

KELMAN IN URBAN SPACE

Excerpt from
The Red Cockatoo:
James Kelman
and the Art
of Commitment



Mitch Miller and Johnny Rodger

In the Foreword James Kelman wrote to George Davie's *The Scottish Enlightenment and Other Essays* (Polygon 1991), he ponders on the typical questions raised by the eighteenth Century thinkers and on their ongoing relevance in today's society:

Do people have the fundamental right to freedom? By what authority does one person or group of people, control another? Is there a case for assuming responsibility over the social and spiritual life of other adults? When does 'teaching' become colonization? Can one culture ever be 'better' than another? Is the attempt to deny your right to exploit me 'unconstitutional'?

The specific place out of which Kelman works and where he continually exposes and examines these questions himself with the tools he has to hand, is the metropolis of central Scotland. And although most of Kelman's writing –fiction, drama, and critique-- takes the life in Glasgow, or of Glaswegians, as its object, it is notable that even when discussing issues and places far flung from his own place Kelman insists on his own voice and his own viewpoint as valid as any other. This notion of democracy as consisting in what Leonard calls the 'equal power of all parties to that dialogue' and in writers being 'nobody but themselves', is evidently so unusual in a class and hierarchy ridden Britain where serious social, political and artistic commentary is absolutely restricted to the standard voice and viewpoint of 'those in control' that Kelman himself has been motivated to give a talk, subsequently published as 'The Importance of Glasgow in my Work' (in *Some Recent Attacks*, AK Press, 1991).

The engagement with Glasgow in Kelman's fiction is however not an entirely straightforward one. In an extended discussion of Kelman's use of Glasgow in his novels, Simon Kovesi points out that in an early manuscript of *The Busconductor Hines* Kelman incorporates a brief foreword stating

...the city of Glasgow referred to by the author is not the actual city of Glasgow which is situated on the west coast of Central Scotland, it is simply a part of the fiction.

In the text of that novel Kelman codifies various areas and parts of the city through abbreviation and shorthand, thus Hines, not only an inhabitant but a bus conductor travelling daily through the city, speaks of 'the district of D', 'Y', and 'High Amenity Zone K'. It may be obvious to Glaswegians and others knowledgeable about the city that these specific codes here represent, respectively, Drumchapel, Yoker, and Knightswood, and it may also be relatively clear where the 'actual' places are in which most of the action in the novel is sited (and in other Glaswegian novels too: *The Chancer*, *A Disaffection*, *How Late It Was*, *How Late*, and *Kieron Smith, Boy*) but as Kovesi says, this playful renaming, or 'denaming' (p57) opens up



a gap between Kelman's textual Glasgow and the 'actual' Glasgow. Kovesi goes on to propose that, in effect, 'it simply doesn't matter where Y or D or Zone K are meant to be' (p57) as the opening up of this gap allows at once for a universal human significance to be assigned by the reader (Glaswegian and especially non-Glaswegian) to the character's daily experiences, and also for an appreciation that the eyes of 'those in control', those who make municipal, political, and civic decisions: councillors, town planners and officials; are ever on plans, projects and abstracts of those zones and populations --wherever the hell they are-- and never on the actual lives of those who live in them.

As Kovesi's commentary on *The Busconductor Hines* shows, spatial politics play out in Kelman's work with a fair degree of regularity. If we can detect another Fanonite aspect of Kelman's work then it may be found in his encouragements to his reader to consider where 'voices' come from -- to literally move 'beyond the Pale' into those spaces reserved for the poor, the marginal or the colonized (all three of which can mean exactly the same thing). For Fanon, the physical separation of the Casbah of Algiers, where the native, Muslim population resided, from the sleek modern residences of the Edge of Sea, residences of the French *pied-noirs* and in its connection to what is greater (the sea that connects Algiers ultimately, to France) a crucial spatial expression of colonial power. This is especially so as the uniqueness, and distinction of the Casbah exists because there is a dominant, exterior culture that delimits and defines it as a distinct and separate experience from theirs. The darkness, confusion and compression of the Arab districts, as memorably captured in Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) seems to prevent sympathetic or authentic knowledge and understanding of the lives led within this space from being expressed, shared or widely understood -- in the absence of which distrust, and demonization are the logical alternatives. In Fanon, this is shown in the extreme case of the colonial judge or policeman confused over the crimes of the native population;

The Algerian kills for no reason. Very frequently magistrates and policemen are nonplussed by the motives of a murder; it may arise out of a gesture, an illusion, an ambiguous statement, a quarrel over an olive tree which is possessed in common, or an animal which has strayed by an eighth of an acre. Confronted by such a murder...the looked for cause and the expected motive which would justify or give grounds for these murders is finally found to be of such disappointing triviality. From thence springs the frequent impression that the social group is hiding the real motive. (Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth*, p240)

Fanon then goes on to show how modern sociology and psychology, working in a colonial setting which removes the native perspective conspire to essentialise and denigrate the Algerian as an individual into a pathological criminal whose deepest impulse will always be to slit throats. This essentialising technique is confronted by Kelman in several essays, notably 'Oppression and Solidarity' (in *Some Recent Attacks*).

Scotland has no Casbah, in the exact sense, but its slum and working class areas can be said to operate in a similar fashion for Kelman, as identified by Dorothy McMillan and quoted in Kovesi's commentary on *The Busconductor Hines*. Here, as Kovesi relates, the districts of Glasgow are codified from their real names into letters and districts, part in mockery of the grandiloquence of town planners and insensitive councilors, partly to render the city more universal and partly to schematize a city marked conceptually and spatially, by class and social differences into 'managed zones';

...[T]he coup de grace to the notion of the readable city comes with the development of outer-city schemes: it is no longer necessary to by-pass the others, their existence need scarcely be recognized at all. For why would anyone go to Drumchapel, Easterhouse, Castlemilk and so on unless they lived there, or knew someone who did, knew personally that is, the powerless and the dispossessed? It is in the gap between the inner city and the undiscovered territory of



the periphery that James Kelman imagines his Glasgow. (cited in Kovesi, pp57-58)

Why indeed, go to District D -- unless you are intent on some form of counter-insurgency? Against this backdrop, it becomes easier to appreciate how for Kelman, moving the attentions of literature into such a space as the Casbah (or perhaps, moving the Casbah into the space of literature) to celebrate its culture, and appreciate the interiority of its residents, is thus by nature a revolutionary act that goes far beyond complacently welcoming a Taslima Nasrin into the colonial precincts. This magnesium spark, even potential violence, of this meeting point between Casbah and the 'European part of the town' is explored both comically, and tragically in Kelman's work. In his fiction this mapping of the casbah shifts from the tenement slums of industrial Glasgow to, in *Kieron Smith Boy*, the housing schemes that ultimately came to embody its post-industrial phase. This orientation of the reader within these particular spaces is not necessarily 'outward facing', a matter of representation of an 'other' to the literary classes, but reaches perhaps for that level of common understanding and mutual comprehension indicated in Tom Leonard, who noted of Dostoevsky that 'when one of his characters ran up into a close I knew what he meant.'

And yet Kelman's treatment of these environments can seem mocking, ironic and even untrustworthy. Kovesi has shown how problematic a ready identification of Kelman's 'Glasgow' for example, with the real city is;

When positioned next to Kelman's repeated and foundational declarations that he always intended to write about and from within his specific culture, so much so that it almost becomes *raison d'être* for his choice of form, the assertion that the world of Hines 'is not the actual city of Glasgow' is problematic to say the least. (Kovesi, p58)

Kovesi's useful distinction of a 'textual' and an 'actual' Glasgow is seen at play here in Kelman's work; where the writer offers up the first, with the

condition of the latter always on his -- and, we might imagine that he hopes, the reader's -- mind.

Further problems with Kelman as a specifically Glasgow writer, a realist and a documentarian of his city, are surely presented by short stories such as 'Roofsliding', where Kelman adopts the lofty tones of intellectual authority to describe a peculiar -- and fictional -- practice, apparently as befuddled by the behaviour of the participants as is the colonial magistrate of the Algerian murderer;

The men arise in single file from out of the rectangular skylight. They walk along the peak of the roof ensuring that one foot is settling on either side of the jointure which is beveled in design, the angle at the peak representing some 80 degrees. During the walk slates have been known to break loose from their fixtures and if bypassing the gutter will topple over the edge of the building to land on the pavement far below. To offset any danger to the public a boy can always be seen on the opposite pavement, from where he will give a warning to pedestrians...

They face to the front of the building. *Roofsliding* will now commence. The feet push forward until the posterior moves off from the jointure... When the feet come to rest on the gutter *Roofsliding* halts at once and the order in which the members finish plays no part in the practice. ('Roofsliding' in *Not not While the Giro*)

The story concludes in the hope that 'further observation might well yield fruits'. Thus in his parody of the discourse, or indeed the survey, of the expert, or of 'those in control' (the local authority for example, or those in charge of the latest 'regeneration' programme), Kelman shows how there is a manufacture of a problematic in their top-down discourse, by a use of superlative and statistics which smooths over the questions of diversity, complexity, agency and autonomy. In the classic authoritarian case the authorities would then claim the right to intervene and regulate or displace the participants (to 'yield fruits') on the basis of the health/safety/risk problem identified by the



expert's survey. Note that the identification Kelman makes with this voice is *colonial*, from a position of observation, never participation. In Hines, we see a similar conceptualization of the tenement into a 'Casbah' area, that again adopts pseudo-scientific language in a subversive fashion reminiscent of the 'detached' anthropological observer who lives safely, and hygienically, beyond the environment he or she sets out to describe. Here the back court of the tenements is conceived in geometrical terms;

The rectangle is formed by the backsides of the buildings – in fact it's maybe even a square. A square: 4 sides of equal length and each 2 lines being angled into each other at 90°. Okay now: this backcourt a square and for each unit of dwellers up each tenement there exists the 1/3 midden containing six dustbins. For every 3 closes you have the 1 midden containing 6 dustbins. But then you've got the prowlers coming around when every cunt's asleep. They go exchanging holey dustbins for nice new yins. Holey dustbins: the bottom only portionally there so the rubbish remains on the ground when said dustbins are being uplifted. What a bastard. (*The Busconductor Hines*)

This ironic discursion that is from its very first sentence, not to be entirely trusted as an analogue of actuality but rather as an expression of personal experience, comes courtesy of the Busconductor Hines' highly sarcastic reverie upon the spaces he, his family and his class inhabit. In adopting a mock-lofty tone – an *inauthentic* voice of where he finds himself, the sciences of geometry (from rectangle to square) and arithmetic (through the use of actual numerals as opposed to nominals) lends an orderliness to the universe that almost immediately disintegrates the more it is described, the more actual experience, and Hines' participation in the life of the backcourt, intrudes upon it. Kovesi extends the geometrical metaphors of Hines through 'lines of thought' that represent

Hines relationship to his world, but also his stolen moments of personal reverie and meditation, that are almost always cut across or disrupted by workmates, wife or his son Paul. Although deeply personal these lines of personal inquiry are necessarily, in the order of 'minor literature', curtailed and directed by the surrounding 'domestic reality'.

Which brings us, necessarily, to considerations of the political import of these writings. The political implications of even Hines' sarcastic empiricism are evident, as exposure of social conditions, but Kelman is clearly exceeding the horizons of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* or *The Road to Wigan Pier*. What these excerpts described, in some sense, is the Gramscian notion of 'civil society', where the collective comes together and acts independently of the state apparatus – the self-developed institutions that reflect the needs and ideals of a culture irrespective of where power might lay. Although Kelman has avoided questions of Scotland's 'Stateless Nation' predicament, it is arguable that his particular 'line' begins at a similar point to the theorist Tom Nairn, or the political scientist James Kellas, both of whom emphasized the importance of civic and civil institutions in a country such as Scotland, where formal political structures did not exist.

Kelman's direction however, is different. Whereas Nairn sees this as failure and calls for separatism, and Kellas argues for the inclusion of all such institutions – up to and including football matches – Kelman defends the autonomy of such practices and institutions that exist 'no matter who occupies the seat of authority' as valid in and of itself. It does not matter that the anthropologist does not understand Roofsliding. These activities permit individuals within working class culture in a textual, or actual universe, to be themselves while reaching out into their social surroundings.



BIRDS DO NOT SING – THE CULLODEN MOOR PROJECT

Michail Mersinis

April 16th 1746 marked the fall of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, which sought to restore the Stuart monarchy to the throne. The armies of Bonnie Prince Charlie and of Prince William the Duke of Cumberland clashed in Culloden Moor in an effort to restore the descendants of the House of Stuart back to the throne. On the 16 April 1746 the entire Jacobite army at Culloden Moor was killed. Indeed the reprisal was so ferocious that the Government dragoons under the command of the Duke of Cumberland dispatched to hunt down not just the fleeing Jacobites. Rebels, bystanders, spectators, residents and anyone else who was within reach (including innocent woman, wounded, prisoners of war and even children) were indiscriminately murdered by the British troops.

The Culloden Battlefield even to this day is considered a place of paramount historical importance to the history of Scotland and yet it has also connotations of grave mourning. A common phrase is often used to describe the crushing silence that is experienced there: Birds do not sing at Culloden Moor.

With the generous support of The Glasgow School of Art and the National Trust of Scotland, I was able to finance a research project and be granted access to the Culloden Battlefield, and make a series of works that investigate the geographical and notional space of the battle. These works investigate the silence that reigns over Culloden using the very medium of photography. The immaterial and invisible silence there is captured using an equally immaterial and invisible material – the primary substance of photography: silver. By combining large-scale photographic negatives with solid sterling silver this body of 45 pictures explores the physical essences that define both Culloden and Photography: silence and silver.