THE DROUTH

STRATEGY

ALEX IS MY DARLING
(AND SUNDRY DEVOLUTIONARY COUNTERGAMBITS)

THE BATTLE FOR GLASGOW GREEN.
THE ADVANCE AND RETREAT OF THE TOWER BLOCK

LAST MEN STANDING:

KELMAN AND BOSWELL’S BATTLEFIELD HEROICS
IRISH WITHOUT AND SCOTCH WITHIN: ULSTER SCOTS
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ii) Two-fold Tactics

At the December 2011 launch event for their recent publication, *The Red Cockatoo: James Kelman and the Art of Commitment*, Johnny Rodger and Mitch Miller proposed that we might understand Kelman’s highly diverse life and work as cohering around the central idea of anti-establishment radical tactics. For Rodger and Miller, Kelman operates as a writer and activist under an ‘anti-establishment ethos concerned with human rights and freedoms, international in both provenance and scope of its humane attachment to first principles, while firmly rooted in the local’. To establish this core mission for Kelman, their writerly methodology, or intellectual strategy let’s say, is to read Kelman through Noam Chomsky using Michel de Certeau as reagent.

Central to Rodger and Miller’s approach is de Certeau’s utilisation of the distinction between strategy and tactics as described by renowned military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz (1780-1831). In short: strategy is that mode of command carried out in their power base by those in power; tactics are devised by those of no fixed base, those in the field who operationalise the strategy of others, in the face of the exigencies and contingencies of their immediate surroundings.

The incorporation of de Certeau’s strategic use of Von Clausewitz allows Rodger and Miller to read singular significance into the fluidity and anti-hierarchism of Kelman’s use of language. That fluidity is evidenced by the diversity of registers brought to bear in his life and work, from localespecific working class speech, to broader dialect, to wider Scottishisms, to standard English, to meta literary norms. The tactical play within such a range is persuasively understood by Rodger and Miller as an assault on normative schema which would have strategic control of language based in standard English literary Generals. To cement this point, Kelman’s Booker Prize Acceptance Speech (1994) was quoted on the launch night:

*There is a literary tradition to which I hope my work belongs. I see it as part of a much wider process, or movement towards decolonisation.*

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James Kelman’s Everyday Strategy

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**Ken Neil**
and self-determination: it is a tradition that assumes two things, 1) the validity of indigenous culture, and 2) the right to defend it in the face of attack. It is a tradition premised on a rejection of the cultural values of imperial or colonial authority, offering a defence against cultural assimilation [ ... ] my culture and my language have the right to exist, and no-one has the authority to dismiss that right.\(^1\)

As well as employing a wide range of linguistic styles to rebel against given commands of literary convention, Kelman makes use of a number of stylistic tactics within that range. One of these is his lethal a-hierarchical use of punctuation. Punctuation as a powerful strategy of command and control that would normally hold in ranked order the components of Literature is regularly and famously dispensed with by Kelman. One important effect of this is the levelling down, they cry, to the basest common denominator. Having reported the de Certeauan conceptual context, I want to think further about this double-layered central tactic in Kelman to suggest that Rodger and Miller might be sending pernicious orders to Kelman by fielding the author as principally a tactician.

There are two reasons for this speculative criticism of Rodger and Miller’s perspective. Firstly, there is a risk that Kelman and his brothers and sisters in arms are held in predetermined ranks by the assumption that his is a life of, if not rank subservience to the Officer’s Club, then at best one which sees a reactionary concatenation of more or less effective tactical responses to the big Orders of Staff Sergeant Bourgeois. Secondly, it might be that the force of Kelman’s double-layered assault is much more than an insurgent’s predictable response to established order; it might be that his assault is a bone fide strategy, one which succeeds in battle, if not in war, as is evidenced, to a degree, by the nature of the inventive which is mortared to Kelman’s very own Forward Operating Base. What follows is an exploration of these two possibilities for Kelman’s operation in the zone.

1. As seen above.

2. As indicated above.

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A tactical missile.

And tuck it man who gives a tuck.

Fuck the football, he reached for a tape. Some of these voices man they would drive ye nuts; grown men, know what I mean, raving away about football. The tape was in, he found the play button.

Fucking Willie Nelson man that was the last thing he wanted.\(^2\)

We might read the ‘who gives a fuck’ here, following Rodger and Miller’s lead, as voiced tactically in unison by each of the constituents of the anarchic amalgam. Altogether the narrator, Sammy and Kelman proclaim ‘fuck the system’:\(^1\) the penal system, the care system, the football system, and the literary system, but best of all, just the System, for the System is the product of strategists and ringknockers who hold power and who hold power away from the likes of regular Sammy, his narrator and Kelman as sentinel for the workerist everyman.

In Rodger and Mitchell’s assessment, then, Kelman’s key anti-establishment radical tactic is double-layered; it is linguistic and stylistic. Firstly, there is the diversity of language from the guttural expletive to the utterly normative which levels out the pernicious strategic hierarchising of institutionalised, Sandhurst Literature. Secondly, within that purposive diversity, there is the mutinous stylistic depunctuation which as well as destabilising familiar textual infrastructure serves to blur the demarcations of protagonists’ roles and responsibilities in text, with readers implicated to boot.

As Rodger and Miller pointed out on the night, Kelman gets his fair share of inventive from those who identify more readily with the etiquette and strategy of Literature’s Main Operating Base, those who would see the levelling in Kelman working in the wrong direction (by virtue of the levelling working at all, I guess, a revealing proclivity which I will return to in conclusion) – his work is a levelling down, they cry, to the basest common
Parrhesiastic Strategy

At the launch event, to reinforce the dehierarchising of conventional linguistic strategies Rodger and Miller introduced Simon Kövesi’s analysis of Kelman’s work. They spoke to the following excerpt from *The Red Cockatoo* which cites Kövesi’s critique:

Kövesi in an extended discussion of this aspect of Kelman’s work shows how, by a ‘flattening of the usual hierarchies’ in presenting working class characters, i.e. those hierarchies where the omniscient narrator presents the action in ‘standard English’, while the direct speech is written in some non-standard or dialect form, Kelman avoids the situation where: ‘Narrator and reader become cognoscenti while the working class character...is patronised, made primitive and animalised’.

Now, Kövesi is not wrong to note as salient the remarkable levelling at work in Kelman’s writing, and Rodger and Miller do well to illuminate it with clarity in their work. As all three literary critics note, the tactic of problematising conventional roles of narrator and actor works effectively to usher in the working class character from the conventional cold, but the cognoscenti still lurk in the Main Operating Base assessing the conspicuous class-positionedness of Kelman’s characters and, of course, of the author himself.

The overt issue of class in much of Kelman’s work, coupled with the dehierarchising tactic, could, strangely, be taken as an offence against the persistence of the importance of issues of class politics in Scotland, and elsewhere, for the tactic on this count lines up with some post-industrial views of late capitalism. In theory, Kelman’s levelling accords in some sense with the flattening of vaniegated Enlightenment-Marxist terrain as part of a sociopolitical scenario wherein, to cite John Roberts, “new movement” politics effectively breaks down the ‘productivism’ and ‘universalism’ of the Enlightenment-Marxian legacy. From that angle, Kelman’s is indeed a tactic at the service of another’s strategy, as capitalism finds new ways to de-differentiate the erstwhile ranked strata within various sociopolitical and cultural systems and, indeed, between those grounding systems. The working class situatedness is but one of many in this model, overt but indistinct, a form on a surface across which tactics are played out by remote control. This would be the depersonalisation of class war, seen from afar, Roberts might complain, by virtue of the telemetry of the Main Operating Base.

For Roberts, this situation has art and literature acting not as a light, but a blind. This is the operation of tactics, spectacular and distracting in all their linguistic and stylistic aggression, as a mask for strategies which lie behind. Rodger and Miller made us aware of negative criticism of Kelman’s work which aims at roughly the same spot. Shortly after the Booker Prize was announced in 1994, Simon Jenkins, writing in *The Times*, accused Kelman of ‘acting the part of an illiterate savage’. By that judgement, Kelman would be the purveyor of poverty or class pornography; a disingenuous peddler who capitalises on what media scholar, John Corner called the ‘psychodynamics of anxiety and security’. Kelman gives us just enough time with Sammy and the narrator (and himself) to absolve our anxieties about being distant from the very real sociocultural unevenness which is a
by-product of the very real pre-post-industrial outlook on class politics. Yet the work somehow secures us against the actualities of any underlying strategies, the hyperbolic Sammy and the utter collapse of Literature’s conventions make for a potent injection, the effects of which last, so, no further inoculation will be required from that stratum for quite some time.

Whatever the plausibility of the above interpretative tactic, it does not seem contentious to state that there will always be present in work like Kelman’s an inherent risk of spectacularising poverty or class, a risk of precipitating Jenkins-style criticism. The most damaging facet of that type of criticism is that spectacularised or paradigmatised poverty stories (think of the BBC’s recent television series The Scheme) ultimately endanger serious consideration of what lies beneath the surface of the tactical domain. Roberts is quite right (so too Rodger and Mitchell) to reinvest the flattened post-industrial landscape with some sociocultural peaks and troughs. And, contra Jenkins, Kelman’s work for Rodger and Mitchell is effective tactically in assaulting actual strategic imperatives, but, reflecting on the launch night and on The Red Cockatoo, and because of what I have just set out, it might be that their assessment of Kelman as tactician does not do justice to the nature of Kelman’s form of cultural class warfare.

For Roberts, writing in The Art of Interruption, it is an act of post-industrial ideology to flatten the discourse of class as if new identity-based politics have smoothed the landscape on behalf of all inhabitants. If Jenkins is right, then Kelman plays a perverse part, albeit unwittingly, in removing the normative, concrete and stratified stylistic, linguistic and sociopolitical infrastructure from discursive territory (at the limits of this line of argumentation at least) – an end product to delight neo-capitalist, post-industrial strategists argumentation at least) – an end product to discursive territory (at the limits of this line of linguistic and sociopolitical infrastructure from the normative, concrete and stratified stylistic, have smoothed the landscape on behalf of all as tactician does not do justice to the nature of Kelman’s form of cultural class warfare.

The issue of an identity-based politics, in some sense ‘taking’ over class politics as a matter of liberation from the ‘productivist’ and ‘universalist’, is suspect on concrete, material grounds. In these terms post-structuralist and post-Althusserian claims to ‘plurality’ and ‘difference’ do not so much draw attention to the realities of power-relations, as empty them of effective content, insofar as treating class as one identity among many is a withdrawal from ascribing explanatory priorities. Ideology in Roberts’s vocabulary is ‘eradicationist’ – it clears away the actual differentiation of material conditions and turns away from representing the world as we know it to be. In respect of the actualities of class, Roberts calls up Terry Eagleton’s essay ‘Defending the Free World’ to put the point beyond doubt. Eagleton pinpoints the ineradicable particularity of class as a sociocultural and political phenomenon.

On the surface, the triplet appears convincing enough: some people are oppressed because of their race, some on account of their gender, and some in accordance with their class. But this is of course grossly misleading. For it is not that some individuals manifest certain characteristics known as ‘class’ which then results in their oppression; on the contrary, to be a member of a social class just is to be oppressed, or to be an oppressor.

Eagleton’s perspective is persuasive; more persuasive than that of the Aunt Sally who would have Kelman score own goals on Sammy’s football team in the name of anarchic de-differentiation. Kelman’s contribution, and Rodger and Miller’s, corresponds with Eagleton’s assessment of the terrain – out there in the field there is indeed the oppressing officers’ club and the oppressed grunts, and Kelman is fighting back, or fighting forward, therefore, doubt about the direction or impact of his levelling might fade.

As the above quote from the Booker Prize acceptance speech shows, Kelman the author is the Kelman the activist, the resistance fighter, the defender of indigenous culture and of his right to self-determination, social, national, linguistic and stylistic. And Kelman’s writerly practice as defence is one of attack against the colonialist enemy in whatever guise. Even if, to the dismay of fellow Scottish writers, Kelman exploits pictorialist variants of Scottish working classness as sharp, vivid and exaggerated components in his counterattacks, his project is one of actual redifferentiation. Roberts has found a comrade, then, for he is clear that to replace class with ‘conceptually loose concepts such as “identity” and “difference” in the name of revivified (social democratic) “civil society” is, effectively, a surrender to capitalism’. Now, I am less concerned about the strength of Roberts’s political argument here and more concerned with defining Rodger and Miller’s reading of Kelman’s work as a substantive contribution to the counter-insurgency following Roberts’s battle cry. However, Rodger and Miller, perhaps no thanks to the lobby of the Robertses and Eagletons, hold something over Kelman and his fellow fighters by identifying him in de Certeau’s panorama as the reactionary, tactical fighter.

Political scientist, Michael Walzer can help develop this second reason for my doubt about Kelman as tactician. Although Roberts and Eagleton are undoubtedly correct in their assertion of the actuality of class uneventfulness and oppression, Walzer takes a pragmatic line on critical debates about class to which my critical perspective just is to be oppressed, or to be an oppressor.

Kelman’s strategy is to present to the Generals and Politicians of the Main Operating Base of Society and Literature a form of writing which, by force of this view on Kelman’s position in this discourse has purchase, then his work might be described, following Michel Foucault, as evidence of the counter-myth would have it that the linguistic, stylistic, fictional and symbolic collapse of complex democracy is effecting protection of excluded and marginalised groups is not for debate here. At issue is the deeply pernicious counter-myth identified brilliantly by Walzer. And this is where Kelman is much more than, for the sake of argument, a puppet of Robertsonian ideology (which would eradicate the progress acknowledged by Walzer) much more, therefore, than a grunting tactician.

The vitriol against Kelman which Rodger and Miller sampled on the night is vitally important to this second aspect. The slaggling received by Kelman is evidence for Kelman that the counter-myth is to be Kelman’s main writerly-military objective. Think of the three-headed amalgam in How Late, the counter-myth would have it that the linguistic, stylistic, fictional and symbolic collapse of complex Sammy is but his fault – no one else is responsible for his fate. But ‘repulsive nobody’ Sammy is positively saintly in the face of the repugnant, dismissive counter-mythmakers, and it is this repugnance that Kelman meets with all his creative force, not as a mere regular insurgent, but as a fighting Officer, with a strategy.

Kelman’s strategy is to present to the Generals and Politicians of the Main Operating Base of Society and Literature a form of writing which, by force of double-layered assault, flushes out the counter-mythmakers who would see the vitriol as nothing but the making of the author’s own otherness. Contempt for Kelman is his proof of our ‘secreted contempt for Sammy – proof of the natural oppression of one class by another as Eagleton outlined. In this way, the fuck it, is far from a resignation.

If this view on Kelman’s position in this discourse has purchase, then his work might be described, following Michel Foucault, as evidence of the strategic threat of the parrhesiastes, that person who primarily chooses a specific one else is responsible for their fate. The extent to which, let’s say, Scottish liberal democracy is effecting protection of excluded and marginalised groups is not for debate here. At issue is the deeply pernicious counter-myth identified brilliantly by Walzer. And this is where Kelman is much more than, for the sake of argument, a puppet of Robertsonian ideology (which would eradicate the progress acknowledged by Walzer) much more, therefore, than a grunting tactician.
relationship to himself: he prefers himself as a truth-teller rather than as a living being who is false to himself, and with this forms a life of self-determination which is unmolested by the given superstructures of a Roberts and maybe even an Eagleton.

A reference to Alain Touraine might augment this closing point. Touraine shares a pragmatic something with Walzer when he points out that, notwithstanding Roberts’s and Eagleton’s redifferentiation of the class war battleground, there might be a form of paralysis in the field:

Is our society still capable of using its ideas, hopes and conflicts to act upon itself? Attempts are being made on all sides to convince us that this question has to be answered in the negative. The liberals ask us to abandon what they see as a cumbersome exceptionality and to let ourselves be guided by the markets. At the other extreme, the ultra-left is content to denounce domination and to speak in the name of victims who have supposedly been prevented from understanding the meaning of their situation.

Touraine is worried that the reconnaissance intel might be paralysed by a degree of intellectual and political stasis – a paralysis grounded on the assumption that social and political change is no longer possible, and that the only possible action that can be taken against economic domination is revolt and an appeal to difference, and that leads to the break up of society. Touraine’s response is to defend in his work and life three ideas:

The first is that the globalization of the economy has not dissolved our capacity for political action. The second is that the actions of the most underprivileged categories are not restricted to rebellion against domination, that they can also demand rights, and cultural rights in particular, and can therefore put forward and innovative (and not merely critical) conception of society.

The third is that, if it is not based upon demands for equality and solidarity, the institutional realm is ineffective or even repressive.

Kelman’s parrhesia, his fearless speech, as termed by Foucault, might be understood as a strategic refusal of the dominant world-picture of domination sent to the front by Roberts, by Eagleton - and by Rodger and Miller. Redifferentiation is a must, still, and Touraine would agree, for the lived relations of class are never to be squared away by the marketing tactics of neoliberal brochures on identity and difference. However, the alternative is not to quarantine in barracks a class of regular tacticians, those whom we anxiously empathise with and then secure ourselves from, expecting them to carry out the reactive orders of another’s Weltanschaung while we observe through binoculars.

Kelman’s strategy throws into relief the repugnant, residual oppression of a class based on the adopted notion that no one but the oppressed one has brought about the lingering oppression. This Kelman does as a strategising parrhesiastes, an Officer of class, one through creative praxis who remains at the front and on the front foot, fighting for first principles which he cannot drop only to avoid slings and arrows.

1 James Kelman, ‘Elitist Slurs are Racism by Another Name’ [Booker Prize Acceptance Speech], Scotland on Sunday, 16 October 1994, Spectrum Supplement, p.2.
8 Michel Foucault, Fearless Speech, New York: Semiotext(e), 2001, p.17.
10 Touraine, 2001, p.2.