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CAUGHT IN THE LABYRINTH OF INTERPRETATION. THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY
 IN A *PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN* AND *LANARK*

Abstract

This paper sets out to make a comparative study between James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, analysing the way in which the narrative structure in the two novels is used to organize the strategy for the delineation of the main characters. Thematically, both novels deal with artists' inner struggle to shape their identity and dwell upon a series of similarities such as the motifs of transformation and flight or the water symbolism. Although the two novels belong to different literary backgrounds, they both try to resist a coherent reading usually based on the realist convention of the well-organized plot, chronological sequence and omniscient narrator. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the way in which the same conventions are handled in each of the two novels and the extent to which the undermining of these conventions enfeebles the reader's authority in the process of reconstructing the meaning of the text.

Keywords: James Joyce, Lanark, quest, labyrinth, convention

Written at the opposite ends of a sixty-five year time span, the two novels under scrutiny share the same wide ranging concerns on the theme of the artist but are also linked by a fine network of intertextual and metatextual relations. In the captivating addendum to *Lanark*, Gray talks about the delineation of one of his main characters as a “portrait of the artist as a frustrated young Glaswegian” pointing out where the recent creation moves away from his predecessor, as he wanted his artist to end tragically. The postmodernist label, attached to *Lanark*, despite the fact that Gray “distances himself from the application of the generic term ‘postmodernism’ to his own writing”(Miller, 2005:116), might persuade one to read Gray’s novel as a descendant of Joyce’s, were it not for Brian McHale’s concept of *reverse-genealogy*, “a powerful tool for reimagining precursor works in light of the postmodern present” (McHale, 2014:10), inspired by Borges’s conclusions on Kafka and his predecessors: “Each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future” (qtd in *ibidem*). Charles Jenks considered “this attitude to the past, more like Renaissance mixing than Modernist collage, implies the historical continuum, which is so essential to the postmodern vision.” We can “read the present in the past as much as the past in the present, as if history proceeded by a gradual evolution of permanent forms, rather than a succession of revolutionary styles, each one of which obliterates its predecessors”(Jenks, qtd in Doherty, 2014:288-289).

Joyce’s novel was published in 1916, on the background of a disillusioned and cynical world placed under the devastating influence of World War I. As the novel was written between 1904 and 1914, it does not illustrate the insecurity and incoherence of life that the post war modernist novelists

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tried to depict, but the modernist tendencies were, however, there, in the bud, as Brian McHale identifies year 1910, the year when human character changed, according to Virginia Woolf, as the onset of modernism. According to him, “nineteen twenty-two”, when *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were published, “was something like high water-mark of literary modernism” (McHale, 2015:3) but when it comes to postmodernism things are not that clear as “the transition to postmodernism, like the earlier transition to modernism, is a process, not a punctual event”(McHale, 2014:26). Written as a life in four books, *Lanark* (1981), is also the result of a long process that began in the mid-fifties, proves to be worthy of the label postmodernist, according to some theorists, the theoretical position of the novel involving, as Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon remarks, “a movement between two poles, Jean-François Lyotard’s famous description of the ‘postmodern condition’ and Paul Ricoeur’s equally renowned ‘historical condition’, both of which hinge on the changing nature of our understanding of the concept of ‘history’”(in Manfredi, 2014:13). Writings about the past, even history books, can’t be simple objective recordings of data, because, as Patricia Waugh notes “the observer always changes the observed” (Waugh, 1988:3). Realist fiction used the historical events to confer writing the air of certainty and detached argumentation that makes readers believe they will always be able to relate the fictional data to events in order to check their truthfulness. Postmodern fiction only explains and describes the process of constructing the facts and of investing them with meaning. Documents no longer facilitate the access to the past because they are only representations or substitutes obtained through the simple description of the raw events. When represented by historical discourse, events are invested with meaning and not with existence (Hutcheon, 1998:57). As Gavin Miller suggests, “a typical postmodern reading might regard *Lanark*, for example, as an attempt to direct our attention to the essential fictionality of the so-called ‘real’ world” (Miller, 2005:86)

The quest for identity mentioned in the title, is not so much related to the characters’ development in the two novels, although this will unavoidably be tackled, but to the readers’ attempt to identify the way in which convention mediates the complex underlying (inter)relations of the two texts. The structure of the novels is relevant for the manner in which convention is employed in modernist and postmodernist texts. Both novels try to resist a coherent reading usually based on the realist convention of a well-organized plot, chronological sequence and omniscient narrator. Stephen’s story begins with a child-like perspective on family life presented in short sentences, describing mainly auditive and olfactory perceptions that later on prove to be a memory projection of a past episode in Stephen’s life. There are several such fragments that interfere in the text, interrupting the narration. In Gray’s novel such breaks in the story are more obvious and more shocking, because the interfering text comes usually after the reader is accustomed with a convention that the story establishes. For instance, after the puzzling story in Book Three, Duncan’s story comes to set our mind at ease. The narrative is very plain and simple, as compared to the more tiring experience of *Lanark*’s story. As if threatening to become independent from the rest of the book, the story is interrupted by an interlude, in which the readers are reminded that they read a frame story.

As far as the convention of plot is concerned, *Lanark*’s story seems to resist it to a greater extent than Stephen’s. Although, in Joyce’s novel, facts are presented in accordance with the emotional state of the protagonist, the fragmentation and the incoherence of the text do not come however, to puzzle the reader in such a way that he shouldn’t be able to find the unifying method to reconstruct the order of the story. Gray goes even further in undermining this convention. Given the fact that the text is split into several stories, we could talk about ‘plots’, instead of plot. The subversive attitude towards the plot convention makes itself felt in the clearest postmodern manner, by firstly installing the convention and letting the way free for it to operate. Taken separately, the stories in Gray’s novel (except the author’s story in the Epilogue) develop their own plots that are not difficult to follow. Duncan’s story is the closest to the realist convention of plot. The narrator of this story proves the same selective omniscience as in Joyce’s novel; we can also detect a trace of the ‘stream of consciousness’ technique, for instance, when Duncan’s imaginary worlds are described. The story consists of a series of connected events that follow Duncan’s life from childhood to his late teens. The reader meets no difficulty in reconstructing the fictional reality as it consists in recognizable patterns of life.

Gray undermines the convention of plot by applying it to different narratives, which he finally forces into one single story. The conventions of the constitutive stories do not have any authority outside the story they control and they cannot join forces in order to merge into one and govern the

narrative as a whole. We could use here one of the oxymorons that Charles Jenks opposes to the realist and even to the modernist finished totality: 'deficient whole' or 'fragmented unity' (in Doherty, 2014:282). By deconstructing, and then reconstructing Lanark's story, the reader cannot achieve a coherent view of the narrative. Not only is the narrative convention undermined, but also the reader's experience of reconstructing worlds out of fiction. There is always something that resists interpretation.

One of the possible interpretations could be to consider Lanark's story as a continuation of Duncan's, on the basis of the fact that Lanark lives, in slightly different forms, the same anxieties that Duncan lived, and because Duncan's story is presented as Lanark's past. Another possible interpretation is based on Duncan's very rich imagination, which can give birth to Lanark's story as a means of saving himself from madness and from self-punishment. Lanark's story can be for Duncan a compensatory world (it wouldn't be the first Duncan creates) where, although he still cannot get love, he may at least die properly (supposing that Duncan's attempt to commit suicide failed). Such an interpretation may have its roots in some lines in the Interlude: "Did Thaw die tragically? No. He botched his end. It set no example, not even a bad one. He was unacceptable to the infinite bright blankness, the clarity without edge which only selfishness fears. It flung him back into a second class railway carriage, creating you"(Gray, 1981:219).

A discussion of the chronological sequence may be useful in order to go one step forward in the reconstruction of Lanark's story. Modernists try to undermine this convention by allowing for shifting back and forth in time and intermingling of past, present and future. In Joyce's novel, stream of consciousness and interior monologue are the perfect ground for this intermingling to be produced under the character's emotions. The shift in time takes place because of accidental associations, such as a sound or a smell: "it would be nice to lie on the hearthrug before the fire, leaning his head upon his hands, and think on those sentences. He shivered as if he had cold, slimy water next to his skin. That was meant of Wells to shoulder him into the square ditch because he would not swap his little snuffbox for Well's seasoned hacking chestnut, the conqueror of forty. How cold and slimy the water had been! A fellow had once seen a big rat jump into the scum. Mother was sitting at the fire with Dante waiting for Brigid to bring tea. She had her feet on the fender and her jelly slippers were so hot and they had such a lovely warm smell" (Joyce, 1993:6). Every association with water and cold makes Stephen shift back to Wells shouldering him into the square ditch or to rats and immediately to the compensatory moment beside his mother and the fireplace. The chronological sequence is, however, not broken, because the reader can easily connect the moments that are remembered with those which provide the necessary association for the shifting in time to occur and also with those projected into the future. In Gray's novel, the convention of the chronological sequence is undermined in the same way as the plot convention. Each story has its own linear time. Time convention, subverted with Duncan's story, which proves that time is reversible, allows for Lanark's story and Duncan's story and even the story of the oracle to take place simultaneously. On the other hand, the intermingling of past, present and future is difficult to achieve because of the fragmentation of the text. The subversive attitude makes itself felt from the very beginning of the novel. The novel starts with book Three and it continues with the Prologue, Book One, Interlude, Book Two, Book Four, Epilogue, after which it goes on, with another four chapters. The novel consists of forty-four chapters. The first chapter does not belong to book one, as we could expect, but to Book Three, and the order of the chapters goes in sequence until the end of the novel. This manner of organizing the narrative provides, on the one hand, multiple possibilities of reading the text, and on the other hand, the basis for the subversion of the time sequence convention. Altering their position in the text undermines the reader's notion of a prologue and of an epilogue. Thus, they no longer perform their usual function. It is the epilogue that has the role of an introduction to the novel as a whole, as the author himself points out towards the end of the epilogue: "the so-called 'prologue' being no prologue at all, but a separate short story (Gray, 1981:499). The chronology of the fiction is broken by this misplacing of books and chapters. The subversion of the chronological sequence convention operates both on the organization of the narrative and on the reader's notion of time.

The organization of the narrative is also significant in Joyce's novel. "The action of the five chapters is really the same action. The pattern of dream nourished in contempt of reality, put into practice, and dashed by reality is worked out in the five chapters in five main models and numerous instances" (Hugh Kenner, qtd by Walton Litz, 1966:67). The five chapters could be considered the

same stage, which only changes the setting five times, but Stephen does not create his dream irrespective of the world outside him because it is the authority of the surrounding world that contributes to his changing spiritual condition. The first chapter presents Stephen in his childhood and his striving to set his soul at ease by putting up with the pressures of his school life. In the second chapter Stephen is a teenager who discovers the sinful pleasures of the flesh and their consequent anxieties, while third chapter represents the ascetic stage. In the fourth chapter Stephen rejects priesthood and his awakening as an artist occurs and finally, the last chapter presents the university life and his decision to leave Ireland. Each next chapter seems to destroy whatever triumph Stephen may have achieved in the previous one, constituting itself as a launcher that pushes Stephen into the next stage of his development. It is as if Joyce wrote his novel as an embodiment of modernist theories. In Brian McHale's words, "modernism is driven by the imperative to innovate, and every innovation is rendered obsolete by the next one, so modernism is distancing itself from its own, most recent manifestation" (McHale, 2015:4). The final chapter is left open because there is no other stage, no 'innovation', to undermine Stephen's decision to leave Ireland. This 'other' stage actually occurs, only not in *A Portrait* but in *Ulysses*, where Stephen is presented returning home.

The discussion of the five different settings brings up the problem of the narrator, the third convention to be discussed in this paper. Considering the splitting of the narrative in five sequences in Joyce's novel, we should talk of either one narrator which performs a different kind of discourse in accordant to the five different stages in Stephen's development, or of five different narrators, diachronic hypostases of a fragmented, superordinate one. The fragmentation in Gray's novel is more obvious because of the presence, in the book, of a number of narrators that is larger than the number of stories and because authors, narrators and characters melt into each other to the readers' bewilderment. At the end of the book, when the readers might decide they know who's who, the Epilogue turns their interpretation with an irony of the finest sort. Lanark meets his maker who generously discloses information otherwise inaccessible to the reader and to other characters, giving details related to the structure of the novel and to the auctorial tricks: "I thought epilogues came after the end.' 'Usually, but mine is too important to go there. Though not essential to the plot it provides some comic distraction at a moment when the narrative sorely needs it. And it lets me utter some fine sentiments which I could hardly trust to a mere character. And it contains critical notes which will save research scholars years of toil'" (Gray, 1981: 483) After being confused by the new light the epilogue casts upon the already narrated stories and by the display of the fictional author's erudition, the reader might be tricked into taking for granted the apparent omniscience of the author, forgetting he is, in fact, another character.

In Joyce's novel, the fictional reality is the result of a series of representations mediated by different types of language. In Gray's novel, we talk about fragmented plot and fragmented narrative, because of the plurality of voices that create the fictional reality from a multitude of perspectives. In the postmodernist text, the utopian claim of the unmediated access to reality is neutralized and facts cannot be separated from their continuous interpretation. In Joyce's novel, on the other hand, the representation of reality does not clash with the reader's idea of it. Since the problem of representation is generally a problem of interpretation, the reader may very well appeal to science fiction, which may very successfully be applied to Gray's text.

The interpretation as Lanark's story as science fiction has the advantage of not being so much conditioned by a coherent reading, as the reader can resist to a higher degree the temptation of applying the reality of the world to the reality of fiction. The appearance of artifice, of construct, of the novel as a whole is maintained, but the interrelation between stories is easier to produce. Thus, it is easier for us to accept the existence in the fictional world of characters such as Gloppy, which turns into an elevator, or that of the oracle, reduced to a voice. The story of the nonentity doesn't resemble the reader's already conceived idea of a life story, but it can be reconstructed in terms of a science fictional text; therefore, the reader will feel no longer puzzled except, perhaps, because of the subject of the story which is, indeed, rather peculiar. This is a story of a man who reduces his life to numbers because of the transience of the world he lives in: "the number and our idea of it are identical. Compared with his phone number, our closest friend is shift and treacherous. (...) No matter how well we know him, how often we meet him, how conservative his habits, he will constantly insult our idea of him by wearing new clothes, changing his mind, growing old or sick and even dying. Most quarrels come from conflicting ideas of a man's character, but nobody fights over his phone number"

(Gray, 1981:108). Cities, which are no longer under the domination of time, mysterious and unexplainable disappearances, people with mouths grown into their palms all of a sudden, all these, although unusual, may be seen as possible and plausible in science fiction, and even more so because there is some overlapping between the period when science fiction emerges as a genre and the period when *Lanark* is written. As McHale points out, “The science-fiction wave arises earlier, in the modernist era, and the postmodernist version in the sixties, but these versions, too, crest during what we might think of as the “long eighties,” from about 1977 (the year of John Fowles’s revision of *The Magus*) to about 1992 (the year of Marina Warner’s *Indigo*) – in other words, during the peak phase of postmodernism” (McHale, 2015:110). However, says Gavin Miller, we do not know if what characters tell is fictional reality of fictional fantasy therefore “the Oracle is narrating existential truths as if they had force of objective reality” (Miller, 2005:85).

The exit from the labyrinth of interpretation is made easier by the reader’s cultural experience, which is, in fact, convention. Postmodern representation has an ambivalent policy, on the one hand subverting the realist transparency and the modernist reflexivity and, on the other hand, using their power that has passed the test of time. Paradoxically, fragmentation, in Gray’s novel, increases the importance of convention as a unifying factor but its main achievement is a greater involvement of the reader in the process of meaning construction.

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