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## ALASDAIR GRAY'S *LANARK* AND (POST-?) POSTMODERNISM

This essay deals with the ambiguous relationship between Alasdair Gray's first published novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981) and Postmodernism. Although critics have generally recognized the book as a remarkable example of postmodernist work and have frequently labelled Gray a postmodernist writer, the Scottish author has always rebelled against Postmodernism and its evasiveness. I will try to demonstrate that *Lanark*'s involvement in Postmodernism runs far deeper than its author is willing to admit and that, despite his deliberate refusal, Gray himself emerges from the pages of his epic novel as a consummate prankster who installs, while rejecting, the very notion of Postmodernism.

Keywords: Lanark, postmodernism, heteropia, chronotopes, intertextuality.

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Scottish writer Alasdair Gray and Postmodernism does not seem to be an idyllic one considering that, more than once, he has publicly admitted his scepticism about Postmodernism and its techniques affirming that he has "never found a definition of postmodernism that gave [him] a distinct idea of it" (M. Axelrod 1995: 74) and, in particular, has repeatedly rejected the label postmodern regarding his first published novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981). On the one hand, a number of contemporary critics share his opinions arguing that it would be reductive to read *Lanark* exclusively through the vague and ambiguous lens of the postmodern paradigm. Among them, to name a few, Stephen Bernstein who has analyzed this "long, encyclopedic, difficult and rewarding" novel (1999: 58) by placing it within the boundaries of the Scottish tradition and by positioning its author as a writer of the contemporary Scottish School, and Gavin Miller who contends that "*Lanark* is not so much a work of post-modernism as a work opposed to modernism" (2005: 36). On the other hand, one could add that, perhaps, it may not be by chance that *Lanark* appears in Brian MacHale's seminal work *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) as a paradigmatic example of a postmodernist text as well as being cited in Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) because of the distinctive postmodern character of its metafictional and overtly parodic self-reflectivity. Since reconciling

these two contradictory claims seems to be somewhat paradoxical or, at the very least, a true postmodern enterprise, the question whether the novel *Lanark* is or is not to be read as a genuine postmodern work of art appears doomed to remain open. Can the ontological hesitancy, the interpenetration of the real and fantasy and the metafictional devices displayed throughout its 561 pages be read as the most evident proofs of its affiliation to postmodern fiction or, on the contrary, are all the literary devices and strategies used with amazing agility by Gray 'just' the complex and eccentric result of his original creativity which has nothing to do with all the issues and concerns commonly denominated 'postmodern'?

Fully aware of the fact that it is in all actuality highly impossible to have the final say in the matter, thus making Colin Manlove's words sound true: "Gray's feeling for life complexity [...] win over any one philosophy" (1994: 121) but, at the same time, still conscious of our right as readers/interpreters to take an active part in the process of reading and meaning-making and, by doing so, escape the author's intentions, I believe that *Lanark* can be read as a striking example of a postmodernist work which contains most of all the typical ingredients of postmodernist writing.

#### THE QUESTIONING OF ANY SENSE OF STABILITY

Postmodernism is usually defined in terms of its ontological indeterminacy. Although there are many possible constructions of Postmodernism, the most immediately apparent feature of postmodernist writing is its ontological heterogeneity, that is the theoretical description of a plurality of universes or worlds which are placed in conflict, violating their boundaries. Actually, the phantasmagoric spaces of *Lanark* are marked by a strong ontological instability. The very complex narrative structure the text displays corresponds, in fact, to an even more complex and ungraspably ontological structure in which a variety of bizarre worlds co-exist. As the subtitle – *A Life in four Books* – reads, the novel is divided into four Books arranged out of order in a series that runs three, one, two, four, deliberately disregarding the logical, chronological and spatial sequences. By this teaser of an opening, which is foregrounded in the Table of Contents, it becomes clear that Gray makes playful use of postmodern traps and devices that are overtly intended to seduce the reader. The scrambled order of the Books immediately challenges both traditional ways of reading and traditional ideas of narrative construction. In particular, the parodic character of this unexpected ordering has a double effect on readers: it works to involve them in a participatory hermeneutic activity and, at the same time, it works to distance them activating their awareness. Gray, in either cases, forces the reader from the very beginning to look at the text with suspicion and demands his/her active response.

These are both central preoccupations of postmodernist writing and unmistakable symptoms of the postmodernist attitude. Moreover, the different worlds the four Books depict and which Lanark, the eponymous hero<sup>1</sup>, inhabits are not just distinct from each other but they belong to opposite areas of existence altogether. What holds the the four Books together, as Marie Odile Pittin argues, is a “complex network of cross-references, be they thematic, structural or formal” (1996: 199). While Book One and Book Two, which occupy the central part of the novel, the so-called Glasgow section, are clearly set in the Scottish city of Glasgow and written in a relatively realistic mode, the fantastic and ambiguous world(s) of the so-called Unthank section, which appears in Book Three and Book Four – that open and close the novel, respectively – is more problematic to deal with and impossible to rationalise.

It is difficult to say whether Gray really takes great pains to set them discretely apart from each other and, as a consequence, the novel turns out to be at once highly postmodern and profoundly realist. Indeed, precisely this ontological disorder, or to put it differently, the fact that there is no clear separation between realism and fantasy, is already enough to have one of the basic postmodern ingredients, that is the quarrel between them. Moreover, a disturbing Prologue, which despite its name Gray perversely locates between Book Three and Book One, moves itself from realism to fantasy thus contributing to feed this ambivalent blending of reality and fantasy. Furthermore, a no less disturbing Interlude, which presents itself as an interpretation of the realistic narrative, and a strange Epilogue, which flaunts its own condition of artifice, contribute to question any sense of stability. One of the immediate implications of this postmodern ambiguity is that *Lanark* undermines the reader's belief in an objective reality and problematizes the entirely textual world. Given the extremely provisional nature of the novel, the reader seems left with but two alternatives: getting so lost and confused to give up the reading in despair, or entering courageously into the novel. In the latter case, there is no doubt that the engagement with the text will reveal itself as a tricky and demanding experience and, at the same time, an extremely pleasurable and intriguing one. Since *Lanark*, in my view, cannot be read as anything but postmodern (as is often the case with postmodern texts), readers can choose to make as much or as little of it. I simply recommend that they make the most of it.

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<sup>1</sup> It would be better to say Lanark/Duncan Thaw since Gray's novel has a protagonist (Lanark) whose identity is split in two characters existing within different time zones. One of them (Duncan Thaw or simply Thaw) engages with the real world of Glasgow while the other (Lanark) engages with the fantastic world of Unthank. Although the narrative is rather ambiguous about their interrelationship, if we take for granted Thaw's suicide at the end of Book Two, we can consider Thaw as the reincarnation of Lanark. (A. Fokkema 1991: 159).

## BETWEEN FANTASY AND THE REAL

Though critics have provided a number of different interpretations in order to offer convincing explanations of the disturbing fictional spaces that constitute the amnesiac world of Unthank and its strange subworlds (that is the highly technological space of the Institute, the Intercalendrical Time Zone and Provan) what does emerge from their criticism is the hybrid nature of these spaces. They can belong to the surrealist realm as well as to the dystopian realm, to fantasy as well as to science-fiction. They might also refer to a deeply disturbing nightmare, to a vision of life after death or to a modern vision of hell, to an allegory on modern society as well as to its satire. Whatever their ontological *status* is, what seems relevant is that these fantastic worlds are juxtaposed to the realistic one. Despite their degree of incompatibility and their different ontological levels, the gloomy world(s) of Unthank and the world of Glasgow are connected to each other so that there is a correspondence between them in a paradoxical space governed by alternative systems of logic that can be defined as postmodern. In other words, violating the ontological boundaries Gray has constructed (we do not know whether consciously or not) what Brian MacHale and Umberto Eco call a 'zone', that is a particular example of Michel Foucault's notion of the heterotopian space<sup>2</sup>, the one which violates the law of the excluded middle, and a prototypical postmodern impossible space where worlds of incompatible structure co-exist. The Intercalendrical Time Zone, according to MacHale, represents a paradigmatic example of a 'zone' because it is a space of paradox completely governed by contradictions. He goes further to affirm that in the case of *Lanark* only the Intercalendrical area constitutes a 'zone' (1987: 44). Yet, if the fictional space of the novel is considered as a whole, one cannot but agree with Luis De Juan Hatchar who convincingly argues that the novel *Lanark* can be defined as a 'zone' due to its pervasive ontological multiplicity (2002: 110). The relationship between the two juxtaposed worlds of Glasgow and of Unthank, in fact, is characterized by a feeling of discontinuity and a strong ontological incompatibility. It is interesting to note that it is Lanark the one who makes possible the dialogic relationship between the darkened world(s) of Unthank and the realistic one of Glasgow; it is Lanark the one who leaps into another world and, in so doing, forces on the reader the possibility of believing in a variety of other worlds. The uncomfortably ambiguous relationship that links Lanark, the

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from the Greek, heterotopia literally means other (*heteros*) places/spaces (*topos*). In a lecture given in 1967, Michel Foucault appropriated this word in order to describe "spaces of difference", i. e. spaces that disturb or unsettle. According to the French philosopher, "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible". (1970: xviii). Foucault's concept of heterotopia has also gained wide currency in postmodern studies to describe the coexistence of multiple and incompatible sites/worlds where contradiction is intensely experienced.

protagonist of Book One and Book Two, to Duncan Thaw, the central character of Book Three and Book Four, leads to further complicate the issue. In this regard, Cairns Craig offers an interesting explanation for the relationship between them. Since the significance of Lanark narrative is unknowable until it is fulfilled and completed by Thaw narrative and vice-versa (Lanark's narrative preceding Thaw's), Craig defines the two characters "hypotypes of one another", that is empty types of one another (1999: 182). Throughout the novel the connections between the two stories are left unexplained and, as a result, the reader is given two highly interrelated and no less problematic narratives which contaminate each other. Notwithstanding this, it would be reductive, as Glyn White aptly affirms, to confine such metatextual readings to allegorical correspondences since "[they] operate between the two main narratives to create perspectives and contexts for each other" (2005: 167). The brief Interlude which strangely appears before Book Two, and whose declared role is that of reminding the readers "that Thaw story exists within the hull of Lanark" (A. Gray 1981: 219), simply adds to complicating rather than solving the reading experience and the reader's understanding of the relationship between the two characters and their narratives. In the Interlude Alasdair Gray uses the typically postmodern metafictional device of foregrounding the literary conventions in order to deliberately misleading the reader by blurring the boundaries between fiction and real life and directly addressing his readers. Despite the subtitle, *A Life in Four Books*, suggesting that the novel deals with only one character and narrates its story through four intricately interwoven Books, it is indeed far from clear whether the two heroes are the same person. This seems to leave room for different readings and at least for two questions: is Lanark, the amnesiac inhabitant of Unthank who suffers from a grotesque skin disease, the reincarnation of Thaw, the misunderstood young artist living in Glasgow and who suffers from asthma and eczema? Are Lanark's adventures the product of Thaw's mental breakdown and hallucinations? The latter hypothesis is sustained by Douglas Gifford who argues that the Unthank section results from Thaw's tormented psyche (1987: 111). Nevertheless, other critics have demonstrated the groundlessness of this supposition arguing that the text itself allows us to consider the two characters as one (Lanark being Thaw in the afterlife) existing within different time zones. For Penny Smith "[...] the text as a whole strains against the idea that the fantastic characterization of Lanark is a hallucination resulting from Thaw's mental breakdown" (1995: 117).

It is widely acknowledged that Postmodernism disturbs and problematizes the humanist certainties about the unitary nature of the Self. By creating Lanark/Thaw as a character with a split subjectivity and a mobile identity Gray has, in fact, challenged in a very postmodern way the humanist assumption of a unified and firmly rooted Self. Not only is Lanark a character without a fixed identity but he also wanders about his own existence because he cannot use his memory to try to make sense of the past as he himself admits: "I'm wandering about my past,

[...] I can't remember" (A. Gray 1981: 103) and then again, a few lines after: "I'm trying to find out about my past" (A. Gray 1981: 103). The fact that he is not confident of his ability to know his past with any certainty and, by implication, is incapable of extending his sovereignty to the events of his past life, are (once again) but manifest traces of his postmodern subjectivity. The Oracle (who occupies the literary space of the Prologue and the hinge between the Lanark and Thaw narratives) is the one who should help Lanark overcome his lack of memory by shedding light on the interrelationship between him and Thaw, yet his words simply cast shadows thus contributing to making it more opaque and unclear. The Oracle's metanarrative *status* is indeed extremely problematic because although he constitutes the realistic narrative of Book One and Book Two – paradoxically presenting them both as a continuation of and at the same time origin to Book Three – he himself is a product of fantasy whose tale soon turns out to be a non-objective and unreliable one. His conflictive account does not unlock the truth about Lanark's past and Thaw's life. Rather, the Oracle becomes a site of dispute. After listening to the Oracle's statements, Lanark and Rima (the girl he is in love with) remarkably have two different and contradictory versions of the 'same' story, as Rima herself firmly recognizes: "We must have been listening to different oracles" (A. Gray 1981: 357). What clearly emerges from her words is that the issue at stake is the existence of objective truth. It is needless to say that the refusal to express a single meaning and the process of negotiating contradictions are concepts at the very heart of Postmodernism and its techniques. It is significant to state that both Lanark and the reader are in search of the final meaning, that is of unity. In particular, the former is in search of subjective unity whereas the latter is in search of narrative unity but, symptomatically enough, neither of them will attain wholeness. Gray's position is fully in line with the postmodern skepticism regarding universal truths and totalizing discourses by preventing his readers, as well as his characters, from reaching any sense of linear development, and thus contesting the very possibility of expressing single, monolithic perspectives.

#### UNDERMINING THE TEMPORAL DIMENSION: THE POSTMODERN CHRONOTOPES

The postmodernist aversion to disciplinary and methodological coherence can also be found in the text's resistance to univocal interpretations and in its offering a variety of contrasting readings susceptible of interpretative significance in the name of (postmodern) multiplicity. Following Aleid Fokkema, who in her semiotic analysis of postmodern characters points out that the problem whether Lanark and Thaw are continuous signs for the same interpretant "is eventually irrelevant: raising the question is more pertinent to the novel than answering it" (1991: 158),

and also following George Donaldson and Alison Lee, who suggest to examine above all what effects the fractured *fabula* of Lanark/Thaw might create for the reader (1995: 157), I cannot but concede that the whole fictional universe of *Lanark* bewilders readers leaving them in a state of hesitancy. Like Lanark who is in search for his past and delves into his life before Unthank in the hope that it will restore to him a feeling of coherence, the reader too tries to make sense of the text he/she is reading. While actually accompanying Lanark's adventures and travelling with him through a variety of spaces (by sea, air and even through open mouth on the ground...), the reader himself/herself takes a journey through the prism of Postmodernism which reaches its climax when the reader enters the Epilogue Room with the protagonist. So cunning are the postmodern strategies and devices used by Gray that readers, like characters, find themselves puzzled, immersed in a dense kafkaesque atmosphere of ambivalence, plunged into a truly postmodern network of cross references, paradoxes, parallelisms and allusions. What inevitably and above all puts the reader under a certain strain is the disrupted and fragmented nature of the narrative which freely moves backwards and forwards.

Gray's use of the postmodern chronotopes, his purposeful violation of traditional fixed concepts of time and space yields an increased indeterminacy to *Lanark*. The analeptic structure of the novel takes the reader backwards in time but instead of helping unfold the story it prevents him/her from a smooth and a linear reading and understanding of the text. This is due to the fact that Gray's treatment of time goes well beyond the simple confrontation of past, present and future. It also goes well beyond the simple use of proleptic anticipations and analeptic returns in order to create disturbing chronologies that are always challenging for readers to comprehend. The non-chronological structuring of the novel and the disturbing way in which Gray handles the question of time are undeniably mirrored in the complexity of the narrative. The best example of this intricate narrative manipulation of chronology is provided on two different occasions by Rima's words. The first time is when she unconsciously refers to Thaw's suicide well before both Lanark and the reader are made aware of it by the Oracle's account: "Oh! I know you Thaw, I know all about you, the hysterical child, the eager adolescent, the mad rapist [...]" (A. Gray 1981: 88). Lanark, however, cannot understand the real meaning of her words and, in fact, he answers her: "You don't know me. I am not called Thaw. I've been none of these things" (A. Gray 1981: 88). Unconsciously again, some pages later, Rima describes the scene of the suicide saying: "Yes, I dreamed a lot of strange things in that armour. You were called Thaw, or Coulter, and we stood on a bridge at night with the moon above us [...]. You wanted to kill me I don't remember the rest" (A. Gray 1981: 103). In both cases, completely shattering our traditional concept of time, Gray plays with linear time. Paradoxically, the events narrated by Rima simultaneously move forwards (anticipating what has to come in the fiction) and backwards (recollecting Lanark's past) thus feeding the reader's confusion and

suspicion. The temporal instability that affects the text also works on another level, affecting the various worlds of the novel: it affects both “the mode of existence of the text and the mode of existence of the world [which] it projects” (B. MacHale 1987: 10).

Not only does Gray use different time scales for the different fictional worlds of the novel but he also makes his characters experience strange distortions of time (and space) even when they inhabit only one world. For instance, in the Intercalendrical Time Zone, a highly disquieting space, the ontological hesitancy is underscored by a strong temporal uncertainty so that time there is completely unpredictable and “a month is as meaningless [...] as a minute or a century” (A. Gray 1981: 374). Both Lanark and Rima experience a feeling of existential anxiety due to this undermining of the familiar temporal dimension and they are subjected to such a high degree of confusion that Rima remarks: “You [Lanark] were away for hours –ages it seemed to me. You have no sense of time. None at all” (A. Gray 1981: 425).

The question of non-linear time/temporal displacement also problematises the real itself in a very postmodernist way, that is by calling into question scientific laws that govern the temporality. Looking at the moon, for example, the two characters feel surprised that the speed of time can no longer be conceived in absolute and objective terms: “a glow appeared in the misty horizon to their left and a globe of yellow light slid up into the sky from behind a jagged black mountain. Rima said, ‘The moon!’ ‘It can’t be the moon. It’s going too fast.’ [...] A little later [...] it rose again behind the mountain on the left” (A. Gray 1981: 386). Another example of the impossibility in the Intercalendrical Zone of reaching a faithful apprehension of reality is the scene in which Lanark and Rima come across a tall blond girl crying. Rima immediately understands that the girl is nobody else but herself in the past: “A tall blonde girl, wearing a black coat and a knapsack, squatted on the road with her hands over her face. Rima whispered: ‘Is it me?’. Lanark nodded, went to the girl and knelt besides her. Rima gave a little hysterical giggle. ‘Aren’t you forgetting? You’ve done that already’. But the grief of the girl before him made him ignore the one behind. He held her shoulders and said urgently, ‘I’m here, Rima! It’s all right. I’m here!’. The upright Rima walked past him, saying coldly, ‘Stop living in the past!’” (A. Gray 1981: 378). This ambiguous and dynamic approach towards the past inevitably leaves the reader perplexed, disoriented and even at a loss. Although, already before reaching the Epilogue, the readers have experienced Gray’s extremely imaginative writing and its offering no firmer answers nor a reassuring sense of wholeness, only when they enter the Epilogue Room with its typographical extravagance<sup>3</sup> can they experience its most challenging and postmodern aspects.

<sup>3</sup> Glyn White has analysed the extravagance but also the power of the graphic figures and devices of *Lanark* in his book *Reading the Graphic Surface. The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction*, 2005.



## THE EPILOGUE OR THE REALM OF TEXTUALITY

Like the Prologue and the Interlude, unnaturally placed, the Epilogue (which is placed four chapters before the end of the novel), must be seen as Gray's most extreme labyrinthical exploration and a thought-provoking postmodern space where paradoxes, tensions and contradictions abound. Above all, it must be considered an excellent example of postmodern metafiction which calls attention to its *status* as a verbally constructed artifact. It is in the abnormal space of the Epilogue Room, "a room of spatial and temporal displacement" (B. Witschi 1991: 86), that the most disturbing event occurs: notably, the impossible encounter between Lanark and his (fictional) author, Nastler. Metalepsis is of course a widely used postmodern device which thanks to a transgression of narrative levels makes characters, authors and readers move across the boundary of the fictional world causing a violent rupture that definitely undermines the narrative's illusions. Yet, admittedly, Nastler himself (or should we not say Gray?) is a "damned conjuror" (A. Gray 1981: 484) and a "joker" (A. Gray 1981: 478) who loves creating illusions and playing tricks in order to deceive both his fictional character/reader (Lanark) and the flesh and blood reader (us) who, in fact, soon discover that "[He'/We']ll get nothing out of him" (A. Gray 1981: 478). As a result, readers find themselves entrapped in the Epilogue Room which turns out to be the room of illusions, nothing but the realm of textuality made of "Print [...] of tiny marks marching in neat lines, like armies of insects, across pages and pages and pages of white paper" (A. Gray 1981: 485) inhabited by characters who, nevertheless, are "[...] real, real, real people!" (A. Gray 1981: 498), where "[...] there's too much intoxication" (A. Gray 1981: 480) so that the reader's position is not safe at all. In other words, readers are forced to come to terms with the narcissistic narrative<sup>4</sup> the Epilogue displays which simultaneously asserts and undermines fictional conventions (while Lanark is forced to come to terms with its wordy *status*/linguistic identity) and whose true aim is to heighten the fictionality of the narrative itself and to underscore the process of textualisation. In this pseudo-chapter Gray shows the endless process of the (de)construction of the novel, (also illustrated by Nastler's statement when he says: "[...] I continually plunge my beak into my rotten liver and swallow and excrete it. But it grows again. Creation festers in me". A. Gray 1981: 481) or, in Patricia Waugh's words, the endless process of "[...] the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion" (1992: 6). Thus, the following

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon calls narcissistic (metafictional and self-reflective) narrative a self-conscious narrative which alludes to its own production and "[...] includes within itself its own first contextual reading". Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, New York, Methuen, 1984, p. 6.

typically postmodern – and potentially endless – *mise en abyme* is an example of the circular structure of the Epilogue and a very disturbing moment for the reader:

“The critics will accuse me [Nastler] of self indulgence but I don’t care. With a reckless gesture he [Nastler] handed Lanark a paper from the bed. It was covered with childish handwriting and many words were scored out or inserted with little arrows. Much of it seemed to be dialogue but Lanark’s eye was caught by a sentence in italics which said: *Much of it seemed to be dialogue but Lanark’s eyes was caught by a sentence in italics which said:* Lanark gave the paper back asking, ‘What’s that supposed to prove?’ ‘I’m your author’” (A. Gray 1981: 481).

Gray is not only ironic about the metafictional nature of his Epilogue but he also parodies the very concept of the authoritative truth and the authorial power whose traditional omniscient viewpoint now becomes avowedly limited and provisional. For instance, Nastler’s loss of control and authority over his text and his own character emerges from his words to Lanark: “I’m working on it [on the Epilogue] here, just now, in this conversation. But you have had to reach this room by passing several chapters I haven’t clearly imagined yet” (A. Gray 1981: 483). Both irony and parody are fundamental concepts within the post-modern rubric in the service of intertextuality whose main aim is based on the fundamental opposition of providing and simultaneously undermining context and boundaries.

The Epilogue is overwhelmed by unreliable and highly disturbing intertextual references which appear throughout the Index of Plagiarisms, a series of thirteen footnotes, some independent lines or marginalia and the fully ironic headings at the top of each page that supply the Epilogue itself. Despite its name, in the Index of Plagiarisms Gray publicly recognizes (or, at least, it is what he apparently seems to do) all the literary sources which have influenced the creation of *Lanark*. On the part of the reader, he/she cannot but find himself/herself caught up in an endless list/web of the most disparate names, that is a kind of summary of the great tradition: from James Joyce and Goethe to Edgar Allan Poe through Pope, James Kelman and Norman McCaig, just to name a few. The problematizing of the nature of reference becomes even too evident in the playful absurd cross-entries between Carl Jung, Walt Disney and...God (!). An Intruder, also, makes his appearance with his ludicrous comments about a no less disparate range of themes. In the footnote 7, for instance, the Intruder writes: “This remark is too ludicrous to require comment here [*sic!*]” (A. Gray 1981: 492), whereas in the footnote 8 he affirms that “A possible explanation” of the fact that the Thaw and Lanark sections are independent “is that the author thinks a heavy book will make a bigger splash than two light ones [*sic!*]” (A. Gray 1981: 493). All these alternative and complementary narratives contribute to the irreverent uncrowning of the authority and to the loss of all sense of origin through Gray’s endless free play of the parodic reworking of the past, of its textual incorporation. In other

words, the Epilogue is a *simulacrum*<sup>5</sup>: it represents the complex but no less ironic dialogue between past and present, “a monstrous set of intertwined texts and a playful mixture of old and new styles [...] of authentic and apocryphal references” (C. Manfredi 2009: 26) which foregrounds the conflict between truth and lies and which contests the concept of hierarchized, closed systems. Its heavily camouflage and its irreducible plurality/poliphony makes it a postmodernist example of what Umberto Eco has defined as an “opera aperta”<sup>6</sup>, a notion not far from the Barthean idea of the “writerly text”<sup>7</sup> which opens the text up to the multi-path interpretations of readers who generate the fiction.

So intricate and unambiguously postmodernist is the Epilogue’s construction that it could be assumed that this chapter alone would suffice to define *Lanark* a postmodernist artifact. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the complexities arising from both the structure and the content of the entire novel i. e. its tendency to vacillate between the fictional realms of realism and fantasy along with its interrogations of conventional constructions of subjectivity; the parodic decentering of the author together with the irreverence for the past; the abandoning of the reader in a forest of contradictions; the methodically dismantling of univocal meaning..., unmistakably move in the direction of the most audacious expressions of Postmodernism, even if to establish *Lanark*’s postmodernism does not automatically make Gray a member of the club. It must also be recognized that in Postmodernism irony is often a “[...] part of a larger parodic gesture with political intent” (L. Hutcheon 1989: 36) and, accordingly, an important political aspect of the novel regards its Scottishness and the Scottish literary tradition but such an analysis is not among my aims. What deserves attention here is that despite Gray’s skepticism strains against Postmodernism, *Lanark* is no doubt a genuine, brilliant postmodern artifact. “That’s an incredible amount of freedom[!]” (A. Gray 1981: 482) on the part of the reader, Alasdair Gray may reproachfully complain, but does he not know that his survival as an author depends on readers who also have the last word? Without them, his words “[...] are lifeless. How can

<sup>5</sup> The theory of the *simulacrum* by the French critic Jean Baudrillard refers to the so-called “loss of the real”. Baudrillard suggests that in the postmodern world the real has been replaced by simulations of reality making problematic the idea of origin, truth, reference and creative impulse. Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulation” in Mark Poster (Ed.), *Selected Writings*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988, pp. 166-84.

<sup>6</sup> The poststructuralist Italian critic Umberto Eco in his work entitled *Opera Aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (1962) puts strong emphasis on the interactive process between text and reader and on the active role of the latter in producing meaning. His idea of the openness of the work of art (*opera aperta*) refers to the fundamental ambiguity, to the polysemy inherent in any cultural text.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes’s idea of the “writerly” or “scriptible texts” assigns the reader a position of control in the construction of the meaning of a literary text. According to Barthes, the reader is the true “writer” of a text, the one who is able to uncover the multiplicity of its hidden cultural and ideological codes. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975).

they reproduce the movement and the noises of the battle of Borodino, the white whale ramming the ship, the fallen angels on the flaming lake?” (A. Gray 1981: 485). How, I wonder, can they reproduce Lanark’s postmodern adventures?

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