

Gregorová, Markéta

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**“AH DON’T HATE THE ENGLISH,
AH HATE THE SCOTS”:
SCOTLAND CONTRA ENGLAND IN
GRAY’S 1982 *JANINE* AND
WELSH’S *TRAINSPOTTING***

Markéta Gregorová

“Failures in a Country ay Failures”: Scottish Negative Self-Perception

Fuckin failures in a country ay failures. It’s nae good blamin it oan the English fir colonising us. Ah don’t hate the English. They’re just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can’t even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. No. We’re ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation. Ah don’t hate the English. They just git oan wi the shit thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots.

—Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993, 78)

THE starting point of this paper is the premise that due to its specific historical, social and cultural development, the Scottish nation has come to define itself in the negative terms of inferiority, failure and defeat. One of the major causes for this self-deprecating perception of Scottishness lies in the country’s history: the glorious victories of celebrated national figures like William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, who crushed invading English armies, are overshadowed by the devastating defeats of the Jacobites, the anti-government rebels who attempted to restore the Stuart dynasty to the throne but failed. Even more importantly, the year 1707 marks a watershed in the course of the Scottish nation’s history, for this was the point when Scotland lost the status of a sovereign state and through the Act of Union it became a part of Great Britain. Scotland’s relationship with England, the wealthier and more powerful southern

neighbour, has been historically tense, to say the least, to the extent that many a Scotsman would describe the English as ruthless colonisers of the northern country. "Colonisers," among other ignoble epithets, is the very word applied to the English by Mark Renton, the protagonist of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), whose infamous indictment of the exploitative English and self-derogatory dismissal of the incompetent Scots in one take introduces this paper.

Another relevant factor to exercise a significant influence over the national character is the legacy of Scottish Calvinism, disseminated in the country by John Knox. Gloomy and oppressive as it is, Calvinism foregrounds damnation rather than salvation, promoting the belief in the total depravity of man, in other words, assuming that each man is inherently and irrevocably evil. Furthermore, Calvinism teaches the paradoxical doctrine of unconditional election, according to which God deliberately chooses a small set of the elect to join him in eternity, independently of the person's virtue or merit. Once predestined either to be saved or to be condemned, men cannot cause God to withdraw his decision, however virtuous or vile their actions. A conviction of one's innate depravity combined with the supposed inability to affect the course, or at least the outcome, of one's life inevitably produce self-hating, frustrated human beings who adopt the policy of passivity and evasion. The frustration accumulated underneath may easily lead to acts of unmotivated violence directed at random targets or to bouts of self-destructive behaviour. It would be certainly a gross simplification to take at face value the stereotype of the Scots as a nation of melancholy drunkards and/or drug users who occasionally revive only to engage in violent assaults, preferably in connection with football matches. The following analysis of two novels deeply rooted in the Scottish soil and preoccupied with issues of Scottish identity rather seeks to demonstrate that despite what seems to be a characteristically Scottish inclination to a negative self-definition, there indeed is a space opening up for an eventual assertion and qualified optimism.

When introducing Alasdair Gray as the author of *1982 Janine* (1984), it is to note that the reputation of this versatile Glaswegian iconoclast rests mostly on his first novel, the ground-breaking *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), which for many critics represents the proper culmination of twenti-

eth-century fiction in Scotland. 1982 *Janine* earned a mixed reception, owing apparently to the bold mixture of explicit pornographic material and outspoken comments on the condition of Scotland in the Thatcherite 1980s, delivered as a series of rambling digressions shaped in the mind of the protagonist, a middle-aged suicidal divorcee and insomniac alcoholic. The entire book takes place within a single night of expurgation, during which the protagonist admits to himself that by having assumed a stance of cowardly compliance, he collaborated on propagating what he hates most: subjection and exploitation. The protagonist is forced to face and exorcise the ghosts of his past failures of responsibility and is eventually lifted from the abyss of self-loathing and self-pity through his resolution to take a decisive action. Though his direction is as yet uncertain, the protagonist emerges in the morning as a reborn man and firmly asserts that from now on, he “will not do nothing” (Gray 1984, 341).

Irvine Welsh’s novel *Trainspotting*, together with the eponymous film (1996) based on the book, earned besides critical acclaim also an enormous popular success and even achieved a reputation akin to a cult status. A deeply troubled novel, *Trainspotting* centres at a disparate group of uprooted and dispossessed Scottish youths who substitute what they see as a lack of meaning in their lives by an abominable combination of heroin, alcohol, random violence and casual sex in shifting proportions. The novel takes the form of a series of loosely interrelated sketches and employs multiple narrative voices, which reinforces the disjointed nature of the drug users’ experience as much as it emphasises the characters’ existential loneliness and isolation from the society and each other. Most of the numerous characters that populate the book are simultaneously known by several different nicknames, which in Cairns Craig’s view provides a “mirror image of the society of isolated, atomistic individuals of modern capitalism” (2002, 97), but it also reflects the fact that the anti-establishment subculture characters are ill at ease with defining their identity. The protagonist, a university drop-out who pursues a private reading of Kierkegaard’s existentialist philosophy and inclines to metaphysical musings, refuses to identify himself either as British or as Scottish and concludes the novel by betraying his community and

deserting Scotland, thus effectively fleeing from his former unsatisfactory identity rather than resolving its tensions.

“Scotland Takes Drugs in Psychic Defence”: The Characters’ Motives for Substance Abuse

Iggy Pop looks right at me as he sings the line: ‘America takes drug in psychic defence’; only he changes ‘America’ for ‘Scatlin’, and defines us mair accurately in a single sentence than all the others have ever done . . . Ah cease my St Vitus dance and stand looking him in stunned awe. His eyes are on someone else.

—Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993, 75)

Douglas Gifford helpfully points out the significance of the name by which the protagonist of 1982 *Janine* goes: he is called Jock McLeish, “Jock” being a slang word for a “Scot” (2002, 920). Gifford continues to observe that the protagonist can be seen “as exemplifying significant features of Scottish character,” for instance “his job with security has been chosen by Gray as saying something about Scottish playing-it-safe, steady employment, being an instrument rather than a valid entity” (2002, 920). Jock too perceives himself in many ways as a representative Scotsman; he even equates himself with his country at one point, when he describes the peculiar attitude of his one-time lover, an amateur Freudian psychoanalyst, towards him: “I was Scotland, something frozen and dumb which she was going to liberate” (Gray 1984, 41). What makes *1982 Janine* a public testimony of Scotland as a whole rather than an individual Scotsman’s private history in the first place is however the extensive battery of comments on the contemporary standing of the country and the people from the point of view of an insider. Jock feels that the Scottish are being subjected to a continuous economic, political and social exploitation at the hands of the English, and that they have been deprived of the agency to affect any of the major decisions licensed by the distant Westminster Parliament. In the last analysis, denying the people the opportunity to determine the course of their country and by extension, their very lives, may mean leaving them with plenty of energy to spare and no sensible tasks to apply themselves to. “So what can we

do with this intelligence we don't need and can't use," Jock accordingly wonders and immediately supplies a precarious solution: "Stupefy it. Valium for housewives, glue-sniffing for schoolkids, hash for adolescents, rotgut South African wine for the unemployed, beer for the workers, spirits for me" (Gray 1984, 12). Jocks insists that his drinking habit serves the purpose of numbing his reasoning faculties and banishing haunting memories; he does not drink in order to feel elated, but rather in order not to feel miserable. "Thinking is a pain," he complains, "because it joins everything together," which a condition that he is strenuously attempting to avoid (1993, 66).

Drawing a link with *Trainspotting*, Grant Farred's observation runs in a similar vein: "In fin-de-siècle Britain, Thatcherite England has evacuated Scottishness, destroyed any oppositional notion of the identity, by making sure that the Scots have nothing to do—except take drugs, commit acts of "nihilism" against their neighbours and their mates, and, in Renton's case, contemplate the end of the Scottish nation" (2004, 221). *Trainspotting* offers an impressive range of substance and non-substance addicts: in keeping with Jock McLeish's bleak recommendation, there is a middle-aged housewife who uses Valium to cope with the death of her crippled son; there is a fourteen-year-old who seduces Renton with the prospect of obtaining hashish; there is Tommy, addicted to having sex with his girlfriend and switching to heroin when she abandons him; and, of course, there is Frank Begbie, dubbed alternately Beggar and General Franco, a deranged macho with a habit of heavy drinking and a bent for picking fist fights in pubs and in the streets. "Scotland takes drugs in psychic defence," reads the title of one of the novel's chapters, and what the characters seek to fend off is mostly boredom, depression and a sense of void (Welsh 1993, 71). Mark Renton, the most articulate of the characters, cannot conceive of any value worth the effort of achieving, so he prefers to leave it up to his heroin habit to steer him through his aimless existence. He ascribes to hard drugs the permanency that he lacks in all the other aspects of his life and speaking about his addiction, he explains: "Junk's different though. Ye cannae turn yir back oan it sae easy. It willnaey let ye" (1993, 90).

“Choose Life”: Facing and Evading Responsibility

Society invents a spurious convoluted logic tae absorb and change people whae’s behaviour is outside its mainstream. Suppose that ah ken aw the pros and cons, know that ah’m gaunnae huv a short life, am ay sound mind etcetera, etcetera, but still want tae use smack? They won’t let ye dae it. They won’t let ye dae it, because it’s seen as a sign ay thir ain failure. The fact that ye jist simply choose tae reject whit they huv tae offer. Choose us. Choose life.

– Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993, 87)

Much of 1982 *Janine* revolves around the protagonist’s bitter assertion that “if a country is not just a tract of land but a whole people then clearly Scotland has been fucked. I mean that word in the vulgar sense of *misused to give satisfaction or advantage to another*” (Gray 1984, 136). Jock’s guilty feelings spring from the part that he himself plays in the exploitation of the country by selling his professional skills out to a non-Scottish-owned company. He freely admits his responsibility as the above rant continues: “Scotland has been fucked and I am one of the fuckers who fucked her” (1984, 136). Jock spends his sleepless nights intoxicating himself with whisky and forging highly elaborate sexual scenarios featuring imaginary women subjected to a selection of humiliating practises, such as bondage and rape. Towards the end of the novel, named for Jock’s favourite fantasy female, Jock recognises that he shares his lot with the women of his daydreams in that he, too, is merely a helpless character in a script dictated by his employer (1993, 333). “Private sexual fantasy is not an escape from the outside world but a re-enactment of the very terms which dominate and repress ordinary humanity,” Craig insightfully comments and adds that Jock’s fantasies “are encouraged by a world economic system which requires the bondage of the self in order to deny the possibility of resistance to the world that it creates” (2002, 186-87). Jock finally manages to overcome his enforced inertia: he undertakes to write an employment resignation letter and grants his imaginary Janine the same freedom, however limited in this case, of recognising herself to be a character in a script.

In *Trainspotting*, a particular significance for the characters’ contested identities arises from the setting of the novel: the

home of all the major characters is explicitly Leith, formerly an independent burgh which merged with Edinburgh in 1920, notwithstanding the disapproval of this step on the part of the majority of Leith inhabitants. Lewis MacLeod elaborates on this historical fact and suggests that in the context of the novel, “the discourse of colonialism extends to Edinburgh itself, insofar as the capital city has forcibly amalgamated Leith and re-figured it as the ‘outskirts of Edinburgh’ rather than an autonomous space” (2008, 89). To the Leith youths, Edinburgh’s Old Town figures as a foreign soil, a site designed for the entertainment of tourists and open to respectable anglicised citizens, but hostile towards the invasion of subversive individuals. In keeping with the novel’s as well as its protagonist’s inclination to negative rather than positive definitions, Mark Renton shapes his identity in an outright opposition to what is mainstream and by extension, English. Naturally enough, he finds this provisional status unsatisfactory to the extent that he becomes a traitor both to his friends – or “acquaintances”, to use the label preferred by Mark’s drug supplier and subsequently adopted by Mark himself – and to his country, whose conditions he views as intrinsically limiting. In the conclusion of the novel, Mark makes a run with the money earned on an incidental drug deal that he was supposed to share with his fellows in crime and heads for Amsterdam, a locus described by MacLeod as “an urban space that is receptive to subversive behaviour without domesticating it” (2008, 102). Mark resigns at his Scottishness, but what is perhaps even more important; he makes a tentative attempt to stay clear of drugs and – after all – to choose life.

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the negative Scottish self-perception of being an inferior nation justly deserving to be exploited by the English coloniser, and examines the manifestations of the internalised parochial status in two novels by two iconoclastic Scotsmen: Alasdair Gray's *1982 Janine* (1984) and Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993). The main characters in both novels seek to define their Scottish identity in opposition to the English and are bound to find their passive defensive stance ineffective.

AUTHOR

Markéta Gregorová, affiliated with Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic, researches in the field of Scottish literature, particularly twentieth-century fiction. Besides journal articles and post-conference publications, she has co-authored two monographs on the subject: the Czech-language *Skotská próza v letech 1900–1980* (2011) and the English-language *Scottish Gothic Fiction* (2012).