Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* as an Act of Literary Resistance

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Abstract

This paper examines the sheer variety of creative roles that the contemporary Scottish iconoclastic writer Alasdair Gray assumes in his works of fiction, discussing the external manifestations of his multifaceted talents in action as well as considering the conveyed effect. Widely regarded as the leading figure of the 1980s Scottish literary renaissance and the founding father of Scottish postmodern fiction, Gray emerged as a major creative artist with the publication of his influential novel Lanark: A Life in Four Books *(1981), which epitomises his experimental approach to literary production and consumption.*

Gray figures in Lanark *not only as the author of the text and the creator of the accompanying original illustrations, he also makes a cameo appearance as the morose and mean writer of the work-in-progress, who engages in an intellectual discussion with his protagonist concerning the plot of the very novel. Under the alias of Sidney Workman, Gray also fulfils the task of the literary critic in annotating the metafictional chapter of Lanark with discursive footnotes and embedding in it an index of earlier authors and texts that have been supposedly plagiarised in the novel under scrutiny.*

Gray succeeds in utilising the characteristically protean quality of the postmodern age for aesthetic purposes of his own making, challenging by the means of the mutually reinforcing form and content of his work our assumptions about the world as we know it.

Keywords: Scottish literature; metafiction; postmodernism

Even though Alasdair Gray expressed his discomfort about being reduced to limiting labels, it has become a critical commonplace to introduce him as a pioneering Scottish postmodern writer. His novelistic masterpiece, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), significantly contributed to galvanising the 1980s Scottish literary renaissance, from which there emerged a host of innovative authors soon to achieve international reputation. Alasdair Gray qualifies as a true polymath: he has tried his hand at a range of literary genres and forms, furnished all his books with his own unmistakably original design and decorations and also painted vast murals commissioned for several public sites in his native Glasgow. Ever since his outstanding literary debut with *Lanark*, Gray has been confirming his position as an incorrigible iconoclast keen on startling his readers and critics out of their asinine complacency. Gray likes to take control over all aspects of the book production process, including tasks that writers do not often deem necessarily integral to their work and leave to other professionals in the trade, such as illustrations, front and back matter and typesetting of the book. This comprehensive approach based on Gray's versatility enables him to appeal to the

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audience on multiple mutually reinforcing levels and to convey a message of extraordinary coherence and strength.

Gray's groundbreaking *Lanark* is a flamboyant exercise in the postmodern literary technique and at the same time a sympathetic exploration of flawed humanity. This voluminous novel of epic resonance comprises four books arranged out of their chronological sequence because, as the author suggests, he wanted the entire book "to be read in one order but eventually thought of in another" (Gray 2007: 483). Two main story lines are being developed, on the first impression seemingly unrelated, yet on closer observation ingeniously interlocked. One story involves a deeply troubled teenager, Duncan Thaw, obsessively pursuing a fulfilment of his artistic vision in a realistic setting of post-World War II Glasgow. Frustrated in his efforts, Thaw takes his own life only to be reincarnated as Lanark, the protagonist of the other story, which is set in the dystopian city of Unthank and follows Lanark's symbolically endowed search for sunlight. The plot does not evolve in a linear fashion and is further complicated by additional framing devices, stories within stories and metafictional digressions. Beat Witschi (1991: 85) points out that in contriving such a multi-layered narrative, "Gray raises questions about the hierarchy and mode of existence of his various worlds. . . Thus it is virtually impossible for the reader . . . to decide who speaks about whom?, and when?, in which world?, and with what authority?" Undermining the notions of hierarchy and authority on the level of form emphasises the implications of the book on the level of content, which is where a strong distrust of official discourse and externally imposed authority are conveyed.

Gray's work, however, neither champions individualism, nor does it celebrate anarchy, quite the contrary, it embraces humanistic ideals and envisions a cooperative society that would balance the demands of the community and the desires of the individual. Gray speaks about "a sense of justice", which he believes is impeded by "institutional dogma and criteria". Institutions "have been made by people for the good of people," Gray contends, "but when we see them working to increase dirt, poverty, pain, and death, then they have obviously gone wrong" (Axelrod 1995: 108). Alasdair Gray does not presume to offer practical solutions for rectifying social wrongs, yet his art wholeheartedly supports what David Couzens Hoy (2005: 2) terms "critical resistance" and specifies "as the emancipatory resistance to domination". Hoy (2005: 6–8) discusses three forms of resistance—political, social and ethical—while maintaining that resistance does not necessarily imply clear goals and ideological programmes and that any active acknowledgement of one's unfreedom ultimately qualifies as an act of resistance. Considering Alasdair Gray's critical attitude to institutional hegemony manifested in his work, another form of active criticism could be added to Hoy's taxonomy: literary resistance. Literary resistance in a broad sense seems to be the default mode of Gray's writing and shows on the interwoven levels of form and subject matter as well as in small details, such as Gray's assuming the roles of the illustrator and typesetter besides that of the author of his work.

A sense of literary self-consciousness pervades much of *Lanark* but becomes particularly relevant in the epilogue, which, contrary to conventional expectations, happens to be inserted about three quarters throughout the book rather than at its end. Here the protagonist confronts his author in an uneasy conversation revolving around the protagonist's preference as to the ending of his story, which proves to be irreconcilable with his author's aesthetic intentions. The "conjuror", as the author figure calls himself, flatly announces that he "plans to kill everyone" and proceeds to elaborate on his perceptions, "display erudition" and "utter some fine sentiments" (Gray 2007: 483–496). The conjuror as presented in the epilogue parodies the traditional concept of an omnipotent author who speaks through an omniscient narrator, a technique which has now been rendered obsolete. Lanark's author admits that he no longer puts himself on par with God with respect to the power that he can exercise over his characters and shows genuine surprise at certain details in his character's life of which he claims no knowledge. A paradoxical situation ensues when the conjuror interrogates his protagonist to learn about the portions of Lanark's story which he has not yet written, for he is working on the epilogue as he speaks with Lanark, and the manuscript of the novel is still incomplete.

The epilogue of *Lanark* brilliantly exemplifies the major points of Roland Barthes's (1977: 148) influential essay "The Death of the Author", which turns on the proposition that the power and privilege formerly enjoyed by the author ought to be ceded to the reader in the interest of literature. Barthes (1977: 145) denies to the contemporary author any existence beyond the text: "the modern scriptor," he suggests, "is born simultaneously with the text . . . and every text is eternally written *here and now*". Hence, the knowledge and perspective of Lanark's creator is as limited as that of Lanark himself, and by implication, Lanark's author comes to be stripped of any pretensions on creating the traditional grand narrative, for he has no complete vision, no coherent worldview to pass on to posterity. Accordingly, Barthes (1977: 146) asserts that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author–God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and crash". He further elaborates:

> Literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*) by refusing to assign a "secret", an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law (Barthes 1977: 147).

In the absence of the grand narrative and a single authoritative voice, a significant share of responsibility in the process of making the novel shifts to the reader, who is encouraged to critical thinking rather than merely following and enacting the wor(l)d of the Author–God.

Besides writing himself into the epilogue in the persona of the conjuror, Gray incorporates in *Lanark* a substantial and elaborate body of seemingly serious

scholarly criticism of the novel in progress. It consists of a battery of discursive footnotes and extended marginalia in the form of an "Index of Plagiarisms", where three distinct types of supposed "literary theft" occurring in the novel are defined and the original authors are alphabetically listed (Gray 2007: 485). On closer examination, the device turns out at least in part tongue-in-cheek. Among plausible pieces of critique, there appears for instance the note: "This remark is too ludicrous to require comment here"; and in the plagiarism index there is the entry: "EMERSON, RALPH WALDO. Ralph Waldo Emerson has not been plagiarised" (Gray 2007: 488–492). The epilogue ends anticlimactically with one last footnote containing Gray's (2007: 499) acknowledgements of those who assisted in various ways with the production of the book, including the typesetters at Kingsport Press of Kingsport, Tennessee. Given the notorious unreliability of Gray's narrators, it does not surprise that *Lanark* does not conclude in universal carnage, as the conjurer conceived it would, but on a more hopeful note. Lanark does learn that he will die the next day, yet he forgets about it immediately and concludes the book in peaceful tranquillity, simply "glad to see the light in the sky" (Gray 2007: 560).

In the epilogue and elsewhere, Gray's idiosyncratic style involves occasional comic relief, with the author using anarchic humour as yet another form of literary resistance against the dominant discourse, while his characters engage in what Hoy categorises as political, social and ethical modes of resistance. Lanark's major act of political resistance consists in his effort to thwart fictional world powers from closing a destructive pact, and although he fails to do this, by attempting it at least he accomplishes an action of outstanding human value. Lanark does not view himself as a heroic figure, and neither does the narrator, who bluntly describes him as "a slightly worried, ordinary old man", but it is precisely this lack of heroic mood that renders Lanark's achievement significant (Gray 2007: 560). Hoy (2005: 7) delineates one particular form of social resistance as "opposition to the ways that institutions shape individuals", which covers a substantial part of the story of Lanark's alter ego, Duncan Thaw. Thaw struggles with the institutional restraints of the art college that he attends on a bursary and that he despises for wasting his admitted talent on unambitious examination tasks focused on commercial design. After being dismissed from the college without degree, Thaw comes into conflict with institutionalised religion, whose representatives do not welcome Thaw's boldly original interpretation of the Creation painted by him in a church mural. "The paradigm for ethical resistance is such that ethical resistance will inevitably fail," Hoy (2005: 8) echoes Derrida and adds, "the ultimate resistance is in the face of death". Ethical resistance applies to both Lanark and Thaw but is best illustrated in Lanark's response to the news of his impending demise in the conclusion of the novel: he ignores the message, thus asserting his ethical superiority over death.

More than three decades after it was first published, *Lanark* does not cease to delight, challenge and critically resist, in the sense that Hoy ascribes to the phrase:

> Resistance is both an activity and an attitude. It is the activity of refusal. It is also an attitude that refuses to give in to resignation. . . . Unlike resignation, resistance can lead to hope—that is, to an openness to the indefinite possibility that things could be different, even if one does not know exactly how (Hoy 2005: 9–10).

Lanark concludes in a characteristically postmodern open-endedness but on a hopeful note, which is, in the last analysis, enabled exactly by the novel's lack of binding ending. Alasdair Gray utilises the uncertainties characteristic of the postmodern era and encourages a re-thinking and re-evaluation of seemingly stable concepts such as truth, reality and authority. Admittedly, none of the experimental techniques that he employs in his writing constitute innovations in themselves. Gray's creative uniqueness lies rather in an eclectic synthesis of pre-existing elements and their clever appropriation to purposes and ends solely of his own making. The landscape of his fiction is marked by metafictional diversions, multiple narrative layers and typographical eccentricities, but permanently underlying there is humour, compassion and a deep commitment to humanity. Ultimately, his writing enacts his often-repeated maxim promoting ethical resistance and fostering hope, which has been engraved among other notable quotations in the new building of the Scottish Parliament opened in 2004: "Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation."

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