

MA Tentative Proposal

The Ludic Narratives of Alastair Gray and Ian Banks

Alasdair Gray, as one of the leading figures of the New Scottish Renaissance of the 1980s, has greatly contributed to the reinvention of the contemporary Scottish novel, which during the preceding decades had become almost tantamount to the urban, working class novel distinguished for the gritty realism employed to depict the hardships of the working classes in de-industrialised Scotland. Gray's first and most famous novel, *Lanark* (1981), aims at the subversion the working-class novel through experiments with narrative structures and linguistic conventions while reimagining many of the themes characteristic for the working-class urban novel. Instead of the prototypical struggles of 'hard men,' in *Lanark*, Gray presents the narrative of a young struggling artist from a working-class family in a post-war Glasgow, which is juxtaposed with a fantastic narrative in the city of Unthank, a parallel infernal version of Glasgow. The multiple narrative layers are self-reflective, interspersed with illustrations, authorial intrusions and the text itself is a combination of different genres — all these are textual experiments have become synonymous with Gray's style. These textual experiments, however, are not something ground-breaking on the literary scene, in fact, the novel has often been described within the wider context of literary postmodernism¹, magic realism², existentialism or even as a critique of modernism³ etc. Gray's other novels are also characterised with a high degree of textual experimentation, while at the same time retaining a superb clarity and simplicity of language. Gray's textual experiments and innovations have had a great impact for the future generations of authors in the sense that

1 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) 37.

2 Eva Martines Ibanez, "Fantasising the Self: A Study of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, 1982 *Janine*, *Something Leather* and *Poor Things*," A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of St. Andrews, 1999, 33.

3 Gavin Miller, *Alasdair Gray: The Fiction of Communion* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2005) 132.

they paved the way to a whole new field of possibilities for literary creation in Scotland and beyond.

For instance, Iain (M.) Banks, one of the most prominent Scottish contemporary novelists, acknowledges Gray's influence by referring to *Lanark* as "one of the best pieces of Scottish literature at least since the second world war and possibly this century."⁴ Banks holds a peculiar position within Scottish literature as an acknowledged writer of both literary (mainstream) fiction and science fiction.⁵ His mainstream novels catalogue a rich range of topics, for instance the grotesque narrative of *The Wasp Factory*, the Scottish family saga of the *Crow Road*, or the multiple dream-worlds of *The Bridge*. Banks' SF, on the other hand, builds on and plays with various SF conventions, but mainly focuses on the genre of space opera, especially in his *Culture* series. However, despite using a different name for mainstream and Science fiction, Banks' fiction is characterized with a cross-generic and experimental quality, which comes into focus through the analysis of his entire oeuvre, both the mainstream and the SF novels. For example, the critic Christie L. March argues that "the distance between his (Banks') SF and mainstream works is shorter than we expect" and that Banks' writing in both genres blurs the distinctions between the two."⁶

Aside from Gray's obvious influence on Banks', Gray's and Banks' fiction shares many common traits. Both authors write mainstream and Science fiction while keeping the boundaries between the two blurred. For instance, they both engage with the narrative structure of their novels in a playful way by employing multileveled narratives that are characterised with a juxtaposition of fantastic as well as realistic elements in a self-reflexive

4J. Robertson, "Bridging styles: A conversation with Iain Banks," *Radical*, Scotland 42 (Dec,1989/Jan.1990), II July 2000, available at www.phlebas.com/text/interv4.html

5 The author uses the name Iain Banks for his mainstream and Iain M. Banks for his Science fiction novels

6 Christie L. March, *Rewriting Scotland* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 82.

manner that underscores the nature of the text as a narrative construct. This allows them greater freedom for experimentation within the text because it creates instability of meaning that forces the reader doubt and hence actively engage with the text. These characteristics coincide with the principle tenets of postmodernism, and both Gray's and Banks' fiction has been analysed within that context. However, while a postmodern reading of Gray's and Bank's novels is certainly valid, it is also limiting, as it does not exhaust their interpretation and does not take into account their SF texts. The common denominator of Gray's and Banks' mainstream as well as SF texts is the degree of textual play employed both on the level of narrative form and content. For that purpose, the aim of this MA thesis is to analyse the postmodernist strategies in Gray's and Banks' fiction as well as put these in the context of ludic fiction by focusing extensively on the function of play within them. To do that, I will start with the presentation of a theoretical overview of postmodern literature in order to access the point to which postmodern and ludic texts overlap and influence each other. The chief theoretical texts concerning postmodernism will be Brian McHale's *Postmodern Fiction* (1987) and Linda Hutcheon's *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1996). Then I will go on to define and give a theoretical background of the function of play in literature based on Johan Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1970) as well as Ruth E. Burke's *The Games of Poetics: Ludic Criticism and Postmodern Fiction* (1994). After that, I will go on to analyse the specific instances of play through close reading of the selected novels. For that purpose, I have chosen texts in which I believe there is a high degree of textual play. Instances of play within them will be analysed on two levels. On the level of form, the analysis will focus on play on with the linguistic sign, the word, the narrative structures and the genre itself. Then, the way the form interacts with the content of the narrative and thus influences the meaning of the text will be examined.

I will start with *Poor Things* (1992), a postmodern historiographic metafiction that is based on the reimagining of *Frankenstein* (1818), where the juxtaposition of the visual and textual narrative as well as typography, together with the multiple contradictory realistic and fantastic narratives, serve to undermine the authority of a single truth in the novel and offer the reader multiple reading paths with which they must engage. Then I will go on to Gray's *A History Maker* (1995), a SF text set in a post-scarcity near-future society where history has ended because there is no need for it to be recorded anymore. Similarly to *Poor Things*, the novel consists of various documents written by the characters themselves in order to record the accounts of their lives. This, however, leaves room for play with the concept of authority of the narrative and by extension, with history itself, which is the main theme of the novel. Furthermore, I will analyse Banks' novel *Walking on Glass* (1986), which is a superb example of play in literature in which, as Katarzyna Pisarska argues, "games are played by the characters with other characters and with the fabric of reality. But they are also played by the author himself with the structure of his novel, for Banks blurs the boundaries between the various universes projected in the work."⁷ This is achieved through the juxtaposition of three seemingly unconnected narratives, the first one being a realistic narrative in contemporary London, the second an account of a SF enthusiast who believes to be an alien trapped on Earth, and a SF narrative in the distant future, where two characters are imprisoned in a castle and are forced to play impossible games in order to find the solution to a riddle and regain their freedom. By the end of the book, the 'reality' of the first narrative as well as the fictionality of the other two narratives are contested through various ingenuous textual games, as it is hinted that the first narrative may in fact be a novel out of which the castle in which the prisoners are trapped are made. I will finish with *Consider Phlebas* (year?), Banks' first novel of the Culture series, where Banks openly engages and plays with the genre of

⁷ Katarzyna Pisarska, *Mediating the World in the Novels of Iain Banks: The Paradigms of Fiction* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014) 93.

space opera by subverting its narrative conventions. According to Christie March, in space opera everything unravels on a grand scale. Instead, Banks constructs the backdrop for space operatic crises, but details characters' actions on a minor scale."⁸ The novel is concerned with the struggles of several characters to retrieve a lost Mind during the Culture-Indiran war instead of the grand scale of the intergalactic war itself. By the end, almost all the characters die, the mind is retrieved, but their actions have no influence on the war itself.

After the selected texts are analysed in terms of the degree and the nature of the element of narrative play within them I will set out to question as well as compare and contrast the results of this ludic literary analysis. I will primarily focus on identifying and discussing the most significant similarities and differences between the authorial intentions of the two authors, keeping in mind at all times the function and the implications of textual play in general – not only aesthetic, but also socio-cultural, political and ethical.

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⁸ March 83.

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