

*Ruxandra Cesereanu*

## **Lanark and Unthank – Posthuman Elements in Alasdair Gray’s Novel**

---

**Abstract:** The novel *Lanark*, by Alasdair Gray, has a complex, labyrinthine architecture, consisting of two identity layers that pertain to a character who appears to be sleep-walking between two worlds: Glasgow and Unthank, the real city and the avatar city. Fictionalization is accomplished through a series of elements borrowed from various conceptualizations about the posthuman.

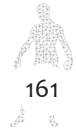
**Keywords:** Lanark; Alasdair Gray; Glasgow; Unthank Fictionalization; Theories on the Posthuman; Mutants; Laboratory-Hospital; Medical Experiments; Speculations on Time and Space.

**RUXANDRA CESEREANU**

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
ruxces@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2018.34.12

Possibly inhibited, to some extent, by the massive, intricate narrative of the novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, written by Scottish author Alasdair Gray (translated by Magda Teodorescu, Polirom Publishing House, 2008), the reader is presented with a book written over the course of twenty years, evincing a complex and labyrinthine architecture and comprising two layers of identities pertaining to a character who appears to be sleepwalking between two worlds: Glasgow and Unthank, the real city and the avatar city. The former is inhabited by Duncan Thaw, while the latter reinstatiates Thaw as Lanark. Fictionalization is carried out unrealistically or, more precisely, via the non-real and the absurd, turning Glasgow into Unthank, and Thaw into Lanark. The two worlds do not interpenetrate, but remain parallel; they are not complementary, but autonomous, functioning independently from one another. The frustrations and complexities experienced in reality are relieved in fiction or, at least, they are recalibrated, reshuffled, reassembled. The author mixes the narrative layers, so the reader must slide back and forth in order to grasp the narrative



thread. The book (built in four sections) begins with absurd unreality and ends with it, while the alleged reality of Duncan Thaw is encapsulated in the novel's midst. Alasdair Gray's method is that of nesting reality within unreality; or, in other words, of enveloping the real inside the onion (or cabbage) layers of absurd fiction (sometimes with SF overtones, even though the author denies such an affiliation).

I will analyze *Lanark* without respecting the narrative (chronological) structure proposed by Alasdair Gray. I will examine the reality of the character and then his unreality, in a linear logic. Thus, Duncan Thaw's real history begins in Glasgow in the 1960s (the protagonist's real story will be recounted by a non-corporeal oracle, located in avatar reality): his childhood recollections are strewn with bewildering perceptions, and his turbulent adolescence revolves around seeking refuge in imaginary worlds – for the real world can only be possessed through fictionalization. The artistic evolution of the character is ambitious: from a would-be modern version of the *Divine Comedy*, illustrated by a new William Blake, to the fresco of ecstasy from Genesis, in the *Old Testament*, Duncan painted as an apprentice in a church. Since Thaw's work is incomprehensible, this character (marked by illness, like any artist at the mercy of an accursed destiny) gets into hospital and, in his hallucinatory reveries, he seeks another inner space where he can live: Lanark and the city of Unthank. Marjorie, one of the women Thaw is in love with but rejects him, becomes Rima, his female companion in Unthank. Although unfolding across two large books, the real story contains a correct urban novel. The salt and pepper of the book

derives from fiction taken to the extreme, from delirium and absurd hallucination.

When he arrives in the city of Unthank, Lanark does not know what the name of the place is, nor is he aware who he is: this beginning is thought out so as to enable any fictional speculation, for if everything is confused, then anything is possible, including in terms of identity construction or deconstruction. The city, unnamed for now, has some blatant peculiarities: the sun only exists in blurry shapes, much like a nebulous star, and people disappear, without any explanation, when darkness falls, as if they were made of gelatin and were subject to a sudden and complete liquefaction. Metropolitan power builds bunkers to prevent the future invasion of an unnamed enemy, and the inhabitants are of two types – vertebrates (solid and untransformed humans) and crustaceans (protesters). In the absence of the sun, the inhabitants become mutants (crayfish, dragons, salamanders), suffering repugnant metamorphoses. Huge mouths or holes gape wide in the city, signalling a way out or a gateway to another world: through such an entrance, Lanark gets to a laboratory-hospital, the Institute, which hosts mutant people. Built underground, inside a mountain on top of which the cities are located, the Institute contains experimental chambers, either for modifying the mutants and finally liquefying them, or for rare cases of healing. The food in the Institute is gelatinous, because it is obtained from residues of liquefied mutants.

Sick with dragon disease (manifested through brown spots on his body and corneal extremities), Lanark is cured and recycled, turning from patient into physician. His main supervisor and mentor is

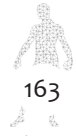


Professor Ozenfant, who philosophizes about innovative therapies: doctors do not have healing protocols but are trained by patients to find the best method of curing them. When the doctor fails to find a solution, the catalyst intervenes (fueling the rapid destruction of the patient). Time, Ozenfant explains, is varied in the Institute, as it is measured by different calendars: the one who leaves the Institute does not travel in the time of the Institute, but in the time of the space to which he is heading (and which can be anything, anyway). Ozenfant himself was once a mutant (a leech-dragon hybrid), but then climbed the hierarchical steps to the Institute's leadership, whose gray eminence he became.

Lanark would have become a perfect god of the Institute if he had not violated its very basic rule: he has healed his first patient (a dragon woman) by reading to her and now he is yearning to escape in order to regain the sunlight and to discover love and friendship with the help of the woman he has cured (Rima, Marjorie's avatar). The healing of the mutant woman is, however, considered a gesture of sabotage against the Institute, so Lanark loses his status as a doctor. Another gray eminence forewarns him that the Institute is a destructive machine whose mission is the cannibalization of humanity, by ingurgitating whole cities and making them disappear, as well as by spreading illnesses among mutants with a view to their complete liquefaction. The Institute is dominated by a cabal of thinkers who form the Council, an entity defined as a political structure with an eschatological and soteriological stake. The utopia is, at the same time, an anti-utopia, as the Institute is an empire that only survives by literally devouring other spaces and cities,

through actions of swallowing and ingurgitation at the micro- and macrocosmic levels. Lanark's abandonment of the Institute and his return to Unthank (this move is called relocation!), as a possible savior of that city, is done through an intercalendrical zone, where time and all the other dimensions are unpredictable.

The city of Unthank has become a closed city, which can be reached only through a pedestrian underground entrance leading to a Cathedral that has become the headquarters and the surveillance center of the Institute. The *Creature*, as the Institute's political and authoritarian structure, which has infiltrated Unthank, is called, aims at temporal and spatial manipulation through two classic strategies: expansion and devouring. The city is dominated by a quasi-sacerdotal bureaucracy and suffers from a strange form of poisoning that makes people change into "frozen animals" (the majority), dominated by "professionals" (the minority). In Unthank there is, however, a department of chronometry, ensuring that Time can be restored at some point. Lanark does not remain isolated from temporal mutations, but becomes a father, and his son with Rima (Alexander) speedily grows up much like in fairy tales, as a sign that time is miraculously processed. Abandoned by Rima and his son, Lanark is trained to become the delegate who will plead the case of Unthank in the solar city of Provan, against the Institute (the political structure with eschatological and soteriological ambitions). The road to Provan is marked by an intercalendrical area, where time expands or narrows with visible effects on the traveler. Lanark travels in a metal bird, which extracts its flying energy from the very (temporal) future of



the protagonists. Boycotted, harassed and drugged, the character will fail in his messianic mission. He will die of old age, like an ordinary man.

Alasdair Gray’s demiurgical strategy consists in the fact that, during the supreme audience in which he attempts to rescue the city of Unthank, the king Lanark presents himself before is actually the author of the book (about) *Lanark*. Thus, the author explains to his character his life and his book, as well as the type of reading that he prefers and that appears to be a hermeneutic of the self. The first basic law: the author is the Illusionist. The second basic law: both the author and the character live exclusively on and through the seduction of the reader, whose soul must be captured (the imagination of the reader is an essential energy)! The third basic law: the fascinating character is always the one who fails on his mission. The reader needs vanquished characters, not victors, since failure is always more captivating to read about than triumph! To shed light on these facts to the reader and the character, the author offers an Index of famous works from which he has minimally “plagiarized” (by distortions) in writing *Lanark*, and he also names the most famous texts dedicated to failure that have influenced him – from the Homeric epics to the Gospels, *Don Quixote*, *Faust*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Moby Dick*.

The multi-layered construction deliberately highlights its hybridity, to induce a state of confusion. Uneasiness is also induced through the blending of styles: from the realistic to the absurd fantastic or to the SF paradigm. The second demonstration of the author concerns the handling of the temporal and spatial dimensions in a novel with parallel worlds: Alasdair Gray’s

lesson proves to be both complicated and simple. The author plays in part with the theory of relativity, but without a clear purpose in mind. Gray is precisely interested in the blurring of boundaries and in ambiguity: the mouths/valves through which people arrive at the Institute or through which they disappear, being sucked into extinction, are intriguing. Time can be branched out at any time (and space as well): the necessary tools are breaches or gaps – and they can be constructed at any time or thought out at least relatively well by a creator. Throughout the narrative of *Lanark*, we come across such breaches, as if the author left fragments of his theory in the text, strewn along the way (in an ascending or descending approach), to help us understand how reality can be fractured and pulverized. Truth thus becomes a container full of holes and gaps, which are encouraged to open gradually. The apogee is not essential to such an approach: that explains why the avatar character, Lanark, not only fails in his messianic initiative, but ends up perishing in a trivial normality. Lanark’s apogee is precisely his failure, and a triumph would not necessarily have made him more fascinating or captivating as a character.

### Posthuman Speculations

Rosi Braidotti states that “[p]osthumanism is the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives.”<sup>1</sup> The syntagm *new alternatives* is essential, for the alternatives to humanism are classified with the help of the new

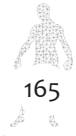


technologies and the new ethics; advanced technology isn't the issue in Gray's novel, for example, but rather ethics, more precisely bioethics. The dissolution of human corporeality, the process of melting, of becoming invertebrate, raises a bioethical question present in posthumanist theories. Are we returning to the state of amoebas or of amorphous teratological entities? Are such human-derived life forms ethical or not? Are we in the stage of trans-speciation or of symbioses that are reminiscent of the idea of post-genesis or new genesis? Are we compelled to return to the beginnings of life before the existence of man, scientifically speaking, hence, the biological change coeval with the posthuman stage, even if this is not a regression?

Braidotti is concerned with defining the posthuman as an intellectual undertaking and a cognitive support for addressing an ardent question of our time, a question that the novel *Lanark* also raises: "how might we resist the inhuman(e) aspects of our era?"<sup>2</sup> Is the solution rational, scientific and philosophical, or is it a practical therapeutic approach? The answer depends on the moment, position and place (platform) where the transition can be made from the human to posthuman. Alasdair Gray suggests that a necro-technology is deployed towards the liquefaction of hominids, as part of a project of extinction and not of a healing process, this extinction being dependent on an involutive perception of humanity. Braidotti believes that "[t]he new necro-technologies operate in a social climate dominated by a political economy of nostalgia and paranoia on the one hand, and euphoria or exaltation on the other."<sup>3</sup> Gray's anti-utopia is circumscribed exclusively by a paranoid and only partially nostalgic perception, but devoid

of any exaltation or euphoria. Braidotti is not inhibited by the overstepping of human boundaries in the speculations on the post-human condition, as she finds and defines an entity of microcosmic valence or a generating stasis or a matrix of life which she calls a *zoe* and which is no longer strictly dependent on definitions within the limits of the human, but can be configured beyond them. The present world is de-anthropomorphized in certain regards, and this must not necessarily be seen or judged negatively, as long as there is *zoe*, as a "vital force of life."<sup>4</sup> What is essential is organic intelligence, even if it no longer has an anthropomorphic character; the defining fact becomes the interrelation or the interactive process between species – thus, *zoe* could be more important as the matrix of life than the classical and canonical *anthropos*. Alasdair Gray merely flirts with such speculations, but does not assume them definitively, because what interests him is the ambiguity of the life system in which he projects his anti-utopian characters. Certainly, the Scottish author would not allow such a revolutionary thought, scientifically speaking, as the one advanced by Braidotti: "Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn."<sup>5</sup> It is not the differences between the different life forms that matter, but their possible interrelation and what they might derive from this, or more precisely, the extent to which hybridization between species and life forms could be successful. By such a proposal, hominids would come out of their hybris of supreme creatures, leaving the dominant anthropocentric equation.

Long before Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles explained the way in which it is necessary to disengage from post-human



times, renouncing, at least theoretically, the anthropocentric conception, as this would not lead to a state of orphanism or involution or cognitive failure: “But the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human.”<sup>6</sup> Posthumanism implies a bioethical dimension, whether this is related to the evolution of human flesh (through various prostheses or electronic, mechanical and digital extensions) or its involution to an invertebrate and liquefied state, as it appears in Alasdair Gray's novel. Cary Wolfe interrogates the idea of maladies, regardless of the (evolutional or involutive) orientation of the human body, and finds that the human being is a patient, according to the policies applied in the field of health and medicine.<sup>7</sup> The healings and subhuman illnesses in Gray's novel relate to a posthumanist bioethics. What is legal or legitimate in the way in which species interfere and, from one point, they become so hybridized that they can no longer be individualized like in their original stage? And how can we still define man in a subhuman-human-superhuman equation, in which the superhuman is (or becomes) a technological extension of man?! The anthropocentric vision is fractured or marginalized, it becomes secondary or even tertiary. A *No man's land* is outlined – and here I am referring precisely to Gray's novel. The non-vertebrate characters in Gray's novel do not

become non-human, but rather a-human. I wonder whether the Scottish author proposes, albeit not explicitly, a discussion about speciesism, if he does not problematize this -ism, since his nonvertebrates are derived from people, who have become ill. But would this be a post-human or anti-human speciesism? When classifying hominids into vertebrates and liquefied or into people who have fallen prey or not to dragon disease, Gray ascertains the disease, but does not engage in species chauvinism, even though such discrimination is present symbolically. This is what the attempts at healing the sick plead for, and this healing possibility does not depend on belonging to a particular species. Something related to speciesism exists, however, in Gray's novel: an inherent moral significance ascribed to the vertebrates, to the detriment of the liquefied.

All this discussion, including its applicability to a novel such as *Lanark*, depends on the cultural instruments we operate with, and the panoply of concepts is quite broad: inhuman, non-human, a-human, posthuman, these are the terms inventoried by Neil Badminton (though not that of anti-human).<sup>8</sup> As for the latter term, Badminton insists, like Cary Wolfe, on the idea that the posthuman does not involve a finality, a failure, an fiasco, but a “working-through of – what follows the prefix.”<sup>9</sup> Alasdair Gray would certainly agree with him.

## WORKS CITED

- Badminton, Neil, *Alien Chic. Posthumanism and the Other Within*, London & New York, Routledge, 2004
- Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013
- Gray, Alasdair, *Lanark*, traducere de Magda Teodorescu, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2008
- Hayles, N. Katherine, *How We Become Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1999
- Wolfe, Cary, *What is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 2010



## NOTES

1. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, p. 37.
2. *Ibidem*, p. 3.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 9.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 60.
5. *Ibidem*.
6. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Become Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 286.
7. Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 51.
8. Neil Badminton, *Alien Chic. Posthumanism and the Other Within*, London & New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 126.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 144.