

THE MANIPULATION OF THE VISUAL FRAME IN ALASDAIR GRAY'S *LANARK*

One of the most outstanding features of Postmodernism is the subversion of traditional literary conventions. In Alasdair Gray's best known work, *Lanark*, this process of questioning is carried out by using the contrast between "visual" and "textual" images throughout the whole novel. These images, which Hobbes perfectly refers to as "*the resemblance of some Phantasticall Inhabitants of the Brain of the Maker*", acquire both a textual (like the author's drawings which illustrate the text) and a textualized perspective (in the many occasions in which the main character creates drawings and paintings which are verbally described in the text):

And whereas a man can fancy Shapes he never saw; making up a Figure out of the parts of divers creatures; as the Poets make their Centaures, Chimaeras, and other Monsters never seen: So can he also give matter to those Shapes, and make them in Wood, Clay or Metall. And these are also calld images, not for the resemblance of any corporeall thing, but for the resemblance of some Phantasticall Inhabitants of the Brain of the Maker, (...) the Materiall Body made by Art, may be said to be the Image of the Phantasticall Idoll made by Nature. (HOBBS 1977: 669)

We can agree with Brian McHale that an iconic shaped text in effect illustrates itself: its shape illustrates its content. Since postmodernist writing exploits the printed text's potential for self-illustration, as a means of foregrounding the materiality of the book, it seems logical that it also explores the possibilities of illustration. A number of postmodernist books are illustrated with photographs, with drawings lifted from other sources or, as in the case of *Lanark*, with drawings made by the authors themselves. Texts illustrated or decorated by their authors include Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and *Breakfast of Champions*, Guy Davenport's *Tatlin!* (1974) and *Da Vinci's Bicycle*, Clarence Major's *Emergency Exit* (1979) and the whole production of Alasdair Gray.

In a sense, the use of illustration is hardly innovative; after all, most nineteenth-century realist novels were illustrated texts. But the reappearance of illustration as a major resource in postmodernist writing does indicate once again the extent of postmodernism's divergence from modernist poetics. By the modernist period, illustration had been removed from its place in the serious novel, displaced downward and outward in the literary system until its last strongholds were popular magazine fiction and children's literature. When illustration re-emerged late in the modernist period, it did so in new and unprecedented forms: as surrealist collage-novels, and as photographic illustration.

The illustrations have in a way supplanted some of the text functions. This kind of works constitute in effect extended jokes at the expense of illustration. But at the same time, the illustrations tend to lose their own logic and coherence through the artist's putting together of visual metaphors and imagined figures. So badly disrupted, these pictures no longer show a coherent and rational story, but the discourse of its creator. Only through this process of image de-centering, the unconscious is able to find its "voice". In *Lanark*, postmodernist illustration relates itself both to the surrealist playfulness and the parody game.

Alasdair Gray is not only a good writer, but also an excellent illustrator. Always closely related to the narrative, his carefully designed black and white drawings underline the most important aspects of the novel, paying special attention to the use of small details. At a certain moment, the reader has to return to the cover or to the drawing of each part by physically closing the book and re-examining its pictures. In other words, Gray's playful manipulation of the conventions of illustration serves also to foreground the ontological opposition between the fictional world and the material book. So, all these devices are used to underline the work's ontological structure. The illustrations are integrated into the structure of the verbal text as other modes of discourse, as visual discourses which contribute to the poliphonic structure of these texts. Through these surrealist images both worlds of discourse, visual and verbal, are brought "into collision". This "caleidoscopic" and postmodernist approach offers the reader many different and contradictory readings, and it is implemented by the rich imagery supplied by the fantastic city of Unthank, the world of the "after death", and the complex and significant typography of the Epilogue.

In the first illustration Gray inserts the full title of the book, dedicated to his son Andrew. A human figure (which physically seems to resemble the author) appears drawing itself and resting over three open books, which clearly enough stresses the self-referential structure and approach of the narrative, anticipating in a way both the form and content of the Epilogue. In that chapter, Nastler's room is described as a place full of paintings which reflect the same room, but "*brighter and cleaner than the reality*" (p.480). The self-conscious and paradoxical component of this chapter, clearly related to Gray's first illustration, gets its climax a bit later when Nastler / Alasdair reveals Lanark the truth about his existence:

With a reckless gesture he 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 eye was caught by a sentence in italics which said:* (GRAY, 1987: 481)

The same illustration also depicts the dark slums of Glasgow / Unthank and a raised hand coming out from a stormy sea and trying to reach the sun. The image perfectly summarizes and links the embedded stories of Thaw (who drowns himself in the sea) and Lanark (Who is obsessed with the quest for light). Right between the slums and the sun, Gray inserts the small and grotesque figure of a paradoxical being, half-human and half-vegetal, which seems

to be eating itself. This is an important image throughout the book, specially in the Institute chapters where we are presented a refined form of cannibalism as a metaphor of human exploitation. Gray insists on this conception by including a latin motto in the illustration which precedes the Book Two: "*Homo a se coctum esumque crustum est hoc fecit separatio*", and in the page 62 "*(man) ... is the pie that bakes and eats itself*".

There is still another hideous and hardly defined monster, described in the book as "*the creature*" or "*a conspiracy which owns and manipulates everything for profit*" (GRAY 1987: 410). In despite of its undefinable form, we can appreciate the Leviathan's huge tail. The monster seems to breast-feed and protect two human figures coming out of the pages of an open book. The incompatibility of the man and the woman embraced is represented by their respectively black and white colours. In fact, the unsuccessful search for mutual love and understanding is one of the main concerns not only in *Lanark*, but in most of Gray's narrative. The illustration is finally rounded with the face of Marjory / Rima in a background of stars and planets; two hollow skulls with a sleeping baby angel within, probably symbolizing the neverending process between life and death, and the ironical inscription in Latin "*Noscite hunc libellum imprimatum concilio scotiae artium non impediunt*".

All these visual allegories are related to other intertexts which, as a whole, give the work its ontological status. In fact, the drawings in the book are parodically described as "*allegorical, imitating the best precedents*". Undoubtedly, The most relevant connections are those referred to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, from which *Lanark's* structural and ideological concern on the subject of power directly derives:

For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH or STATE (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an artificiall man; though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended. (HOBBS 1977: 81)

So, the complex devices of power acquisition are progressively illustrated by referring the author's drawings to Hobbes' philosophical approaches to society. If in the first illustration we had caught only a glimpse of the Leviathan's tail, in the next one we see the whale in its full size proudly crossing the sea. Hobbes' image of the Leviathan is taken from the Bible, in which God describes a huge water beast he is specially proud to have made because it is "*king of all the children of pride*". The kingdom of the beast is also a peculiar one. The Earth, watched by the eye of "*Providentia*", is represented as a surrealist mixture of reality and utopia, hold by the figure of the Magistra Vitae crowned with laurels (a clear allusion to the contents of Book Three). Gray inserts both mythical images (like a mermaid, a dinosaur or an Egyptian sphinx) and real items (like the Statue of Liberty, an Aztec pyramid, or a Buddha) as well as keeps some of the names of the continents (Asia, Africa) while changing others like Melancholia (Europe) and Atlantis (America). This powerful and postmodernist illustration reminds the reader, in the words of Brian Aldiss, that in Gray's world "*reality is as re-*

liable as a Salvador Dali's watch". Evil and Good, represented by the feminine figures of the "Fama Bona" and the "Fama Mala" try to attract the world with their trumpets. Their images stand over the carved pillars of experience, depicted as an old woman with a plumb line, and the virginal truth, two features which deeply influence the evolution of the main character throughout the novel. The "Magistra Vitae" seems to stand triumphantly upon death and oblivion while a big arrow enigmatically links the dates of 1614 and 1979.

Book One opens with an illustration which shows a certain continuity with the preceding drawings. Gray offers a visual "zoom" effect, by widening the scope of the globe and introducing the Leviathan again, this time with its mouth opened and ready to swallow a caravel. In a corner, coming out of the mist, we can see part of a figure representing the King-State as described in Hobbes' Leviathan. The sword he grasps in his right hand seems to cut the overall darkness, in an image that reminds us of Hobbes' words:

This considered, the Kingdome of darknesse, as it is set forth in these, and other places of the Scripture, is nothing else but a Confederacy of Deceivers, That to obtain dominion over men in this present world, endeavour by dark, and erroneous Doctrines, to extinguish in them the Light, both of Nature and of Gospell; and so to disprepare them for the Kindome of God to come. (HOBBS 1977: 628)

The ship, seriously threatened by a rough ocean and a bright ray coming from the sovereign's mouth, seems to look for shelter between two big pillars which contain a variation of the city of Glasgow motto: "Let Glasgow Flourish / By Telling the Truth". However, the city is depicted at the verge of its apocalyptic destruction by flooding, which will effectively happen in the chapter entitled "End": "Yes, yes!" said Lanark excitedly. "Yes, we must all get to the top, there's going to be a flood, a huge immense deluge" (GRAY 1987: 555). At the bottom of the picture we can see the faces of some of the main characters in the book; Thaw's parents and the minister McPhedron. In fact, the contents of this part of *Lanark* are centered on the realist story of Thaw's artistical education and the social, religious and familiar pressures on him.

The next illustration is also related to Glasgow, this time by inserting the symbols of the city: the bell, the fish and the tree. The shield is held by two little angels who witness a seventeenth century dissection of a corpse. An arrogant skeleton representing death seems to prevail in the group of doctors and scholars examining the body. Obviously, this is the part of the book in which Thaw kills himself after failing both to paint the genesis and to love Marjory. The role played by Thaw (like Gray) is that of the painter and creator of worlds. Thaw is able to perceive "reality" from many points of view, and consequently his paintings clearly reflect the multiple perspectives to be found in the book. An art critic describes Thaw's pictorial work in a way it could be also applied to *Lanark's* fiction:

Of course it will be almost impossible for me to criticize it. It isn't cubist or expressionist or surrealist, it isn't academic or kitchen sink or even naive. It's a bit like Puvis de Chavannes, but who nowadays knows Puvis de Chavannes? I'm afraid you're

going to pay the penalty of being outside the mainstreams of development. (GRAY, 1987: 328)

In the illustration of Book Four the image of the King-State comes out of the mist and reappears in full power, exactly as described by Hobbes:

The Sovereignty is an artificiall soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; the magistrates, and other officers of Judicature and Execution, artificiall Joynts; Reward and Punishment (...) are the nerves, that do the same in the body natural; The Wealth and Riches of all the particular members, are the Strength. (HOBBES: 1977: 81)

We can see how the king rules with the sword of force (which is hold by an arm made up of soldiers) and the staff of persuasion (appropriately hold by religion) upon the earth. The monuments and geographical details depicted by Gray allow the reader to identify the landscape with a grotesque representation of Scotland. This very image, clearly related to the last part of the novel (Book Four), is also *Lanark's* cover illustration and the clearest allegorical reference to the contents of the whole novel. So, the ideological system used by "the creature" to control the world is visually formulated according to Althusser's conception: the army and its violent repression, corresponding with one of the king's arms (the force), and law, education and work on the field of persuasion. Quite appropriately, this part of *Lanark* is entitled "the matter, form and power of a commonwealth". In fact, Gray's picture is a close adaptation of Hobbes' *Leviathan* original front page.

In a way or another, all the illustrations are referred to the subject of power and society. Their main contribution to the novel is that they suggest new approaches to the traditional way of understanding the relationships between visual images and the text contents. Gray's drawings create an illusion of close correspondence, as they seem to capture an external reality which will be reflected in the text as in a mirror. An important feature shared by verbal and visual images throughout the text is the complex and self-conscious ambiguity between the levels of reality and fantasy. The illustrations provide traditional utopias with the paradoxical status of "reality", simply by materializing them in the author's drawings. All these images are no longer fantastic abstractions, but important inputs with textual meaning and relevance, accomplishing a key role in the structure and working of *Lanark*.

Mario Díaz Martínez
Universidad de León

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