

Not not the "real" James Kelman

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A Review of

Simon Kővesi, *James Kelman* (Manchester University Press, 2007), ISBN 978-0-7190-7096-9, xiv + 210pp

Simon Kővesi's book forms the most substantial publication on James Kelman's fiction to date. Given this fact, it is somewhat disconcerting to find an epigraph in the introduction that details Janet Todd's mild dismissal of Kelman in an interview that appeared in *The Herald* in March 2006. In considering Todd's reservations about Kelman ('the trouble is one ought to admire him'), Kővesi detects the hidden prejudices of the literary establishment and provocatively states that 'one implication might be that most literary academics who claim to like Kelman's work, actually do not. She seems to be suggesting that Kelman benefits from a silencing political correctness, a general fear that actually nobody really likes Kelman's work much at all' (1). In making this claim, Kővesi illuminates one of the more problematic features of Kelman criticism in that it is often instilled with 'a silencing political correctness' that serves to overshadow the formal and linguistic subtlety of the fiction. While Kővesi disparages those critics that have pigeon holed Kelman's work within a narrowly defined form of social realism or that have illustrated classism in their solidarity or derision (both overt and covert) of the writer, he occasionally falls victim to a more insidious form of the very 'political correctness' that he seeks to efface. Throughout the study, Kelman's statements on art, politics and culture are too often taken to the letter and discussion of the fiction frequently rests upon the critical parameters that Kelman himself has established. It would be foolish to deny that Kelman's commentary in regard to his literary aims – the breaking down of narrative hierarchies and his striving towards 'facticity' and 'concretion' – is not important. If taken to extremes though, this tendency to agree with everything Kelman says becomes almost as problematic as those snifty dismissals of Kelman's work based upon instinctive prejudice. To pin too much on a writer's pronouncements in regard to his or her work can lead to a critical and conceptual paucity which, in the end, does little justice to the writer or his work.

For all that, there is much to commend here. The book is meticulously researched and contains cogent material on the cultural, social and political context of the fiction. There is some detailed analysis of Kelman's interventions as a political activist; his involvement in Worker's City during the controversial City of Culture Year; and there is sustained discussion of the now infamous Booker controversy (the furore over Kelman's win in 1994 with his fourth novel, *How late it was, how late*). Some of this contextual material adds real substance to critical understanding of the works. An account of the stigma attached to Glasgow bus conductors in the 1970s and 1980s when Kelman was working on the buses and on his first novel, *The Busconductor Hines* is highly cogent as are the repercussions of the Industrial Relations Act of 1971 (which led to disaffection with the idea of Union activism) and the context of emigration from Glasgow during the period when Kelman was writing *A Chancer*. Kővesi also provides numerous diverting tit bits, as when he observes that Kelman is now used as a citation for eighteen different items in the OED from idiomatic usages of 'minute' and 'monosyllable' to 'non-standard' items like 'mawkit' and 'midden' (13).

Kővesi chooses to make the novels his focal point (although there is some cogent discussion of Kelman's play, *Hardie and Baird*) while acknowledging that there is room for equally lengthy studies of the shorter fiction. Most space is given to the first four

novels (Hines, *A Chancer*, *A Disaffection* and *How late it was, how late*), although there is some succinct and lucid discussion of *Translated Accounts* and *You have to be Careful* in *The Land of the Free* in the final chapter. While the most successful sections are those where the contextual framework of the novels is given, there is also a strong sense of engagement with the texts, including some astute close readings and cross references in many of the chapters. This forms a welcome change from some of the broad and sometimes cumbersome brushstrokes that have characterised critical discussions of Kelman's work. There are also some intriguing theoretical insights, as when Kovesi considers the pared down and perspectively limited form of narrative that Kelman developed in *A Chancer*: Kovesi states that, 'in fact, minimal Glaswegian inflexions and lexis aside, the narrative is not a 'voice' at all: it is text and does not have an imaginable mouth, or a locus of oral delivery'. However, I feel that this line of argument becomes rather laboured when it is suggested that the narrative 'has no mind' (68).

Discussion of Hines is further enhanced by reference to Kelman's early manuscripts. Kovesi notes that an early draft of the novel contains a foreword where it is stated explicitly that the Glasgow in Hines is not to be equated with the 'real' Glasgow (55). Through this material, Kovesi emphasises the way in which the geographic locale of Glasgow is abstracted in the novel. In Hines, identifiable place names like Drumchapel and Knightswood become the more indistinct districts of D and 'Zone K'. This process of contraction reveals the debt which Kelman's work owes to Franz Kafka's three novels. Given this dimension to the writing, Kovesi argues that 'it may have been a shame that the Foreword did not make it into Hines, as from the start of his novel-writing, it would have complicated and textualised his reception which is too often reductively contextualised in the straightjacket of a realism interpreted through authorial autobiography rather than narrative form' (58).

As I have intimated in my opening paragraph, the main shortcoming in the study lies in Kovesi's tendency to take Kelman's pronouncements on his work and many of his political essays to the letter without adequately pointing out the uncomfortable disparity (both in quality and content) between the essays and the fiction. There is also some self-reflexive guilty-middle-class-academic posturing going on in parts of the book which peaks in the penultimate chapter. Here, Kovesi acknowledges that he too is complicit in his involvement with the academic disciplines that serve to marginalise and feed upon 'subaltern' voices like Kelman's. Such a line of thought illustrates honesty and a capacity for self questioning and I can see how it might lead to some stimulating tutorial debates. However, in print, the results are far from entertaining and sit rather uneasily with other parts of the book.

Kovesi shows consistency in his focus upon the class-basis of Kelman's language politics while there is less discussion of the philosophical and literary traditions from which Kelman's work emerges (despite some pointed references to Heidegger and Sartre in Chapter 3). While there is cogent discussion of Kelman in relation to other Scottish writers (the usual culprits – Ian Rankin and William McIlvanney), there is little acknowledgement of the Modernist traditions that underpin Kelman's work. Nevertheless, there is some pertinent consideration of the ways in which post-colonial theory and Deleuze and Guattari's conception of 'minor literatures' might form a pertinent context for considering Kelman's literary politics. Putting my reservations to one side, this is a useful contribution to critical discussion of Kelman's work overall but there is still much ground to be covered in coming to terms with the literary sensibilities of this complex and challenging writer.