

BEYOND CHRONOLOGY: UNRAVELING TIME IN ALASDAIR GRAY'S *LANARK*

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ABSTRACT. The present article takes a closer look at the intricate relationship between modernism and postmodernism, specifically exploring the concept of time in the postmodern literary text using Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* as a case study. The analysis of the treatment of time in the postmodern novel reveals a departure from linear chronology. Such a departure is achieved through the postmodern characters of the novel, particularly Duncan Thaw and Lanark, who become vessels for the exploration of temporal dimensions. In addition, the narrative structure, characterized by fragmentation and unconventional sequencing, support the non-linearity of time. The article also discusses the intertextuality of time, considering the relationships between past, present, and future within the novel's realistic, fantastical and dystopian settings. Thus, the examination of *Lanark* unfolds as a postmodern exploration of temporal fluidity, challenging conventional notions of time and inviting readers to reconsider their understanding of temporal progression. In doing so, the article contributes to the broader discourse on postmodern literature and its innovative approaches to temporal representation.

KEY WORDS: postmodernism, chronotopes, temporal fluidity, metafiction, identity

Introduction. From Modernism to Postmodernism

Defining postmodernism is not an easy task, as the term describes a very complex movement that influenced all areas of life and art. Trodd observes the complexity of the term, arguing that "in the 1970s and 1980's, postmodernism comes in at least six different versions" (2001: 88). Interestingly enough, Trodd's list of versions contains some opposite terms such as resisting/embracing, escaping/engaging, also mentioning the term "anti-modernist", implying that postmodernism is inextricably linked to modernism. This relation between modernism and postmodernism opens up another compli-

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cated conversation based on two fundamental questions: Is postmodernism a continuation of modernism or is it the opposite of and the reaction to all that is known as being modernism? As expected, the opinions are multiple and diverse, as we shall see in the present paper.

A common way to approach and understand postmodernism is by seeing it as emerging from modernism: postmodernism as an extension of modernism. For example, in his conclusions to the book *The Life and Times of Post-modernity*, Tester argues that attempting to understand postmodernity by itself is an impossible task. The author states that “if post-modernity is one expression of a conflict of modernity and if, moreover, post-modernity is therefore a point of critique of modernity which is nevertheless dependent on modernity, then in this case that post-modernity is a condition of transcendence” (1993: 151). Moreover, Tester concludes that without relating it to modernism, postmodernism cannot be defined since “in itself is has little or nothing by way of a set of definite, characteristic features” (1993: 151). Tester’s definition is of importance because of it emphasizes the transcendence of boundaries. Therefore, one can conclude that, unlike modernism, postmodernism breaks barriers, transcends boundaries and gives way to new forms, new identities and new practices. As a result, there are no more fixed limits of space and time, but a limitless manifestation of art, thus, in this emerging postmodern space that is characterized by boundlessness everything is possible.

For David Lodge, the relation between modernism and postmodernism is characterized by opposition and rejection, since for him postmodernism can also be termed antimodernism. Discussing literature and especially writing novels, Lodge argues that just as modernism emerged as a reaction to realism, so too postmodernism was born as a reaction to modernism. Moreover, Lodge considers that while modernist fiction is in fact still realistic fiction in which the writers embarked “on the other side of realism” as they are “pursuing reality of the daylight world of empirical common sense into the individual’s consciousness, or subconscious, and ultimately the collective unconscious, discarding the traditional narrative structures of chronological succession and logical cause-and-effect” (Lodge 1981: 6), the postmodern writers are on a quest for “some alternative principle of composition: Contradiction, Permutation, Discontinuity, Randomness, Excess and the Short Circuit” (Lodge 1981: 13).

Ihab Hassan (1987) reevaluates modernism in terms of postmodernism on seven rubrics meant to transpose some crucial elements from modernism to postmodernism. These are: a. urbanism, b. techologism, c. dehumaniza-

tion, d. primitivism, e. eroticism, f. antinomianism, g. experimentalism. In his book, *The Postmodern Turn*, Hassan attempts to define postmodernism by proposing a provisional scheme meant to help understand the three modes of artistic change that took place in the last hundred years (avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism). Although the differences that Hassan enumerates are numerous, some binary opposed terms concerning modernism and postmodernism are worth being mentioned: form/antiform, creation/deconstruction, centering/dispersal, genre/intertext, selection/combination, narrative/anti-narrative, Grande Histoire/Petite Histoire.

Time in the Postmodern Literary Text

Returning to Tester's attempted definition that is focalized on the need of postmodernism to transcend boundaries, the postmodern literary text demonstrates such a tendency in a plethora of ways. As far as the aspect of time is concerned, the postmodern writers' desire to escape the existing limits becomes obvious in his attempt to escape time itself. Nonetheless, since such a task is practically impossible, the postmodern authors decide to break the patterns, disrupt the linearity of time and form strange combinations of fragments that obviously bring confusion and chaos.

In his article, *The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads?*, David Lodge brings into discussion the state of the novelist who is found at crossroads, since he apparently has only three choices/roads on which to go: traditional realism, fabulation and non-fictional narrative. Lodge suggests that the novelist's inability to choose between the three possible ways forces him to write about the problems of writing a novel, thus transforming this personal issue into a subject of the novel that Lodge describes as the "problematic novel" (Lodge 1992: 205). However, it is common knowledge that "the problematic novel" is just another term for metafiction.

Linda Hutcheon (1988: 3) introduces another term, historiographic metafiction, stating that it "describes fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past." It becomes clear that postmodern writers obsess with escaping the past, discovering that such a task is impossible without a representation of it. Moreover, for Steven Connor, the postmodern novel is characterized by a "continuing commitment to the representation of the past" (2001: 131).

Nonetheless, this obsession with the past influences both the present and the future, since writers employ time as a narrative strategy meant to erase itself altogether. Through a mixture of time frames, postmodern novelists

create confusion concerning when the action takes place. Moreover, if it is uncertain whether the action takes place in the past or in the present due to the erasure of clear borders, future is definitely a time of dystopia from which one desires to escape but is unable to. Moreover, some postmodern authors resort to the use of magic realism, which once again creates a space in which time might not flow according to the established standards, might become futile or might stop altogether.

Romanian scholar Lidia Vianu argues that, in fact, for the postmodern author there is no past, present or future, but just “real time” that is a form of the present: “real time, the concrete time of the *Desperado* work, the interval during which the plot begins and ends (stops, rather) and the hero struggles with indecision (too little is clear and certain in such works), is the present” (2006: 36-7). Moreover, Vianu considers that in postmodern fiction, the only certainty is the constancy of uncertainty and confusion since this type of fiction:

is a constant crossing of chronological directions, which are governed as much by now as by then, mostly ago, real time feeds incessantly on imaginary duration, which, in its turn, breaks and reforms under our own eyes. Imaginary duration makes the past roots of the present bloom, while real time, when the reader could try to sum up what he has been reading, is almost suffocated. (Vianu 2006: 36-7)

The scholar’s conclusion is that the postmodern “book becomes a maze of past presents” (Vianu 2006: 39) as the postmodern present is actually some sort of a past present that makes sense only if organized on levels pertaining to the generation to which it belongs.

Time in *Lanark*

Lanark: A Life in Four Books by Alasdair Gray is a novel that blends elements of fantasy, dystopia, and autobiography. The story is divided into four books, each exploring different aspects of the protagonist’s life. Book One introduces the reader to the protagonist, Duncan Thaw, a young artist growing up in Glasgow. Duncan struggles with his artistic ambitions, personal relationships, and his battle with a skin disease. Book Two continues to follow Duncan’s life and the reader witnesses the main character’s artistic development, relationships, and the impact of his skin condition. The narrative explores themes of identity, creativity, and the struggles of an artist. Book Three shifts its focus to a character named Lanark, who navigates the bizarre city of Unthank, facing its challenges and mysteries. The narrative explores philosophical and

existential themes, as well as the consequences of one's actions. Book Four is a very apocalyptic like part in which Lanark finds himself back in Unthank, which is on the verge of complete destruction. Moreover, Lanark, who has met the author and has rapidly aged, calmly awaits his death while Unthank disintegrates.

Lanark's structure does not follow the general pattern and the chronological one. *Lanark's* components are Four Books, a prologue, an interlude, "to remind us that Thaw's story exists within the hull of Lanark's" (Gray 1981: 219) as well as an epilogue. The order of the Books in the novel is Three, One, Two, Four, the prologue inserted between Book One and Three, the interlude between Book One and Two, and an epilogue between chapter 40 and 41 of Book Four. This unusual order receives an explanation from the author through Nastler, the fictional author that Lanark meets during the plot of the novel: "I want Lanark to be read in one order but eventually thought of in another" (Gray 1985: 483).

This strange structure affects the chronology and the plot of the novel, since the reader is faced with a multitude of fragments. Although it comes four chapters before the end of the novel, the Epilogue is intended to act as "an introduction to the work as a whole" (Gray 1985: 499). Thus, the reader is confronted not only with a fragmented, difficult to read novel, but also with the deconstruction and reconstruction of its worlds and of the novel itself.

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. (Polopoli 2014: 669)

As far as the plot and its themes are concerned, one cannot help but agree with Glyn White's statement, "the themes of *Lanark* are time, history and politics" (2005: 162). Nonetheless, in a very obvious manner, the plot stresses the problem of time, especially through the two protagonists: Duncan Thaw and Lanark. The novel actually follows two major plots, depicting the life of the two characters, and although the two parts are combined, the author insists that: "the fact remains that the plots of the Thaw and Lanark sections are in-

dependent of each other and cemented by typographical contrivances rather than formal necessity. A possible explanation is that the author thinks a heavy book will make a bigger splash than two light ones” (Gray 1985: 493). Polopoli observes that “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” (2014: 667). Once again, the reader is challenged to try to make sense of something that is purposefully meant to be confusing, and as Polopoli correctly observes, the distraction of the reader starts from the very title of the novel:

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? (Polopoli 2014: 667)

These are just a few of the possible questions that arise from the purposefully bewildering postmodern text, to which scholars have added many others. However, for the sake of space, the present paper focuses specifically on the issue of time in the novel.

The problem of time is of great concern to Thaw in Books One and Two. The postmodern character is specifically interested in the past, since, according to him the past is eternal and thus becomes of great significance:

When a thing is perfect it is eternal. It can be destroyed afterward, or slowly decay, but its perfection is safe in the past, which is the only inevitable part of the universe. No government, no force, no God can make what has been not have been. The past is eternal and every day our abortions fall into it: love affairs we bungled, homes we damaged, children we couldn’t be kind to. (Gray 1985: 337)

Thaw stresses that the only truth is the past, since the future is unknown while the present is built on the past. What Thaw intends to underline is that one cannot change the past. Therefore, it becomes an obligation to become aware of it, to remember it, especially past mistakes that must never be forgotten. However, despite the fact that Duncan Thaw is concerned with time and he is the protagonist of the realist part of the novel, the unreliability of time is stressed through the symbolic clocks that cannot be relied upon.

“What o’clock is it?” said Thaw.

“I don’t know,” said Drummond. “None of the clocks in this house can be relied on, least of all the ones that go. It’s a pity ma isn’t here. She could estimate the time by things like passing aeroplanes.” (Gray 1985: 273)

Thaw desires to understand, to know what time it is, to live in the present, but he is constantly reminded that one cannot know such a thing and that the only certainty is the presence of death. The constancy of death explains Thaw’s obsession for the past, since for the character the past equals eternity. As a result, Thaw becomes obsessed with painting the mural perfectly (“[...] the mural must be made perfect. When a thing is perfect it is eternal. [...] Let you and I, Mr. Rennie, make eternity a present of a complete, perfect, harmonious, utterly harmless thing” (Gray 1985: 337), failing at everything else, and eventually grasping that he is also failing is his attempt to reach perfection. As an artist, Thaw yearns for a form of permanence and eternity based on his belief that achieving perfection in his work will grant his art a timeless quality. Therefore, faced with the idea of death and convinced that the past is the only inevitable part of the universe, Thaw longs for a form of artistic immortality; he hopes to contribute to the timeless continuum of the past. Moreover, the mural is not only a symbol of the pursuit of artistic excellence, but a way to transcend the borders of the present. It could be concluded that Thaw’s obsession is in fact a reflection of the theme of time and its complexities in the novel, where the protagonist becomes the vessel for contemplating the interconnectedness of past, present and future.

In Books Three and Four, the fantasy part of the novel, a very different image of time is given. “The organization of time in Books Three and Four is very complex, and in common with postmodern chronotopes in general, a number of conflicting forms of time are used”, and the critic points out that the novel strives to depict a zero-time of planet earth, a time of creation Smethurst (2000: 138).

Nonetheless, the whole life of the protagonist of the novel is reflected in his death, which once again plays an important role. Moreover, as previously mentioned, the books structure influences the temporal order both in Glasgow and in Unthank. In Unthank time passing is different from the realist manner since time is under government control: “The decimal calendar hasn’t been introduced here and what the council calls days can be months – years” (Gray 1985: 425). The reader soon finds out that in this dystopian world people “don’t bother much with time” (Gray 1985:18), which eventually leads them to destruction.

Lanark is introduced as a character who does not know anything about himself; he has no memory whatsoever, and therefore, he has no past and no sense of identity. Lanark constantly attempts to know his past, but he feels he cannot, emphasizing “his postmodern subjectivity” (Popoli 2014: 669). The novel introduces the Oracle, a mysterious and enigmatic figure who plays a significant role in the narrative, since it is a prophetic being with the ability to see the future, and characters seek its guidance and insights. The Oracle is located in the Institute, a surreal and oppressive setting where Lanark initially finds himself. The way the Oracle works is that it imparts cryptic and symbolic messages, often in the form of dreams or visions, which serve as a means of guiding and influencing the characters’ actions. The Oracle’s predictions and advice fail in helping Lanark get a sense of identity by understanding the past, thus contributing to the overall sense of mystery and complexity in the novel.

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. (Popoli 2014: 669)

In Book Four, Lanark and Rima enter the Intercalendrical Zone, a surreal and metaphysical space within the novel that plays a significant role in the narrative’s exploration of time, existence, and the limitations of conventional reality. In this space, all dimensions and orders disappeared; up and down are interchangeable and the duration is unmeasurable in any conventional way. The novel departs from older conventions of time and space towards a more postmodern state in which even its characters want that boundless freedom that is received when escaping natural conventions. It is in the Intercalendrical Zone where Rima discovers her pregnancy and Lanark feels free as if a burden was lifted: “a burden lifted from him, a burden he had carried all his life” (Gray 1985: 386). Lanark’s symbolic freedom can be interpreted as an escape from the material world, thus, aligning with postmodern themes of seeking freedom from societal constraints and embracing boundless possibilities. Nonetheless, this postmodern boundlessness that is characterized by temporal uncertainty also leads to existential hesitancy, as Popoli’s close reading of the text emphasizes. 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” (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 (Popoli's 2014: 670) that Rima remarks: "You [Lanark] were away for hours – ages it seemed to me. You have no sense of time. None at all" (Gray 1981: 425).

Moreover, the mysterious passing of time is accentuated by the birth of Lanark and Rima's son, who grows quickly under their own eyes, while they do not age at all. Therefore, the symbolic space of the Intercalendrical Zone challenges both the conventions of time, as well as those of reality, granting the postmodern text the ability to explore the complexities of existence, freedom from constraints, and the fluid, subjective nature of time. Nonetheless, the strangeness of this postmodern chronotope is an invitation to engagement as it remains open to interpretation.

The artistic quest of Duncan Thaw is reiterated in the fantasy parts of the book, as Lanark also attempts to make sense of time, his own identity and life itself by writing. According to Polak, Lanark's artistic attempt is Gray's way of playing with the reader:

Lanark starts writing a novel that would depict his first days in Unthank. But here Gray plays with the reader again. How can a man lacking memory start writing a memoir-novel? At the same time, novel within the novel, i.e. Lanark's manuscript in Book Three, Chapter Three, is the only instance where any kind of temporality is mentioned in the fantasy sections. It is here that we learn that Lanark has spent 31 days in Unthank. So, Lanark's novel has a greater amount of "realistic" features than all fantasy sections of Lanark put together. Without this numeric data, one has the feeling that Book Three, as well as other fantastic books in the novel, is happening in some kind of a temporal vacuum. (Polak 2002: 403)

Therefore, Lanark's attempt to write a novel is closely connected to the issue of time. Nonetheless, the character's artistic task is a much more complex endeavor, reflecting multiple themes of the novel. Besides a failed attempt to define his identity, as well as an effort to make sense of the chaos around him, writing could be interpreted as a form of escapism and a way to navigate the uncertainties of the strange reality surrounding him. Moreover, the metafictional aspect of the writing task once again blurs the lines between fiction and reality, supporting the postmodernity of the text.

Furthermore, Gray offers its novel the previously discussed boundless characteristic by interweaving the literary device of time with the use of historical and autobiographical elements, together with a great amount of

self-reflexivity. Angus Calder argues that “*Lanark* is an historical novel in that three different but overlapping constructions of Glasgow are used to illuminate the progress of twentieth century man from barbarism to barbarism via the application of new technologies” (Calder 1994: 204). For Calder, *Lanark* is worthy of being compared with the great classics of world literature, while also being a very “Scottish” book:

Lanark is not only an *ambitious* book which directly, with astonishing courage, challenges comparison with *Paradise Lost*, *Faust* and *Moby Dick*, it is also a very *Scottish* book and a *topical* book about Scotland here and now. It treats with sad respect the Scottish past of medieval Catholicism, eighteenth century enlightenment, inventive industrialisation, aborted socialist revolution, and waste. (204) (original emphasis)

However, Calder concludes that “*Lanark*’s prime concern is with present and future” (1994: 205). Therefore, we could argue that the postmodern obsession with the past is just a camouflaged dissatisfaction with the past and as well as a strong fear of the future, due to the unmistakable uncertainty resulted from the relativisation of everything.

Conclusions

The examination of time in postmodern literature, exemplified by the characters and narrative structures in *Lanark*, displays a departure from traditional notions. The postmodern novel challenges the linear flow of time, employing fragmentation, deconstruction, and reconstruction to create a narrative that defies conventional boundaries. The characters become vessels for exploring the multifaceted nature of time, oscillating between a reverence for the past and a desire for a boundless, timeless present.

The postmodern novel not only disrupts the conventional understanding of time but also delves into the interconnectedness of past, present, and future. The narrative strategies employed by postmodern writers reflect an obsession with escaping the constraints of time, leading to a constant interplay between reality and imagination.

Alasdair Gray’s novel invites readers into a narrative space where time is elusive, boundaries are porous, and the conventional understanding of temporal progression is disrupted. Through the characters’ experiences, the novel challenges readers to reconsider their perceptions of time, embracing the postmodern notion that time is not a linear, fixed entity but a complex and ever-shifting phenomenon.

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