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Stephen R. Jones

Action at a Distance: Narrative Structure and Technique in Iain Banks' *Whit*

In *Whit* (1995) Iain Banks, as he does throughout his work, employs narrative structure and technique to layer his story with multiple themes and manipulate the reader's experience of the text. One of the most common ways he does this is through the use and manipulation of a traditional quest narrative. This type of narrative centers on the often physical journey of a protagonist in search of an object, the location and return of which will restore normality to the protagonist's world. Prior to *Whit* Banks has employed variations of this form in, among others, *The Crow Road* (1992), *Against a Dark Background* (1993), and *Complicity* (1993). In all of his novels the resolution of this movement involves the protagonist experiencing some form of personal enlightenment, such as Frank's discovery of his true identity in *The Wasp Factory* (1984). To create and manipulate this structure Banks uses, reuses and adapts particular narrative techniques, the most common of which are flashbacks, foreshadowing, and foregrounding. These techniques also function to create structures within the text that assist Banks' exploration of certain recurring themes, the most common of these being the nature of truth, religion, and self-discovery. Banks employs all of these techniques and themes in *Whit* to create a structure that shapes the reader's experience of the text to mimic that of its protagonist. By using the narrative theories of Labov and Propp¹ to

¹William Labov, *Language in the Inner City* (Oxford, 1977) and Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Austin, 1968). The application of this combination of theories is

outline *Whit*'s structure and then examining the function of the secondary narrative and the application and effect of Banks' techniques, it is possible to describe how he combines structure, technique and theme to create a reading experience that mirrors Isis Whit's experience of constantly changing truths.

The plot of *Whit* is presented through two narratives. The primary narrative relates Isis' adventures in London and Scotland and is punctuated by the secondary narrative, which relates the history of her community. To help readers unfamiliar with the novel's plot, it is summarized below, in chronological rather than narrative order.

The novel's narrator, Isis Whit, is the granddaughter of Salvador Whit, the Founder and Overseer of a religious cult who inhabit a communal farm near Stirling. Luskentyrianism begins in 1948 after Salvador is found washed up on a Harris beach by Aasni and Zhobelia Asis who revive him with a mysterious ointment from Khalmakistan known as *zhlonjiz* from Khalmakstan. Gaining consciousness and unable to find his valuable canvas bag, or remember who he is, the concussed Salvador has a religious vision which he writes down in what later becomes the Luskentyrian's holy text, the *Orthography*. Acting on "instructions from God," Salvador marries the sisters and begins spreading the word of the Luskentyrian faith. Moving to Stirlingshire following the bequeathment of a farm by a follower, the Order continues to grow. After both his son and his granddaughter are born on February 29, Salvador's own birthday, he declares that those born into the Order on this day are "Leapyearians." The eldest of these is to be his successor and named the Elect of God. When their father, mother and paternal grandmother, Aasni, are accidentally killed in the "Great Fire," Isis becomes Salvador's heir, the Elect of God, rather than her older brother Allan. After this tragedy, Isis' great-aunt Zhobelia mysteriously disappears from the community. Isis' position as an Elect of God is strengthened when it is discovered that she has a supernatural gift for healing. Salvador then establishes the Festival of Love, a four-yearly event where copulation is encouraged in the hope that new Leapyearians' will be conceived.

When it is discovered through a letter that Isis' cousin Morag, a world renowned musician, has become apostate and refuses to return from London for the upcoming Festival of Love, Isis is sent to retrieve her. With the aid of her cousin Zebediah, now living in a squat in London, Isis discovers that Morag has become a porn star but fails to find her. Isis returns to the Order with her maternal grandmother Yolanda where she is accused of betraying the Order by stealing the last vial of *zhlonjiz*. Acting, once more, under the "instructions of God," Salvador attempts to "forgive" Isis with a failed seduction and attempted rape. Following this ordeal, Isis discovers that Allan faked Morag's apostasy and planted the *zhlonjiz* in her kit-bag as part of his plan to take her place as

the Elect of God. Discovering Zhobelia in a nursing home, Isis learns that the Gift is handed down through the female side of the family, that Zhobelia caused Salvador's visions by whispering to him while he slept, and that the mystical and rare *zhlonjiz* is a compound of Sloane's liniment and various herbs and spices. Zhobelia also tells Isis that she and her sister found Salvador's canvas bag containing twenty-nine thousand pounds, which Aasni eventually burnt, causing the Great Fire. Using this information, an old army pay book and the last bank note from Salvador's bag, Isis discovers that Salvador was originally Moray Black, a petty criminal who deserted the Army with a large amount of stolen money. While running from the Army, Moray stowed away aboard the *SS Salvador* and was washed overboard in a storm off the coast of Harris. Isis then returns to the Order with Morag and Zhobelia where she confronts Salvador with the truth and exposes Allan as her betrayer. She then takes over the running of the Order, retaining Salvador as the figurehead and placing Allan in a powerless administrative post.

The structure of *Whit*, as mentioned above, is primarily a conventional quest narrative similar to that previously used in *Against A Dark Background*. However, this basic structure is complicated by the continually changing nature of the quest's objective and the addition of a secondary narrative, a technique also employed in *The Crow Road*, to relate the McHoan Families history, and *Complicity*, to present the anonymous serial killer's perspective. In *Whit* the reader's expectations of a traditional quest structure are used to create a truth, supported by the secondary narrative, which each shift of objective then disrupts. Quest narratives, like other folk tale structures, adhere closely to a structure based around the movement from a disruption to a resolution. In *Language in the Inner City* (pp. 362-70) Labov identifies the basic units of narrative structure that constitute this movement, and in *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* (pp. 79-83) Propp identifies the eight basic roles that characters must fulfill to enable the movement from disruption to resolution. Applied to the quest narrative, and more specifically to *Whit*, these units and roles function in the following ways:

The Abstract previews the story, summarizing the events to come and establishing the themes. In *Whit* this is formed by the first section of Chapter 1 where Isis is introduced in the character role of *Hero*. Describing Isis' first experience of her supernatural power, Banks shows her wondering "whether whatever gift I had could act at a distance."² The notion of action at a distance is signaled as a key to meaning. This highlights Isis' ability to question established notions of truth and identity and in turn foregrounds the truth and self-belief as the true objects of the quest and the narrative's main themes

The Orientation involves creating the story's normality by establishing its rules and characters. Having performed the "are you sitting comfortably"

²Iain Banks, *Whit* (London, 1996), p. 4. Henceforth *Whit*.

function, Banks then uses the rest of Chapter 1 to establish the normality of Isis' world. This includes expanding the possibility of the supernatural, describing the basis of Luskentyrianism, introducing the society and characters of High Easter Offerance and establishing the facts that will support the narrative's internal reality. Chapter 2 continues this task but switches to concentrate on Isis' character, reinforcing both her inquisitive nature and her naivety.

The narrative then moves to its *Complicating Action* where the reality established in the orientation is threatened and a hero is dispatched to retrieve an object or person that will restore normality. In *Whit* Isis is dispatched to retrieve Morag whose apparent apostasy has disrupted the Order's normality. The reader is led to believe that Isis' grandfather Salvador occupies the role of Dispatcher (whose function is to send the hero on his or her quest), and that Morag's role is that of *The Princess*, the character or object sought by the Hero.

Labov's next stage, *Evaluation*, involves creating a pause between the task and its completion to warn the reader that the resolution is imminent. This is achieved in *Whit* by the insertion of a summary of the events leading up to Isis's failure to find Morag and prior to her own return home. This signals the end of the initial quest. However, it is apparent to the reader that, with fifteen chapters left and the object still not retrieved, the story is far from its resolution.

In the remaining chapters of *Whit* several new *complicating actions* occur and the focus of the quest shifts from a physical goal to a more abstract one. Isis is accused of betrayal, Salvador attempts to rape her, and she discovers Allan's plot to usurp her. The disruption is no longer just of the Order but of Isis' place in it, her trust of her closest relatives, and her perception of the truth. These new complicating actions also change certain characters' roles. Morag changes from *The Princess* into a *Helper* (who provides information that helps the hero locate the *Donor*), Allan moves into the roles of *Villain* and *Dispatcher*, while Salvador swaps *Dispatcher* for *Villain*. Isis' great-aunt Zhobelia is now identified as the *Donor* (who supplies the Hero with the magic object) and Isis' task becomes to find her and learn the truth about her grandfather, shifting the role of the *Princess* from Morag to the more abstract notion of "the truth of the Order's foundation."

This new set of *complicating actions* is then followed with a second *Evaluation*. Having found Zhobelia, gained possession of the "magic object" and discovered the truth about Salvador, Isis reviews her situation and sums up the choices she must make. This provides a dramatic pause before the resolution and reminds the reader of the novel's themes.

The *Resolution* involves the completion of the task and the restoration of normality to Isis's world. Isis confronts Salvador and Allan and takes over as the Order's new leader. The character roles are again changed by the confrontation of Salvador and the exposing of Allan, who acquires the additional

role of *False Hero* whose function is to masquerade as, or attempt to usurp, the *Hero*.

The final unit, *the Coda*, is the “happy ever after” section summarizing the story and supplying the moral. The final section of Chapter 29 deals with Isis and her ability to heal, making connections back to the abstract with its references to healing, “action at a distance,” and storytelling. This circularity brings the narrative to closure, revealing the real objects of the quest to have been truth and self-belief.

This basic structure is complicated by a secondary narrative recounting the story of how the Order came into being, from Salvador’s arrival on Harris to the Great Fire that killed Isis’ parents. This serves to establish what Isis believes to be the truth about the Order’s development. As the primary narrative progresses, the truth established in the secondary narrative is undermined until Zhobelia’s version of events finally reveals the accepted truth of the secondary narrative to be false when the two narratives merge in Chapter 24.

As demonstrated above, all of Labov’s and Propp’s units can be found in *Whit*. However, Banks complicates Labov’s narrative movement and, playing on the reader’s expectations, makes Morag’s rescue appear to be Isis’ primary task. This initial quest is used to lead Isis into a situation where truth changes from a constant to a fluctuating entity. This is then reflected in the narrative structure by presenting the quest’s goal and character roles as constantly changing. This structure places the reader in a similar situation to Isis where truths are gradually revealed to be falsehoods. The secondary narrative in this respect serves to make the reader accept the story of Luskentyrianism as the established truth, which is then undermined by events in the primary narrative.

To create a structure that achieves this, Banks uses several narrative techniques. Flashbacks, fore-shadowing, and a secondary narrative help to create a structure that builds and then destroys notions of truth, while literary references are used to push the reader into making incorrect interpretations.

Although *Whit* has a definite linear narrative tracing Isis’ experience between 1st and 15th May 1995, the events between these dates are punctuated by flashbacks involving Isis’ memories and experiences. These flashbacks take two forms, those that involve a shift to Isis’ childhood, and those that, preceded by a flash-forward, involved the narrative’s present and disrupt its linearity.

The use of flashbacks of the first type is established in the abstract section of Chapter 1 where Isis’ memory of her first healing is used to establish the novel’s main themes:

I was in my room reading a book.

I turned a page.... Suddenly a dizziness struck me, and I was acutely aware of the paper’s thin dryness, rough against the skin of my fingers and seemingly conducting some powerful, disorienting energy from it to me. I sat as if stunned for a moment,

while the unbidden memory of my first Healing coursed through me, suffused with the light of a distant season.

It was a hot summer's day; one of those close, still afternoons when a distant haze over the hills or across the plain might become thunder before the evening, and stone walls and outcrops of naked rock will give off small bursts of sweet, heated air when you walk close by (*Whit*, p. 3).

Banks first sets up one situation and then shifts from it to Isis' recollection of another. Isis, as the narrator, is recalling both situations from memory. However, the present situation concerning the quest is the main recollection. The flashback is secondary, but helps to establish the novel's reality and emphasize its themes. By flashing back within the first page Banks draws attention to the importance of the Healing both to Isis and as a key to interpretation. This introduces a skewed reality that raises the possibility of the supernatural and also serves to establish Isis' self-doubt, facilitating later thematic developments. Its position within the first chapter also indicates the importance of flashbacks within the novel's structure.

The type of flashback also helps to establish the importance of symbols in the novel and provides an insight into Isis' relationship with both her cousin and her Grandfather:

While I was lying there still trying to sleep, I thought of my cousin Morag, the apostate, and recalled once sitting with her on the platform of the Deivoxiphone, in the warm sunlight of summer four years ago when she was the age I am now and I was fifteen (*Whit*, p. 94).

This modulates from present narrative to flashback in the same way as before and establishes the flashback's two subjects, the Deivoxiphone and Morag. The recollection of the Deivoxiphone provides an insight into Salvador's relationship with his granddaughter and signals the importance of symbols in the novel:

My Grandfather had been dubious, thinking the device had too much of an aura of clutter about it, but he could refuse me nothing.... I did not, of course, believe that we would literally be able to hear the voice of God any better...but as a symbol of our ideals I thought it was powerful and important (I was going through a serious stage at that age and objects and stories which seemed symbolic meant a lot to me) (*Whit*, pp. 94-5).

Salvador's fondness for his granddaughter (from Isis' perspective) is made clear through his willingness to bend the rules for her, which also suggests a willingness to bend them for himself. The description of the Deivoxiphone as a symbol indicates that objects in the narrative are symbolic and that to Isis the story itself is a symbol. The description of the device as an "instrument" in the next paragraph may also indicate that instruments are to be seen as symbolic.

If this is the case, then Isis' church organ, Allan's electric organ and, most importantly, Salvador as an instrument of God, can be seen as indicating various things about each character. By associating Isis and Allan with traditional and modern types of the same instrument, Banks indicates major differences in both their personalities and their ideas of the future of the Order. In playing a traditional wind-powered organ, Isis adheres to the Order's beliefs about technology, making her a Luskentyrian traditionalist. In contrast, the apparently trivial remark that Allan once "played some form of portable electric organ" (*Whit*, p. 63) in a London rock group foregrounds Allan's modernizing ambitions. The foregrounding of instruments as symbolic also suggests that Salvador's position as a mouthpiece of God is symbolic. Coupled with the foregrounding of religious symbols as arbitrary and accidental (discussed below), this suggests that Salvador is important as a symbol of the Order's beliefs rather than as an actual prophet.

The second flashback technique found in *Whit* is used to disrupt the linearity of the quest narrative. Banks does this by jumping forward in time, placing Isis in a situation and then jumping back to explain how this situation arose. This scene framing occurs in Banks' previous work only once, in a less complicated form, in *The Crow Road*. This technique first appears in *Whit* at the end of Chapter 2 with a promise of disruption to the Order's reality. "I arrived back at High Easter Offerance to find disturbance and alarms, a disaster in the making and a War Council in progress (*Whit*, p. 37). This ends the chapter with a suggestion that the complicating action is about to occur. This expectation is then confounded by the beginning of Chapter 3:

The next morning, while the dawn was still just a grey presence in the quiet mists above, I splashed into the waters of the river just downstream from the iron bridge, my feet squelching through the chill mud under the brown water. On the steep bank above, under the somber canopy of the drooping trees, in a silent, massed presence, stood almost every adult of our Community (*Whit*, p. 41).

The chapter leaps ahead to the following morning leaving the reader unaware of what has happened. This works to delay the revelation of the complicating action, which is then delayed further by the insertion of an orientating section where Isis' departure on an old inner tube is described. Banks ends this section with the same technique, prolonging the suspense:

I set my mouth in a tight line and paddled away down stream, heading for the sea and the city of Edinburgh, where my mission would take me first to the home of Gertie Possil (*Whit*, p. 42).

Here the reader is made aware of a mission and an initial destination; curiosity is raised higher and the reader is pulled further into the narrative. The next section of Chapter 3 jumps back to the previous evening and explains how Isis found herself floating down the Forth:

'What?' I asked appalled.

'Your cousin Morag,' Grandfather Salvador told me, 'has written from England to say that not only is she not returning for the festival at the end of the month, but she has found what she calls a Truer Way to God. She has sent back our last monthly grant to her.'

'But that's terrible!' I cried. 'What false faith can have poisoned her mind!' (*Whit*, p. 42).

Here the initial complicating action is finally revealed and the reader is informed of the War Council's meeting and its final decision to send Isis to retrieve Morag. After a religious service Isis retires to bed and the narrative jumps forward again:

The day brightened slowly around me. I paddled through the swelling dawn chorus and beneath the drifting mists, between the mud and grass of the river banks where puzzled-looking cattle stared big-eyed at my passing (*Whit*, p. 51).

This is followed by a brief explanation of the Order's theology and then a return to Isis further down the river. The narrative then jumps back again to early that morning before Isis' departure, setting up the opportunity for her later betrayals. This technique is employed only when Isis is traveling and can be seen to bear a relation to the Order's idiosyncratic modes of travel, most significantly "back bussing." This presentation of information in a non-linear fashion not only disrupts the narrative, providing suspense and dramatic pauses, but also reflects Isis' ways of thinking as influenced by her upbringing in the Order. The general effect of this is to make the reader's journey through the text resemble Isis' journey yo-yoing around Britain, slowly collecting the scraps of information that eventually alter her perception of the truth. In the reader's case, however, this truth needs to be first established and this is achieved by the use of a secondary narrative.

The secondary narrative is told during dramatic pauses in the primary narrative and concerns Salvador's apparent past. By communicating his story through Isis in a separate narrative, Banks shows the reader what Isis believes to be the truth. However, Banks manipulates the reader's trust in Isis as a reliable narrator to make him/her accept this version of Salvador's story as definitive. The reader's experience therefore mimics Isis' in that he/she is made reliant upon a single authority and then, by the end of the novel, witnesses its destruction. This is similar to Banks' use, in *Complicity*, of a second-person secondary narrative that makes the reader complicit with the actions of the novel's serial killer and thereby helps to build the novel's main theme of complicity into its structure.

The secondary narrative begins during Isis' journey down the Forth to Edinburgh. The shift is made in a similar way to the shifts into flashbacks in that Isis introduces the subject of the narrative first in a short segue paragraph:

If I was finding my journey tiring and painful, I reflected that it was as nothing compared to the seminal aquatic rebirth undergone by my Grandfather, four and a half decades earlier (*Whit*, p. 63).

After the idea of a secondary narrative as part of *Whit*'s structure is introduced, its subsequent appearances simply jump from primary to secondary narrative without any warning. For example, chapter 5 ends with the following sentence:

A minute later, the train gave a series of jerks and started moving forward again, gathering speed and taking me away from Edinburgh, heading south (*Whit*, p. 88).

While chapter 6 begins with:

The day after the great storm, Aasni and Zhobelia scraped my Grandfather clean of tea and lard and took him to the farm of Mr Eoin McLlone, the free-thinker who had offered shelter to the sisters before (*Whit*, p. 91).

This section of secondary narrative is presented, like the first, during a lull in the primary narrative. By choosing moments where little is happening to relate Salvador's story, Banks uses the structure of the primary to accommodate the secondary. This technique cleverly avoids either disjointing gaps with no narrative purpose or dull linking descriptions of Isis' journeys.

Like scene framing, the secondary narrative is also used to create suspense; for example, chapter 8 ends with "Urgent action was obviously called for. What I really needed to do was talk to God" (*Whit*, p. 132), while chapter 9 begins:

I think my grandfather still holds that one of his greatest achievements of his ministry was the conversion of Mr. McLlone to the set of beliefs which at the time our Founder was still in the act of formulating (*Whit*, p. 135).

The secondary narrative then relates the story of Salvador's first convert. The event foreshadowed at the end of chapter 9 is delayed first by the secondary narrative and then by a jump forward in the primary narrative to a later conversation:

'Well it smells like that liniment stuff me mother used to slap on us as soon as we coughed out of turn,' Dec said, flopping into a huge cushion beside me (*Whit*, p. 137).

The primary narrative then jumps back to Isis' attempt at talking to God: "I had partaken of the precious *zhlonjiz* unguent some hours earlier, in my loft bedroom.... In short it didn't work" (*Whit*, pp. 137-8). The delay in recounting Isis' ritual causes a dramatic tension that is then deflated by Bank's description of the ritual. However, the comedy of this distracts the reader from the real

purpose of this section, which is to signpost the true nature of *zhlonjiz* as liniment mixed with herbs and spices. Banks plays with the reader, presenting significant information as a trivial detail. What seems important is Isis' failure to communicate with God, not that her magic potion smells like a mundane lotion.

The secondary narrative's final function is to explain the Order's rituals mentioned in passing in the primary narrative. This technique allows the novel's reality to be presented smoothly without any disjuncting sections of exposition; for example, in chapter 3, a ritual is described involving lard and tea. The mystical *zhlonjiz* is also mentioned:

In the center of the table stands a small wooden box which contains a vial of our holiest substance, *zhlonjiz*, while behind it stands a tall Russian samovar on a battered silver tray.... Sister Astar filled a large bowl with tea.... The tea was just ordinary tea, but tea has great symbolic value for us.... Next came a plate containing a slab of common household lard; this too was passed around (*Whit*, p. 47).

No explanation for the use of these substances is given, which arouses the reader's curiosity and prompts the question: how did such mundane substances gain religious significance? This is answered in the secondary narrative. Upon finding Salvador washed up on the shore, Aasni and Zhebilia attempt to revive him using the only materials they have to hand:

Aasni remembered that people who swam the English Channel would cover themselves with grease, and so they broke out the lard... Zhebilia opened the special chest her grandmother had sent her from Khalmakistan on her twentieth birthday and took out the bottle of the cherished leaning ointment called *zhlonjiz*... she made a poultice and put it on the wound. The man still shivered. They didn't want to get their coats covered in lard, so they opened one of the chests of tea...and tipped the dark tea leaves over the man's quivering, white-larded form (*Whit*, p. 67).

The significance of the three substances is therefore revealed and the symbolic value of the tea and the lard is shown to be a by-product of necessity. Through this technique Banks indicates the arbitrary nature of religious symbolism. However, while the source of *zhlonjiz*'s importance is revealed, its true nature remains a mystery. While the techniques discussed above create a structure that allows truth to be created and disrupted, a further technique is employed to ensure that this action does not destroy the novel's reality. To establish in the reader's mind the truth of the world in which *Whit* is set, Banks foreshadows important events with apparently trivial events. This technique also facilitates the reversal of truth that both Isis and the reader experience. One of the most important examples of this concerns Salvador's "divinely sanctioned rolling revision" (*Whit*, p. 19) of the Orthography. The first indication that rules can be changed and visions reinterpreted is presented as a conversation between Isis and two converts concerning the Heresy of Size:

The Heresy of Size came about when a few of Grandfather's original followers, misunderstanding his teachings on the physicality of the soul, decided that the bigger and fatter one was, the larger a receiver one presented for God's signals and so the better one would hear God's Voice. Perhaps the fact that Salvador had filled out somewhat over the previous few years to become an impressive and substantial figure had something to do with the Sizist Heresy...had they been able to see photographs of Salvador when he first appeared on the sisters' doorstep, when he was, apparently, quite skinny, they might not have deceived themselves so (*Whit*, pp. 11-12).

This establishes that the interpretation of Salvador's visions has occasionally been problematic and neatly introduces the lack of evidence, photographic or otherwise, of Salvador's past life. This mention of the Heresy of Size initially seems to be a trivial aside with the single function of filling out the Order's reality. However, it also allows a later and more significant heresy, the Heresy of Prudishness, to slot into the narrative without disrupting its reality.

The Heresy of Prudishness was a result of grandfather originally teaching that while it was wrong to restrict sexual relations between people of the same generation, it was right to do so *between* generations. He later amended this to specify that only if one full generation lay between the two people concerned should their love be forbidden (*Whit*, p. 227).

Salvador's reinterpretation of his laws and the unquestioning acceptance of his followers are therefore made credible by previous events. This also serves to establish the flexibility of Salvador's teachings and, being connected to sex, indicates that the reinterpretations may be inspired by something other than the divine. The revelation that the entire Luskentyrian faith is based on lies is therefore built into the novel's narrative structure in such a way that the reader barely notices it. However, when the truth is finally destroyed, because of the subtle foreshadowing of the possibility of multiple interpretations, this is made believable within the novel's reality. Banks can, therefore, be seen carefully to structure the novel to contain this disruption and maintain the reader's belief using the Orthography and other works of literature to create and then undermine false notions of truth.

Throughout the novel Banks employs literary references as a technique for truth building. The references are, like his use of narrative structure, used to create and then frustrate reader expectation. They build a false concept of the truth in the reader's mind and shape the reading experience to echo Isis' physical experience. At the beginning of her quest, Isis is given a kitbag containing several books, including a copy of the Orthography. This book is referred to throughout *Whit* and, as discussed above, is itself used to foreground the possibility of a changing truth. This is further demonstrated when Isis lists the literary contents of her kitbag: "The kit-bag contained a copy of the Orthography (with Salvador's most recent amendments hastily written it by myself from our

notes)" (*Whit*, p. 51). The amendments to the Orthography foreground Salvador's truth; as received from God, as open to re-interpretation. This is then transferable to all truths within *Whit* and ultimately to Salvador's version of the events that lead to Order's creation. This list of books continues:

old, battered but beautiful leather-bound pocket editions of *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, *Waverley* by Walter Scott, *Paradise Lost* by John Milton and Maunder's *Treasury of Knowledge* (*Whit*, p.51).

The inclusion of these texts within Isis' kitbag identifies them as important to Isis and prompts the reader to draw comparisons between the texts mentioned and *Whit* itself. This creates expectations in the reader as to the route that the plot will take. The information the reader has been given presents Isis as a member of an obscure religious cult about to undertake a journey from Scotland to England through a world of unbelievers of whose culture she is almost totally ignorant. In this context certain parallels can be drawn between *Whit* and the other texts. The parallel with *The Pilgrim's Progress* may create an expectation of a religious quest with a final clear goal. As a Scot traveling into England, Isis' mission can also be read as a reverse parallel of *Waverley*. This parallel is strong enough to suggest that as *Waverley* is wooed by the Jacobites, so Isis may be distracted from her goal by the Un-saved. The inclusion of *Paradise Lost* in the kitbag suggests temptation and invites a reading of Isis as an Eve tempted by the serpent of late twentieth-century technological luxury. More importantly, it foregrounds the gaining of forbidden knowledge leading to the questioning of a God and creating a threat to an idyllic existence in the Luskentyrian community. Maunder's *Treasury of Knowledge* is a compendium of facts published during the 1830s and therefore pre-dating many modern scientific advancements. The inclusion of this in Isis' kitbag suggests an adherence to old knowledge and a reluctance to embrace technological progress. The texts referred to later in the novel are also made significant by their place in the narrative, creating expectations and illuminating aspects of the plot.

At one point Orwell's writing of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is paralleled with Salvador's initial version of the Orthography. "Meanwhile, Mr Orwell, on another Hebridean island, near the whirlpool, wrote what he almost called 1948" (*Whit*, p. 136). Salvador's continual changing of the Orthography can be seen to echo Big Brother's continually changing representation of history. Both figureheads abuse their positions to impose a truth on their subjects that maintains their power. Again the reference creates associations and expectations of the established truth being false, and also the possibility that, like Winston Smith, Isis will uphold that truth even after she has discovered its falsity.

While contemplating her response to accusations of betrayal Isis retires to the library where, she narrates, "I picked up a copy of *The Prince* and read a

few of my favourite passages" (*Whit*, p.265). This apparently incidental act foregrounds the deceptions Isis engages in, to prove her innocence, expose Salvador and then gain control of the Order. The mention of this book late in the narration, and its jarring with her other reading materials, indicates that Isis is more calculating than she allows the reader to believe. That she is familiar with Machiavelli also helps to account for her behavior during the final chapters when she finds her position within the Order threatened.

The use of literary reference has two purposes, to foreground events and make them plausible, thus supporting the reality of the world of *Whit*, and to create certain expectations of the narrative. These are then disappointed or, in the case of Orwell and Machiavelli, fulfilled by the narrative's plot, adding to the creation of a truth in the reader's mind that is eventually shown to be false.

As I have shown above, Banks uses a number of techniques to create a reading experience that echoes the actions of the plot. These techniques all contribute to the creation of reader expectations of the truth before confounding them. The techniques are also employed to maintain the novel's internal reality and therefore avoid a disappointing conclusion. These techniques also work to explore and expand the novel's themes.

The flashback technique employed throughout the novel to disrupt the quest narrative and to maintain internal reality also serves to introduce and develop themes. The first flashback of the novel, discussed above, introduces both Isis' self-doubt and her questioning of her identity as represented by the Gift:

Later—years later, with the benefit of a more mature perspective on that vivid childhood instant—I was to recall precisely (or at least seem to) what I had felt when I'd lifted the fox off the ground, and, troubled, ask myself whether whatever Gift I had could act at a distance (*Whit*, p.4).

Memories are foregrounded as important and it is through the memories of Isis and other characters that important details are revealed. Isis' doubt of the accuracy of her memory is also important in highlighting its subjective nature, and the possibility that different characters will remember the same events differently. This in turn leads to the theme of the nature of truth, suggesting that, like memory, truth is subjective.

The religious themes are explored mainly through foregrounding and foreshadowing. By establishing the three main symbols of the Order through a description of rituals and then later revealing the symbols' source of meaning to be accident or deceit, the arbitrary nature of religious symbol, and, by extension, religious ritual and religious belief, is revealed. The ultimate revelation of this point comes from the disparity between Salvador's and Zhobelia's versions of events. The opposition between the two narratives has the effect of emphasizing several of the themes. Most obviously, the different versions of events emphasize the subjective nature of truth. The truth established by the

secondary narrative is revealed to be false through events in the primary narrative. The sisters withheld the truth about the *zhlonjiz*, the money, and the “visions” from Salvador and therefore, as far as he was aware, his version of the Order’s formation was the truth. Salvador himself also withholds information, thereby altering others’ perceptions of the truth. By not telling the sisters and subsequently anyone else of his previous criminal life, he controls their perceptions of him. He suppresses the truth about the foundation of the Order to protect himself from his past and in doing so devalues his followers’ faith in his teachings. By showing a religious cult based upon a selective truth, Banks suggests that, as with religious symbol, religious truth is created by mortals rather than passed down from immortals.

The opposition between the two narratives also highlights the feminist issues raised in the flashbacks as part of Isis’ questioning of her identity. The forthcoming Festival of Love and the Order’s expectation that she will conceive and give birth to an Elect of God causes her anxiety throughout the novel and raises the question of sexual choice and freedom. Isis constantly asks herself, and others, if she should follow the traditions of her faith, even though she does not yet feel ready for motherhood and is unsure of her sexuality. This can be seen to address pressures on young women in society to conform to social convention, becoming wives and mothers regardless of their own feelings. It also suggests the way that religious beliefs can be used to perpetuate such traditions. The belief that Isis herself is of the Elect is based on her being a Leapeyearian (born on February 29th like her father and her grandfather) and her possessing a “Gift” like Salvador. The position of Elect of God and ultimately of Overseer is in this way seen as originating and passing down from Salvador.

Zhobelia’s revelation that Isis’ gift has passed from female to female and that Salvador has no supernatural powers indicates that the real power behind the Order lies with the female line. Isis is therefore destined to lead the faith not because she is Salvador’s granddaughter but because Zhobelia is her great-aunt. Isis’ discovery of this truth, plus the advice she receives from her maternal grandmother Yolanda, enables her to make the decision not to participate in the Festival of Love until she feels ready.

While Zhobelia’s revelations connect all the themes for the reader, for Isis they remain unconnected and unresolved until the final chapter when, having restored normality, she contemplates her new position and relationship with her community:

Here was what mattered; here, looking out over these stunned, bewildered, awed, even fearful faces, *here* was action at a distance, here was palpable power, here was where belief—self-belief and shared belief—could truly signify.

Truth, I thought. *Truth*; there is no higher power. It is the ultimate name we give to our Maker (*Whit*, p. 455).

Isis finally finds self-enlightenment, discovering that her identity is connected not to her Gift but to her community. These two paragraphs reveal that she now associates action at a distance with power, belief and truth. They also show us that she has realized that her identity is bound up in her position within the Order and the power and responsibility connected to it. Consequently the importance of the Luskentyrian faith is the way it functions to bond a community together through a common belief, rather than its status as the word of God.

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