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Postmodern Fantasy: the Supernatural in Gray's *Comedy of the White Dog* and Welsh's *Granton Star Cause*

Alasdair Gray's short story «The Comedy of the White Dog» was published in 1984 in a collection entitled *Unlikely Stories, Mostly*, a publication which coincides with the revival of the writing of fantasy in Britain. As the academic critic Patricia Waugh pointed out in *Harvest of the Sixties*, the novel in the eighties «took a distinctly fantastic turn» which, combined with «essayistic narratorial intrusions»¹, emphasised the fantastic as a revision of the supernatural for postmodern purposes. The popularity of the fantastic and the supernatural seems to have endured beyond the 1980s, if one considers that Irvine Welsh also makes substantial use of it in his collection of stories published in 1994, in spite of a title suggestive of the strictest and drabest realism, *The Acid House*. Indeed, Welsh insists in interviews that his fictional universe is situated as far away as possible from the academic, intellectual world which he feels represents the main inspirational factor in mainstream British fiction:

I particularly detest British fiction because you can never get past the idea that here is someone sitting down at a desk writing. [...] I don't use any literary references because literature just feeds off itself – it feeds off its own culture. I try to feed off contemporary culture like video/music/acid house, the whole kind of drug culture, all the kinds of experiences that are working around that so that the book is about emotions rather than intellect².

In spite of this highly sarcastic – psychic? – defence, Welsh does seem to derive at least the fantastic method of composition from his predecessors of the 1980s. Indeed, both his own and Gray's story start out as typical modern Scottish fantasies, in the sense that Colin Manlove ascribes to that genre, namely that of fiction that involves the supernatural, while taking the specifically Scottish shape of a quest inward engaged in by an

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1. Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 179-180.

2. «Scotland Reads Irvine Welsh in Psychic Defence», Irvine Welsh interviewed by Maria Jenskey, September 1995. on <http://www.oculus.com/Welsh.html>, p. 4. This defence is also interesting because of its direct statement of a desire in contemporary writing to move away from postmodernism and academia. This ambition has been found in many works of fiction in recent years, including those written by American novelists such as Paul Auster.

isolated hero who is pulled back to his roots. The critic contends that despite the diversity, even heterogeneity of Scottish fantasy literature, they all have in common their self-centredness:

There is always the sense of a pull backwards, or even downwards, to one's roots. From where he is, the Scots fantasist seems to journey back to his native land³.

Added to this central feature is a sense of barrenness, even violence. Both Welsh's and Gray's stories seem to conform superficially but emphatically to this description of Scottish fantasy, with the definitely local, or at least restricted scope of Welsh's title, his use of the Scottish idiom throughout the story, and with the insistence on Scottish ballads and myths in Gray's story. The opening of «The Granton Star Cause» serves to establish a sense of the local that the story will keep up throughout:

It hit Boab Coyle hard, right in the centre of his chest. He stood at the bar, open-mouthed, as his mate Kev Hyslop explained the position to him.

Sorry, Boab, but we aw agree. We cannae guarantee ye a game. Wuv goat Tambo n wee Grant now. This team's gaun places. Gaun places!? Gaun Places!? Churches League Division Three! It's a kick about, ya pretentious cunt. A fucking kick about!

(GSC, 120)

Welsh reinforces this effect of banality by immersing the reader even deeper into the crude reality of his characters' lives through his use of an *in medias res* incipit. In addition, in both «The Granton Star Cause» and «The Comedy of the White Dog», the protagonist is soon isolated and starts on a quest about either the identity of the dog or the causes of his own misfortunes.

A zone

The illustration that appears on the first page of «The Comedy of the White Dog» adopts and complexifies the traditional pattern: stylised thistles announce the heavy emphasis on localism, while the pet dog might provisionally be seen as an indication of homeliness, all the more so as the drawing is integrated into the part of the text that renders most

3. Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: a Critical Survey*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994, p. 4. For a comprehensive definition of Scottish fantasy, see p. 1-17.

systematically the routine aspect of every day life by mentioning such details as the icing of a cake, or by using first names only for the characters, as well as comforting assertions such as «It's going to be a nice little family party» (CWD, 19). Yet, the dog of the illustration appears as grinning in a strange— because human — way, and with its tongue unnaturally lolling out of its mouth through clenched teeth. In addition, the dog's head seems to have been drawn at a different angle from the body. This can be interpreted as advance notice of the fact that what governs this story is the concept of dislocation, all the more so as the metaphor is immediately taken up by the text, with a visual allusion to «bright patterns that did not harmonise» (CWD, 18) in the description of the house, and with the use of the musical metaphor of discord (CWD, 19). The result is that from the outset, the reader is transported into a space of fundamental hesitation, or, as Tzvetan Todorov puts it:

«J'en vins presque à croire»: voilà la formule qui résume l'esprit du fantastique. La foi absolue comme l'incrédulité totale nous mèneraient hors du fantastique; c'est l'hésitation qui lui donne vie⁴.

The ambition to explore the undecided territory, the margin of a dialectics, is an element that can be detected in Welsh's claim that he has moved to a different source of inspiration from the traditional, and in Gray's repeated comments on his interest in the «in-betweenness» of two stages, most famously evidenced in the dual generic attribution of *Lanark, A Life in Four Books* (1981) and dwelt upon in many interviews, such as the following one:

I remember a children's prose version of the *Odyssey* read when nine or ten. The idea of a voyage from one magic island to another gripped really hard. Of course the quest was to get home again, but the journey interested me more than the hope of arrival⁵.

4. Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris: Seuil, 1970, p. 35

5. Mark Axelrod, «An Epistolary interview, Mostly with Alasdair Gray», *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, summer 1995, p. 2. *Dalkey Archive Press*, <http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/pages/interviews/interview-gray.html>

The result of this concentration on the transitory in the text is that Gray's story, and Welsh's, take on a decidedly meta-fictional aspect which, in effect, blurs the borderline between reality and fiction. However, Welsh manages to perform this rather commonplace exploration in an unusual manner, by calling into question the psychological realism of his story, thus providing a mirror image within the text of the forces working on it from the outside. The character's elderly, respectable

working-class parents are turned into «sleazy, lecherous bastards» (GSC, 122) who engage in sadomasochistic sexual practices, providing a jarring, distorted counterpart to the supernatural transformation of the main character into a fly: the common taste for human excrement, as well as the reversal of power which is at the core of both sadomasochistic encounters and the story, stresses the shared strangeness and therefore the link between the two realms. The assumption is that the supernatural transformation in the main protagonist appears as more rational than the supposedly realistic element of the plot. The text makes this fundamental reversal clear by juxtaposing in the figure of the mother the stereotypical reactions with the more sulphurous – stranger in the etymological sense of the term – facet of her personality:

— Ah'm gauny shite in your mooth, Boab Coyle! It's whit wi baith want! Dinnae deny it!

— Naw! Don't shite in ma mooth... don't... shite in ma mooth... shite in ma mooth... shite in ma mooth... SHITE IN MA MOOTH!

[...]

— Hiya Cathy. How are you doing, love?... Good... Dad's fine... How's the wee felly?... Aw, the wee lamb! N Jimmy... Good. Listen love, wir just sitting doon to oor tea. Ah'll phone you back in about half an hour, n will huv a proper blether... Right love... Bye the now. (GSC, 134-135)

In «The Comedy of the White Dog», the very first words, echoing as they do the incipit of fairy tales, also serve to heighten the sense of a world that is suspended between two possible interpretations:

One a sunny afternoon, two men went by car into the suburbs to the house of a girl called Nan. (CWD, 17)

What this incipit emphasises is indeed the magic mixed with the familiar, or rather the uncanny, the borderline, the moment when the story hesitates between two possibilities, what Brian McHale rephrased after Todorov as:

The fantastic, in other words, involves a face-to-face confrontation between the possible (the «real») and the impossible, the normal and the paranormal⁶.

What Welsh and Gray are staging in their stories is a literalisation of that commonplace statement made about the fantastic: a confrontation in the physical sense of the word, a fight to death in both cases for the supremacy of one or the

6. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London and New York: Routledge, 1987, p. 75.

other of the two realms, which ends up in a rewriting of the fundamental question raised by the fantastic as a genre. In both stories, the vehicle for the intrusion of the supernatural is an animal which, in both cases, is violently killed. The destruction is carried out with a glee which can only be attributed to the metaphorical design behind the story: that of representing the process of staging the confrontation itself. In «The Comedy of the White Dog», the barbarity of the annihilation of the animal emblematic of the space occupied between reality and fantasy is an indicator of the violence with which the text tackles the *cliché*:

With a great yell, he seized the beast's hind leg with his free hand, sprang up and swung its whole body against the wall. [...] He felt its head crush with the impact, swung and battered it twice more on the wall, leaving a jammy red stain each time. (35)

In «The Granton Star Cause», the same semantic field presides over the destruction, which however is presented to the reader from the opposite angle, owing to the focalization of the story by the fly:

Doreen [...] picked up *The Evening News* as she put down the phone and sprang over to the wall. Boab didn't see the threat until the rolled paper was hurtling towards him. He took off, but the paper caught him and knocked him back against the wall at great speed. (GSC, 135)

Contrastive banality

Granting the specific and shared purpose of carrying the *topos* of hesitation to its logical self-destructive extreme, both stories nevertheless rely on typically postmodern strategies of the integration of the supernatural. They introduce in particular the *topos* of contrastive banality, namely the pervasive sense of the familiarity of the supernatural event, which derives from Kafka's *Metamorphosis*⁷. Gray's characters betray no surprise at the sight of a dog abducting a young girl, and no curiosity when she is restored to them apparently unharmed. As to Welsh's protagonists, they are granted two occasions to resist the blatant intrusion of the uncanny into their universe, without seizing either. On first meeting God, Boab Coyle starts out as mildly incredulous, and almost immediately takes the intrusion for granted. It only takes the narrative twenty lines for the character to switch from one posture to the other:

7. For a more comprehensive definition of the concept of contrastive reality, see McHale, *op. cit.*, p. 76-77. For the extent of Kafka's influence on Gray's work, see his own answer to Axelrod: «Kafka and Kafka», *op. cit.*, p. 2.

Boab was totally deflated. There seemed to be an almost translucent aura around this man. He spoke with certainty and conviction. Boab almost believed him. He didn't know what to believe anymore.

If you're God, what ur ye daein wastin yir time oan me?

[...]

Boab found God's whingeing pathetic. – You fucking toss. If ah hud your powers. (GSC, 129)

The second opportunity of resistance is offered to a different character which, in strict accordance with what happens in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, remains just as soberly cool-headed as his predecessor on meeting his former friend in the shape of a large bluebottle. As Patricia Waugh pointed out, the attendant disorientation of the reader forces him to pursue a more thorough questioning of his vision of reality:

The effect [...] is close to that of a schizophrenic construction of reality [...], where information is not processed, where metalingual insufficiency results in a failure to distinguish between hierarchies of messages and contexts. Here the historical world and the alternative or fantasy world merge. In metafiction they are always held in a state of tension, and the relationship between them – between «play» and «reality» – is the main focus of the text⁸.

«The Comedy of the White Dog» presents a graphic rephrasing of the same duality, which plays on the pictorial notion of plane organisation. Three of the four illustrations of the story effectively point to the overlapping of our conception of reality and the supernatural by featuring a drawing both of the title's white dog – soon turned into the icon of supernatural transformation in this story – and of the young girl who, by her sheer humanity, conventionally stands for the world of external reality. In the three illustrations, the dog successively appears in the foreground, the background and the foreground again, thus graphically indicating the possibility for endless reversals of our conception of reality and fiction. Those strategies all foreground the exploration of what Gray calls «the journey» or, in the words of Margaret Elphinstone:

[Scottish fantasy] destabilises contemporary notions of what is «real», drawing upon past traditions, dreams, subconscious hopes and fears about the supernatural, and giving them a validity which is at least equal to, and often stronger than, the rational laws that supposedly govern the external world. My reading of Scottish fantasy suggests to me not so much a binary opposition: real/fantastic, as a demolishing of the *boundary* that divides the

8. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London and New York: Routledge, 1984, p. 38.

real from supernatural. [...] In this re-location the borderlands become central, the liminal place where action takes place, and, in the plot, where the plot can start to happen⁹.

The assumption made by Elphinstone here is that the work of art takes place in the space left by the simultaneous creation and destruction of the limit between the real and the supernatural. In that respect, Gray's strategy of including a scholar to rationalise the white dog out of the fantastic and simultaneously having this scholar lead the story inexorably back to its uncanny world restricts the scope of application of this story strictly within the narrow boundaries of the space in-between, while making its very delineation problematic. In a typical self-contradictory movement, the Canadian scholar is the only outsider – or non-Scot – in the story, while also being the only character who bears a Scottish surname, McIver:

What is this white dog?

McIver answered in the tone of someone starting a lecture: Well-known references to the white dog occur in Ovid's «Metamorphoses», in Chaucer's unfinished «Cook's Tale», in the picaresque novels of the Basque poet Jose Mompou, and in your Scottish Border Ballads. (CWD, 32)

Here, Gray resorts to his favourite technique of proliferation of clues designed to contradict one another, such as intertextual overkill, the subtle mixture of the real with the apocryphal, with the usual result of making the boundary – whether textual or generic – an increasingly elusive one.

Subtextuality

In addition to an erasure of the division between fantasy and reality, Gray and Welsh are in effect reversing Elphinstone's statement by interchanging the status of respectively «real life» and obviously fantastic imaginings, thereby challenging not only our notions of the place occupied by fiction in postmodern fantasy, but also the reality status of our very conception of «the real». Anne Varty, writing about Gray's short stories, notes that:

Gray has a fine sense of our capacity to confuse description with explanation and his imagination luxuriates in the creation of possible worlds which expose assumptions we make about our own¹⁰.

9. Margaret Elphinstone, «Fantasising Texts: Scottish Fantasy Today», ASLS Conference: 14 May 2000, <http://www2.arts.ac.uk.ScotLit/ASLS/Melphinstone.html>, p. 2.

10. Anne Varty, «How the Laws of Fiction Lie: A Reading of Gray's Shorter Stories», *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, Robert Crawford and Thom Nairn, eds., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991, p. 127.

Both Gray's and Welsh's stories reverse the conventional precedence of the real world over the possible world by effectively opening on to a subtext made up of widely disparate threads. Gray builds the subtext mostly on intertextuality, while Welsh achieves a similar goal by resorting mainly to heteroglossia. The result, however, goes beyond mere reciprocal challenging.

Absurd

Welsh's subtext is made primarily apparent by its heavy reliance on stereotyped languages. «The Granton Star Cause» integrates a multitude of idiolects that comment upon one another. It borrows from popular cliché – «friendship had to be put on the back burner» (120), or «having one's cake and eating it» (122) – or from legal vocabulary – «mutually advantageous to both parties» (122); from foreign languages – «Wir finished. Finito. Kaput» (123) – and Marxist *clichés* – «so ah don't want any lumpen-proletarian malcontents threatening ma investment» (126). In addition, the text covers the semantic field of economics in the general sense of the term, with such occurrences as «it's aw down to market positioning, Boab. We have to find our niche in the market» (127), or the language of abuse, as in «ya fahhkin slag, cunt» (124). The resulting heteroglossia, added to the deliberate phonetic transcription of the Scottish voice draws, as in Gray's story, the reader's attention to reality as a linguistic construct. The fantasy is put to metafictional use in the sense that, by making the confrontation between the hyperrealist world and the parallel world as jarring as possible, the text manages to induce just the possibility of a reversal of the status of fiction and magic: writing one's own hyperrealistic fiction cannot escape the traps and boundaries of linguistic determinism. The sheer proliferation, hence artificiality of the description makes it possible for this narrative to be seen in turn as an episode in someone else's fantasy, especially in a story that relies on metalepsis for its uncanny dislocation. This is the meaning that can be attributed to Boab's mother's phone conversation with her daughter. By including the emphatically realistic into her strange sex ritual, it reverses the traditional precedence of one narrated mode over the other. The same can be said of the fly's

interior monologue, which integrates psychoanalytical *clichés* by literalising them into coincidence with its own parallel universe:

There was one aspect, however, where it was like father like son. He knew he could not trust himself to see his mother's shite. It would be too arousing, that succulent, hot sour faeces, all going into his father's mouth. Boab felt his first conscious twinges of an Oedipus complex, at twenty years old, and in a metamorphosised state. (GSC, 135)

What Welsh does is to summon what he despises as being «existing literature», in this case the literature of the absurd, to combine it to a more contemporary, a «trash»¹¹ version of the same idea – with the obvious allusion to David Cronenberg's revisiting of the *topos* in his 1986 movie *The Fly*. The result is a mixture of the absurd (the isolation of the hero unable to escape the downward spiral that he has created himself) and contemporary culture. Patricia Waugh comments upon the use of fantasy to criticize contemporary society:

In the eighties [...], male writers too [...] perceived the advantages of the fantastic for presenting dislocated worlds or politically motivated dissections of the nation. Two prominent Scottish voices, Alasdair Gray and James Kelman, drew on fantastic strategies to construct a defamiliarized vision of their native Glasgow, motivated, as the title of one of their novels suggested, by *A Disaffection*¹².

11. In «Eurotrash» another short story included in the collection a character despises the whole of the youth culture and contemporary society as so much trash.

12. Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties, op. cit.*, p. 197-198.

13. Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 131.

14. That God should serve as the figure through which the intrusion of the supernatural is carried out, through the use of the stereotype of authorial intrusion, is an apt symbol of destruction, while simultaneously mocking the postmodern.

The result of Welsh's handling of the dislocation is a shock to the ontological structure of the realistic universe. The shockwave is destructive rather than merely unsettling; it seems to bring the parallel world, as well as the referential world that is portrayed, to a halt, in effect literalising Cairns Craig's statement, made about Welsh's most famous novel *Trainspotting* that:

The world of urban Scotland is no longer a stage of history [...] it is a world where history has ceased to operate¹³.

Welsh's story conveys a bitterness, a self-hatred that is equalled only in the most often quoted passages from *Trainspotting* and *1982, Janine*, by Gray. It is aptly formulated in the story by the symbol of the uncanny, God¹⁴:

Ah made yous cunts in ma ain image. Yous git oan wi it; yous fucking well sort it oot. That cunt Nietzsche wis wide ay the mark

whin he sais ah wis deid. Ah'm no deid; ah jist dinnae gie a fuck. It's no fir me tae sort every cunt's problems oot. Nae other cunt gies a fuck so why should ah? Eh? (GSC, 129)

The sense of stasis is not only enforced by the sheer nihilism of this address, but also by the circularity that governs the structure of the short story, which concludes on Boab's friend Kev going through the very same throes as Boab does at the beginning of the story. It is also encapsulated in the name given to the central character. «Boab Coyle» is both his and his father's name, thereby foregrounding repetition; the surname is a homophone of «coil», which gives the repetition its spiral effect. In addition, the word «coy», suggested in the name, with its negative connotation, echoes the annoyance in God's address. Finally the Christian name «Bob» – preferred to «Rob» or even «Rab» – being a palindrome, it indicates the hesitancy, the reversibility of the worlds, while the added «a» stresses localism, giving a definitely Scottish background to the stagnation of both worlds.

Intertextuality

Gray's subtext is mostly based on intertextuality. His title provides an economic means of introducing generic multiplicity into the text, as the reader has to look for a subtextual reason in order to understand the word «comedy». By thus artificially introducing drama as a genre into the tale, the text casually adds an unexpected interpretation of itself according to the conventions of the genre¹⁵. The opening paragraph, with its accumulation of forward-pointing pronouns, conforms to that of a prologue, while the second paragraph, which introduces each character by stressing their interrelations reads like a *dramatis personae*. The two uncanny climaxes receive a specifically dramatic treatment, with the first one being witnessed by the main character from a privileged and comfortable vantage point, and the second, involving as it does the absence and sudden reappearance of light, emphasising the crucial importance of the visual. This is in turn backed up by the central illustration¹⁶, in particular in the case of the first turning point, which is almost exclusively dedicated to the concept of framing. In the illustration, the characters in the foreground are standing in front of the library

15. Comedy, and by extension drama, is by no means the only genre intertextually imported into the story, although it is probably the most operative. In a typically postmodern move, the text also borrows from mystery tales such as Mautpassant's or Poe's. It also includes a parody of the popular literary form of detective stories, by having the character striving to put together the pieces of the legend, and stealthily searching his own flat for the dog.
16. See Alasdair Gray, *Unlikely Stories, Mostly*, Penguin Book, 1984, p. 26.

window¹⁷. Through the window, the reader can observe the abduction taking place as if on a stage, thanks to the placing of the characters on a table. Framing is additionally emphasized by the inclusion of a framed painting that echoes the window, as well as because of the arbitrary framing of the illustration as a whole, which deliberately cuts one of the figures in the foreground in half.

This iconic repetition of the notion of dramatic presentation of events also paves the way for a thematic exploitation that rests on the sheer visuality of any illustration, with its obvious allusion to voyeurism. The historical characters brought into the story serve to heighten this connection. Of the four historical realemes, namely D.H. Lawrence, Havelock Ellis, H.G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw, three were notorious in their time for their writing on sexuality and sexual freedom. This is another effective means of conveying to the reader a sense of a possible reversal between the (historically) real and the fictional: here, four writers, or producers of fiction in the historical world are turned into elements of fiction in the story. To make this point clear, Gray's metalepsis introduces the four writers neither as characters nor through their books, but as framed photographs, thereby self-consciously drawing attention to the construction of his intertextual zone by referring to frame-breaking.

The insistence of the text on the constant grinning of the dog makes for a sort of dramatic irony, in addition to intertextually introducing magic into the text – with its obvious reference to the Cheshire Cat and therefore to Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*. Only the dog knows more than the characters, a fact which turns him into a metaphor of the spectator of the play. One more time, in a typical Grayian interaction between the verbal and the iconic, this feature is reinforced by the central illustration. The characters in this drawing are not turned towards the scene they are witnessing as one would expect, but are facing the reader/viewer. The latter is therefore once again substituted to the character as a spectator. What the illustration achieves is an easily recognizable literalisation of the dead metaphor that identifies the reader as the spectator of the plot/play, thus questioning it in a truly economical way while making room for a subtextual, parallel world which might restore some metaphorical power to the *cliché*.

17. The library simultaneously serves as an apt symbol of generic proliferation.

Finally, the illustration also serves another purpose, a fact that is made apparent by its situation in the text. In all three editions, it is placed on the page which faces the description of the disruption of the realistic world by the supernatural – «Something strange was happening on the darkened lawn» (CWD, 25/7); «he was bashed by some monstrous possibility» (CWD, 27) –, thereby in a way opening a door on the possible world in a laconic, unequivocal manner. The novelty here is that the parallel world is truly accessible only to the reader, who is the only one capable of reconstructing discourse out of the two media which coexist in this story. As a consequence, the story as a whole manages to displace the boundary between the real and the fantastic to an imaginary space where text and drawing coalesce into one consistent meaning. The margin from which the supernatural operates is therefore effectively destroyed only to reappear in an immaterial sphere, a different, hypothetical parallel world in fact, situated in the reader's mind. So that in a final reversal which is the hallmark of Gray's writing, the supernatural actually becomes a metaphor for the construction of the text, as opposed to the initial postulate that the text serves as a vehicle for the construction of the fantasy, or alternatively that the text breaks down the boundary between the real and the supernatural. The ultimate logical step to this constructive-deconstructive process is a radical challenging of our status as readers. The parallel world co-created by the text, the illustration and the reader's interpretation in turn questions the reader's safe external status. The white dog – whose colour, like that of the white page, serves more as a receptacle for creation than as actual creation – becomes the vehicle for endless rewritings and reversals. Is it the creature or the creator?¹⁸ Is it a creation of the text, or is the text a creation of the white dog? Ultimately, because of the illustration's integration of the reader into the picture, one might wonder whether the reader, or more significantly the external, realistic world, might not be a creation of the white dog.

18. This is a typically postmodern issue that Gray has addressed several times, most famously probably in *Lanark* with the appearance of the author who writes himself into his own narrative.

Dislocating the frames

This radical reworking on the notion of frame-breaking is once again indicated by a cooperation between text and illustration:

on the one hand, the text gives several intertextual origins for the white dog, thereby summoning a variety of hyperdiegetic worlds; on the other hand, the illustrative pattern shows the story's enduring emblem of the supernatural to appear to be jumping out of the book. The second paperback edition features a drawing of the white dog's sexual encounter with the young girl that was not in the other editions. This drawing is situated on the back cover of the book, therefore graphically and symbolically indicating an escape, at least an exit from the fictional world. So that Stephen Berstein's confident and generalizing statement about «[Gray's] satirical blend of realism and fantasy»¹⁹, relevant as it may be to such fabulative allegories as «the Start of the Axletree» or «Five Letters from an Eastern Empire», has to be re-examined when applied to «The Comedy of the White Dog». This story rather allies fantasy and realism for metafictional purposes, in order to foreground the process of its own construction, and its attendant resistance: the reader has to read the words and look at the picture, but even that does not ensure the enduring of meaning: a few «real», referential months or years can enable the story to escape, or such at least is the suggestion made by the change in the illustration pattern of the back cover of *Unlikely Stories, Mostly*.

Moreover, what Gray achieves in «The Comedy of the White Dog» is also a reappraisal of the ultimate goals of metafiction through the fantastic incursions. The dislocations which they generate, like the ontological shock which they produce in Welsh's story, turn the gap left by interpretation into the key to the understanding of them all, as is suggested by the title of Gray's collection. Anne Varty, commenting on this title, notes that «all of Gray's shorter fictions are unlikely»²⁰, thereby stressing the thematic contribution of the fantastic as a means of asserting the provisionality of the work of fiction. More important is the title's appended qualification, the adverb separated from the assertion of unlikelihood²¹ by a comma that turns it into something like a self-deprecatory afterthought. This last minute addendum – or so it is made to appear – fundamentally revisits the provisional and supernatural with... the provisional itself, which in effect creates a second degree in the revision, a sort of meta-metatextuality. What's more, Gray re-offends in the title of his second collection of stories *Ten Tales Tall and True* (1993) by

19. Stephen Berstein, *Alasdair Gray*, London: Associated University Presses, 1999, p. 17.

20. Anne Varty, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

21. One might point out that the term «unlikely» is also a conveniently non-committal cover term that can include the supernatural and uncanny as well as the realistic.

indicating on the blurb that the title is indeed false – a tall tale– because there are only nine stories in the collection. Finally, in a typical circular move, Gray, who has often been described as an academic *manqué* urges the reader – in particular the scholar – not to take those constructions seriously, by placing the grin of the dog as a constant ironical watch on our reading of the text.

What the story finally achieves is a playful formal reworking on its own final sentence which claims that «He would never again be bound by dull laws» (CWD, 36). Gray moves so far away from the dull laws of fiction-writing as to create a sort of «ghost text» that can only be recreated imaginatively by the reader. Welsh's story seems to abide by the same motto, even though his *blasé* pessimism puts the suspension inherent in the fantastic genre to literal use in order to create a picture of reality that is arrested in a non-zone. Both writers successfully re-examine our assumptions on the metafictional use of fantasy to an extent that seems to fictionalise the very sphere of the reader. Just as the white dog seemingly gets the upper hand on both the reader and the text, the un-godlike God of the not so sacred Granton Star cause might exhibit the same power. In a world that finally and meticulously spirals in on itself, who might be next on God's list is anybody's guess. The hypothetical, provisional or maybe simply unlikely suggestion that lurks under this circular conclusion to Welsh's story is certain at least to broaden the white dog's grin.