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Gavin Miller

The Cult of the White Goddess in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*

In *The White Goddess* Robert Graves wrote:

All saints revile her, and all sober men
Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean—
In scorn of which I sailed to find her
In distant regions likeliest to hold her
Whom I desired above all things to know¹

Michael Bell, amongst others, has noted the importance of primitivism to modernist literature: "Conrad, Eliot, Joyce and Yeats...four major modern writers, have all shown an interest in primitive life or ancient myth from the standpoint of their own civilization."² Primitivism is also important in modernist Scottish literature: the work of both Neil Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon, for example, frequently involves reference to an earlier mode of human existence. One of the most important post-war Scottish novels, Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, is a reaction to this characteristic of modernist writing—and, in particular, to the primitivism found in the literary theories of Robert Graves.

Duncan Thaw, the protagonist of the realist books of *Lanark*, is a parallel to, and a parody of, the primitively inspired modernist artist. Scotland, for

¹Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, 3rd edn. (London, 1952), p. 5. Henceforth *Goddess*.

²Michael Bell, *Primitivism, The Critical Idiom*, 20 (London, 1972), 48.

Gray, is a patriarchal society formed by the ascetic Protestantism of a more or less latent Calvinism. Scottish culture therefore has little space for adult males who, like Duncan Thaw, would indulge in the economically unproductive life of an artist. Thaw therefore tries to protect his artistic sensibilities by inventing a matriarchal lunar religion of which he is the priest. This is precisely the response also advocated in the forties and fifties by Thaw's real-life literary contemporary, Robert Graves. The latter's book, *The White Goddess*, contends that the artist should create an aristocratic lunar cult opposed to the rational, Apollonian religion which underlies modern political, economic, and scientific organization. The character of Thaw, though, can be seen to provide a skeptical counterpoint to Graves's primitivism. The worship of the white goddess perverts Thaw's art into a private fetishism, and destroys his capacity for meaningful human relationships. His quest for the sun, when reborn as Lanark, is, in truth, an attempt to escape this cultic isolation—he is searching not for a solar deity, but, instead, for a son whom he can love. Sandy, his son by Rima, offers Lanark an opportunity to escape from the stifling patriarchy which made such a mess of his earlier life as Duncan Thaw. Lanark's crucial mistake is to renounce this tender and loving relationship with his own son.

The potential of Lanark's relationship with Sandy contrasts sharply with the relationship between Mr. Thaw and Duncan. Mr. Thaw is unreceptive to his son's spontaneous interests, and attempts to direct them in a more scientific and technical direction:

[Thaw] drew a giant with a captured princess running along the brown line, and since he couldn't draw the princess lovely enough he showed the giant holding a sack. The princess was in the sack. His father looked over his shoulder and said, 'What's that you're drawing?'

Thaw said uneasily, 'A miller running to the mill with a bag of corn.'³

In order to smother his son's artistic orientations, Mr. Thaw acts as if Duncan's drawing were an inquiry into celestial mechanics: "Mr. Thaw got a golf ball and a table lamp and explained that the earth was like the ball and the sun like the lamp. Thaw was bored and puzzled" (*Lanark*, p. 121).

The situation is equally unpromising elsewhere in Gray's fiction. In 1982 *Janine*, for example, Jock McLeish's spontaneous inclinations are entirely stifled by the demands of Scottish patriarchy. Jock wonders if Hislop, his old teacher, may have been his biological father. His suspicion may be biologically unfounded, but it is existentially accurate: Jock is initiated into the community of Scottish masculinity by his relationship to Hislop. Ritualized punishment is the rite of passage by which a boy comes to be acknowledged as a

³Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (London, 1987), p. 121. Henceforth *Lanark*.

man: "[Hislop] smiled and nodded, slipping the Lochgelly over his shoulder under the jacket. He said gently, 'Go to your seat son. There's a spark of manhood in you.'"⁴ Jock's scriptural allusion reveals a theological significance in this ritual humiliation: "'The Lord Chastiseth whom he loveth,' says the bloody old Bible" (*Janine*, p. 86); or, as Paul's epistle expressed it, "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son he receiveth."⁵ God acknowledges as His kin those who accept His punishment:

If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?
But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons (Heb. 12.7-8).

The boys who are beaten so arbitrarily by Hislop therefore also acquire a mysterious guilt: "I did not tell my mother that he had belted me because I believed that getting hurt that way was a shameful thing" (*Janine*, p. 82). The theological allusions extend further: the pupils who attain manhood are inculcated with a sense of original sin—as the adult Jock remarks, "There is evil in me, which is why I deserve whatever I get" (*Janine*, p. 60).

This expectation of providential punishment suppresses Jock's authentic reaction to Helen's supposed pregnancy. Helen's father, like Hislop before him, is a spokesman for the Judeo-Christian religion: "as Mr Hume stonily raved and thundered like Moses on Mount Sinai he was talking about Denny, although he did not know it" (*Janine*, p. 299). His diatribe exploits Jock's original sin: "I must have already suspected I was shit for Mr Hume's words completely crushed me. I saw that I was a dirty bit of stupid wickedness and it was right that three men were flexing their muscles to punch me" (*Janine*, p. 299). Thus, though Jock does not love Helen, he sees her supposed pregnancy as the proverbial accident sent providentially to punish him for betraying Denny. He accepts his lot, and expresses an inauthentic desire to marry Helen: "I said softly, 'Please inform your daughter that I love her dearly and will marry her whenever she feels it best that I do so'" (*Janine*, p. 300). Jock therefore acquiesces in a loss of autonomy and authenticity:

[Mr Hume] stopped in front of me and said, 'You're a cold fish.'
I shrugged. I felt that what I was no longer greatly interested me (*Janine*, p. 300).

It should therefore come as no surprise that Thaw's resistance to the stifling demands of Scottish manhood have a religious aspect to them. His con-

⁴Alasdair Gray, 1982 *Janine* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 85. Henceforth *Janine*.

⁵*The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Heb. 12.6.

flict with his culture's latent patriarchal religion is initially played out in his refusal to eat the same food as his parents:

Her son always refused shepherd's pie or any other food whose appearance disgusted him: spongy white tripe, soft penis-like sausages, stuffed sheep's hearts with their valves and little arteries. When one of these came before him he poked it uncertainly with his fork and said, 'I don't want it' (*Lanark*, p. 122-3).

Such personal preference must be punished in the fashion mandated through Paul by the Almighty himself:

[Mr. Thaw:] 'Tell her you're sorry and you'll eat what you're given.'
Then Thaw would snarl 'No, I won't!' and be thrashed (*Lanark*, p. 123).

Not even a sound Scots thrashing, however, is quite enough to destroy Thaw's self-confidence. Accordingly,

On the advice of a neighbour they one day undressed the furiously kicking boy, filled a bath with cold water and plunged him in. The sudden chilling scald destroyed all his protest, and this treatment was used on later occasions with equal success (*Lanark*, p. 123-4).

This ordeal forces Thaw to participate in the sacramental rituals which bring him into communion with his latently religious society. The christological and anthrotheophagous overtones of the shepherd's pie are clear:

He stared at the mushy potato with particles of carrot, cabbage and mince in it and wondered if brains really looked like that. Fearfully he put some in his mouth and churned it with his tongue. It tasted good so he ate what was on the plate and asked for more (*Lanark*, p. 124).

Thaw, however, soon dissents from the latent religion of his people. His flight after his adventure with the midden-rakers sets the scene for a revelation:

The dark, similar streets seemed endlessly to open out of each other until he despaired of getting home and sat on the kerb with his face in his hands and girmed aloud. He fell into a dwam in which he felt only the hard kerb under his backside (*Lanark*, p. 128).

In this state of abandonment, it seems that his cry of despair is answered. A heavenly force—distinct from the Judeo-Christian deity—manifests itself in order to guide him back to his homeland:

[he] awoke suddenly with a hushing sound in his ears. For a second this seemed like his mother singing to him then he recognized the noise of waterfalls. The sky had cleared and a startling moon had risen. Though not full there was enough of it

to light the canal embankment across the road, and the gate, and the cinder path (*Lanark*, p. 128).

The moon then vents its wrath:

As he stepped off the bridge Thaw seemed to hear the moon yell at him. It was the siren. Its ululations came eerily across the rooftops to menace him, the only life. He ran down the path between the nettles and through the gate and past the dark allotments. The siren swooned into silence and a little later (Thaw had never heard this before) there was a dull iron noise, *gron-gron-gron-gron*, and dark shapes passed above him. Later there were abrupt thuddings as if giant fists were battering a metal ceiling over the city (*Lanark*, p. 128).

As if by some providence, Thaw is then re-united with his family, and spared from the anger of the moon. "Beyond the power station he ran his head into the stomach of a warden running the other way. 'Duncan!' shouted the man" (*Lanark*, p. 129).

This experience is remarkable because Thaw disobeys his father's commands, but avoid the usual punishment of a thrashing or a cold bath:

Thaw was very uneasy. His adventure with the midden-rakers was a horrid crime than not eating dinner so he expected punishment on an unusually large scale. After closely watching his mother that day...he became sure that punishment was not in her mind, and this worried him. He feared pain, but deserved to be hurt, and was not going to be hurt. He had not returned to exactly the same house (*Lanark*, p. 129).

Although his parents are merely relieved that he is alive, it seems to Thaw that he has found a relationship which annuls the sinfulness of his unproductive spontaneous interests.

After his encounter with the moon, Thaw therefore fantasizes of himself as a prophet. To some extent, he employs motifs borrowed from Judeo-Christian culture. He transforms his evacuation from Glasgow into an escape from the Flood: "It struck him that the sea was behind these hills; if he stood among the trees he would look down on a grey sea sparkling with waves" (*Lanark*, p. 130). His mother assures him that this is untrue, but he cannot shake off this forceful image: "The sparkling grey sea was too vivid for him to disbelieve. It fought in his head with a picture of farms and fields until it seemed to be flooding them" (*Lanark*, p. 131). Thaw subsequently models himself after Moses, leading the chosen people to the Promised Land—or even Christ leading the redeemed to Heaven:

Thaw trudged along the coast road at the head of a mob of about thirty or forty.... He wanted to seem mysterious to these boys, someone ageless with strange powers, but his feet were sore, he was late for tea and afraid he would be blamed for arriving

with so many friends. He was right. The hostel gateman refused to allow the other boys in (*Lanark*, p. 132).

These Judeo-Christian motifs are, however, transplanted into a worship of the feminine deity who saved Thaw during the air raid. Thaw is disappointed by the local girls who "were all too obviously the same vulgar clay as himself" (*Lanark*, p. 135). He finally settles upon an Artemis-like figure in an advertisement: "one day when visiting the village store he saw a placard in the window advertising Amazon Adhesive Shoe Soles. It showed a blond girl in brief Greek armour with spear and shield and a helmet on her head" (*Lanark*, p. 135). The pursuit of this figure drives Thaw to climb Ben Rua, despite his father's injunction not to do so unless suitably equipped:

On the grey-green tip of the summit he seemed just able to see a figure, a vertical white speck that moved and gestured, though the movement might have been caused by a flickering of warm air between the mountaintop and his eye. To Thaw the movement suggested a woman in a white dress waving and beckoning. He could even imagine her face: it was the face of the girl in the adhesive shoe-sole advertisement. This remote beckoning woman struck him with the force of a belief, though it was not quite a belief (*Lanark*, p. 140).

The incarnate moon summons Thaw, approving of his spontaneous desire to climb Ben Rua like some sandaled Biblical prophet.

When Mr. Thaw learns of this adventure he is pleased, despite himself, at his son's sudden burst of physical activity:

His father looked at his sandaled feet and said, 'If you do it again you must tell someone you're going first, so we know where to look if there's an accident. But I don't think we'll complain this time; no, we won't complain, we won't complain' (*Lanark*, p. 145).

Again, though, Thaw has been spared a thrashing or a cold bath because of a manifestation of the moon goddess. Mr. Thaw's leniency merely confirms unwittingly his own subordination to the will of the goddess. Thaw therefore intensifies his fantasy life in order to preserve a sense of exemption from the demands of his patriarchal culture. At primary school, "[Thaw] told long stories with himself as hero.... The vivid part of his life became imaginary" (*Lanark*, p. 134). The vocabulary here alludes to a quotation which Thaw stumbles across from Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*:

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. ...These perceptions, which enter with the most force or violence, we may name impressions; and under the name I may comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By *ideas* I mean the faint image of these in thinking and reasoning (*Lanark*, p. 161).

Shortly after this passage, Hume admits that his phenomenological distinction is not absolute:

In sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions...on the other hand it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas.⁶

The distinction between perceiving and imagining blurs: impressions may become as dull as thoughts, and ideas may have the vivacity of feeling.

By such an inversion of phenomenological vivacity, Thaw refuses to ascribe reality to his embodied existence: "Apparent life was a succession of dull habits in which he did what was asked automatically, only resenting demands to show interest. His energy had withdrawn into imaginary worlds and he had none to waste on reality" (*Lanark*, p. 157). He feels that his real life is led in daydreams of secular soteriology:

He was a survivor of the third world war. The poisonous radiations which had killed most of his contemporaries had, by a fluke, given him eternal youth. In two or three centuries of wandering about the shattered earth he had become leader of a small group of people who had come to trust his gentleness and wisdom. He had brought them to the crater, protected by its walls from the envy of a bygone age, to build a republic where nobody was sick, poor or forced to live by work they hated (*Lanark*, p. 158).

Thaw's ongoing sense of divine inspiration allows him to maintain a core of authenticity behind his superficial assent to the pragmatic life of his culture:

[Mr. Thaw:] 'Have you any notion of what you would like to be?'

Thaw considered. In the past he had wanted to be a king, magician, explorer, archaeologist, astronomer, inventor and pilot of spaceships. More recently, while scribbling in the back bedroom he had thought of writing stories or painting pictures.

He hesitated and said, 'A doctor' (*Lanark*, p. 148).

This preserved sense of spontaneity is what permits Thaw's adolescent rebellion against his allotted role: "People in Scotland have a queer idea of the arts. They think you can be an artist in your *spare* time, though nobody expects you to be a spare-time dustman, engineer, lawyer or brain surgeon" (*Lanark*, p. 211). Thaw therefore escapes the fate which awaits Coulter—the latter reflects on his job in the shipyard: "At first the novelty made it not too bad. It was

⁶David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1978), p. 1.

different from school, and you were getting paid, and you felt a *man*" (*Lanark*, p. 215). A real man, though, must surrender all inclinations which are without technical utility: "engineering isnae compulsory, I chose it. And I'm a man now. I have tae take it seriously, I have tae keep shoving my face against this grindstone" (*Lanark*, p. 216).

Thaw's waking existence is, however, gradually corrupted by the influence of his inner religious life. Instead of getting to know ordinary teenage girls, he is infatuated with the blonde Kate Caldwell because she resembles his goddess. This forlorn interest in Kate is quite clearly a prop for his fantasy life:

[Thaw] heard a cry from behind. He turned and saw Coulter wave and shout, 'Don't worry! Don't worry! Tae hell with Kate Caldwell!'

Thaw walked onward with a small perfect image of Kate Caldwell smiling and beckoning inside him (*Lanark*, p. 175).

Thaw's subsequent pursuit of this image leads to a quite extraordinary scene:

It was possible to imagine that the trunk between his arms contained the body of a woman. He hugged it, pressed his face against and whispered, 'I'm here. I'm here. Will you come out?' He imagined the woman's body pressing the other side of the bark, her lips wrestling to meet his lips, but he felt nothing but roughness (*Lanark*, p. 176).

Such behavior is, as J. G. Frazer might remind us, appropriate to a worshipper of Diana:

...the mortal King of the wood had for his queen the woodland Diana herself. If the sacred tree which he guarded with his life was supposed, as seems probable, to be her special embodiment, her priest may not only have worshipped it as his goddess but embraced it as his wife....

Even in the time of Pliny a noble Roman used thus to treat a beautiful beech-tree in another sacred grove of Diana on the Alban hills. He embraced it, he kissed it, he lay under its shadow, he poured wine on its trunk. Apparently he took the tree for the goddess.⁷

Robert Graves urges a similar devotion upon literary artists in his book, *The White Goddess*, first published in 1948, and republished in an enlarged edition in 1952. As Graves's biographer, Martin Seymour Smith remarks, the former's "debts to Frazer (of *The Golden Bough*)...have been noted by most

⁷J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edn. (London and Basingstoke, 1987), p. 8.

commentators.”⁸ This may explain why the book was originally accepted by an editor who was himself an admirer of Frazer: “Eventually, it was T. S. Eliot, at Faber, who came to his rescue” (*Graves*, p. 398).

Graves's argument in *The White Goddess* is a continuation of the modernist interest in primitivism. Just as Thaw's visual art is predicated upon his affinity with the lunar goddess, so, for Graves, poetic inspiration is precisely the union of the poet's soul with a lunar deity: “Constant illiterate use of the phrase ‘to woo the Muse’ has obscured its poetic sense: the poet's inner communion with the White Goddess, regarded as the source of truth” (*Goddess*, p. 446). The rational, Apollonian individual who hopes to write poetry by going to creative-writing classes, or by buying a rhyming dictionary, is in for a shock:

Poetry began in the matriarchal age, and derives its magic from the moon, not from the sun. No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of: ‘Kill! kill! kill!’ and ‘Blood! blood! blood!’ (*Goddess*, p. 446).

Although Graves's doctrines may seem bizarre, they do agree significantly with the presentation of modern society found in Gray's fiction. Graves sees poetry as essential to a fraternal relation with the natural world:

[Poetry] was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family (*Goddess*, p. 14).

Poetry therefore opposes the ethic of technical efficiency which exploits a natural world previously protected by the aura of the sacred:

‘Nowadays’ is a civilization in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonoured. In which serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus-tent; ox, salmon and boar to the cannery; racehorse and greyhound to the betting ring; and the sacred grove to the saw-mill (*Goddess*, p. 14).

The parallel between Graves and Gray would also seem to be extended by a common depiction of a connection between instrumental rationality and ascetic Protestantism. The disenchantment of nature can, for Graves, be traced to the victories of this exclusively patriarchal sect:

⁸Martin Seymour Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London, 1982), p. 387. Henceforth *Graves*.

The Civil Wars in England were won by the fighting qualities of the Virgin-hating Puritan Independents, who envisaged an ideal theocratic society in which all priestly and Episcopal pomp should be abolished, and every man should be entitled to read and interpret the Scriptures as he pleased, with direct access to God the Father (*Goddess*, p. 468).

Graves insists that the eventual consequence of this victory is "that money...is the sole practical means of expressing value or of determining social precedence; that science is the only accurate means of describing phenomena" (*Goddess*, p. 468). Much of what motivates Thaw to worship the moon can therefore be found explicitly in Graves's work. There is little place for the unproductive work of the artist in a society dedicated to an economic and technical efficiency derived from an austere, patriarchal Protestant religion.

Graves's doctrine develops, however, in a way which, one might reasonably suspect, will not be supported in Gray's fiction. Graves is appalled by the connection between patriarchal religion and democracy: "Puritanism took root and flourished in America, and the doctrine of religious equalitarianism, which carried with it the right to independent thinking, turned into social equalitarianism, or democracy, a theory which has since dominated Western civilization" (*Goddess*, p. 468). Democracy, for Graves, is an illegitimate employment of the instrumental thinking favored by the lower classes:

We are now at the stage where the common people of Christendom, spurred on by their demagogues, have grown so proud that they are no longer content to be the hands and feet and trunk of the body politic, but demand to be the intellect as well—or, as much intellect as is needed to satisfy their simple appetites (*Goddess*, p. 468).

In an echo of social contract theory, Graves assumes that democracy is a pact between self-interested individuals who so idolize the economic efficiency of private contract law that they seek to extend it into public law. This is why the speaker of 'The White Goddess' embarks on his quest in 'scorn' of those who are "Ruled by the God Apollo's Golden Mean" (*Goddess*, p. 5). For Graves, the reciprocity of the social contract—expressed in the principle "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—eventually detaches legality from morality:

If...it is wished to avoid disharmony, dullness and oppression in all social (and all literary) contexts, each problem must be regarded as unique, to be settled by right choice based on instinctive good principle, not by reference to a code or summary of precedents; and, granted that the only way out of our political troubles is a return to religion, this must somehow be freed of its theological accretions. Positive right choosing based on moral principle must supersede negative respect for the Law which, though backed by force, has grown so hopelessly inflated and complex that not even a trained lawyer can hope to be conversant with more than a single branch of it (*Goddess*, p. 471).

The common people, who work for a living and employ economic rationality, must therefore be shielded from the temptations of constitutional law, democratic freedom, and human rights. Instead of blindly following the law, the hands and feet and trunk of the body-politic should, Graves argues, blindly follow an ethically gifted elite:

...so few have the capacity to make a proper moral choice between circumstances or actions which at first sight are equally valid, that the main religious problem of the Western world, is briefly, how to exchange demagoguery, disguised as democracy, for a non-hereditary aristocracy whose leaders will be inspired to choose rightly on every occasion, instead of blindly following authoritarian procedure (*Goddess*, p. 471).

Graves contends that "proper moral choice" is provided by worship of the moon-goddess:

...the word *lex*, 'law,' began with the sense of a 'chosen word,' or magical pronouncement.... But as soon as religion in its primitive sense is interpreted as social obligation and defined by tabulated laws—as soon as Apollo the Organizer, God of science, usurps the power of his Mother the Goddess of inspired truth, wisdom and poetry, and tries to bind her devotees by laws—inspired magic goes, and what remains is theology, ecclesiastical ritual, and negatively ethical behaviour (*Goddess*, p. 471).

Poets, we will recall, are the priests of the moon-cult. They are the "non-hereditary aristocracy" who Graves hopes will eventually be the acknowledged legislators of the world: "Only after a period of complete political and religious disorganization can the suppressed desire of the Western races, which is for some practical form of Goddess-worship...find satisfaction at last" (*Goddess*, pp. 476-7). What Graves prescribes, from his villa in Franco's Spain, is, in essence, a fascist political structure. The majority of the population—the "hands and feet and trunk of the body-politic"—can be allowed autonomy only in the sphere of material production and means-end rationality. Their ultimate ends they must accept uncritically from a ruling elite possessed of a sacred authority. It is, quite frankly, astounding that Graves could promote such lunacy (I use the term advisedly) so soon after World War II.

The narrative of *Lanark*, fortunately, provides a skeptical counterpoint to the ramifications of Graves's cultic modernism. Thaw's worship of the white goddess takes over, and corrupts, his entire existence, so that his life provides a parable for the failure of the primitivist sect in modernism. Both Thaw's art and his social life are destroyed by their subjugation to his personal cult, and this is particularly evident in his treatment of women. The cancerous spread of the belief system which initially protected Thaw's artistic integrity becomes apparent during his time as an art student. When his locker is robbed during

his first day at the art college, Thaw's sense of Judeo-Christian original sin re-asserts itself as he confesses the loss to his father:

[Mr. Thaw:] 'What were you afraid of? Did you think Id' thrash you?'

'I deserve to be thrashed' (*Lanark*, p. 235).

Under the rationalization of saving to the value of the stolen goods, Thaw puts himself through a self-mortifying penance designed to reunite him with the moon goddess:

Next morning he rose at seven, walked to school to save tram fares and dined on a cheap pie. This left him hungry but came to seem sufficient in two or three days, then he lost appetite for it and drank a cup of milk instead. Daily his stomach grew content with less. His mind was clenched, his surface reinforced against surrounding life (*Lanark*, p. 228).

This asceticism shields him from the external world of people and things: "All sounds, even words spoken nearby, seemed dulled by intervening glass" (*Lanark*, p. 228). He is in a Humean borderline state in which "our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas." This allows Thaw to direct more of his energy towards his religious life. The color yellow, an association with the "gold flake" of the moon (*Lanark*, p. 160), animates external nature, triggering Thaw's sexual and emotional responses:

Yet while he looked on people with the cold interest usually felt for things, the world of things began to cause surprising emotions. A haulage vehicle carrying a huge piece of bright yellow machinery swelled his heart with tenderness and stiffened his penis with lust. A section of tenement, the surface a dirty yellow plaster with oval holes through which brickwork showed, gave the eerie conviction he was beholding a kind of flesh (*Lanark*, p. 228).

Thaw proceeds to seek out the incarnation of the lunar goddess in Molly Tierney, "the velvet-voiced girl with blond curls" (*Lanark*, p. 229). She, perhaps, may embody, to use Graves's words, the goddess "whose broad high brow was white as any leper's/ Whose eyes were blue, with rowan-berry lips/ With hair curled honey-coloured to white hips" (*Goddess*, p. 5). As Thaw sits with Molly in Brown's cakeshop, she seems filled with a divine light:

Sounds of people moving and conversing at other tables blurred and receded, but tiny noises nearby (MacBeth's breathing, a spoon striking a saucer) were magnified and distinct. Molly Tierney came into sharp focus. The colours of her hair, skin, mouth and dress grew clearer like a stained-glass figure with light increasing behind it. Second by second her body was infused with the significance of mermaids on rocks and Cleopatra in her barge (*Lanark*, p. 230).

Molly, however, is an illusory incarnation: "Her voice became a mixture of babyish and whorish. 'Jimmy, it's my architecture homework. This model cathedral we've to make. I've tried to make it but I can't.... Will you make it for me?'" (*Lanark*, p. 231). Thaw reacts with vividly imagined contempt for this false idol: "A voice in Thaw's head raved at MacBeth, 'Spit in her face! Go on, spit in her face!'" (*Lanark*, p. 231). On the walk home, lunar imagery betokens his disenchantment with Molly: "Clock dials glowed like fake moons on invisible towers" (*Lanark*, p. 231).

Thaw therefore perverts his artistic creativity into the production of religious iconography. He sketches an idea for a painting with "a moon in the sky above the treetop" (*Lanark*, p. 236). Though the moon eventually disappears from this painting, he still expects his work to eclipse that of the others in his year. He is disappointed, though, to find that there are better, less devotional, works:

...it seemed overworked and dull, but he had still expected it to eclipse the work of everyone else and was depressed to see two other pictures equally good. They showed ordinary kitchen interiors. Their paint was carefully used to represent solid figures and the space between, and their common depth of light and air was finer and saner than the unique sombreness of his own rigid composition (*Lanark*, p. 238).

Nevertheless, though his work is aesthetically substandard, a subsequent black-and-white sketch is "easy to photograph" (*Lanark*, p. 246) and is reproduced in a newspaper. This restores his faith in his contact with the goddess: "the published photograph gave him a moment's pleasure of almost sexual potency. He went over to the refectory in a mood of unusual confidence" (*Lanark*, p. 246).

A providential meeting soon comes his way:

One evening Thaw came down to Sauchiehall Street when the air was mild and the lamps not yet lit. So fine a lake of yellow sky lay behind the western rooftops that he walked toward them in a direction opposite home and was overtaken by Aitken Drummond at Charing Cross (*Lanark*, p. 253).

Because of his attraction to the lunar color yellow, Thaw meets Aitken and goes with him to the art-school ball, where he meets Marjory Laidlaw. During their consequent romance, Thaw experiences what Graves would describe as the "exaltation and horror" excited by the "religious invocation of the Muse" (*Goddess*, p. 14).

He sat on the upper deck watching the pure line of her face and throat against the black window. They filled him with delight and terror for he would need to cross over to them and he hadn't much time. He stared desperately, trying to learn what to do by intensity of vision (*Lanark*, p. 265).

Marjory's sexual favors would be an erotic communion with the goddess—he therefore transplants her into Kelvingrove Park, an appropriate sacred context:

Nearby an almost full moon was freckled by the top leaves of an elm. The river gurgled faintly against its clay bank, the distant fountain tinkled. Marjory said, 'Lovely.'

He said, 'I've once or twice felt moments when calmness, unity and... glory seemed the core of things. Have you ever felt that?' (*Lanark*, p. 285).

Thaw's attraction to Marjory is therefore as shallow as his pubescent infatuation with Kate Caldwell. He has little interest in Marjory as an individual, and is effectively obeying Graves's injunction that the artist must look beyond phenomenal women in order to unite himself with the ideal reality of the goddess: "Truth has been represented by poets as a naked woman: a woman divested of all garments or ornaments that will commit her to any particular position in time and space" (*Goddess*, p. 446). Marjory is merely a ceremonial object to be exploited in the sacred rituals which have taken over Thaw's artistic powers:

He stopped and gripped her arm. 'Marjory, can I draw you? Naked, I mean?'

She stared. He said eagerly, 'I won't be embarrassed—my picture needs you' (*Lanark*, p. 286).

As Thaw's reference to the needs of his picture implies, he treats Marjory as the vessel of the goddess. A dream clarifies the solitary self-assertion of his sexuality, which is now almost fully subordinated to the worship of the goddess:

Thaw dreamed he was fornicating awkwardly with Marjory, who stood naked and erect like a caryatid. He rode astride her hips, holding himself off the ground by gripping her sides with knees and arms. The cold rigid body stayed inert at first then gradually began to vibrate. He had a thin, lonely sensation of triumph (*Lanark*, p. 276).

Thus Marjory is a sacred prostitute through whom Thaw would commune with the lunar deity.

Thaw's treatment of his sister provides a further satiric counterpoint to the Gravesian doctrine that the hands and feet of one's corporate life are merely accidental to the pursuit of the goddess. When Ruth dares to damage one of Thaw's paintings, he turns to violence: "he stooped and twice drove his fist hard into her stomach" (*Lanark*, p. 237). His subsequent apology is quite perfunctory:

He said coldly, 'I'm sorry.'

He could only think of the grey smear on the picture. Coldness and indifference spread through him like a stain (*Lanark*, p. 238).

He does not see his cruel selfishness reflected in Ruth's response: "God, how I hate you! How I hate you!" (*Lanark*, p. 237). So long as the painting goes well, Thaw is convinced of the inspirational acknowledgement of the goddess; and that is all that matters: "Mr. Thaw made tea that evening and the family ate in silence. Inside himself Thaw was very cheerful indeed but hid the feeling because the others could not share it. Afterward he began the picture again and finished it three days later" (*Lanark*, p. 238). Thaw's communion meal with his family is an empty ritual; his real communion is with the imaginary other who inspires his artistic life.

Graves would be proud of Thaw's sense of superiority to domestic existence:

The White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual 'other woman,' and her part is difficult indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years, because the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every maenad's and muse's heart (*Goddess*, p. 447).

Family life is, for Graves, the antithesis to an artistic existence:

The reason why so remarkably few young poets continue nowadays to publish poetry after their early twenties...is that something dies in the poet.... He has lost his sense of the White Goddess: the woman whom he took to be a Muse, or who was a Muse, turns into a domestic woman and would have him turn similarly into a domesticated man. Loyalty prevents him from parting company with her, especially if she is the mother of his children and is proud to be reckoned a good housewife (*Goddess*, p. 447).

When read against *Lanark*, however, Graves's pronouncements provide an indictment of the primitivist response to modern society. Cultic modern art does not resist exploitation; it merely consolidates the position of those who are the exploiters. The enraptured masses furnish a means to the aesthetic life—they make the paint, print the books, and, in the case of a lucky few women, provide the nude models and the poetic muses. The complicity of primitivism with the exploitation which it claims to abhor is most apparent in the attitude of Graves (and Thaw) to women. We find an ironic synecdoche of their doctrines: both are priests of matriarchies where women are silent props for their artistic masters.

Lanark does not merely undermine cultic aesthetic projects; it also presents, in passing, a better response to the problems which drive both Graves and Thaw to their repellent doctrines. Gray's narrative presents Thaw, when

reborn as Lanark, with a chance to escape his Gravesian modernism precisely by returning to a mundane life in which both his art and his sexuality may have significance for others. First, though, Lanark must escape from Sludden, who controls the biggest clique in the Elite Café, and who subscribes to an axiology of power: "Moments of vivid excitement are what makes life worth living, moments when a man feels exalted and masterful" (*Lanark*, p. 5). Art, for Sludden, is merely one more means by which to enter a Gravesian "non-hereditary aristocracy": "An artist doesn't tell people things, he expresses himself. If the self is unusual his work shocks or excites people. Anyway, it forces his personality on them" (*Lanark*, p. 6). In symbolic opposition to this ethic is Lanark's need for the sun—as one of the protesters tells him, "we are agreed upon one thing: the need for sunlight" (*Lanark*, p. 43). Lanark's search for the sun, as Ozenfant notes, is opposed to worship of the moon. In typically primitivist fashion, he therefore invites Lanark to understand his quest as a search for a new deity: "you are no Athenian, no Florentine, you are a modern man.... As for lovemaking and friendship, humanity has always preferred to enjoy these at night. If you wanted the moon, I could sympathise, but Apollo is quite discredited" (*Lanark*, p. 78). Ozenfant (whose name alludes to the Cubist painter and art-critic, Amédée Ozenfant) would therefore agree with Graves's modernist contempt for sun-worship: "Apollo the Organizer....seated on Zeus's throne, is beginning to find his ministers obstructive, his courtiers boring, his regalia tawdry, his quasi-royal responsibilities irksome, and the system of government breaking down from over-organization" (*Goddess*, p. 475).

Lanark's real interest, though, is in the son, his own son Sandy. This relationship provides him with an avenue for the tenderness and intimacy proscribed by the masculine roles of his culture.

The boy stopped complaining and settled in his arms. The small compact body was warm and comforting and gave such a pleasant feeling of peace that Lanark wondered uneasily if this was a right thing for a father to feel (*Lanark*, p. 424).

This scene opens up a genuine alternative to the ethic which drives Thaw to create his private religion. Instead of an authoritarian relationship between father and son, there is presented a mutually loving relationship in which both individuals may find satisfaction. Lanark, however, cannot properly see the value of this relationship because he is still too infected with Gravesian doctrines. When he should be looking after Sandy, he meets an alcoholic who advises him on the true nature of women:

'Women have notions and feelings like us but they've got tides too, tides that keep floating the bits of a human being together inside them, and washing it apart again. They're governed by lunar gravity.... How can they follow ordinary notions of decency when they're driven by the moon?' (*Lanark*, p. 427)

With this excuse, Lanark neglects Sandy in order to get drunk, and acquiesces in a misogynistic indifference: "A warm stupidity began to spread softly through him. He heard the man say, 'You have to like women but not care for them: not care what they do, I mean'" (*Lanark*, p. 428). Lanark's consequent insensitivity to his loved ones drives Rima away, and she takes Sandy with her.

Lanark is then seduced again by the prospect of being part of a ruling elite. He abandons his son, and realizes what he is losing only when Sandy observes his departure for the Assembly: "the watcher was surely Sandy and at once the grotesque flimsy aircraft and being a delegate and being a provost seemed stupid evasions of the realest thing in the world" (*Lanark*, p. 467). The highest reality, Lanark realizes briefly, is not the divine realm inhabited by the moon-goddess. Instead, the everyday social world, neglected by cultic modernism, should be his primary concern. This anagnorisis, however, comes too late—Lanark's fate is already determined, and he will only again have this relationship with Sandy in a dream granted by Nastler, his conjuring author.

Lanark is therefore a response to the primitivism which may be perceived in modernist art and literature. On the one hand, Gray's narrative agrees with the general modernist distrust of the economic and religious foundations of modernity. On the other hand, though, it can be read intertextually with Graves's *The White Goddess* as a satire upon the cultic modernist ambition which understands art as the scripture and iconography of an ascendant theocracy. Lanark is therefore a didactic text. It informs us that cultic art is little better than the masturbatory power-fantasies which fill Thaw's adolescent imagination. At the same time, it gestures, by an implied contrast, towards an aesthetic which recognizes the social and personal world as a value higher than art.⁹

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