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Ramon Lopez Ortega

Language and Point of View in Lewis
Grassic Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*



If the great Dutch language disappeared from literary usage and a Dutchman wrote in German a story of the Lekside peasants, one may hazard he would ask and receive a certain latitude and forbearance in his usage of German. He might import into his pages some score or so untranslatable words and idioms--untranslatable except in their context and setting; he might mould in some fashion his German to the rhythms and cadence of the kindred speech that his peasants speak. Beyond that, in fairness to his hosts, he hardly could go--to seek effect by a spray of apostrophes would be both impertinence and mistranslation.

The Courtesy that the hypothetical Dutchman might receive from German a Scot may invoke from the great English tongue.

With this plea Grassic Gibbon introduces his trilogy,¹ *Sunset Song* which had appeared in 1932, *Cloud Howe* in 1933, and *Grey Granite* in 1934. It is more than mere chance, surely, that an author claiming to be a revolutionary who had devoted much of his life to upholding the cause of his class, should restrict his preface to a reflection on the language of his novel, when in his world the current "socialist realism"

encouraged the imitation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century models, closing the door to formal experiment.

A Scots Quair is centered in the recent history of the Scottish Lowlands and the consequent upheavals made by industry on its rural communities. It was Gibbon's historical sense which shaped a story of enduring social conflict. This is a closely-woven work of art, not a propagandist tract, so his technique is especially well-gearred to so rich a subject, a changing social situation in which human pawns strive to grasp the meaning of their economic and spiritual destiny. A radical evolutionary process threatening their survival as a community, requires collective decisions to forge a future; because of this and the dynamic quality of his experience and understanding, Gibbon had to use a language both mixed and multivalent.

Much has been written about the epic and cyclic nature of the plot, its progression from the tilling of the land to heavy industry, but the technique employed has received scant attention, and the debatable character of the conclusions reached leaves much room for further discussion. Since we are dealing with a working-class writer having a proletarian outlook and sensibility, any evaluation of the possible formal innovations and aesthetic achievements in the novel would contribute to a better understanding of the concept of "working-class literature." Still, a full assessment of the validity of this category seems inseparable from the discussion about proletarian culture over the existence of which controversy in the twenties swung between the "proletkult" theorists and the sceptics who deny the possibility of any culture other than that of the ruling class. Whatever our opinion may be, a proper estimation of Gibbon's work must surely require an adequate study of its language.

Jack Lindsay, Ivor Brown, Hugh MacDiarmid, Ian Milner, Kurt Wittig, and even Jack Mitchell, among its distinguished critics, maintain that both construction and language are less convincing in *Grey Granite* than in the previous volumes; some see the purported flaw in a diminished poetic quality.² More recent criticism, however, seems to point in a different direction. After discussing what seem to me the main features of the language texture of the trilogy, I shall try to show from internal and textual evidence that *Grey Granite*, the book which most fully portrays the industrial scene and in which the collective hero is most obviously the working class, maintains an artistic parity with the other two volumes.

Some think otherwise, but it is difficult to imagine a working-class literature totally isolated from the English mainstream, and it is impossible to ignore substantial con-

tributions to it from authors with a working-class point of view providing something other than the new theme that already preoccupied the Victorians. Therefore, while the debate on the existence of a working-class culture with a language and values of its own continues, one should adhere to a method of determining mutual influences within the whole corpus of the English literary tradition.³

The language of *A Scots Quair* successfully renders the country speech of the North Eastern Lowlands, usually known as Lallans, Synthetic or Braid Scots, a direct descendant from the Old English dialect Northumbrian. Views may differ on Gibbon's use of it,⁴ but generally it is consonant with his prefatory note. Sentence-structure, word order, and internal rhythm,⁵ rather than less significant features which might exclude a larger public, convey the essence of the vernacular.⁶ Linguistic re-creation is never merely literal registration: the literary process implies both artifice and convention. In Gibbon's modified syntax literary English intermingles with the flow and cadence of conversational Scots, "the twists of the Scottish idiom"⁷ to use his own words, showing the characteristics that, as Norman Page⁸ has noted, mark spoken language, namely, intimate signals,⁹ incomplete sentences, colloquial repetition, hesitations, verbal omissions, anacoluthon, and other grammatical "inconsistencies." It is an oral style--David Craig finds it one of the most oral novels ever written--with uncommon poetic power, something on which almost everyone agrees. This poetic cast owes much to the predominance of the Doric in it; it is the language of the most memorable characters in the first two volumes, and of the everyday communal gossip throughout the trilogy. Even Ewan, "who so seldom spoke it" as the author tells us, reverts to Scots in moments of emotion (*GG* 464). English is employed almost always in opposition to the vernacular, and this opposition reflects sharp class distinctions. Chris's own inner conflict usually manifests itself as a linguistic one:

"...two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart and tormented her. You hated the land and the coarse speak of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day and the next you'd waken with the peewits crying across the hills, deep and deep, crying in the heart of you and the smell of the earth in your face, almost you'd cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness of the Scottish land and skies. You saw their faces in firelight, father's and mother's and the neighbours', before the lamps lit up, tired and kind, faces dear

and close to you, you wanted the words they'd known and used, forgotten in the far-off youngness of their lives, Scots words to tell to your heart, how they wrung it and held it, the toil of their days and unending their fight. And the next minute that passed from you, you were English, back to the English words so sharp and clean and true--for a while, for a while, till they slid so smooth from your throat you knew they could never say anything that was worth the saying at all." (SS 37)

English, the language of the gentry, is both despised and admired by the common folk, and this ambivalent attitude is obvious, for instance in the tattle around the way Chris spoke:

"...if she said it in Scots the woman would think, *Isn't that a common-like bitch at the Manse?* If she said it in English the speak would spread round the minister's wife was putting on airs." (CH 209)

Ellen Johns, the English girl who believes that her name is a misspelling of Helen (GG 382), fails to integrate into the community partly because of her language. Hers is a counterpoint voice to Scots. In *Grey Granite*, the *Tory Pictman*--a conservative paper--is said to be "full of dog Latin and constipated English, but of course not Scotch" (485). To put the dramatic dialogue of the novel into sociolinguistic terms, two different communication systems--the literary rendering of an elaborate code and a restricted one--are placed in permanent conflict. The metaphoric and aesthetic potential which, according to Basil Bernstein, a restricted code may have,¹⁰ is revealed in many passages exemplified in the wedding "invocation" of McIvor the Highlander:

"...he wished them long and lovely days, a marriage in the winter had the best of it. For was not the Spring to come and the seed-time springing of their love, and the bonny days of the summer, flowering it, and autumn with the harvest of their days? And when they passed to that other winter together they would know that was not the end of it, it was but a sleep that in another life would burgeon fresh from another earth. He could never believe but that two so young and fair as his friend and his friend's wife, once made one flesh would be one in spirit as well; and have their days built of happiness and their nights of the music of the stars." (SS 123-4)

Far from being contrived, the language may be the most germane to the content of the story. Recurring aliteration and rhythmic anapaestic prose¹¹ show the traces of a past that still survives, and reproduce the pulse of living and working.¹² Careful use of polysyndetic coordination heightens the tempo when the plot demands it; yet at times this effect is complemented with the vigour of frequent asyndetic paragraphs which, in *Grey Granite*, recall the almost telegraphic style of Henry Green's *Living*, the novel that pioneered new interest in working-class life during the thirties:¹³

"...would she never get out of it, get a job, get away, have clothes, some fun? If they couldn't afford to bring up their weans decent why did father and mother have them?" (GG 370)

Other stylistic devices such as similies taken from nature that spice the narrative with popular flavour, and frequent anadiplosis endowing the elders' speech with an arcane, proverbial quality, enrich the poetic vein. This is in no way diminished in *Grey Granite*:

"Ewan dim in the light of the early dawn, lying so still, so still he slept that near every morning you'd be startled the same, feared that he lay there dead..." (GG 363-4)

A sustained internal rhyme fleshed with the familiar Scots vocabulary, adds a rural colour so often mentioned by critics--"We can hear the earth itself speaking," as Neil Gunn said.¹⁴ Yet the tone is harsh, increasingly so in pace with the story; this is no gentle poetry, but a strong and insistent harmony, a recurring note in the final book of *A Scots Quair*. Occasionally, as if to remind us that literary language is an artifice even when based on popular speech, Gibbon uses more bookish and archaic forms. Thus he prefers *meikle* to *muckle*, *childe* rather than *chiel*. This is the language of the Scottish literary tradition referred to in this study.

With this semi-colloquial structure, often built on an evocative indirect style and a peculiar distribution of the generic and self-referring "you"--both in modified direct and indirect speech¹⁵--the novel is an antiphony whose voices proclaim deep social rifts. This plural style without the novelist's intrusion, is a technical advance over Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and most proletarian novels of the thirties. In this subordination of the author's voice to those of his characters, Gibbon ranks with major twentieth-century writers: he only organizes the material.

The divers voices embody opposing forces in work and action.

At times echoes of an age-old culture blend with the new sounds of unrelenting class-war endowing inherited forms with a new revolutionary meaning, proverbs and sayings mingling with slogans and pamphlets, Biblical allusions with the aggressiveness of the political or trade-union harangue (*CH* 214-5, 240); political speeches--Jock Cronin's is of a piece with those found in other working-class novels of the thirties (*CH* 268)--alternate with the voice of the land, the rural gossip that carries the stigma of prejudice and custom; but it is in Robert Colquhoun's revolutionary homilies that the boldest synthesis of old and new is to be found:

"In the years when the Great War ended the world seemed to turn in its sleep and awake, a new promise cried all about the earth, the promise of the Christ fulfilled in Man--fulfilled in the movements of pity and hope that men called by many names, meaning the same. Against ignoble oppressions and a bitter tyranny the common people banded themselves at last--in a Christ-like rage of pity to defend their brothers who sweated their blood in the mines, to give warmth and light and ease to us all. And the leaders of the great Nine Days, days filled with the anger and pity of the Christ who drove the money-changers from the Temple courts, looked in their hearts and found there fear, heard the crunch of the nails that were driven in through the shrinking hands of the Christ. And they sold Him again, his promise in Man, each for their thirty pieces of silver." (*CH* 349)

In *Grey Granite* the spontaneous protest of the Depression--Alick's bitterness is shared by most apprentices in contemporary novels¹⁶--runs side by side with clear statements from Socialist theory:

"You don't quarrel with History and its pace of change any more than you quarrel with the law of gravitation. History's instruments, the workers, 'll turn to us some time." (*GG* 414)

The semantic markers of a lingering piety, such as the ejaculatory prayers towards the end of *Cloud Howe* ("LORD, REMEMBER ME WHEN THOU COMEST INTO THY KINGDOM"), give way to revolutionary mottoes in *Grey Granite* ("DOWN WITH THE MEANS TEST AND HUNGER AND WAR"), and the occasional verses from hymns and traditional songs in the first two volumes, become in *Grey Granite* the militant verses from "The Internationale." (*GG* 395)

At other times some voices spring out from the continuum of the prose, indicating the irreconcilable poles of the struggle; in the last volume, in moments of crisis the voices raised in confrontation--the Town Council, the Church, the Labour Party, the Press, the Police--are no longer "murmurings" embedded in the narrative, but rather recorded as a series of clippings from different sources (*GG* 441, 485-6, 491-2), and the effect of this multiple perspective on a single event is almost Brechtian.

The novel's organic unity and vitality raising it to the rank of a genuine national epic, result from this intricate weaving-together of contrasts, and the rhythm generated by such a tension is one of the work's achievements. In the anonymous narrator of *Sunset Song*--the medieval chronicler, as Jessie Kocmanová refers to him--one can already detect an ironic overtone which betrays a conflicting, dialectical view of the history of the powerful families which he recounts. From Ewan Tavendale, in my opinion the central character of the final volume, comes the political speech, the radical language of the thirties (*GG* 457). These are perhaps the first and last echoes of the "communal" voice, as it has been rightly described, of the poliphony which is at the core of the "quair." It is therefore hard to see Kurt Wittig's difficulty in identifying the speakers,¹⁷ however anonymous they may appear, for the chorus is not a whole community in unison, but an easily identifiable assembly of conflicting interests and points of view. All this somehow reminds one of *The Waste Land*--T. S. Eliot, incidentally, had a high opinion of Gibbon. Nevertheless, Eliot uses a language that is mythical, meta-historical, almost cosmic, in which it is possible to jump from English to German, or from French to Sanskrit, while the expression in Gibbon's trilogy is local, of the earth, rooted in history.

The supposed linguistic and compositional flaws found by almost all the critics of *Grey Granite*, even by one as sympathetic as MacDiarmid, seem to me non-existent. Changed circumstances exact a change in style: language is once more moulded to fit the new scene, the great industrial city, adapting itself to a new rhythm, that of the machine, more monotonous, mechanical, repetitive. Because *A Scots Quair* tells of the dissolution of the Scottish peasantry and the emergence of the industrial proletariat, the last rites of a pastoral will be witnessed in the ineluctable demise of its image, and in a change in the nature of its poetry. The new hero is bound to be less individual, more anonymous and impersonal--perhaps less memorable. But this is not a stylistic flaw of the author; rather, it is a merit. At the end of the book, as if reminding us of the deliberate change, there is a return to an Arcadian style, when Chris decides to go back to the

country (GG 496).

Bearing all these facts in mind it is easy to trace the literary tradition from which, as most critics agree, Gibbon comes: the ballads; the poems of Burns; Walter Scott's historical novels; the works of George Douglas Brown and William Morris; the styles of William Alexander and J. MacDougall Hay; *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*; Dos Passos's innovatory narrative; and the poetry of Gibbon's great friend and compatriot, Hugh MacDiarmid.¹⁸ To complete this survey of Gibbon's literary forebears--however indirect their influence may have been--reference should be made to the Chartist writers and those nineteenth-century Scottish poets whose verse has as its main subject industrial exploitation and poverty. The Chartist Ernest Jones and the Scottish poetess Ellen Johnston are the names that readily spring to mind. It is curious that Gibbon's critics, most of whom are familiar with working-class literature, have not made any mention of them; because, although these writers may not be of the highest rank, undoubtedly they occupy a position worthy of note along the road which leads towards Gibbon's masterpiece.¹⁹

These considerations about *A Scots Quair* do not allow us to conclude that the integration of a working-class experience and perspective into the novel form has signified the appearance of a completely new kind of literature; yet certainly both language and form have been noticeably affected by the requirements of a new theme and a corresponding shift in focus to an extent that is both considerable and differentiating. Indeed, although it may not be possible to claim that a working-class culture as such exists--the only soil in which a genuinely proletarian literature could grow--it can certainly be maintained that this class manifests distinctive cultural traits and is, assuredly, one of the main channels by which our popular traditional heritage comes to us.²⁰ A fertile synthesis, a balanced merging of these components--the world-view peculiar to a fully developed working-class consciousness and the elements of a radical legacy, still alive in folklore and working-class popular customs--can give birth to coherent works that bear no relationship to the "subliterature" of the propagandist type which has predominated until now. In literature, the perspective of a new collective consciousness is not revealed simply by recording a certain set of living conditions--that was perhaps the greatest weakness of the late nineteenth-century English naturalists. Instead, it must be translated into the expression of that class engaged in a continuing struggle for survival and for the achievement of its own identity. In creative writing, this demands recourse to different levels of language and registers that transcend the mere function of giving "local colour," as they do in traditional lit-

erature. For Gibbon it demands the incorporation of a popular and vernacular idiom and of that literary tradition of oral radicalism, fed by the inexhaustible quarry of the Authorized Version of the Bible; it demands, too, an adequate use of the working class's own means of expression, that is, the political speech, the pamphlet, and the trade-union debate.

What is revolutionary about this technique is not the discovery of a language "totally new" to serve as the vehicle for a different experience but, on the contrary, the endowment of an old, but living language with the most modern devices of radical expression.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Gibbon is neither so naïve as to seek a "new" language for his class, nor is he saddled with the chronic sense of inferiority of the working-class author over expressing himself in his native idiom and drawing upon the dialect resources of his own community, be its dialect regional or social, or both. Few proletarian authors have drawn mainly on popular speech: Gibbon is a notable exception. He knows how to tap the potential of everyday language and, at the same time, how to make good use of bourgeois literature to which, in an often quoted statement, he paid generous tribute: "It is not a decayed and decrepit dinosaur who is the opponent of the real revolutionary writer, but a very healthy and vigorous dragon indeed."²¹

Not only does *A Scots Quair* convey the "pastoral feeling about the dignity of that form of labour" referred to by William Empson in his well-known essay on proletarian literature,²² but, in addition, it reveals the dignity of a form of struggle. Reading the work of authors such as Lewis Grassie Gibbon, James Barke, or Lewis Jones, all of them belonging to the thirties, one wonders what F. R. Leavis meant when he declared that "in matters of literature, that was a barren decade."²³

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NOTES

¹ *A Scots Quair* (London, 1971). Subsequent references will appear in the text.

² See Ivor Brown's "Foreword" to *A Scots Quair* (London, 1950); Ian Milner, "An Estimation of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*," *Marxist Quarterly*, 1 (October 1954), p. 214; Jack Mitchell, "The Struggle for the Working-Class Novel in Scotland: 1900-1939," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 21 (1973), pp. 401-2. As a working-class character Ewan

Tavendale may display atypical traits, but this could hardly impair the novel's quality.

³ "English" is used here in its broadest linguistic sense, covering the literature from the Old English period--Old English being, of course, the mother tongue of the non-Gaelic dialects spoken in Scotland (the language of the Lowlands is sometimes called Anglian Scots)--to the present, and includes obviously both English and Scottish writers.

⁴ Cf. Geoffrey Wagner, "Lewis Grassie Gibbon and the Use of Lallans for Prose," *Aberdeen University Review* (Autumn 1952), pp. 333-4; J. K. Kidd, "The Voice of the Land," *Scottish Library Association News* (December 1964), p. 15.

⁵ For example: "What to give the weans, what to give the man, fed he must be ere he took the streets to look for that weary job he'd not find--he'd never find one you had come to ken!" (GG 369).

⁶ Sympathy is therefore difficult with those who deplore his less than purist use of Lallans. On this see Geoffrey Wagner, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-4.

⁷ From a letter to Cuthbert Graham in 1933; quoted by Geoffrey Wagner, *Ibid.*

⁸ Cf. Norman Page, *Speech in the English Novel* (London, 1973), chapter I.

⁹ A sensitive use of the Scottish interjection--*losh*, *och*, *feuch* are common--helps to shorten the author's commentary.

¹⁰ Basil Bernstein, "A Sociolinguistic Approach to Socialization; with some Reference to Educability," in J. J. Gumperz and D. Hymes, eds., *Directions in Sociolinguistics* (New York, 1971), p. 472.

¹¹ Gibbon can arrange sentence elements to fit into a metrical pattern and to adapt to the same foot: "...and he swore at the thing/and Chris sat on the top,/and Ewan came running/and jumped there as well,/and it closed with a bang,/and they all of them cheered" (CH 217-8).

¹² Gibbon himself says of Lallans: "it is still in most Scots communities...the speech of bed and board and street and plough, the speech of emotional ecstasy and emotional stress. But it is not genteel. It is to the bourgeois of Scotland

coarse and low and common and loutish" (quoted by Geoffrey Wagner, op. cit., p. 328). If this is indeed the expressive power of true Scots, Gibbon's prose surely conveys it.

¹³ I have dealt with this in *La crisis económica de 1929 y la novelística de tema obrero en Gran Bretaña en los años treinta* (Salamanca, 1974).

¹⁴ Ivor Brown, op. cit., p. 6. Often an unmistakably epic flavour is provided by the repetition of the subject: "And the great-grandson of Cospatric, he joined the English..." (SS 16); "So the Bruce he took their lands..." (CH 200).

¹⁵ On this see: Graham Trengove, "Who is you? Grammar and Grassic Gibbon," *Scottish Literary Journal* (1974); and Ian J. Simpson, "Lewis Grassic Gibbon," *Scottish Educational Journal* (April 1954).

¹⁶ Cf. *Grey Granite*, p. 370; Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole* (Harmondsworth, 1969--first published 1933), p. 180.

¹⁷ Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 332.

¹⁸ Cf. Jack Mitchell, op. cit., pp. 387, 397-8, and 402-3; Ian Milner, op. cit., p. 218; Jessie Kocmanová, "A Scots Quair and its Relevance to the Scottish Proletarian Struggle of the Nineteen-Thirties," published by the University of Seville in *English Literature and the Working Class* (Sevilla, 1980); Hugh MacDiarmid, "Lewis Grassic Gibbon," in *Modern British Writing*, ed. Denys Val Baker (New York, 1947), pp. 315-16; David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People* (London, 1961), pp. 291-2.

¹⁹ H. C. Wyld's description of the link between Anglo-Saxon poetry and much later English literature might well apply to that between Gibbon and some of these writers: "There is...a continuity, not of conscious inheritance, but of something more deeply interfused" ("Diction and Imagery in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," *Essays and Studies*, (1925), p. 51.) Here, I suggest, the linking element, whether direct or indirect, may be found in a growing working-class consciousness.

²⁰ I have attempted to treat this more fully in *Movimiento obrero y novela inglesa* (Universidad de Salamanca, 1976); "Industrial Conflict and the Viewpoint of the English Novel in the 1930s," *Gulliver* (Berlin, 1978); and "The British Novel of the 1930s and the Working Class," (Universidad de Sevilla, 1980).

²¹ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, "Controversy: Writer's International," *Left Review*, 1 (February 1935), p. 179.

²² William Empson, "Proletarian Literature," in his *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935), p. 8.

²³ F. R. Leavis, "Retrospect of a Decade," *Scrutiny*, 9 (June 1940), p. 71.