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‘GORGEOUS MONSTROSITY’: DERRIDA’S DECONSTRUCTION AS AN ALTERNATIVE POSTMODERNIST TOOL IN ANALYSING ALASDAIR GRAY’S *POOR THINGS*

The article is a postmodern interpretation of Alasdair Gray’s acclaimed novel *The Poor Things*. The main motifs in the novel are re-read in the light of the theories of Jacques Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein. At the centre of the analysis stands the intertextual and deconstructive reading of the role of the main heroine, Bella Baxter. As the novel’s ‘gorgeous monstrosity’, Bella is a prototype construct embedded in the linguistic nature of reality. In Gray’s postmodern vision, Bella embodies the main concerns of the novel: the blurring of the boundaries between concepts (such as centre/periphery; memory/forgetfulness; life/death), and the continuous questioning of their definitions

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Commenting on the tendency among contemporary critics to classify his novels as postmodern¹, Alasdair Gray writes: ‘I have never found a definition of postmodernism that gives me a distinct idea of it’ (Bernstein 1999, p. 28–29). He concludes that the term *post-modern* stands for no more than *contemporary* or *fashionable*. Gray is right in finding that postmodernism seems to continually elude clear-cut definitions. In literature, it has been seen as a destructive force, undermining and subverting past traditions. Yet, it is also interpreted as incorporating multifarious past motifs, and depending on them for its very existence. Linda Hutcheon describes postmodernism as self-reflective and referential at the same time, historical and metafictional (Hutcheon 1988, p. 315). This leads her to the conclusion that postmodernism is essentially contradictory. While other critics have often juxtaposed it to modernism, in an attempt to characterise it as a reaction to modernist ideals, Hutcheon warns against the oversimplification inherent in such standpoint. She argues that in order to distinguish both movements, false binary oppositions tend to be created. Among them she mentions seriousness/irony, depth/surface, coherence/contingency and order/chaos. Such pairs are misleading, she says, because postmodernism rather than

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¹ See e.g.: Randall Stevenson, 1991, *Alasdair Gray and the Postmodern*, in: *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, Robert Crawford and Thom Nairn (eds.), Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press; *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present*, Susanne Hagemann (ed.), 1996, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang; Alan Bold, 1983, *Modern Scottish Literature*, London: Longman; *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams*, Gavin Wallace, Randall Stevenson (eds.), 1993, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 3, 56, 96.

allowing itself to be limited by either of the contradictory characteristics, questions the validity of each of them.

If we consider questioning as the very core of the movement, postmodernism appears to be not an organised system of ideas, but rather a method of analysing the ideas that so far have either been taken for granted or overlooked by traditional criticism. Nonetheless, the method is very unmethodical. It is unmethodical or almost anti-methodical in the sense of differing from the conventional understanding of *methods* as ordered and well-defined concepts. The method that is closest to such description is *deconstruction*. The image that best describes the apparent inconsistency of deconstruction is Wittgenstein's metaphor of a geometer who uses his compasses to draw a line while at the same time altering its span every now and then as if following a rule which the observer is unable to grasp (Staten 1984, p. 2). A method there is though, even if deconstruction requires re-examination of our concept of methods. Introduced in 1967 by Jacques Derrida, deconstruction has since been sometimes wrongly identified with the idea of vehement criticism or even *destruction*, i.e. breaking of the original argument of the analysed text into pieces so as to damage it beyond recuperation (Smith 2006: 34). In reality, nothing is more alien to deconstruction, which is intended by Derrida as a tool of engaging into a dialogue with the text, while its outcome is 'ultimately positive and constructive' (Smith 2006, p. 34). At the same time Derrida remarks that deconstruction should not be perceived as a method applied to a text by the critic, so to say, 'from the outside.' On the contrary, 'deconstruction is something which happens inside [the text]' (Caputo 1997, p 9). This idea of deconstruction as a process working inside the text is very stimulating for literary critics as it provides them with a method of interpreting the text founded on the inner workings of the text itself. It might be said that the critic is the one who helps the text to interpret itself meaningfully and yet in a way which eludes final meaning or interpretive closure. I believe this approach to postmodern criticism to be far more productive than the one suggested by Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory* (Barry 1995, 91). In fact, I would go as far as to say that without such rephrasing postmodern theory stands the risk of stagnation on the safe ground of following the familiar literary traits of postmodern writing, such as intertextuality, irony or 'narcissism' mentioned by Barry.

At this point, it is worth considering the question to what extent it is legitimate and justifiable to place deconstruction at such a privileged position in the postmodern critique. It is clearly only one of the possible ways of dealing with texts and it is often regarded as a 'milder' approach among postmodernists, i.e. the one which does not aim at destroying or annihilating the metaphysical concepts in the process of deconstructing, admitting the impossibility of such task (Sharman 2004, 90). It is also deeply embedded in philosophical discourse, although Derrida frequently applied deconstruction to other fields, including analysis of literary texts, most notably of Joyce's *Ulysses* (Caputo 1997, 181–200). On the other hand, as Brian McHale argues, a single unified understanding of postmodernism is an illusion: 'Just as there are a number of romanticisms, in the plural, depending upon our strategic purpose in using the term, so there are a number of postmodernisms.' (McHale

1988, 279). McHale shows how our reading of postmodernism is conditioned by the method we choose to approach it. Whereas he focuses his interpretation of postmodernism on the concept of *dominant*, I intend to attempt a similar experiment following the guidelines of deconstruction.

As already noted, deconstruction is not a destructive process. Far from that, it aims at doing justice to the text by revealing it as a construct itself, an interpretation on its own rather than just an object of analysis. Interpretation, according to Derrida, is our only possible relation to the world, a relation that realises itself through language. According to Derrida ‘everything is interpretation’ (Smith 2006, 42). Thus, it is unrealistic to long for ‘the state of Nature’ (Smith 2006, 36) as Rousseau does in his essay *On the Origin of Language*, in which one sees things as they are, i.e. not distorted by the mediation of language. It is to a certain extent this type of longing for ‘the state of Nature’ that informs the creation of Bella Baxter in the novel entitled *Poor Things* by Alasdair Gray.

Alasdair Gray, born in 1934, is one of the most important and influential modern Scottish writers, and, as some critics have claimed, ‘one of the most acclaimed Scottish postmodernists’ (Hagemann 1996: 12)², who has played a crucial role in the history of Scottish literature³ and continues to exert influence on contemporary Scottish writers.⁴ Proclaimed by Anthony Burgess as ‘the best Scottish novelist since Walter Scott’ (Bernstein 1999, 18), Gray has also gained recognition as an artist, non-fiction writer, dramatist, and poet. He describes himself humorously in the introductory note to one of his most acclaimed novels⁵, *Poor Things*:

‘Alasdair Gray, the editor, was born in Riddrie, Glasgow, 1934, the son of a cardboard box manufacturer and part-time hill guide. He obtained a Scottish Education Department Diploma in Design and Mural Painting and is now a fat, balding, asthmatic, married pedestrian who lives by writing and designing things’.

Although the postmodern traits of Gray’s writing have been acknowledged by critics, their analyses tend to focus on Gray’s earlier novels, typically omitting *Poor Things*. While it has been recognised as Gray’s ‘commercially most successful novel’ (Böhnke 2004, p. 13), in the critical field *Poor Things* has remained in the shade of Gray’s masterpiece, *Lanark*⁶. However, some critics are reluctant to apply postmodern criticism to the

² Hagemann accounts for Gray’s popularity with the postmodernist critics by enlisting the postmodern traits in his writing: ‘Among his hallmarks is a pervasive ambiguity. Cross-references make characters slide into one another, and cause writing to melt into painting; a commitment to Scotland is alternately asserted and dismissed; chapter headings contradict contents; intertextuality and self-referentiality undermine the narrative’s meaning (...)’ (Hagemann 1996, 12).

³ Especially so his leading role in the period between 1980 and 1987 which came to be known as ‘Second Scottish Literary Renaissance’.

⁴ On the role that Alasdair Gray continues to play in contemporary culture cf. Bernstein 1999, 18.

⁵ *Poor Things* won both the Whitbread Best Novel Award and the Guardian Fiction prize in 1992.

⁶ Compare e.g. Stevenson op.cit; and Gavin Miller, ‘Alasdair Gray: The Art of Communion’ in *Scottish Cultural Review of Language and Literature*, 4 (New York: Rodopi, 2005). On the other hand, Böhnke embarks

analyses of the novel. Horst Prillinger, though classifying *Poor Things* as belonging to the current of postmodernist fiction, declares that his interpretation of Gray's novel can do perfectly well without 'all the postmodern mumbo-jumbo' (Prillinger 2000, p. 70). Prillinger's ironical 'mumbo-jumbo' expression reflects the confusion present in Gray's own remarks concerning postmodern criticism and the way it is expected to work on his texts.

The initial point in the narrative of Gray's *Poor Things* consists in the experiment informed by the quest for Rousseau's unmediated perception: the experiment of bringing the protagonist, Bella Baxter, to life. Bella is a woman with a brain of a new-born baby, with no memory (or apparently no memory), and therefore no past and no knowledge of the world. Though, the situation is not quite clear as Bella gradually discovers that her body does have a past even if her mind does not. Bella is brought to life by Godwin Baxter, a medical scientist who having entered into possession of the drowned body of a young pregnant woman, mysteriously resurrects her but not before he has put the brain of her nine-month-old foetus into her head. It is significant that although the narrative appears to focus on the creation and person of Bella, she herself is presented as a construct of apparently contradictory and incongruous ideas ill-suited to stand together in an unstable balance. In that way, the concept which appears to be the central construction of the narrative proves to be the very source of its disequilibrium.

Although Bella is apparently an artificial construct, the outcome of a medical experiment, she is at the same time portrayed as the personification of the quest for the 'natural', pure, and unmediated immediateness of cognition. This tension between nature and art is emphasised and dramatised in the novel. When referring to Godwin's experiment on two rabbits, Mopsy and Flopsy, one of the characters, McCandless, first calls them 'natural freaks' (Gray 1992, p. 22), but then corrects himself saying they are 'works of art, not nature' (Gray 1992, p. 23). Art, as opposed to nature, assumes negative connotations which are emphasised by the novel's correspondence to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Bella, the 'centre' of the text, is also 'outside' the text as she may be interpreted as Shelley's monster. This correspondence has been analysed meticulously by Stephen Bernstein (Bernstein 1999, pp. 111–122) and it is worth noting that it goes far deeper than the mere adoption of the idea of creating a 'monster' on the basis of human corpses. Let us, however, have a closer look at the concept of monstrosity in *Frankenstein*. I have put 'monster' in quotation marks because Shelley challenges the meaning of the word by asking who the *real* monster in the book is. For one thing, Frankenstein's creation rhetorically sets himself as the object of sympathy in the narrative, thus questioning the appropriateness of being referred to as a monster. The question is reinforced by Victor Frankenstein's claiming re-

on a detailed analysis of *Poor Things* stressing the political and ethical concerns underlying Gray's version of postmodernism, while Georges Letissier focuses on the linguistic, multi-voiced aspect of Gray's novel, see George Letissier, 'The Voices of Transgressive Parody in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*', in *Voices from Modern Scotland: Janice Galloway, Alasdair Gray*, ed. Bernard Sellin, (Nantes: Centre de Recherche sur les Identités Nationales et l'Interculturalité, 2007).

sponsibility for the murders committed by his creation, suggesting that he is in fact the real monster. While Shelley's discussion of monstrosity leads to an ethical conclusion, the way *Poor Things* further questions the concept of monstrosity not only discredits such moral stance, but also discards any possibility of drawing a conclusion on the discussion. Instead, it allows for different readings of monstrosity and shows the impossibility of attaining a final understanding of its meaning even as it seems to change at each approach and in the end remains open to uncertainty. If we were to follow Shelley's way of argument and assume that monstrosity is connected with unethical behaviour, we soon find that the boundary between ethical and unethical is deliberately blurred in *Poor Things*. For one thing, Baxter repeats Victor's confession: 'I deserve death as much as any other murderer' (Gray 1992, p. 67), but the similarity is apparent. Baxter's tentative use of the word *murderer* ('as any other murderer' rather than Frankenstein's declaratory 'I, not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer' (Shelley 1993, p. 74) shows he himself is not convinced about the adequacy of the application of the term to his case. Paradoxically, Baxter's act of 'murder' seems to be connected to bringing Bella to life. Even if we keep in mind his egoistic reasons for creating Bella and acknowledge that by his experiment he possibly shortened the natural spell of life of her unborn baby, the question remains as to the legitimacy of the use of the word *murder* in this context. Whichever way we approach it, the ethical judgment cannot be final.

If, on the other hand, we were to follow the other argument of *Frankenstein* and connect monstrosity with physical appearance, we find that in Gray's parody of the relation between Victor Frankenstein and his monstrous creature, paradoxically, it is Godwin Baxter who appears to be the monster. His body seems to be ill-suited to his facial expression, and the description of his appearance gives the idea of incongruity almost as if his body was literally sawn together from separate patches of human and animal (ogre, bear) parts. The fact that he also seems to unite infant-like features alongside old-age characteristics as though defying the natural aging processes is even more baffling. Although according to the plot it is Bella who has been patched together from infant and adult parts, yet it is in Godwin Baxter's appearance and not in hers that these discrepancy between adulthood and infantility seems to find expression:

'Despite the ogreish body he had the wide hopeful eyes, snub nose and mournful mouth of an anxious infant, with a brow corrugated by three deep permanent wrinkles. In the morning his coarse brown hair was oiled and combed flat on each side of a centre parting, but as the day wore on spiky tufts of it rose behind his ears, and by mid afternoon his scalp was as shaggy as a bear's pelt' (Gray 1992, p. 12).

This impression of Baxter's monstrosity in McCandless's manuscript is corroborated by the portrait depiction of Godwin Baxter provided by the author as well as by the letter of McCandless's wife in which she argues with the description of Baxter as a 'monster' ('Why did my second husband describe Godwin as a monster...?' (Gray 1992, p. 259)). We also hear McCandless refer to Godwin as a monster when he finds himself being led by him up the stairs: 'I thought I was in the grip of a monster' (Gray 1992, p. 31).

This is not to say that Bella herself manages to escape the comparison to a monster. In his letter to Baxter, Wedderburn refers to Bella as a 'gorgeous monster' (Gray 1992, p. 91), an apparent oxymoron that further stretches the scope of the possible interpretations of the term. It does not help Bella at all that Wedderburn's letter appears to be ramblings of a madman. The comparison to a monster is thus established. Reading it again in the context of Mary Shelley's novel, the comparison at first appears to be ungrounded as Bella clearly shares nothing of Frankenstein's physical repugnance, which, as I said, seems to apply rather to her creator, Godwin Baxter. She, unlike Frankenstein's beastly creation, is a 'gorgeous monster'. The only meaningful level of parallel is Bella's condition of being a creation, a 'construct' made of unsuitable parts put together. Whereas the monstrosity of Frankenstein's creature is accounted for by the incongruity of different corpse fragments joined in his body, Bella's 'monstrosity' seems to lie in the apparent unfitness of the concepts she embodies, i.e. mind and body, death and life, childhood and adulthood, past and present, memory and forgetfulness. By raising the question of monstrosity of putting together concepts which not only seem ill-suited but even contradictory, Gray challenges the reader's idea of the natural. And, if we were to choose to regard Bella as a 'freak' similar to Mopsy and Flopsy, Gray points out that Bella is not necessarily the only monster in the novel. By giving his chapters the suggestive titles 'Making Me', 'Making Godwin Baxter', and 'Making a Maniac' alongside 'Making Bella Baxter', Gray implies that all of his characters resemble Bella as constructs of different and often incongruous ideas. The author's insistence on the process of 'making' of his characters provides a good metaphor for his way of looking at the ideas they embody as essentially unstable and open to the shifts of meaning and multiple readings. As Derrida would warn us, 'they are not what they say they are' (Sharman 2004, p. 87).

The concepts which are under constant examination of deconstruction are the ones based on 'the metaphysics of presence' (Staten 1984, p. 17), i.e. the ones which lay claim to their permanence, universality, and existence beyond time and space. Deconstruction underlines their hidden discontinuity, and the fact that they are equally linguistic constructs similar to other concepts they claim to exceed or even legitimise. Above all, deconstruction shows that the meaning of such terms is not pure and transcendental but that its 'boundary' is fluid and open to what traditionally is seen as 'accidental' or even contradictory. Henry Staten illustrates this by showing that for Derrida *forgetfulness* is an example of such an 'accident' in the concept of *memory*: 'Derrida points out that the necessary condition for the definition of *memory* is that it must be subject to forgetfulness: a *limitless memory* would be *not memory but infinite self-presence*.' (Staten 1984, p. 2).

Let us have a look at how Gray plays with this idea of memory and fluid boundaries. I have already mentioned that the fact of Bella's being *constructed* from a body of a twenty-five-year-old woman (Victoria Blessington as I shall refer to her from now on in order to avoid confusion with Bella) and a mind of an infant is a clever way of Gray's introducing the question of body-mind relation in his novel. Baxter is quick to notice that Bella's body far from being passive seems to preserve certain memories from Victoria

Blessington's life. One of them is her Yorkshire dialect, for which he accounts in the following way:

'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 for 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...' (Gray 1992, p. 34).

Not only is Bella's body the seat of such 'instincts', if we want to give credit to Baxter's explanation, but it also appears to be the means through which she gains partial access to Victoria Blessington's memories. This is apparent in the chapter in which she is confronted with Victoria's husband. When questioned by him if she can remember anything of his person, Bella answers hesitantly: 'Nothing certain... yet something in your voice and appearance *does* seem familiar, as if I once dreamed it or heard it or glimpsed it in a play' (Gray 1992, p. 216). She subsequently asks the General to let her hold his hand claiming that 'it might remind her' and after he has done so she suddenly exclaims: 'You are horrible!' (Gray 1992, p. 216), which incidentally turn out to be the exact words Victoria uttered on the day she left her husband. Thus, although Bella seems to be *generally* unaware of her past, and her mind is *overall* a tabula rasa, memories from Victoria's life from time to time mysteriously break through and make their way to Bella's awareness. For Bella, concepts of memory and forgetfulness seem to be so close as to almost merge in a peculiar state of 'uncertainty'. Indeed, suffering from amnesia, which is how Baxter accounts for Bella's state, might be said to give a similar idea of a blend of memory and forgetfulness.

Gray continues playing with the concept of memory when he makes McCandless ridicule the whole idea of Bella's recollections from Victoria's life by claiming that his own alleged poetical talents come from his previous life: 'All my memories and hopes of Bella became rhyming sentences so easily that I often felt I was not composing them but *remembering* them from a previous existence' [my italics, J.M.] (Gray 1992, p. 55). It is also worth keeping in mind that the story of Bella Baxter, if we are to believe Victoria McCandless, is written by a sclerotic, thus presumably being itself a blend of memories/distorted memories and pure imagination of Archie McCandless. This intertwining of the concepts of memory/forgetfulness and fantasy in the novel relativises their definitions and situates them on a species of gradual continuum. The attempts at subtracting any of the three from this continuum are bound to end up in fiasco as any of them pulls after it associated meanings of the other ones. The discussion on the boundaries of memory is wittily concluded by McCandless's handwritten line at the end of his memoir: 'Please remember me sometimes' (Gray 1992, p. 247), thus through weakening the act of remembering by the addition of 'sometimes', the line suggests the co-existence of the processes of remembering and not-remembering. And so, here as elsewhere in the novel, the final conclusion remains the lack of conclusion.

Bella's perception of time and space also defies an unambiguous understanding. As McCandless notices: 'Her worst fault... is her infantile sense of time and space. She feels

short intervals are huge, yet thinks she can grasp all the things she wants at once, no matter how far they are from her and each other' (Gray 1992, p. 70). Similarly, the text questions the concepts of life and death, even as Baxter claims to have cured Bella of death (Gray 1992, p. 27), as if death were no more than a special kind of disease and as such it were engulfed by the domain of life.

This boundary-crossing between different concepts in *Poor Things* in order to reveal their instability is close to Wittgensteinian model of destabilisation or *defamiliarisation*, which Henry Staten compares with Derrida's deconstruction (Staten 1984, p. 96). Wittgenstein understands language as operating on different levels of separate language games, or contexts. The meaning of the word in such systems, rather than inherent in the word itself is understood as its actual use in different language games. These uses may vary significantly but they nonetheless constitute a linguistic continuum on a scale of gradual fading of familiarity. Wittgenstein compares such resemblances to those of family members. The transition from one concept to another obeys the rules of intermediate gradations as described by Darwin in the *Origin of Species*: the individual differences between species and sub-species 'blend into each other by an insensible series; and a series impresses the mind with the idea of an actual passage. The boundaries between concepts are thus deceptive and arbitrary as they divide up the linguistic continuum.' (Smith 2006, p. 67). Seen as members of a fading continuum of meaning, the apparently contradictory concepts put together in Bella's creation can be seen as standing at far ends of the same scale. In the light of the *language game* theory, McCandless's interest in Darwin and the questions whether 'life mainly evolve(s) through small gradual changes or through big catastrophic ones' (Gray 1992, p. 15), as well as his humorous referring to Godwin Baxter as Darwin (Gray 1992, p. 25) do not seem accidental, and point to the linguistic dimension of the text. And so Godwin Baxter's experiment on Bella can be read as an elaborate game with linguistic concepts put together in a patched-up, unnatural combination. The result, his 'gorgeous monster', is an intricate linguistic construct dazzling the readers with its multi-meaningfulness and tempting them to deconstruct the densely entangled concepts.

Similarly to Bella, who is a *gorgeous monstrosity*, the object of art and indeed the perceived world in Gray's postmodernist vision are also such *gorgeous monstrosities* which, when deconstructed, leave the reader in uncertainty. At one point in the book General Blessington refers to Baxter's account of Bella's history as a 'word game' (Gray 1992, p. 228). As a matter of fact, Gray's narrative abounds in different *word games* which intertwine repeatedly creating a patchwork of confused patterns. The conflicting voices in the novel present their own versions of the events, trying to gain dominance and convince the reader of their veracity. This fight to win the credentiality finds expression in frequent breaking of the rules of their language game by referring to a foreign language game in an attempt to legitimise their accounts. The trick only holds chances of succeeding if such meta-terms or meta-narratives are presented as standing beyond any language game and as such guaranteeing the truth of the discourse (Bernstein 1999, p. 119). And so the reader's

only chance of 'seeing through' the trick lies in identifying such concepts as part of – rather than lying beyond – the patchwork of the linguistic games.

An example of such a 'foul' in Gray's linguistic game is the reference to the language of science by the editor of McCandless's novel. In his Introduction to the *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer* he claims that:

'Those who examine the proofs given at the end of this introduction will not doubt that in the final week of February 1881, at 18 Park Circus, Glasgow, a surgical genius used human remains to create a twenty-five-year-old woman' (Gray 1992, p. 9).

His deliberate reference to the scientific vocabulary (*evidence, proof, facts* etc.) aims at convincing the reader of the superiority of his interpretation of McCandless's narrative. He is soon ridiculed, however, when the 'proofs' he urges the reader to examine turn out to be far from convincing, and often irrelevant, and his argument gets caught in a vicious circle when he argues that the *fact* that the description of Baxter's abode differs from its actual looks 'of course, only *proves*' (Gray 1992, p. 280) [my italics, J.M.] that it was changed later. McCandless's narrative is presented both as the one whose veracity is yet to be proved and as the very source of its validation. Similarly ridiculed is Victoria McCandless, who discredits her husband's memoirs by appealing to common sense. It is soon revealed that she herself may be suffering from mental disorder (which is hinted at in the critical notes) (Gray 1992, p. 308).

However, one character in Gray's novel seems to play his *word game* fair. When the detective employed by Victoria Blessington's father in order to trace his lost daughter enters the scene by the end of the book, it turns out that the only *personal* trait of this exceedingly 'ordinary man' (Gray 1992, p. 211) is his style of speech in which he never uses first-person pronouns, thus making it thoroughly *impersonal*. In this style he delivers the summary of the investigation which he finishes with an inconclusive 'Good luck to you, Miss or Lady B' (Gray 1992, p. 212), thus refusing to answer the question of the true identity of Bella. When asked to account for Victoria's death and her coming back to life, he equally withholds any answer seeing it as 'not his department' (Gray 1992, p. 212), as he puts it. Significantly, it is Bella who speaks first after the detective: "I like that man," whispered Bella so intensely that I did not know if she understood him' (Gray 1992, p. 212). Paradoxically, the message of detective Grimes, which Bella seems to understand perfectly, consists in the lack of any personal communication in his speech. In his totally impersonalised account of facts, that almost lacks any human traits, he is unable to draw any conclusions from his investigation.

Not surprisingly, all seems to indicate that the role reserved for the reader analysing and deconstructing Gray's narrative has been that of the detective. And so, in this last joke played by Gray on the reader, the latter is led to realise that after the deconstruction of Gray's gorgeous monstrosity, which he has been tempted to undertake, all he is left with is the detective's stuttering and dehumanised speech. For all its apparent certainty it leaves the reader in darkness about the true identity of Bella and the veracity of the conflicting

accounts of her life. On his way through the book he has been tempted not only by Bella, but also by each of the voices in the book following Baxter's confession: 'That is what I tell people but don't you believe me! Judge for yourself' (Gray 1992, p. 27). Accordingly, judging for himself and investigating one by one the elaborate threads of the plot, the reader arrives at a point where he is in no position to pass any judgement. It is not just, as Bernstein claims, that at certain point 'the veracity of McCandless's narrative becomes unimportant' (Bernstein 1999, p. 119), but rather the reader is led to realise that without reference to the metanarratives, there is no way to establish where the truth lies. Since he has put them under doubt, all he is left is a confusion of disjointed 'facts'. At the end of the book he is left in uncertainty and finds that all he can do is repeat after Godwin Baxter: 'I disagree with your language, not facts' (Gray 1992, p. 100).

Alisdair Gray's *Poor Things* is a playful and witty take on postmodern ideas in which the author challenges the reader to embark on a deconstruction of his linguistic monster. No sooner does the reader catch the bait, though, than he is caught in a semantic trap only to realise that in order to proceed he needs to use the very terms he seeks to deconstruct. As such, Gray's *gorgeous monstrosity* remains a never-ending experiment, always open to deconstruction, never fully deconstructed.

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„GORGEOUS MONSTROSITY”: ODCZYTANIE POWIEŚCI *POOR THINGS* ALASDAIRA GRAYA
W ŚWIELE DEKONSTRUKCJI JACQUESA DERRIDY

Artykuł jest próbą postmodernistycznej interpretacji powieści współczesnego szkockiego pisarza Alasdaira Graya zatytułowanej *Poor Things*. Zamierzeniem autorki jest odczytanie głównych wątków powieści w świetle teorii Jacquesa Derridy oraz Ludwiga Wittgensteina. Centrum analizy stanowi intertekstualne oraz dekonstrukcjonistyczne odczytanie roli głównej bohaterki powieści, Belli Baxter, jako lingwistycznego konstruktu. Jako „cudowny potwór” (*gorgeous monster*) ujawniający się w strukturze powieści, Bella Baxter przedstawia prototyp lingwistycznej natury rzeczywistości w postmodernistycznym ujęciu Graya. W ujęciu tym zaciera się granice pomiędzy pojęciami, a ich definicje są nieustannie kwestionowane

Słowa kluczowe: postmodernizm, Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things*, Jacques Derrida, dekonstrukcja