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Cristie L. March

Center, Margin, and Myth in *Fergus Lamont* and *Lanark*

In an introduction to *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin explain that,

A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place because it is precisely within the parameters of place and its separateness that the process of subjectivity can be conducted.¹

For many post-colonial writers, the exploration of this post-colonial interpretation of power, place, and self in turn necessitates a negotiation of space, center and margin as infusing meaning into power and identity for their characters. In the course of these literary discussions of the relationship between the center and the margin, such writers as V. S. Naipaul and Jean Rhys question the validity of an established center as an empowered space for identity. In *The Mimic Men*, for instance, Naipaul's characters travel from the Caribbean to London in order to establish a sense of self, but upon arrival the distance between center and margin collapses, dismantling the privileging structure of power relations between the two. This disintegration of centrality's power offers the characters a chance to refigure their concepts of identity from the margin. London is no longer the focal point for meaning-making, but only one

¹Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York, 1992), p. 392.

of many locations for powerful identification.² The margin, through this collapse, becomes a space that post-colonial characters can occupy meaningfully, foregoing the center. Yet the only means by which the power of the margin unfolds is by each character's journey to the center; characters must individually dismantle the spatial significance of margin and center to create meaning.

Many modern Scottish novels discredit this search for identity. Instead, the characters in these works reject what they believe is the center to pursue the margins as a place for empowerment and the creation of identity. In effect, these characters are outcast, alienated from their central existence by the feeling that such a life is mediocre and meaningless. The margin, however, offers an alternative existence that emphasizes difference, a distancing from the mundane. In these works, the center initially appears as the inevitably industrial Glasgow and its working-class population. The implication of Glasgow as center is that the working-class denizens coalesce into a faceless mass, stripped of identity and therefore of power. Thus characters divorce themselves from this identification in order to embrace a more elite (a narrower) concept of self. In doing so, the characters displace themselves from their societal roles, leaving them spaceless, searching for acceptable marginal places.

As narratives of the urban working class, Scottish novels use these outcast protagonists to exemplify the alienation that, as a "sub-country" of Britain, Scotland itself has suffered in its relationship with England. Two novels in particular, Robin Jenkins' *Fergus Lamont* and Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, focus on this movement from center to margin and the inevitable return to illustrate an understanding of the true Scottish identity. The characters are a manifestation of the cultural and economic alienation the working-class Scot received (and receives) at the hands of the British (read English) government and social hierarchy. In Gray's and Jenkins' visions, the margin is the only locus of power available to the characters—the only way they can create meaningful space for themselves. The exiled space they occupy creates a personal identity as Scots and a national identity for Scotland. This setting apart allows the characters to participate in a myth-making that offers the possibility of empowerment. The issue at work in these novels, which like Frame's story reveal the emptiness of these searching gestures, is not a confounding of margin and center, as with *The Edge of the Alphabet*, but instead is a misunderstood conceptualization of where the true margin is. Gray's and Jenkins' characters do not understand that empowerment is available not through the traditional myths of "Scottishness," the perceived margins to which they flee, but through

²Similarly, Antoinette in Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York, 1982) recalls a friend's letter describing London as "a cold dark dream (p. 80), rendering the place unreal to a woman from the West Indies. And, as the story progresses, we see that Antoinette cannot in fact access the meaning-making identification with England that Rochester takes for granted. For her, England is "their world...made of cardboard" (p. 180).

their very identities as members of the working class. This space, epitomized in Glasgow, is in fact the margin itself. Here, Jenkins and Gray claim, is the true locus of power.

Robin Jenkins writes *Fergus Lamont* as an autobiography. Now an old man, Lamont begins his account by describing his youth in the slums of Gantock (a pseudonym for Greenock) and his discovery of his illegitimate descent from Lord Corse. While this inheritance is based only on hints and innuendo about his mother, he embraces the elevated position, eager to set himself apart from his fellow slum-dwellers. Lamont pursues his "birthright" as an aristocrat throughout his childhood and early adult years. As one of the elite, he looks disdainfully at his playmates, thinking, "They had no pride or imagination. They were content to become shipyard workers. Theirs was by birth the Scotland of tenements and low-paid jobs. Mine was the Scotland of castles, famous families, and heroic deeds."³ It is during this stage of his life that Lamont moves away from the mainstream. His supposed heritage allows him to establish distance from his low background and to situate himself in the myth of the Scottish aristocracy. The idea of "castles, famous families, and heroic deeds" is part of Scotland's noble past in its heyday as England's rival. Lamont desperately wants to be a part of this myth to justify his own existence. His powerless, faceless identity as a member of the urban working class cannot give him the individual distinction that the myth of aristocracy can. As one of his teachers explains, "You must bear in mind, Fergus, that the Scots landed gentry are a tribe apart" (*Lamont*, p. 70). That the landed gentry is "apart," apart from the masses to which Lamont belongs, is what so attracts him. By successfully entering that realm, he can exclude himself from this urban identity as Fergus Lamont and instead be the gentleman Fergus Corse-Lamont. He will become one of the elite on the margins of the mainstream, more powerful than being one of the many commoners in Gantock.

However, his working-class background refuses gentrified behavior such that he cannot sustain the necessary detachment of a gentleman: "I had to take care lest I throw away with a few plebeian barbarisms what since leaving Gantock I had schemed, lied, deceived, betrayed, and even killed, to achieve: that was, my status as an officer and gentleman" (*Lamont*, p. 173). Because he is unable to accept this role, his wife, Betty, blackmails him into leaving her by returning him to Gantock, exposing his slum origins. Too proud to lose his hard-won escape from his past, Lamont accepts her bribe and flees to the northern isles.

In doing so, he rejects the myth of the Scottish gentry and embraces the even older myth of the Highland Celt. He arrives at his croft in East Gerinish and becomes involved with the beautiful and simple-minded Kirstie. Lamont takes great pride in her, especially when an old rival of his, Donaldson, arrives

³Robin Jenkins, *Fergus Lamont* (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 59. Henceforth *Lamont*

on the island. When Donaldson leaves, Lamont rejoices, as "I stood on top of the cliff, like a Viking chief, hand-in-hand with my Celtic princess" (*Lamont*, p. 292).

In East Gerinish, Lamont alienates himself even further from his origins. On the barren island he can be the "Viking chief" or simple Highland crofter without fear of exposure. He is no longer required to play the game of the gentleman nor need he be ashamed at belonging to the urban working-class in Gantock. Lamont again chooses a marginal group as a means of creating distance between himself and his working-class background. The island crofters are an ever-diminishing people, located literally on the fringe of Scotland, evidenced by the fact that only Lamont, Kirstie, and a family of four remain in East Gerinish. The crofter, by his physical and cultural location, becomes a signifier for the "real" Scotland in Lamont's eyes. In addition, the Gaelic Kirstie speaks offers, to Lamont, a discursive subversion of the dominant Glaswegian discourse. Her speech represents all that Gantock is not: the Scottishness Lamont seeks. The ability to become part of an ancient history allows Lamont the space he needs to rewrite his own history. The problem, however, lies in the fact that this identity, too, is mythic—a pastoral scene which denies the existence of an urban Scotland and which therefore breaks down when Lamont attempts to become part of it. Kirstie dies, the other family leaves to pursue modern farming inland, and he cannot keep up the pastoral illusion any longer. Without Kirstie he cannot play the Celt, and without Betty and her connections he cannot return as a gentleman. Instead, he is forced to come back to Gantock.

Again in Gantock, Lamont cannot resign himself to becoming another member of the masses. He styles himself a poet hermit, refusing visitors, admirers of his poetry, and even his own son. He will not reconcile himself to mediocrity and therefore insists on maintaining an emotional distance from his origins, creating yet another space to re-envision his identity. Yet despite his attempts reminders of the Scottish space he truly occupies surround him. The end of his autobiography recounts his visits to people from his childhood, like his uncle and his former girlfriend. Although he tries to maintain distance as an old man writing his memoirs, his text is continually drawn back to the Gantock which, despite all his attempts to free himself, still shapes his identity. The last line of his account illustrates this relationship: "I felt no hatred of the young German airmen doing their loathsome duty, and for the people of Gantock, at that moment suffering terror and pain and death, I felt only pity and love" (*Lamont*, p. 337). That Lamont, who has spent his life fighting against a kinship with the working-class, writes of feeling "pity" for them is not surprising. But the "love" on which he ends, and on which word he dies, reveals his own acknowledgment of his identity as one of them, which the rest of the autobiography resists.

According to Cairns Craig, "The expression of Scottishness has come to depend upon the classes which are least touched by English values: lower-

class and working-class culture has thus come to be the repository of all that has been elided by the Scottish bourgeoisie's mimicry of English values."⁴ Therefore Lamont's pursuit of Scottishness must necessarily return him to his urban origins. The Scotland he is trying to find, the Scotland which will make him unique, is the Glaswegian landscape of his childhood. The implication this story has for Scotland itself is evident. If Scotland is to escape the anglicizing effects of England, it must abandon many of its mythic dimensions, particularly the tartantry which forms most people's identification of what is "Scottish." Instead it should look to its modern incarnation—the urban working class. In his search for an empowering space Lamont does not recognize that his identity as a member of the Scottish masses is in itself a marginalized identity, not the center he tries to escape. It is marginalized both by a Britain which does not recognize the Scottish worker as the epitome of what is Scottish and by the persistence of a Scottish mythology which obscures the real locus of power, the people themselves, with a heritage that is in and of itself powerless. Living in the margins, an exiled working-class identity has the power to explode these myths by virtue of the fact that, as Lamont does, those who seek the real Scotland necessarily return to Glasgow.⁵

Alasdair Gray's character Lanark, like Lamont, tries to create an "uncommon" space in order to re-identify himself. In doing so, he moves from a seemingly mundane life to subversive, marginalized roles in various organizations, like the Institute, to create a distance that can allow his re-identification. He first appears as young Duncan Thaw from a working-class family living in Glasgow. Like Lamont, he seeks to escape this common identity, although his escape route is through the institution of "Art." By becoming the "Artist," Thaw attempts to establish distance between himself and his origins. He also tries to re-vision Glasgow itself. As he comments to a fellow art student,

What is Glasgow to most of us? A house, the place we work, a football park or a golf course, some pubs and connecting streets. That's all... And when our imagination needs exercise we use these to visit London, Paris, Rome under the Caesars, the American West at the turn of the century, anywhere but here and now. Imagi-

⁴Cairns Craig, "Going Down To Hell Is Easy: Lanark, Realism and the Limits of the Imagination," *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, eds. Robert Crawford and Thom Nairn (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 91.

⁵Glasgow, not Edinburgh, is the identifying city for Scottishness because Glasgow denies the English influence, while Edinburgh has historically tried to embrace it. The common conceptualization of Edinburgh as urbane and refined, the "London of the North," and Glasgow as the working man's city, rough around the edges and defiantly working class, lends to this identification of Glasgow as the "center" for Scottish identity.

natively Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves.⁶

In his art, Thaw attempts an alternative depiction of Glasgow but can paint only images of chaos. While constructing a Creation mural in a local church, he again cannot control the forms. The chaotic images on the walls and the ceiling of the church manifest his own, and Glasgow's, mutability. He cannot transform the city into his artistic vision of what it should be, something apart from the "normal." Thaw's attempt to tap into a mythic idea of Art, of art as a revision of reality, has failed in that Thaw cannot paint the Glasgow he desires. He can only reflect the lives of its urban workers. Frustrated, he tries to drown himself.

This suicide attempt marks the birth of Lanark in the novel's third book. The first two books tell Thaw's life and the third and fourth books describe his futuristic incarnation as Lanark. While his life as Thaw exists in the "real" modern Scotland, his life as Lanark exists in a fantastic world which is an exaggerated version of that Scotland. The city, Unthank, in which Lanark appears is a demonized version of Glasgow. From the first scene, where Lanark is alone on a café's balcony instead of inside with the rest of the café patrons, it becomes evident that Lanark experiences the same alienation that Thaw did. In a sense, Thaw has re-figured himself into another version of his first life and is as unsuccessful in his attempts to revise the world around him. As Lanark, he pursues a glimpse of sunlight, ever rarer in Unthank, as he did his artistic vision as Thaw. The sun is another attempt at myth-making, something that Lanark thinks will redeem Unthank as Thaw thought Art should redeem Glasgow.

When Lanark finds that he cannot revision Unthank, that the city defies the sunlight he so desperately pursues, he becomes disgusted with it and desperate for a way out. He inadvertently summons the Institute's mouth which commands him to enter. Like Thaw's drowning, Lanark's passage to the Institute is a rebirth. While the lake evoked images of an amniotic fluid, the mouth, squeezing through a passage, head first and naked, is the birth canal itself. At the Institute, he once again has the opportunity to restructure his life, this time as a caretaker. Again, though, he chooses to pursue an alternative course to the placid life prescribed. He tries to find some meaning in rehabilitating his patients but learns he should hasten their demise so they can become the food and energy which feed the Institute and its inhabitants. He refuses this role and is outcast by the rest of the Institute.

This cycle is repeated throughout the rest of the novel. Each time he is "reborn" he tries to subvert the mainstream in order to create a meaningful space for himself. Each restructured society prompts his removal to a position

⁶Alasdair Gray. *Lanark* (New York, 1985), p. 243. Henceforth *Lanark*.

beyond the normal in his search for identity. His attempts always fail, though, because he creates myths like the redeeming quality of art to revise the world around him. The result is that he sees the degradation of his world more clearly than does the rest of society but cannot come to terms with working-class life as portrayed in each of his incarnations. Rather than accept the urban landscape that is Scotland, he tries to subvert his identity as part of it by embracing myths that cannot create space for his re-identification. By inadvertently choosing the margins in Glasgow and Unthank, he debunks the re-envisioning he himself is trying to accept. He unmakes, rather than constructs, the futuristic myths which obscure the reality of the here-and-now. What Lanark does not realize is that his marginal position as part of the Scottish working-class, like Lamont's, is powerful. He becomes frustrated with painting Glasgow because he cannot fit his creations to the mythic vision of what Glasgow should be and fails to see that his painting actually portray the reality of the Scottish situation. Only by understanding the actual Scotland, rather than the mythologized vision, can he come to terms with his identity as one of the masses. As a member of the urban working-class, he can live meaningfully as a Scot without relying on an unstable mythic framework. This requires a return to the center he attempts to escape, as the margins he seeks cannot provide the empowerment he desires.

The structure of both novels offers another type of myth-making, of a setting apart from the normal to establish identity. Lamont, in writing his autobiography, can select specific circumstances and impressions from the information available, presenting himself as one of the elite. In discussing his war experiences, he says, "I never thought I would be killed... The reason for my confidence was that I felt I had a greatness within me, too valuable to be lost... The men in my company called me anointed. They intended sarcasm and achieved truth" (*Lamont*, p. 110). In this way, he figures himself a man apart. As "anointed," he is not one of many soldiers, but a figure of greatness distanced from the war experience.

Lanark's structure is also a means of myth-making, even more so than *Fergus Lamont*. Nastler, the "author" of all four books in the novel, appears in character near the end of the fourth book to meet with Lanark and explain his intentions for the story. The novel is therefore Nastler's own myth-making, a means of creating to which he belongs, by his existence in the story, but from which he marginalizes himself as a separate entity. Nastler figures himself as an eccentric genius, controlling the creative space of the novel. However, he is at the mercy of the reader, who is in effect creating the entire story by reading it; a fact he acknowledges when speaking to Lanark: "It doesn't matter how much you detest this book I am writing, you can't escape it before I let you go. But if the readers detest it they can shut it and forget it; you'll simply vanish and I'll turn into an ordinary man" (*Lanark*, p. 495). To Nastler, as to Lamont, the final space for meaning-making and myth-making is the page itself, apart from the characters he describes. He fails to realize, though, that in vainly

placing himself within the narrative, he is ultimately only one of the characters in the reader's mind. If the page is all, then Nastler cannot set himself apart from the story but instead is drawn back to that center as soon as the reader closes the book. Again, there is an escape from the center to the margin which results in a collapse of marginality, returning the character to the normalized center.

Lamont, Lanark, and Nastler ultimately fail in their attempts to create seemingly marginalized space that can set them apart and empower them. Lamont moves further into the past, and further away from Gantock to find the real Scotland that can validate him, but finally returns to the Gantock he tried to abandon. Exploded Scottish myths, Glenda Norquay notes, are a parody, "a deeply mocking response to images of Scottishness."⁷ It is therefore no surprise that Lamont cannot enact them fully. Even his last attempt at control, by writing, is thwarted by his death before he has finished his memoirs. In addition, his present-day life invades his account of the past: he recounts his visits to the library, where he simply another of the old men in the reading room. Also, his son writes the postscript to the novel, in which he informs the reader that he has removed part of the account, thus destroying some of the effect Lamont was trying to create.

According to William Harrison, Gray's works entail "the Glaswegian focus on the urban center and the individual's existence and placement within the city's socioeconomic construct."⁸ Although Lanark moves into the future to seek a space that will allow him to live on his own terms, he cannot escape the societal framework which supports him within each of his incarnations. In the end, despite his attempts for distinction through Art or at the Institute, he is only "a slightly worried, ordinary old man" (*Lanark*, p. 560). Even Nastler's myth-making cannot help him control the story, although he is on the "outside." For instance, Lanark somehow has a son about whom Nastler did not write. The power of exile and the myth-making it allows, therefore, are in the character's minds only insofar as they attempt to make the myths they employ real. Their power therefore has no basis in social reality.

The result of this myth-making is a perceived empowerment that functions as a panacea for the characters. These characters, however, eventually destroy their own re-visions and expose the truth, however reluctantly. Although a temporary solution, this myth-making is no replacement for a real social identity. The past, in Lamont's case, cannot be revived in the face of modern urban reality, while the future, for Lanark, can be only an extension of the same. The irony lies in the fact that a shift in the perception of what is "Scottish" is neces-

⁷Glenda Norquay, "The Fiction of Robin Jenkins," *Cencrastus*, 24 (Autumn 1986), p. 6.

⁸William M. Harrison, "The Power of Work in the Novels of Alasdair Gray," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 15 (Summer 1995), 163.

sary for establishing a Scottish identity, but Lamont's and Lanark's singular perceptions are too often obscured by myth-making and an illusion of centrality and marginalization which prevents their embrace of that urban identity. At the same time, their myth-making illustrates to the reader the futility of such myths in creating a real⁹ Scottish identity. Jenkins and Gray debunk traditional ideas concerning what is "Scottish" in order to suggest a means by which Scotland, in its marginalized position in relation to England, can claim an identity which wields power in the here-and-now. If Craig is right and the Scottish working-class is indeed the repository of Scottishness, then its own marginalization at the hands of Scotland's imitation of Englishness and at the hands of Scottish myths is the locus of power. But Jenkins and Gray point out, through their characters' attempts and failures, that a change in Scotland's perception of Scottishness, a collapse of the center and the margin, is necessary to claim that power.

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⁹This idea of a "real" identity is tied closely to concepts of nationalism, especially in light of the Scottish Nationalist movement and the rejection of Englishness. Timothy Brennan quotes José Carlos Mariátegui as saying "The nation...is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined" (Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha [London, 1990] p. 172). In effect the idea of nationalism is itself a myth, and therefore a sense of "real" identity that is intrinsically linked with a nationalistic agenda is also a "myth." It is important to distinguish between this mythology and that of the "Scottish" past. This sort of myth-making carries with it a real social impetus (illusory though it may be) that leads to power—the power to enact political and social change. Hitherto commonly accepted myths of Scotland, however, can only elicit nostalgia, not social and political reform.