurred by constant transgressions and neither of them can rightfully claim itself to be the exclusive holder of objectivity, truth, or reality.

² It should also be noted that most of the evidence accumulated in the notes is entirely irrelevant as to the truthfulness of McCandless's narrative; having the map of Glasgow will not convince skeptics about the existence of someone like Baxter or about his experiments. What these mock-notes do is to provide the effect of truthfulness by means of offering 'documents'.

3. Conclusion

The central theme of Gray's *Poor Things* is the demonstration of resemblances between the discourses of art and anatomy, showing that they both rely on fictional narratives in creating their theories about human nature, subjectivity, and identity. By this Gray suggests that there is no clear boundary between reality and fiction, that reality is nothing but a textual or discursive effect achieved by various strategies of representation and protocols of authentication. Discourses like anatomy and history traditionally claim authority as having a claim to objective truth, whereas art as a discourse has different claims to other kinds of truth. By pointing to these similarities, Gray follows a Scottish literary tradition that has been running parallel with English literature. Being a visual artist and a writer at the same time, Gray ingeniously uses the two media in exploring issues of authority, creation and representation in defining and constructing identity. The three groups of illustrations stress different aspects of identity. Anatomy claims authority over deciding the nature of men's corporeality, yet, studying the history of anatomy, one can find that from the earliest endeavors anatomy always aimed at proving fictionally constructed theories, ideas that often preceded any kind of verification. Later, with the scientific turn brought by the nineteenth century, medical science built for itself a myth of objectivity and immunity for the fictions of social and artistic concepts. This resulted in the break between seemingly neutral and objective anatomy, and the artistically constructed image of men. Evoking Foucault's arguments, Gray's novel shows that despite of its self-made myth of neutrality, medical science also functions in accordance with the rules of mythmaking. Gray joins this argument by adapting anatomy illustrations, showing how they function in a fictional context, and forcing the reader to consider multiple aspects of the anatomical illustration of human body, including their artistic features, or at their openness for such categorization. He uses anatomy in symbolic ways, stressing how much bodily symbolism is part of our everyday lives. Within the second group, we find caricature-like portraits claimed to be the works of William Strang, an actual Scottish engraver from the turn of the century. Gray shows the artificiality of human character by demonstrating that the categories by which we measure identity and personality are constructs of art and of narratives which we use as parts of reality, forgetting that they started as and still are works of fiction. His archetypal characters appear as products of these fictional categories, proving that identity is built from constituents produced by art. Parallel with this, he constantly reminds the reader how anatomy and science refuse such notions, sticking to their own presuppositions and methods that are based on ignoring the social man.

Through the example of Bella Baxter, the heroine of the main narrative, Gray stresses the impossibility of the united self and how the continuous body is just a fictional fabrication of politics and society. Personality cannot be composed without fictional elements, and its unity is an illusion created by these fictions. With the third group of illustrations, Gray demonstrates the way history tends towards fiction which is quite similar to the case of anatomy as both produce their conclusions according to unique phenomena yet by generalization and ignorance of the particular features that are also markers of individuality. The product of science is thus a unified and transparent self that is identical with nobody, yet it is used as the representation of everyone.

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