



*Literature*  
of  
**Region and Nation**

## **LITERATURE OF REGION AND NATION**

**A Twice-Yearly Newsletter Published by the Department of  
English at the University of Aberdeen**

**Volume 3, Number 4, Spring-Summer 1993**

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Literature of Region and Nation welcomes contributions. Articles, notes, queries, and information about work in progress should be sent to the editor, **Dr Colin Milton, Department of English, King's College, The University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB9 7AW, Scotland.** Full-length articles are subject to peer review.

**ISSN: 0958-2487**

**DIALECT AND DIALECTIC: Region and Nation in Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole***

A particular kind of regional novel developed during the nineteen thirties, as a specific and urgent response to the historical and political events of the period. Examples of this kind of novel largely concentrate on the distressed areas of the interwar period (euphemistically designated 'Special Areas' by the National government), which tended to be areas where heavy, labour intensive industry had developed in the nineteenth century. These areas also tended to have a strong sense of regional identity, and were often areas where regional forms of English were in common use.<sup>1</sup> Examples of this kind of novel might include a number from South Wales, such as Lewis Jones's *Cwmardy* (1937) and *We Live* (1939), or Jack Jones's *Rhondda Roundabout* (1934), the Scottish trilogy (*Scots Quair*, 1932-1934) by Grassie Gibbon, and a number from English mining or manufacturing areas, such as Walter Brierley's *Nottinghamshire Means Test Man* (1935) and Ralph Fox's similarly located *This Was Their Youth* (1937).

These novels (and the list is by no means exhaustive) are quite varied, but all share a number of features. In each there is a sense of political urgency, which appears as the project of communicating to a wide national readership. The political implications of these texts are not determined by this concern alone, but the relation between the representation of the regional community within the novel and the implied reader seems likely to have a central effect on the novel in both literary and political terms. In this article I will explore the construction of region and nation—and the part which language plays in this process—in one such novel, Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1933), and particularly its effect on the role of the important character, Larry Meath.

Greenwood's novel is not in any simple sense representative of all these novels—many distinctions could be made between each text, and some sub-dividing of the type is certainly possible—but it presents some of the problems which other novels of this kind have to deal with in an interesting form, and it was also the most successful of them in terms of the width of its readership. There were thirteen imprints of the novel between 1933 and 1940 (including a cheap edition first printed in 1935) and a successful stage version (1934).<sup>2</sup> Reviews were very favourable, and it is notable that many stressed the novel's function of informing the 'better off' or 'southern' reader of the plight of the distressed areas. Thus, the liberal *News Chronicle* reviewer wrote that the novel 'should



make the easygoing Londoner feel personal pity for the misery of out-of-workers in the North'.<sup>3</sup> Given the implied project of informing the nation about its distressed regions, this success is not merely incidental. *Love on the Dole* is set in 'Hanky Park', said in the novel to be near to Salford, but probably based on Salford itself (where Greenwood was born and brought up). The first chapter (called 'Hanky Park') gives an authoritative overview of the area, using a register which implies an 'educated' Standard English speaker: 'it is that district opposite the parish church of Pendleton, one of many industrial townships comprising the Two Cities'.<sup>4, 5</sup> There is within the opening paragraph the first example of many in the novel of the translation of local terms ('black patches of land, "crofts" as they are called', p. 11), which implies that this standard English speaking narrator is addressing his peers. This construction of the reader as very much a spectator of an unfamiliar culture becomes even clearer slightly later in the chapter, when the (allegedly) specific regional practice of 'whitening' doorsteps is commented on:

Families from south of the Trent who take up residence here are astonished at the fashion and say that from whence they came, nothing like this is ever seen. The custom persists. (p. 12)

Though the word 'families' might seem to be a generalising one, suggesting a regional rather than class difference, there is in fact a strong sense here that the north/south divide is in itself almost identical to a class division (this is true too in many of the contemporary reviews of the book). The archaic 'whence' and the genteel sounding 'astonished at the fashion' create an impression that these families are middle class, and perhaps rather condescending.

All this seems to imply that the narrator's voice is to be identified with a reader who is constructed as an educated, middle class spectator of this seedy (yet fascinating) new world. This narrator, and the reader whose position he defines, seem to look down on the town from a position of remote objectivity, so that at the end of the chapter, the narrator can totally sum up life in Hanky Park: 'Places where men and women are born, live, love and die and pay preposterous rents for the privilege of calling the grimy houses "home"' (pp. 12-13). The opposition between region and nation, strange and familiar, dialect and standard speech seems clear-cut.

In fact, the novel's narration—and its positioning of readers and characters—is slightly more complex than analysis of the opening chapter alone would suggest. There is a gradual transition in the next

chapter to a more colloquial narrative voice, and to the use of direct speech, which allows the people of Hanky Park to begin speaking for themselves. In the description of the man who wakes people for work, the narrator modulates into a less 'superior' seeming kind of speech: 'Whether or no he actually was blind none could say; he was Blind Joe Riley, that was all' (p. 13). Blind Joe introduces the reader to the dialect spoken by the characters throughout the novel: 'N' rest f' t' wicked, lad, 'cept them as is bobbies, an' they never do nowt else'. It seems reasonable to argue that the transition from objective overview to a more sympathetic involvement serves a useful function in gradually shifting the reader's position from an external viewpoint and thus giving a sense of zooming in on the town: the purpose of the novel is revealed to be the replacement of objectifying dismissal by a more intimate understanding.

This narrowing of the gap between implied reader and character viewpoints should not be underestimated as a device in the novel; though it is a device common to many novels (and especially their openings), it is likely to be especially important here, since there is a great deal of information to be communicated which will be utterly new to any actual reader who at all resembles the implied reader. Details about how these people live are essential to understanding how they come to be as they are.

However, this merging of the viewpoints of narrator, implied reader and characters only goes so far in the novel, and the question of dialect remains important. The narrator may get closer to the characters after the initial chapter, but there is still a clear variety shift between the language which characters use, and the language which is used about them. This is particularly obvious in switches between direct speech and reports of thought. Harry Hardcastle (who together with his sister and mentor Larry Meath is a main character in the novel) arguing with his sister says, 'Ah saw y' talking to Ned Narkey, last night. What time did he let y' come in, eh? That's what Ah'd like t' know.' (p. 18) His thoughts following her response are represented thus:

Harry mumbled something, resentful of Sal's allusion to his being a chorister. She seemed to delight in provoking him. Oh, this kind of thing took all the pleasure out of the idea. (p. 18)

This has the effect of contributing to a hierarchy of discourse in which Standard English is seen as a more intelligent and articulate discourse than the dialect form. Though there is clearly a gesture towards representing Harry's thoughts in the free indirect, 'oh, this kind of thing ...', the reader is left with the impression that only the narrator can really



articulate—or translate—characters' thoughts for them. At times, the novel does have quite extensive passages which render the thoughts of characters (particularly Harry's<sup>6</sup>), but they are always in a standard English which tends to mark them out as the narrator's report of thoughts. Where there is use of free indirect, this is also in Standard English, and, at best, the implication can only be that characters think in a different language from the one they speak—or to put this another way, that dialect is a non-thinking language.

This is a problem which partly results from a traditional realist device, whereby the narrator can slip into and out of characters' minds by using a neutral kind of English which smooths over transitions between characters' voices and the narrative voice. The device is, however, only hidden where characters use a reasonably Standard English. If characters speak a clearly marked dialect, then the narrator's traditional use of Standard English for articulating thought becomes very noticeable, and cannot but help bring into play notions of hierarchy and status.

The problem has a major impact on how this novel is to be read, which can be further noticed by examining the important character of Larry, the main political activist of Hanky Park. Even from early on in the novel, when the reader is invited (partly through his 'Standardised' English thoughts) to identify closely with the young Harry's enthusiasm for the masculine and adult world of work at Marlowe's engineering works, Larry's voice appears as one possessed of a more detached insight. When Harry is trying to get an apprenticeship at the works, he deliberately avoids Larry, because he remembers that though he is both clever and sympathetic, he sometimes gives 'unexpected' advice, as when Larry 'warned him ... that it was a waste of time serving an apprenticeship to engineering' (p. 23).

Larry's voice, with its capacity to comment on the whole system of employment (and unemployment) in Hanky Park, is thus, like the narrator's voice, able to discourse about the experience of a life which other characters (for the most part) simply pass through unreflectingly. And this voice is, on the whole, a Standard English one (though Larry does use a range of more and less colloquial forms<sup>7</sup>). This is an aspect of Larry's character: he has some education, and the people of Hanky Park ask him for help with form filling, and sometimes for other kinds of explanation.

However, it also makes him an outsider to some degree. The odious Ned Narkey replies to Larry's question, 'Who are you referring to, Ned?' in the following way:

Ned curled his lip. 'Referrin' ... referrin', in rising tones: 'Ach. The bloody edge you put on makes me sick,' indignantly: 'Who the 'ell d'y' think y' are?' (p. 134).

By approaching this accusation of superiority through one of the novel's villains, its force is played out and diminished for readers who might well notice that Larry does indeed speak a different language from his neighbours and workmates.

Nevertheless, Larry does have a language difficulty which the novel both makes use of and avoids facing. After Sally hears Larry giving a political speech in the street, she becomes conscious of his language and her own: 'I was listening. But I don't know nowt—er—anything about politics' (p. 87). It is not surprising that this awareness should be aroused after Larry's speech, which concludes thus:

That is the price we will continue to pay until you people awaken to the fact that Society has the means, the skill, and the knowledge to afford us the opportunity to become Men and Women in the fullest possible sense of those terms. (p. 86)

The language here seems to be that of a politician who is trying to speak in a simple way, but cannot hear that his speech is full of a class-marked bureaucratic form of Standard English ('the fullest possible sense of those terms'). The apparently intimate term of address, 'you people' is also worrying: it may be intended to signify the potential power of the people, but it more clearly seems to signify 'you people down there'. Moreover, the phrase 'until you ... awaken' suggests that it is the people's fault, and perhaps draws unfortunately on a discourse of moral exhortation (of an 'if only you'd pull yourselves together' variety).

As these examples suggest, the novel does have some consciousness of this speech difference as a problem for (and feature of) Larry but it does not always follow up the implications of the interesting problems it raises. For instance, when Sally hears this speech of Larry's, she is aware of its speech variety, and its high status may well be a factor in her sexual attraction to him.

Another significant example of how Standard English is associated with status and intelligence is provided by the political discussion at Marlowe's Engineering works. Ted Munter maintains that 'you can't do without capickle' (p. 182 and after). Jim, who sees Larry as a political leader, is unable to make any headway against Ted's arguments on the matter and asks Larry to prove why Ted is wrong. In fact, Larry responds by saying that capital is necessary, but that it is not simply a naturally



occurring fact. He gives a Marxist explanation of what capital is:

And whenever you use the word 'capital', again, remember that it only means raw material and the labour of working people combined ... millionaires are men who possess millions of pounds worth of working people's labour. That is all that money is; your labour, our fathers' and our fathers' fathers' labour. You must ask yourself whether we can do without that. (p. 184)

Ted simply replies, 'you can't do without capickle'. It is evident that Ted's dialect pronunciation of the central word at issue (and its constant unvarying repetition) marks his argument as inferior in relation to Larry's Standard English and slightly rhetorical speech.

It is not only speech which separates Larry from the community which he wishes to serve. Through his language he is able to make general observations on the system of life in Hanky Park, and to attempt to modify the systematic consequences for himself. Thus he refuses to marry Sally when he has no job, seeing impoverished marriages and parenthood as one of the factors which makes the poor even poorer. In the end, though, his shared situation does unite him with the experience of the other people who live in these conditions. The Larry who seemed 'superior' (in various senses) at the beginning of the novel, is as trapped as everyone else in Hanky Park. He loses his job at Marlowe's and dies from tuberculosis, aggravated by his poverty (and his exhausting political work). His possession of a more 'sophisticated' discourse about his situation does not help him. His unemployment and death also deprive Sally of any hope of either escaping from Hanky Park, or enduring it. She gives any hope of happiness or fulfilment, and finally becomes the mistress of Sam Grundy (the bookmaker who has become rich and influential by preying on false hopes of escape). By this means, she manages to get jobs for her father and for Harry, through Sam's corrupt influence over the local council. The system does, in the end triumph over even Larry's relative detachment and insight.

Nevertheless, the way in which a national and regional form of English functions in *Love on the Dole* has a profound effect on the politics of the novel. Only the narrator and the character Larry seem able to articulate and interpret the experience of Hanky Park. Dialect speakers are, on the whole, seen as inarticulate victims, rather than agents. A certain political passivity in the novel has been detected by critics. Carol Snee writes:



The only two characters who manage to escape from the stifling, oppressive world of Hanky Park are Larry through death, and Sally through prostitution ... The perspective is the same as that of the liberal social novel so common in the nineteenth century. He is saying to the reader, 'look, this is what working class life is really like, isn't it terrible?' as though to identify the problem is enough. However, the liberal optimism of the nineteenth century ... is not available ... Greenwood appears subconsciously to transfer the blame to the working class themselves, who are presented as being too stupid to bring about change, or to listen to Larry's message that socialism is the answer.<sup>8</sup>

Much of this seems very much the case, and I would argue that the role of Standard and regional English play a central part in the construction of characters, narrator and implied reader which results in this sense of unchanging passivity. However, it also needs to be said that these notions of the regional and national do not only have negative effects on the novel, and also that such notions are not, as Carol Snee argues, merely an 'indication of Greenwood's own unstated ideology'.<sup>9</sup> The almost total dominance of the inhuman system in Hanky Park, and the lack of insight and articulacy on the part of its victims, are not merely incidental to its project: that is the central source of its power as a literary/political text. Likewise, its construction of a national readership and regional victims is not merely ideological for the author (though as other novels of the kind show, this novel's approach is not inevitable in every detail). It results from a set of actual (and ideological) historical relations between region and nation, which govern the way in which readers, narrators, novels and even authors are constructed.

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*Notes*

1. The situation in Welsh novels is different in that many came from regions where Welsh and a specifically Welsh-English were both in use as common languages. However, the novels referred to above were all written in English, with reference to the regional form of that language.
2. Details taken from *Red Letter Days—British Fiction in the 1930's*, by Andy Croft, 1990, p. 109.
3. *Red Letter Days*, p. 108 (other similar reviews are also cited).

4. Penguin edition, 1969, p. 11. All subsequent page references are to this edition, and will be given in brackets in the text.
5. Standard English is not, of course, itself an easily definable and absolutely invariable dialect, but the use of the term here represents the range of English usage accepted as being of relatively high status throughout the nation.
6. See Part One, chapter three, for example.
7. Compare, for example, his private speech on p. 47 with his public political speech on p. 86. Conversations with other characters about work and politics tend to resemble the public and more formal Standard variety of speech.
8. 'Working Class Literature or Proletarian Writing?', in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s*, edited by J. Clark, M. Heinemann, D. Margolies and C. Snee, 1979, p. 173-4.
9. 'Working Class Literature or Proletarian Writing?', p. 173.