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A Sense of Place: narrative perspective in the short stories of James Kelman

J. D. Macarthur

EDITOR'S NOTE

Traduit par Gwenvaël Moreuille

- 1 For three decades Scottish author James Kelman has been a controversial and influential figure in British literature. It is unfortunate that the shameful critical neglect of such a considerable writer has concealed the complexity and subtlety of his work. Moreover it is odd that what little academic scrutiny there has been has failed to deal with his short stories, which embody the larger part of his fiction. This is a puzzle to Kelman himself: 'Everything is in the short stories. If people looked at the short stories they wouldn't ask me the questions they do about the novels.'¹ Readers of this journal will be familiar with the neglect of the short story form in British literature, but in Kelman's case the comparative lack of interest in the form has had a knock-on effect in the understanding of his novels. The short stories allow him to demonstrate a range of narrative techniques which enable him to address in fiction the political and philosophical issues which concern him. Kelman has stated that his work is the result of 'the admixture of two literary traditions, the European Existential and the American Realist.'² The political motivation of realist writing connects very well with Kelman's conviction that the Scottish working classes have been colonised culturally by those from other regions and social classes and have been denied a voice in literature. However, by exploiting fully the possibilities of narrative forms and by adjusting the perspective of the narrative voice, Kelman demonstrates not only a political viewpoint but also a philosophical one. When he considers the relationship of narrators and readers, and narrators and their material, he constructs a complex structure of interaction which requires some analysis. *Where*

characters choose to locate themselves physically in relation to other people and their physical environment demonstrates at various points political self-determination, the desire for clarity and to restore order in oneself, solipsistic distortion and the attempt to understand in a social and existential sense our place in the world.

- 2 At this point it would be useful to indicate some of the issues which will *not* be discussed in depth here. The ‘sense of place’ in the title does not refer to the setting of much of Kelman’s fiction in west-central Scotland. It may be tempting to discuss identifiable locations in Glasgow, but the intentional absence of description in the stories means that a working class bar in Partick could at the same time be a bar in London or New York. Like Kafka’s Prague, Kelman’s Glasgow is recognisably Glasgow, but recognisably many other places too. This is one device to encourage the everyman nature of Kelman’s characters. In fact it is the *language* which establishes the setting. It is clear that Glasgow is important for Kelman, not as a physical location but as a way of thinking in relation to class and language, a ‘socio-cultural experience’.³ Neither will this paper consider the ‘sense of place’ which is implicit in the extensive use of the free indirect style of narration. Kelman does not use this exclusively, of course; he makes full use of an extensive range of narrative forms. However, by employing the free indirect style to a substantial degree he allows the reader access to the consciousness of the character without the overt mediation of the narrator and without suppressing the individuality of the character’s voice. The resulting matrix of relationships between author, character and reader could be interpreted in terms of the ‘sense of place’ of each, but this issue will not be dealt with here.
- 3 In an essay dealing with how politics and discourse interact⁴, Marie Louise Pratt has observed that many of the descriptions of landscape in travel and exploration accounts of the colonial era betray an ideological position as well as an aesthetic purpose. She takes as one example Sir Richard Burton’s account of his ‘discovery’ of Lake Tanganyika in 1860. Pratt notes how Burton seeks out a high point and describes the panorama below him. By doing so he establishes his dominance and authority over the scene below: ‘the whole scene is deictically ordered with reference to his vantage point.’⁵ The manner in which he describes a scene reflects his assumption of the right he has, as an agent of a colonial power, to exert authority over the countries subsumed into the British Empire. The analogy with the narrator in works of fiction is obvious. The perspective of the narrative viewpoint in relation to place can tell us much about the social and aesthetic values of the author, or the values of characters in fiction. Kelman has been consistent in his desire to present a reality which has hitherto been rejected, that of the Scottish working class. This is one reality which has been unrepresented and discarded by the cultural elite, and it may go some way to explaining the critical neglect of Kelman’s writing:
- The very idea of literary art as something alive and lurking within reach of ordinary men and women is not necessarily the sort of idea those who control the power in society will welcome with open arms. It is naïve to expect otherwise. Literature is nothing when it isn’t being dangerous in some way or another and those in positions of power will always be suspicious of anything that could conceivably affect their security.⁶
- 4 Political views have consequences in the choice of narrative option. Kelman’s democratic impulse is to allow the characters to be their own narrators insofar as this is possible in a work of fiction. This is important in Kelman’s writing, but he is by no means unique in his awareness of the issue, and precedents exist in Scottish literature. An illuminating

example can be found in George Blake's novel *The Shipbuilders*, which uses this idea of narrative perspective to great effect in order to contrast the two main characters, Leslie Pagan, a wealthy shipyard owner, and Danny Shields, one of the yard workers. Class differences are implicit in the way their situations are presented. On one occasion Leslie's vantage point could not be any higher as he flies with his son above the scene in his aeroplane:

The plane steadied at last on her course some two thousand feet above Clydeside, and all that crowded realm lay before for all the world as if a child had laid it out on the nursery floor. Insects crawled along narrow ribbons – cars on the innumerable, quaintly intersecting roads. Houses were mere comic blocks set in silly rows; the bunkers of a golf course were rosy pockmarks on diseased skin. The great river itself had narrowed to a strip of lead and in Leslie's brooding eyes the gantries over the empty berths of the shipyards lining the banks from Dumbarton up to Glasgow seemed at once frivolous, pretentious and pathetic.⁷

- 5 This is only a part of a long description which serves to emphasise Leslie's detachment from the troubled reality of a declining Clydeside. By distancing himself from it he can reorder the harsh reality as he pleases, like the child laying out toys on the nursery floor. He becomes superior in terms of physical placement but also god-like in that he can render human life below as like that of insects. Even when Leslie is on the ground we are aware that he is secluded from his surroundings. Leslie's journeys through the city are most often carried out enclosed in his car, speeding through the streets.

- 6 For Leslie's employee, on the other hand, there can be no escape or seclusion from the city. Danny Shields' perspective is distinctly ground level:

He made for the bend off Argyle Street. The entry was unfriendly, with the night wind blowing the gas in the single lamp to send swinging shadows up and down the whitewashed tunnel. In the yard he came upon a waiting taxicab, its driver asleep in the seat under the feeble glow of a bulb in the roof. There was a confusion of parked coal-carts and ice-cream barrows before the heavy gate that led to Jess's cottage; and groping his way among them, his eye was caught and held by the glow of the oil-lamp gleaming through the window.⁸

- 7 Danny's world is cold and unwelcoming. Shadows shift and thereby obscure and confuse. While Leslie can fly unhindered, at least temporarily, Danny must grope his way through a landscape that is uncertain and over which he exerts no control. What is notable in the above examples is that the account of Leslie's flight employs a great deal of metaphor, a mark that Leslie is able to impose his vision and judgement on what he sees. Danny's scene is rendered without metaphor. He is in the scene, but not the creator of it. In both cases, however, we must bear in mind that the omniscient third person narrator is, so to speak, looking down and arranging the characters' perspective. Burton Pike, considering how the city is portrayed in fiction, has expressed the idea succinctly:

When a narrator looks at the city from above he is placing himself in an attitude of contemplation rather than involvement. The elevated observer is within the city but above it at the same time, removed from the daily life taking place on the streets and within buildings. He can look up at the sky and out at the horizon as well as down at the city itself.⁹

- 8 Kelman seeks to emphasise his belief in the characters as their own narrators by the use of a perspective which is almost exclusively ground level. The viewpoint becomes that of the character himself, rather than an elevated and external narrator. In Kelman's short stories we frequently encounter the solitary man pacing the streets of the city. These characters are not in an elevated position but it is the case that they are 'in an attitude of

contemplation'. However, this is not contemplation in the sense that Pike intends in the above quotation. The painful and obsessive nature of the typical Kelman character's deliberations do not lead to any unraveling of the chaos they experience. The recurrent aimlessness of their wandering is indicative of the inability of the characters to arrive at any resolution and is consistent with the notion of the absence of closure. They never arrive at a destination because they have none to aim for. One example is the story 'Greyhound for Breakfast' in the collection of the same name. The central character, Ronnie, has bought a greyhound and, frightened of the reaction of his wife Babs, he walks the streets with the dog preparing himself to face her. He constantly puts off returning home. Even his fatigue and discomfort cannot motivate him to face his wife who will ask the questions he is unwilling and unprepared to answer:

Ronnie paused. He had been walking a wee while, as far as the town hall. He crossed the zebra crossing, making for Copland Road. His tea would be ready right at this minute and Babs would be wondering. But it was still too early; he was not prepared enough. And his fucking feet were beginning to sore. And if *he* felt like that what about the dog? A sit down would have been nice.¹⁰

- 9 The impression we have here is of Ronnie's familiarity with the city. In fact it seems as if he has to pause and make an active effort to place himself because his surroundings are so familiar that while he is deep in thought he registers little of the scenery. When he is aware of the city around him it serves as a cue for memories of his past:

He had arrived at the pier. It was derelict. He stood by the railing peering through the spikes. The ferryboat went from here to Partick. Old memories right enough! Ronnie smiled. Although they werent all good. Fuck sake. They werent all good at all. And then these other memories. And the smells. And the journey twice a day six days a week. These smells but of the river, and the rubbish lapping at the side of the steps down, and at low tide the steps all greasy and slippery, the moss and the rest of it.¹¹

- 10 The sense impressions here: the smells, the sound of rubbish lapping in the water, the feel of slippery steps, place Ronnie very much part of the scene. This is a depiction of a city in decay. This is not a flowing river with movement and flux, but stagnant water. Like Ronnie's thoughts, and the thoughts of many Kelman characters, the lack of movement produces nothing except an uncertain footing and atrophy. These same aspects turn up in another story in the collection, 'Home for a couple of days' which features Eddie, who walks around his home town to avoid, for an unspecified reason, visiting his mother. His walking also provokes an attempt to recall his past, but rather less successfully than Ronnie above. The naming of the streets he passes along seems to reflect the process of his recalling of his old neighbourhood:

He continued round the winding bend, down past the hospital and up Church Street, cutting in through Chancellor Street and along the lane. The padlock hung ajar on the bolt of the door of the local pub he used to frequent. Farther on the old primary school across the other side of the street. He could not remember any names of teachers or pupils at this moment. A funny feeling. It was as if he had lost his memory for one split second.¹²

- 11 Eddie, in spite of his long absence, is also familiar with the short cuts of the area, 'cutting in through Chancellor Street and along the lane'. However, this is also a city in decay, his old pub bolted up and no doubt smashed open by vandals. In both the above quotations the free indirect style allows the reader to view the scene through the eyes of the characters, and we can share at first hand Eddie's 'funny feeling' at his memory loss.

- 12 In two instances Kelman does use a narrator who at a point in the story raises himself to a high vantage point, but the manner in which Kelman uses this perspective is transformed to remain consistent with the themes and tone of the author's work. The characters do so to separate themselves from people around them and to allow them to try to make sense of their world. One example is 'Joe laughed' from *The Good Times* and the other is 'Not not while the giro' in the collection of the same name. In 'Joe laughed' the young narrator leaves his companions and enters a derelict factory building. He climbs higher and higher in the building until he reaches a small room at the top from which he can gain access to the roof. He is dispirited and his solitary wander through the factory seems to be a deliberate attempt to distance himself, literally and figuratively, from the other boys. They become disembodied voices in the distance. Disembodied sounds crop up on a recurrent basis in Kelman's work, as in, for example, 'Home for a couple of days' or 'Forgetting to mention Allende'. They serve to emphasise uncertainty, separation, and isolation. In 'Joe laughed', the narrator has to struggle to climb up to a window to get a better view. However, when he gets up to the window he has only a partial view of the roof, and nothing more:

I went up on my tiptoes to see out but the window was high and I couldny see the pitch. [...] The way the roof was angled the view was way ower and I couldnay see out properly at all, no unless I could stretch up higher. [...] I heaved and got it open, but then it stuck halfway, less, it jammed. But I could hear a couple of the boys shouting. It sounded far away, like the pitch was right away ower the other side of the docks. I dived up my arms through the gap, then my head and shoulders. I got my elbows wedged ower the sill to take my weight. I waited, getting my breath. The roof was about five feet below. I got a shiver, that bit of dizziness ye get, my head gon that roomy way, I had to shut my eyes a wee minute.¹³

- 13 Rather than Pratt's clear and 'deictically ordered' scene below, the narrator's struggle actually ends in no sight at all when he closes his eyes to stop the scene revolving in his head. He cannot even position himself to take advantage of the high outlook: the window jams and he can get only his head through, wedging himself in. The reader is not convinced by his later assertion that 'Once I was at the top of the roof I would be able to see everything'.¹⁴ The boy has a desire to see everything clearly by taking a detached and superior perspective, but given his subsequent description of the danger involved and his uncertainty and apparent failure of courage, it seems unlikely he will follow through with success. Kelman, typically, leaves the matter unresolved in the final sentence: 'I wasnay sure what I was gony do, no from now on, I maybe no even do nothing, it would just depend.'¹⁵ In the other example of the elevated perspective the narrator of 'Not not while the giro' uses the raised viewpoint, but he is aware of the limits to his vision:

Often I sit by the window in order to sort myself out – a group therapy within, and I am content with the behaviourist approach, none of that pie-in-the-sky metaphysics here if you don't mind. [...] Choosing this window for instance only reinforces the point. I am way on top, high above the street. And though the outlook is unopen considerable activity takes place directly below.¹⁶

- 14 This narrator is fully conscious of his partial view. He does not seek to reorder what he sees but to analyse it in order to reorder himself. How typical of a Kelman character that he should do this inside his own head, group therapy with a group of one.
- 15 Kelman can use narrative perspective to alert us to deficiencies in the characters, a distorted vision. 'Extra cup' in *Lean Tales* begins with the narrator, who has reported for work as a sweeperup, describing in meticulous detail being led by a clerk through the

work site to his department. The description is a single sentence almost two hundred words in length, only part of which need be quoted to give an idea of its nature:

He led me out of the gatehouse, through the massive carpark and into a side entrance, along a corridor between offices then out, and across waste ground into another building where I followed him along the side of a vast machineroom into a long tunnel and out through rubber swing doors, onto more waste ground but now with rail tracks crossing here and there, and into another building via a short tunnel leading sharply down then up a concrete incline at the top of which we entered an ancient hoist [...]¹⁷

16 The excessive detail of this account may be an attempt to stress the warren-like nature of the factory, but this could be done in a much more succinct and less tedious way. The paucity of punctuation serves to emphasise the seemingly endless path they take. Such disproportionate prominence is given to this delineation of his route by the narrator that we begin to suspect very quickly that his perspective may be a distorted one, and this is confirmed at the conclusion of the story when he quits the job on his first day because of the coolness of his workmates. Their slightly offhand attitude towards him does not merit such an extreme reaction from him. This is a man whose perspective on life is skewed. Like the narrator of 'the same is here again' from *Lean Tales*, whose viewpoint is literally ground level (i.e. head against the ground), minute things have taken on undue prominence in his mind. Hence his reaction to the place he travels through.

17 The story 'the same is here again' seems to confirm that being locked into self-awareness can be a futile and destructive thing; too close a perspective distorts rather than clarifies. The 'speaker' of this interior monologue is a typical Kelman character: a down-and-out from Glasgow living rough in London, surviving on petty theft. The title refers to the incessant barrage of thoughts and impressions which torture him. He longs for respite from his overactive mind. His plea for peace, like his thoughts, is overwrought and repetitive:

I have to clear my head. I need peace peace peace. No thoughts. Nothing. Nothing at all.¹⁸

18 He closes his eyes and rubs them, hoping that it will rub away his agonised state, but the same things endlessly present themselves:

Here I am as expected. The shoulders drooping; they have been strained recently. Arms hanging, and the fingers. Here: and rubbing my eyes to open them on the same again. Here, the same is here again. What else.¹⁹

19 The expression 'the same again' is interesting. 'Again' can be both the adverb of time and operate as a noun; again becomes a thing, a state of being. In other words, the nature of our existence is just a constant repetition of what has come before. The narrator is weary, 'shoulders drooping', 'arms hanging', 'strained', and is aware of the impossibility of change, 'Here I am as expected...What else.' This is true for many Kelman characters, but this particular narrator's state is exacerbated by his hypersensitivity to the physical world. His senses are heightened to a painful degree. He finds himself lying on the ground and the tiny details there are grotesquely magnified by his peculiar perspective to create a world where the minute and the usually unnoticed loom large. Grass is no longer grass, but a collection of individual blades:

This grass grows in a rough patch and cannot have it easy. The blades are grey green and light green; others are yellow but they lie directly on the earth, right on the soil. My feet were there and the insects crawled all around. A fine place for games. They go darting through the green blades and are never really satisfied till hitting the yellow ones below. And they dart headlong, set to collide all the time

into each other but no, that last-minute body swerve. And that last minute body swerve appears to unnerve them so that they begin rushing about in circles or halting entirely for an approximate moment.²⁰

- 20 The parallel between the insects and human beings is clear, either pointlessly going round and round in circles or paralysed momentarily, and never coming into contact with each other. The passage above is the culmination of the narrator's too close focus. Throughout the story he is acutely aware of his body, especially its decay, and his focus is on the tiny physical details: the pores in his skin, the flakes of dandruff, the red veins in his eyeballs, nasal hair, the hairs on his legs. He is constantly aware too of his physical sensations, especially the discomfort in his gut. Raili Elovaara's quotation from Karl Jaspers may be relevant:

If a man comes to look upon his life as spiritually unacceptable, as intolerable were it merely because he can no longer understand its significance, he takes flight into illness, which envelops like a visible protector.²¹

- 21 This recalls Dostoevsky's *Notes From the Underground* and the narrator's obsession with his decaying teeth and the pain they cause him. Kelman's narrator suffers similarly, and cannot do otherwise. Everything becomes distorted and takes on a prominence that is false.

- 22 Kelman displays not only an awareness of how characters move around locations but also how they occupy locations and how they position themselves in relation to other people. To deal with what would seem initially to be such an unpromising subject for a story requires skill and boldness. Scottish fiction writer Alan Warner has noted this ability, remarking that Kelman has:

A beautiful ability to tell a story in which nothing happens – that fantastic one in *Greyhound for Breakfast*, 'Even in communal pitches', where the guy just shifts position at a party where he can't get settled but it comes across as this huge, reverberating life changing, existential statement – it's so good.²²

- 23 The story to which Warner refers is one of several where this idea is explored. 'Keep moving and no questions' from *Not Not While the Giro* is another good example. 'Even in communal pitches' sets out its theme at the outset:

I had arrived at the following conclusion: even in communal pitches people will claim their portion of space; he who sits in the left-hand corner of one room will expect to obtain the equivalent corner in every room. This is something I cannot go but I felt obliged to conform to standard practice. It was a kind of community I was living in.²³

- 24 This is consistent with the depiction of lack of community which is a frequent theme in Kelman's work. Ostensibly part of a community, a person's first aim is in fact to separate themselves from those around them. Choosing a particular space is an attempt at self-definition, identifying oneself by the space one occupies. The narrator, however, has problems finding and hanging on to a suitable space. He distances himself from the party's activities in his attempt:

I had taken some of the drink but without overdoing it, I was more concerned with retaining the portion of space.²⁴

- 25 When he moves into another room he is uncertain and still separating himself from others:

I waited a couple of seconds, not looking at anybody, then strode to the staircase and went on up to the next landing. There were scuffling noises behind but I didn't look back. I didn't mind at all if people were following me; I just didn't want to give

the impression I knew where the fuck I was going, cause I didn't, I was just bashing on, hoping for the best.²⁵

- 26 The lack of direction and the 'bashing on' regardless are familiar traits of the Kelman character. Eventually he finds a space to occupy in the bathroom, particularly suitable as he can lock others out:

When I closed and snibbed the door I could hear the sounds of a couple of folk outside on the landing, as if they had been following me and had now realised it was a wild goose chase. Obviously I was a bit sorry for whoever it was but in a sense this was it about claiming your portion of space and I was only fitting in with the conventional wisdom of the place.²⁶

- 27 The repeated assurances that what he is doing is just the 'standard practice' and 'fitting in with the conventional wisdom' may be ironic. We cannot be sure if others feel the same way or if, as is more likely, this behaviour is peculiar to the narrator.

- 28 A similar, but perhaps better example than the one identified by Warner is 'Keep moving and no questions'. The narrator paces the dark, wet streets around Euston Station in London; once again we find the rootless wanderer in a Kelman short story. The title would seem to indicate that constant movement is important to avoid confronting difficult questions about life. In order to escape the rain and to take a break from walking he enters a folk club where he picks up a girl with whom he leaves the club. She seems to be his female counterpart because she also carries a bag with her belongings and makes no disclosure about any destination. However, at the end of the story she has a place to stay while he is left in the street with nowhere to go. The interesting thing is the narrator's sensitivity to people's position in relation to himself and others, as well as the poses they strike. He constantly makes reference to the manoeuvring of those around him. He describes his first encounter with the girl and the attempt of another man to pick her up thus:

I sat down in a space next to the back wall and after a moment closed my eyelids. When I opened them again the space to my right had increased to around five yards and a girl was kneeling on the floor with her arms folded. She was alone - but in this direct fashion. Her head stiffly positioned, the neck exactly angled. [...] Her toes seemed to be maintaining a sort of plumb point - and her arms! - folded in this direct fashion. Jesus.

[The man approaching her] paused a fraction when he arrived, then dropped to his knees, his hands placed on the floor to balance, fingertips pointing on to the side of her limbs he was facing her.²⁷

- 29 This precision about space exhibits yet another attempt to impose some order, charting things accurately to achieve some understanding, but the attempt is futile. The narrator gives up:

Ach. Fuck it. What a carry on. I don't know...can never really get it all connecting in an exact manner.²⁸

- 30 There is the uncomfortable realisation that precision, relating every detail, may be evidence of obsessive behaviour and lack of perspective, especially when no sense can be made of the information.

- 31 It is clear that Kelman's fiction presents us with a complexity which cries out for detailed analysis and this paper can only suggest some topics for further investigation. Great emphasis has been placed on Kelman's use of language, and it is certainly the case that in this respect he has been an influence on a generation of Scottish writers, notably Irvine Welsh. However, it is time that critical attention be directed towards his achievements in

other areas. His insistence on the short story as the form which often best serves his purpose is evidence of his international influences. He views himself as part of an international tradition which takes in the American Realists, such as William Dean Howells, and the European Existentialism of Dostoevsky, Kafka and Beckett. It is the narrative perspective of Kelman's narrators which enables us to see the two strands of the political and philosophical being woven together. Kelman is a political writer and is greatly concerned with those sectors of the community who have been denied a voice by other more powerful groups. Politics and discourse interact when narrators position themselves above a scene to exhibit detachment from and power over what they describe. Kelman allows his characters to be their own narrators and this is done from a ground level perspective; they do not set themselves above and detach themselves from their surroundings. If they do, the act is evidence of the existential desire to make sense of the world and one's place in it. Nevertheless, wherever they place themselves the Kelman character has only a partial or distorted view and nothing is made clear. However sensitive they are to how people position themselves and their interaction in terms of location, no order can be imposed on their disordered existence. This fusion of the political and philosophical is subtle and challenging. It is the quality of the execution, Kelman's success in the imaginative expression of those two areas, and his original vision which should rouse us to give the author greater critical scrutiny than he has hitherto enjoyed.

NOTES

1. Personal communication with the author, December, 2001
2. 'Foreword - Letter to My Editor', *Busted Scotch*, 9
3. 'The Importance of Glasgow in My Work', *Some Recent Attacks*, 80
4. Mary Louise Pratt, 'Conventions of Representation: where discourse and ideology meet' in Willie Van Peer, 1988
5. *Ibid.*, 15
6. Kelman, 'Introduction', *An East End Anthology*, 2
7. *The Shipbuilders*, 57
8. *Ibid.*, 171
9. Pike, 34
10. *Greyhound for Breakfast*, 217
11. *Ibid.*, 216
12. *Ibid.*, 32
13. *The Good Times*, 5-6
14. *Ibid.*, 7
15. *Ibid.*, 9
16. *Not Not While the Giro*, 196-7
17. *Lean Tales*, 43
18. *Ibid.*, 20
19. *Ibid.*, 20

20. *Ibid.*, 20
 21. Elovaara, 28
 22. Warner, 126-7
 23. *Greyhound for Breakfast*, 181
 24. *Ibid.*, 182
 25. *Ibid.*, 183
 26. *Ibid.*, 183-4
 27. *Not Not While the Giro*, 143-4
 28. *Ibid.*, 149
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ABSTRACTS

Le présent article étudie la narration chez l'Écossais James Kelman, notamment la subtile complexité du rapport entre la technique narrative de ses nouvelles et ses préoccupations philosophiques et politiques. Cette étude est faite dans le but d'illustrer le propos de l'auteur lui-même selon qui son œuvre se trouve à la croisée du réalisme américain et de l'existentialisme européen.

Dédaigné par la fine fleur de la critique littéraire, le réalisme se rattache à une idéologie bien connue. Or Kelman ne ménage pas ses mots pour dire que la classe ouvrière, à laquelle il appartient, a été colonisée par une élite qui l'a réduite au silence. Politique et discours s'entremêlent intimement chez lui pour agir l'un sur l'autre lorsque le narrateur se place au sommet de l'action pour la décrire ; ce qui implique, certes, une forme de recul ; mais aussi l'adoption d'un point de vue qui maîtrise ce qui se passe sur les sphères inférieures. L'engagement politique de Kelman se décèle dans la transformation de ses personnages en narrateurs. Le désir existentialiste de vouloir donner un sens au monde et à la place que l'on y tient est, là encore, teint d'une vision politique. Voir la façon dont les personnages gravitent autour des lieux et celle dont ils se positionnent par rapport aux autres, est souvent la marque d'une volonté de la part du narrateur de définir l'être et ainsi d'imposer du sens, un ordre à un monde qui en est dépourvu.

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