

Re-presenting the margins: revisiting the Scottish countryside in L. G. Gibbon's *Sunset Song*

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I

In his *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* Raymond Williams comments on the gradual institutionalisation of the dominant (Anglo-American) version of modernism and the cooption of its subversive possibilities by the capitalist market dynamics, which it at least in some forms tried to challenge, or bypass, in the initial phase of its emergence in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century (*Politics* 35). As several critics have amply demonstrated, one of the defining features of this 'established,' market-governed tradition of modernism was a many-pronged ideological ambivalence in its response to social modernity.¹ Such ambivalence or inbetweenness of the modernists, which stands in conspicuous contrast to their aesthetic radicalism, as Williams has argued, was a part of the broader 'structure of feeling' of dominant cultural formations in their clash with emergent ones at a specific historical context. Hence Williams' suggestion that artistic and other institutional practices, 'these laws, constitutions, theories, ideologies, which are so often claimed as natural, or as having universal validity or significance, simply have to be seen as expressing and ratifying the domination of a particular class' (*Problems* 36-37). The dominant modernist discourses, more often than not, either prioritized the middle classes over the working classes, the masculine over the feminine, the urban over the provincial, the elite over the popular, or took an ambivalent stance in times of conflict between the two poles of these dyads.² The crises the hegemonic class, gender or space faced at the turn of the century and the culture of negotiations, new compromises and new institutional practices the crises generated have been subjects of extensive critical enquiry in several disciplines. The historian Eric Hobsbawm, for one example, has devoted an entire chapter, 'Who's Who or the Uncertainties of the Bourgeoisie' in his *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (165-91) to understand the nature of the culture of ambivalence which was one of the products of this crisis.

Williams considers the possibility of tracing 'an alternative [modernist] tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century' (*Politics* 35) that could fruitfully counter the ideology of ambivalence of the canonized metropolitan tradition of modernism. The politics of market economy has to be challenged, if at all, from outside its space, that is to saying the imperial metropolis in the age of modernism. The hegemony of the discourses of the centre has to be interrogated through discourses from the margin. This alternative tradition, it is hoped and believed, would be much closer in spirit to the late-nineteenth century avant-garde futuristic vision of making it new, its 'intent . . . to reintegrate art in the praxis of life' (Burger 86). In other words, for Williams, it would be 'a tradition which may address itself . . . for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again.' The works that foreground perspectives of the working classes (and the peasantry), women, non-Anglo-American 'fringe' spaces, provincial/ rural cultures, through extensive use of modernist formal innovations, can make some salutary interventions in this regard. Such modernist works, apparently paradoxically, can also make the paradigm of the 'non-modern'/ 'regressive' spaces question the paradigm of the 'progressive' 'modern,' and thus help us understand better the grand narrative of modernity, whose pitfalls are increasingly evident in the alienation, fragmentation and anomie of our times.

In the context of these few initial comments on the culture of modernism, this paper seeks to explore how the Scottish 'modernist' novelist Lewis Grassie Gibbon (pen-name of James Leslie Mitchell, 1901-35) adopts various marginal ideological perspectives in *Sunset Song* (1932), the first novel of his trilogy *A Scots Quair* (1932-'34), in order to create an 'alternative' provincial discourse of modernism at the time of gradual institutionalisation of its dominant metropolitan tradition. Since it is not possible within the limited scope of this article to undertake a detailed discussion of all possible aspects of the author's ideologically 'non-modernist' aesthetics within a modernist stylistic framework, I wish to concentrate on a small set of interrelated issues pertaining only to one aspect of the novel, the problem of rural/ regional 'reconstruction' and its thematic, formal and ideological ramifications. The issues of class and gender, of course, will appear occasionally, for Gibbon's treatment of the Scottish rural and provincial space as a category of identity formation cannot be altogether separated from his exploration of other such categories. Not only does Gibbon's endeavor, the paper seeks to argue, offer a critique of the dominant modernist tradition by hinting at the possibility of an 'alternative' (marginal) modernism, at the same time it is marked by a departure from certain Victorian Realist fictional conventions. The Victorian Realist tradition abounds in novels set in the countryside and therefore offers rich ground for spatial imagination of the rural; but the discourses of the countryside presented in such novels, as Williams has shown, invariably foreground the perspectives of the absentee landlord, the gentry or the middle class, perspectives celebrated in the long pastoral tradition. I shall try to show how Gibbon not only contributes to a marginal provincial discourse of modernism—a movement that has largely been seen as a product of the metropolitan artistic sensibility—but also, in the process, departs from the dominant pastoral and middle-class tradition of dubious representation of the countryside.

II

L. G. Gibbon was born and brought up and lived his life in a socio-cultural location of multiple marginalities. This marginal location largely shaped his negotiations with the aesthetics and ideology of the contemporary culture of metropolitan modernism and modernity. Economically a member first of the peasantry and then of the working/ lower-middle class, spatially belonging to a peasant community (born in Aberdeenshire in the rural Scotland into an impoverished crofter family), culturally inhabiting the fringe space of Anglo-American modernism, he was shaped to participate in as well as interrogate the prevalent politico-ideological and literary-cultural discourses of his time. His Scottish national identity only contributed to this all-round condition of otherness. The traditional economic and cultural hegemony of England over 'backward' Ireland, Scotland and Wales reduced these three, in the formulation of Eric Hobsbawm, to the status of 'the Other Britain.'² Hailing from a rural place in a culture far away from the locus of power and groping for its identity within the Great British 'family,' Gibbon chooses as the theme of *A Scots Quair* the material, emotional and spiritual struggle and evolution of marginal peoples—first, the Highland Scottish peasantry and then the industrial working class. The reality of the peripheral class and cultural location of the author and his subjects is, again, mediated in the fictional framework through the dominant perspective of Chris, another marginal entity—a woman in a rabidly patriarchal culture. Here is one of a few instances of a male author writing an entire trilogy with a woman's as the most prominent, if not the 'central,' perspective. Gibbon's narrative space in the trilogy is thus teeming with possibilities of multi-layered interventions in the hegemony of the dominant metropolitan middle class masculinist discourses of modernism.

Whether this is a consciously adopted strategy on the part of the author is a matter of conjecture. But one understands that the stage has been prepared for grappling with these discourses —often naturalized by what Williams calls the 'metropolitan forms of perception'—from outside the space of institutionalized modernism. The trilogy, thus, presents itself with the possibility of exploring this modernism

. . . with some of its own sense of strangeness and distance, rather than with the comfortable and now internally accommodated forms of its incorporation and naturalization. This means, above all, seeing the imperial and capitalist metropolis as a specific historical form . . . It involves looking . . . from outside the metropolis: from the deprived hinterlands, where different forces are moving, and from the poor world which has always been peripheral to the metropolitan systems. This need involve no reduction of the importance of the major artistic and literary works which were shaped within metropolitan perceptions. But one level has certainly to be challenged: the metropolitan interpretation of its own processes as universals (*Politics* 47).

Such intervention from the periphery, and its interrogation of metropolitan universalism, of course, substantially draws its critical energy from the formal rubric of modernisms. Sara Blair draws attention to the fact that the plurality of modernisms has created adequate space for us to seek alternative voices to the dominant high Anglo-American modernism within the larger aesthetic category of modernism itself. Modernist formal innovations could be, and were, she argues, employed for such interventions. Blair's argument has obvious echoes of the Brechtian assertion that it is the use of forms and techniques from specific cultural-ideological perspectives and with compatible 'intentions' that make the forms and techniques radical. Blair contends:

In a vast array of contexts and places, writers during the era of high Modernism and beyond adapted its formalism and techniques, even its defining idioms, often so as to contest its political commitments. This was especially true for certain women, African-American, and socialist writers —what we can cautiously, with qualification, term writers on the left—attempting to open new public spaces or spheres for the expression of varied responses to modernity, and various political and social claims on its realities (Levenson ed. 162-63).

Gibbon, according to this definition a leftist modernist writer, attempts at representing a marginal Scottish peasant culture from its own perspective, thereby departing on the one hand from the 'metropolitan forms of perception,' and from the trend of portraying the countryside from the perspectives of the aristocratic landlord or the distant middle class city-dweller observer on the other. His unromantic, unsentimental and unidealistic representation of the rural space, that refuses to indulge in a facile glorification of the countryside, offers a critique of these perspectives, which have been central to the romantic heritage of the British pastoral imagination.³ In his project of rural reconstruction Gibbon shows from within the problems plaguing Kinraddie life and thus challenges the privileged pastoral vision of the countryside as a locale of eternal and uninterrupted bliss. The nature of the metropolitan intellectual hegemony is thus mediated in his work in its discursive complexity, and is not reduced to the banal binary of the country and the city. Such a complex, realistic representation involves an interrogation of the age-old myth of the 'organic community' and frees his treatment of the issue of class of the simplistic reductionism that characterised a whole lot of literary works produced in Britain around the same time, the 1920s and the '30s, mostly by city-centric middle class 'Marxist' intellectuals.⁴ At the same time, *Sunset Song* is an example of how modernist techniques can be used successfully for a representation of the countryside, which has been either ignored in high Modernist discourses, or given a politically stabilizing representation that undervalued the (necessary) course of political-historical development.

Gibbon looks at the Scottish provincial reality from the perspective of the actual inhabitants of the region, the peasantry, and later, the working class. At one level the trilogy, as a whole, fictionalises the classic theory of social evolution from the country to the city. *Sunset Song* offers a discourse of the gradual dissolution of a peasantry and its unsuccessful

struggle against the invasion of a rent-and-wage form of agriculture. It is the self-definition of the peasantry, their construction of a distinct identity for themselves and the ways they innovate in order to grapple with prevalent historical forces, which constitute the narrative fabric of *Sunset Song*. If gender-inequality, lack of access to institutional education and technological modernity, and a somewhat rigid refusal to come to terms with the external world of momentous changes are some of the negative aspects of this self-fashioning, a positive emphasis on the communality of spirit, a belief in the uninterrupted continuity of life force in the region and a close, nourishing association with land and nature are the sources of self-subsistence of this people. It is this strength derived from a material as well as emotional association with people and nature that Williams describes as 'spiritual.' In such 'spirituality,' in Williams' formulation, 'the bitter memories of the clearances, the Highland laments, the legends of prehistory are woven into a cloth that both covers and defies poverty' (*The Country* 269).

The author's invocation of this 'spiritual' strength in the novel takes mainly two forms—exploration of an agrarian class-identity and construction of a regional subjectivity through an emphasis on the local. One of the ways in which the class-identity of the peasantry is conceived is politicization of the intense physicality of their life. The essential physicality of hard work is dealt with in its dual reality of pleasure and pain, so that any hollow aestheticisation of agrarian life becomes suspect. The harvest episode (67-71), for instance, is described from the perspective of an insider, a participant in the prosaic physical process, and not from the perspective of the detached observer. Thus collective work is represented in its contradictions, neither condescendingly reduced to a 'mere' physical activity as opposed to 'superior' mental activities, nor celebrated or valorised. There is a corresponding mixture of the prosaic and the poetic in the use of language in this part of the narrative. The grueling hardship of '. . . your back near cracked and broke with the strain of the bending' (68) is followed by the temporary relief and savory success of 'but in three days time the ley was cut, the yavil glowed yellow across the dykes and they moved to that without stop' (69), only to resurface in the anxiety that dissolves the border between the physical and the emotional: 'it came on real blistering weather of heat, but hardly you'd bear to touch on the wood of the reaper shaft when you soused the horses, so hot it grew. Kinraddie gasped and then bent to its chaving again, this heat wouldn't last, the rain was due, God help the crops that waited cutting them.'

Such collective physicality and close association with the natural habitus emphasize not only the positive reality of the complex totality of man as an individual, as a part of his community and as an integrated entity of the bio-physical natural order, but also a primitive mode of existence in which servile dependence on nature turns the bonding into crippling bondage. This unromantic vision of life in Kinraddie, participation in or close identification with the process of physical work rather than its neutral observation, and an emphasis on the collective rather than the individual dimension of work, are features of the genre of 'working class fiction,' though the working class in the technical sense does not figure in *Sunset Song*. There are works involving the working class produced broadly at the same time, whose treatment of the work process and the marginal people is ideologically

dubious. One can, for instance, compare Gibbon's representation of the peasantry and rural nature with that of D. H. Lawrence's. Like Gibbon, Lawrence migrated from the country to the city, but unlike Gibbon he went through an upward class-migration. His representation of the rural (man and nature), more often than not, is that of a physically and emotionally distant observer who approaches the whole experience from outside, from an alien framework. Like Gibbon, Lawrence never glorifies country life in a romantic fashion, but nor does he emphasize the political in it. In rural representation, what characterizes Lawrence is an evasion of the literal, as it is. There is almost typically a metaphorical import, as in the first chapter of *The Rainbow* that transforms hardship and exploitation into essential vitality and regenerative physical prowess:

Heaven and earth was teeming around them, and how should this cease? . . . They knew the intercourse between heaven and earth, sunshine drawn into the breast and bowels, the rain sucked up in the daytime, nakedness that comes under the wind in the autumn . . . Their life and interrelations were such: feeling the pulse and body of the soil, that opened to the furrow for the grain and became smooth and supple after their plowing, and clung to their feet with a weight that pulled like desire . . . They mounted their horses, and held life between the grip of their knees (3-4).

In stark contrast with Gibbon's account of the harsh harvesting process, the political here is nullified by the symbolic, the poetic. In such aestheticisation of the political, the reader is granted the role of the safe, distant, complacent observer; he is allowed to identify with a particular social position, which is legitimized through such accounts. It is precisely this identification-separation-fetishisation technique that creates a smooth narrative of complacent roundness and draws the reader 'within,' something Brecht critiques in his model of distancing-engagement-inclusion-contradiction because it keeps the reader 'with' it.⁵ The Brechtian emphasis on the inorganicity of form that allows contradictory presences to coexist has to be seen in contradistinction with the Lukacsian idea of 'totality' in fictional representation that resolves all contradictions into a seamless whole. If Lawrence's passage is an example of smooth 'totality,' or what Stephen Heath calls 'fetishistic happiness,'⁶ Gibbon's employment of an inorganic modernist form that relies on the principle of contradictions substantially reduces the possibility of unproblematic readerly identification with the narrative world. Such an inorganic form is compatible with his thematic debunking of the myth of 'organic community' of the British countryside. The smooth narrative of rural nostalgia gives way in the novel to an incongruous combination of the prosaic and the poetic that marks Chris and her brother Will's ambivalent attitude to men and nature in Kinraddie. They are simultaneously attracted to and repelled by them: 'He would whisper his hate to Chris as they lay . . . And Chris would cover her ears and listen, turning this cheek to the pillow and that, she hated also and she didn't hate, father, the land, the life of the land . . .' (30-1).

A concrete comparison of the passage from *The Rainbow* with the first paragraph of 'Ploughing,' the opening chapter of the body of *Sunset Song*, in which Gibbon presents

a partially poetic account of life at Kinraddie, would help us substantiate the point (allow me this rather long quotation):

Below and around where Chris Guthrie lay the June moors whispered and rustled and shook their cloaks, yellow with broom and powdered faintly with purple, that was the heather but not the full passion of its colour yet. And in the east against the cobalt blue of the sky lay the shimmer of the North Sea, that was by Bervie, and maybe the wind would veer there in an hour or so and you'd feel the change in the life and strum of the thing, bringing a streaming coolness out of the sea. But for days now the wind had been in the south, it shook and played in the moors and went dandering up the sleeping Grampians, the rushes pecked and quivered about the loch when its hand was upon them, but it brought more heat than cold, and all the parks were fair parched, sucked dry, the red clay soil of Blawearie gaping open for the rain that seemed never-coming. Up here the hills were brave with the beauty and heat of it, but the hayfield was all a crackling dryness and in the potato park beyond the biggings the shaws drooped red and rusty already. Folk said there hasn't been such a draught since eighty-three and Long Rob of the Mill said you couldn't blame *this* one on Gladstone, and everybody laughed except father, God knows why (25).

The poetic, symbolic and the erotic in Lawrence's passage is not altogether absent here, but what is different is the recurrent punctuation of the smooth and beautiful with contradictions, 'which refuse to blend smoothly with one another, cutting across the action rather than neatly integrating with it . . . the audience is constrained into a multiple awareness of several conflicting modes of representation' (Eagleton 66). A 'distanziating' modernist narrative of disjunction—of what Brecht called 'order without hierarchy'—is created. This play of contradictions is primarily rendered through the conjunction 'but' and the close coexistence of the apparently beautiful but actually dreary possibility of a better world and its continuous deferral. The passage is in the traditional third person omniscient narrative, until in the last sentence several perspectives of the 'folk,' of Long Rob, are brought in; an enigmatic 'you' referring to the 'folk,' or the characters inside the narrative, and also possibly to the reader outside it, is introduced; and the use of the single word 'father' strikes and compels the reader to go back to the first sentence to identify Chris Guthrie at the centre of this whole passage, a formulation of whose stream-of-consciousness, the reader now realises, the entire passage must have been. The reader is forced to be alert, and the possibility of identification is replaced by an alienation effect. The border between inside and outside the narrative, and between narrative past and present dissolves to make the reader actively participate in the rest of the narrative. The distance between the reader and the fictional world is put to question. A typically modernist narrative in form is thus employed for a politically progressive understanding of the traditional, non-technological existence of a marginal peasant culture languishing in a state of servile dependence on nature's bounty.

If construction of an unromantic class identity is one part of Gibbon's questioning of the myth of 'organic community' and high modernist metropolitan universalism, the other part of this enterprise is his fashioning of a regional subjectivity through an emphasis on the local and the concrete. The two are, of course, essentially implicated in each other. Indeed, spatio-cultural self-fashioning emerges as a vital ingredient in the formation of peasant culture in the narrative. In each of the first two novels in the trilogy, *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe*, which deal with life in the Scottish rural region Kinraddie and the provincial Segget respectively, an entire chapter is devoted to minute topographical presentation of the locale of representation. Significantly, this is not done in the third novel, *Grey Granite*, which chooses as its setting the urban space of Duncairn, which, being closer to (though it is not quite) a modern industrial city, is characterized more by monotonous urban typicality than by specific regional features. Also, because of the global nature of the movement of capital and the emergence and development of an international working class consciousness through the labour movement, Duncairn has lost the local emphasis so vitally retained by Kinraddie and Segget. Invocation in a number of ways of a sense of rootedness and of pride in a rich regional peasant cultural heritage is one means of creating the authentic flavour of the 'local' in the first two novels. The minute topographical realism that produces a visual, almost physical impact on the reader contributes in narrative terms to the goal of capturing the tempo-spatially immediate, the here and the now. But the present, as a part of a historical continuum, receives its meaning and validity only through an evocation of memories, through oral narrative forms like myths, legends and folklores in the novel.

Commenting on the relation of memory, historiography and storytelling in "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" Walter Benjamin invokes a distinction between 'epic' forms and 'novel' forms of narrative. The 'epic' forms, which directly or indirectly have an oral and communal character, have greater historiographical value than the written 'novel' forms: 'Any examination of a given epic form is,' for Benjamin, 'concerned with the relationship of this form to historiography. In fact, one may go even further and raise the question whether historiography does not constitute the common ground of all forms of the epic. Then written history would be in the same relationship to the epic forms as white light is to the colors of the spectrum' (Benjamin 95). Memory acts as a creator of tradition, not just an aesthetic tradition comprising the tellers and listeners of narratives across generations, but also a historio-cultural tradition submerged in the process of epical storytelling. Communal memory shapes the community's consciousness of its past, as also the modes of its dynamic, futuristic self-fashioning at present. The validity of absolute chronological categories like past, present and future, used to define 'progress' of communities, thus, becomes suspect in understanding the nature of representation of history in these epical genres. Drawing on Benjamin's suggestions in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," we can argue that in such 'epical' narratives informed by narrative functioning of memory, progress is understood not in terms of the teleological continuity of these distinct temporal categories, but in terms of a singular non-sequential 'abridged' perception of the three.

Oral elements, and communal memory functioning through them, are foundational to Gibbon's literary reconstruction of the alternative local 'history' from the people's perspective in *Kinraddie*, and to a lesser extent, in *Segget*. An aesthetically informed, non-linear, non-written, informal 'history from below' captures the essence of history as a sustaining heritage in popular consciousness, and as a source of emotional nourishment and spiritual subsistence, which makes struggle in the material life towards a better future possible. By continuous invocation of the past through myths, legends and folklores and ceaseless recourse to allusions, anecdotes, even gossip and rumours, in the quotidian life, the people in the Mearns try to locate themselves in their temporal and spatial universe. The mythical Golden Age, also a part of their collective regional identity, is mentioned several times in the first two novels. Gibbon thus draws attention to the essential narrativity and discursive formation of people's history which locates itself outside the pale of the dominant historiography of 'progress.' In his attempt at constructing an archaeology of regional history through a complex network of popular narratives and oral discourses, and locating these small 'works of fiction' in the material-emotional-spiritual history of the people and the place, the porous nature of the boundary between history and fiction as separate discourses is exposed. The two modes of knowledge-production converge and advance in a mutually informing process in the narrative. To take one example, *Sunset Song* opens thus:

Kinraddie lands had been won by a Norman childe, Cospatric de Gondeshil, in the days of William the Lyon, when gryphons and such-like beasts still roamed the Scots countryside and folk would waken in their beds to hear the children screaming, with a great wolf-beast, come through the hide-window, tearing at their throats. In the Den of Kinraddie one such beast had its lair and by day it lay about the woods and the stench of it was awful to smell all over the countryside, and at gloaming a shepherd would see it. . . And it ate up sheep and men and women and was a fair terror, and the King had his heralds cry a reward. . . So the Norman childe, Cospatric, that was young and landless and fell brave and well-armoured, mounted his horse in Edinburgh Town and came North. . . (1).

Almost all the features of Gibbon's historical reconstruction and formation of a regional identity through 'storytelling' can be found here: the predominantly peasant culture and the people's perspective which invokes the material past of a feudal character; a combination of the legendary, the mythological and the anecdotal with the historical; abridgement of different time-frames through memory; compression of space through travel in mythical times; the interface of the home and the world in a pre-technological ambience; an intimate, personal bonding between the teller and the listener of the narrative(s); accumulation of cultural heritage through orality across generations and the resultant erection of a tradition; a rambling, elaborate, unabbreviated, gradual unfolding of the narrative; an air of the storyteller's personal familiarity with the subject of narration (or, the insider's approach, 'an artisan form of communication' Benjamin, 91); and above all, the imagination of community and construction of cultural identity through time and

space and the people's obvious pride in recounting that 'history' which would serve as a source of strength at present.

The entire section—and also the rest of the novel—is replete with elements of folklore and anecdotes about past people and incidents, recounted by the insiders of the community. Phrases like 'they said', 'folk said' and 'some said' abound, especially in the first few sections. Such devices give the novel an 'epical' quality, which no more remains a creation, or pronunciation, by a single, central, godlike 'author.' 'Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn,' Benjamin writes, 'and among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers' (1). Gibbon's storytelling/ 'historytelling' enterprise thrives upon the decentered voices of innumerable anonymous storytellers. The 'aura,' or creative authority, of the 'author' is thus replaced by the mediatory role of an authorial persona, a mere pivotal consciousness. As long as it is the general life of Scotland, Aberdeen or Kinraddie that the narrator deals with, he uses such narratorial devices as 'they said,' 'folk said' and so on. It is only when he zooms in on the individual character of Chris or her family that such devices are replaced by an omniscient third person narration. Thus, in the first case, the narrator's omniscience is challenged from within; he is only one of the narrators in a community of narrators. Dealing with collective consciousness, therefore, demands a flexible and accommodative technique that is lost in the representation of an individual, where the individual narrator is presented as adequate. The "Drilling" section, which concentrates mainly on the fortunes of Chris from her own perspective, for one example, is narrated mostly through third person omniscient narrative. One of the rare occasions here when 'folk said' is used deals with the process of harvest, the general productive life of the community. Through reduction in the authority of the 'author,' exposition of the fundamental materiality and historicity of a fictional narrative, and foregrounding of the fictional characters as creators of their own history through narrative self-reflexivity, Gibbon challenges the aura of the work of art. The sovereignty of the institution of art itself, which the 'historical avant-garde' wanted to challenge at the initial phase of modernism, is questioned.

Capturing the oral linguistic intonations, the vibrating colloquial nuances of the language of the people, the cadence, gait and spirit of the local form of the vernacular was an absolute imperative for any degree of authenticity of such an 'epical' project of historical reconstruction. Gibbon's polyphonic prose style draws richly on local speech rhythms, idiomatic patterns and the vocabulary of the soil. The linguistic or communicational life, as well as the creative, conceptual or spiritual life of a people cannot be dissociated from its material life. The language of verbal communication, Marx argued, is first of all an extension of a more fundamental mode of communication in the material life of a people, that is, the 'language of real life.' Linguistic relationship is a superstructure based on the foundation of the bonding of shared physical experience of the process of labour and exploitation:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest form (8).

Failure to devise a language compatible with the material and the metaphysical life of a people, that is, producing *their* history in the powerful ‘standard’ form of a language, in the language of the dominant culture—in this case, that of the metropolitan middle class—would amount to distorting and falsifying history as a whole. It would also imply a subsumption of the distinct, independent but marginal discourse within the dominant discourse of history and culture. Indeed, inventing a proper language and form for representation of the ‘alien’ reality of a marginal population or culture has always posed difficulty for the metropolitan middle-class writer.

It has been equally challenging for the agrarian/ working class writer to accommodate the experiences or sensibilities of the subaltern within the available language and form. The dominant literary language, forms, and genres are produced by the hegemonic culture which also controls the complex dynamics of the institutions of publication, criticism and readership. Raymond Williams thus comments on the difficulty that besets the ‘marginal’ writer of an alternative tradition:

Their [the working class writers’] characteristic problem was the relation of their intentions and experience to the dominant literary forms, shaped primarily as these were by another and dominant class . . . Within a culture and especially a literature in which contemporary social experience had become important and even central, as is clearly the case in English after the bourgeois consolidation of the eighteenth century, the situation of the working-class writer is exceptionally difficult. In verse he may have the support of traditional popular forms, and these produced, in fact, an important body of street ballads and work songs . . . The formal features of the novel, on the other hand, had no such correspondence (*Problems* 218-19).

The problem, thus, is essentially one of ‘translation’: translation of ‘alien,’ ‘exotic’ experiences into the form and ‘language’ available within the horizons of expectations of the metropolitan middle-class readership. Gibbon’s reshaping of the available novel form through its ‘oralisation,’ and ‘epicalisation’ is his way of negotiating the challenge at one level. The abundance of folklores, legends and anecdotes adds to it an elasticity that makes it a medium flexible and receptive enough, like ballads in verse, to accommodate the

alternative cultural experience. In the more complex case of language, he had to strike a balance between the authentic language of the people and the place he deals with and that of the culturally hegemonic readership. Hence his diffident 'Note' in the beginning of *Sunset Song*, where he compares his tricky position with that of a Dutchman writing in German about 'Lekside peasants,' presumably for a German audience (xiii). This opens up new linguistic and formal possibilities for him, resulting in a heteroglossia that finally contributes to his larger project of questioning metropolitan universalisms from a provincial cultural space through pluralisation of language itself. In moulding the English 'literary' language into the rhythms and nuances of the rich oral possibility of the North-East countryside Scots, the author enhances the expressive potentials of the Standard English language and thereby transforms it into a more democratic medium suitable for the use of people in the margins. As Thomas Crawford notes in the introduction to *Sunset Song*, 'It was Gibbon's strategy in the introductory note to pretend that he was writing in English, with only a few modifications. But in reality he achieved something rather different. He cloaked the Scots vocabulary in English spelling, writing 'blether' as 'blither', 'blaw' (to boast) as 'blow,' 'braw' (fine, handsome) as 'brave' and so on, easing the reading for non-Scots. But for native speakers, the pronunciations and meanings automatically given to words like 'ongoing' and 'childe' strengthen their convictions that they are participating in a life that is both familiar and national, though gone, perhaps, for ever' (x-xi). Gibbon's reconstruction of the English language is a means by which the local identity of the marginal Scottish people finds expression in the more powerful culture.

In the context of the relational economy of European cultures and nations marked by hegemony and hierarchies, Gibbon's is clearly a case of the 'empire' writing back through inscription of its long 'otherised' self upon the language of the centre. His 'progressive' modernist intention, in contrast to the 'ambivalent' high-modernist sensibility, thus finds an appropriate expression in his multi-dimensional, pluralistic intervention in the sphere of language. It is not just a matter of Scotland rewriting the language of England and a peripheral rural space 'provincialising' the discourse of metropolitan London; it is also about the peasantry reshaping and writing itself in the language of the middle class, a marginal culture 'feminising' the originally 'masculine' English language by endowing it with a new flexibility, fluidity and therefore a novel accommodative- creative possibility; and finally, it involves the marginalized culture of orality reinventing itself through intervening in the dominant culture of writing. Gibbon's linguistic iconography, therefore, apart from holding crucial ethnographic implications, explores the possibility of making modernism itself much more sensitive towards the cultures of the margins.

Through a politically conscious synthesis of modernist and realist formal features in a 'flexible modernist' technique, and a polyphonic accommodation of the voices of postmodernism, *Sunset Song* challenges the silencing politics of both traditional Realism and institutionalized Modernism from the perspectives of the marginal. For Gibbon, as for us students of literature and culture, critically exploring the reality of marginality and its literary ramifications is a step towards understanding the politics of representation and erasure, which has always been a marker of the economy of power inhabited by the

dominant and subservient 'structures of feeling' in a given cultural context. *Sunset Song* aesthetically challenges various levels of erasure of the marginal through interrogating modernism from outside its ideologies of metropolitan middle-class universalism. It is one such 'neglected work left in the wide margin of the century,' to recall Raymond Williams' formulation, that reminds us of the possibility of an alternative modernist tradition that deserves much more critical attention today, when it is being increasingly difficult to look forward 'to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again' (*Politics* 35).

Endnote

¹ The socio-political ambivalence of several writers belonging to the dominant tradition of modernism has received extensive critical attention. Apart from the well-known orthodox Marxist positions and the works of Raymond Williams on the 'dubious' treatment of many modernists of the issue of class, one can profitably invoke the contribution of several critics—to take only a few examples, Lawrence Rainey, Sara Blair, Marianne Dekoven, Stanley Sultan, Andreas Huyssen, Benjamin Buchloh, Marshall Berman and so on—to the debate on the complex relationship between modernism and various aspects of social modernity, in the spheres of class, race and gender, fraught as they are with discursive silences and contradictions.

² This is obviously a rather general proposition that needs to be applied with a degree of flexibility to individual cases. All modernists even within the dominant tradition of modernism were not equally conservative, or radical, in their response to all spheres of social modernity. An individual with a robustly progressive attitude in one sphere might have a rather lukewarm, or even conservative, response to another. Compare, for one example, Virginia Woolf's position on the issue of gender with her take on that of class and race.

³ Hobsbawm draws attention to the fact that 'Scotland and Wales are socially, and by their history, traditions and sometimes institutions, entirely distinct from England, and cannot therefore be simply subsumed under English history or (as is more common) neglected' (294). The traditionally weak economy of Scotland—which made it economically only an appendage of England—also ensured the historical cultural hegemony of England over this country.

⁴ I am generally indebted to Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* for this part of my argument. The dominant cultural forms co-opt certain residual ones, Williams suggests, in order to thwart the birth of the emergent political energy. Williams underscores the socio-political significance of such pastoral visions thus:

It mattered very much whether an experience of the country—in its whole reality, from a love of the land and its natural pleasures to the imposed pains of deprivation, heavy and low-paid labour, loss of work and a place—was ranged for or against them [the peasantry]. . . A selection of the experience—the view of the landlord or the resident, the 'pastoral' or the 'traditional' descriptions—was in fact made and used, as an abstract idea, against their children and their children's children: against democracy, against education, against the labour movement. In this particular modern form, the rural retrospect became explicitly reactionary, and given the break of continuity there have been very few voices on the other side (*The Country*: 271).

Gibbon certainly is one of these 'very few voices.' One might add that such politics of representation of the countryside is by no means a part of the British literary imagination alone. The romantic and pastoral sensibility has its strong equivalents in dominant or residual forms in all parts of the world that have experienced a feudal world order, or gone through the process of industrialization and 'modernity.'

⁵ Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* is a fascinating account of the Middle class Marxist intellectual passion and fashion and a largely romantic treatment of the issues of class, artistic commitment and revolution and so on by a host of writers in England from the 1920s—the 'Red-Letter-Days'—to the World War II.

⁶ Brecht was the first to theorise the ideological significance of 'identification' produced by literary/ theatrical texts. The aesthetic effect is created through an identification of the 'consciousness' of the reader/ audience with that of the characters/ actors inside the text. But this 'identification,' paradoxically, is produced by a mode of 'distanciation' and 'negation' that should be distinguished from 'separation.' Brecht discovers in Chinese painting the principle of 'montage,' guided not by synthesis, but by 'juxtaposition,' of apparently incoherent images. Thus an order without

an imposed wholeness or constraint is established; multiplicity of perspectives instead of an organic unity leads to a 'displacement,' 'estrangement' or 'separation' that thwarts the creation of 'empathy' in the reader/ audience. The principle of relative autonomy, of 'order within multiplicity without constraint,' active in such a conception of a work of art has progressive implications because it does not force the political elements to form mere parts of the whole, but allows for their free play. Fictionality of the work of art or representationality of the process of representation itself is foregrounded through 'defamiliarisation', and thus the 'aura' of the work of art is dispelled. This leads to a critically useful, dialectically produced 'knowledge.' Art as an institution is thereby connected with the praxis of life.

⁷ See Stephen Heath, "Lessons from Brecht" in Francis Mulhern (ed.) *Contemporary Marxist Literary Criticism*. Let us also remember in this context Walter Benjamin's invocation of the illusive technical 'perfectionism' of photography that creates beauty (Heath's 'fetishistic happiness') out of an imperfect crude reality which is hardly beautiful.

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