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"Post-Meta-Modern-Realism – The Novel in Scotland"

Scottish novel writing presents us with a heterogeneous field of enquiry which has regularly outwitted attempts to contain it within a literary scheme. The 1994 Booker Prize for Fiction demonstrated this in arresting fashion when it produced a provocative Scottish coup; not only was the winner James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late*, but it was joined on the shortlist by George Mackay Brown's *Beside the Ocean of Time*. The infamous uproar accompanying Kelman's win blasted his use of a Glasgow voice and alarming numbers of swear words. Brown's novel could not have provided more of a contrast to Kelman's urban sprawl; *Beside the Ocean of Time* is set on the fictional Orkney island of Norday and evokes the mythic Nordic past as well as the devastating World War Two history of those islands. Tightly structured, lyrical, elegiac and poetic in its engagement with the landscape and island life, the novel and its traditionally omniscient storyteller narrator are in many ways the opposite of Kelman's contemporary Glasgow seen through the complexly presented consciousness of his blinded protagonist Sammy Samuels.

It is possible to characterise these writers as exemplary of two diverse polarities, some would say contradictions, of Scottish writing, a tradition famous for both realism and romance, frequently in the same work. Kelman is more often read as a realist, representing city-bound working-class lives and voices of the present time in an uncompromising vernacular which forces the reader to see the world from the point of view of his all-male cast of protagonists. Brown is celebrated for his association with Orkney, is seen, in fact, as the islands' literary representative and consistently portrays his rural home in his poetry and fiction. *Beside the Ocean of Time* is the story of Thorfinn Ragnarson, a young dreamer through whom the reader encounters stories evoking Orcadian myth and history, from the distant Nordic past to the battle

of Bannockburn to seal wives and their strange ways. The latter part of the novel relates the devastation of Norday in the Second World War when it is turned into an airbase for the British air force. Thorfinn, now a writer, eventually returns to the deserted island after his experience as a prisoner of war and contemplates the creation of the 'unattainable poem' of his birthplace. History and biography entwine with myth, folklore and an abiding interest in ritual in Brown's writing constructing a sensibility more often placed within the romance region of the Scottish tradition.

However, on closer, more patient examination the polarities begin to break down and contradictory characteristics emerge. Brown, with his enduring belief in myth, can be conceived of as a modernist writer on a quest for "a universally applicable value system".[1] Yet Schoene believes that Brown is "a modernist writer with postmodernist tendencies" where "his resolute conflation of fact and fiction, his disregard for generic boundaries and his firm belief in the text as a means of reconciling disparate aspects of an essentially discontinuous reality"[2] are all postmodern features of his work. His artistry is never disputed. In contrast, Kelman, seen as a quintessential working-class writer, is by that definition artless in directly disgorging his experience onto paper in an unmediated manner. Of course, this hackneyed perception is thankfully fading now and Kelman's radical stylistic innovation is more widely valued. The interiority of his work, with its stream-of-consciousness sensibility, is qualified by disorientating slippages of pronouns and linguistic registers, placing his narrative voice on the boundary between the internal and external worlds of his protagonists. Kelman's taking up of this modernist strategy draws attention to the instability of texts and the selves they represent and defies grounding categorisation. Take the opening of *How Late It Was, How Late*:

Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts; but ye want to remember and face up to things, just something keeps ye from doing it, why can ye no do it; the words filling yer head: then the other words; there's something wrong; there's something far far wrong; ye're no a good man, ye're just no a good man. Edging back into awareness, of where ye are: here, slumped in this corner, with these thoughts filling ye. And oh christ his back was sore; stiff, and the head pounding. He shivered and hunched up his shoulders, shut his eyes, rubbed into the corners with his fingertips; seeing all kinds of spots and lights. Where in the name of fuck . . . [3]

This seems to me to fulfil Virginia Woolf's exhortation to the fiction writer to "look within" and "examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day".[4] The extract moves from an alienated interiority to third person objective description to direct expression, perhaps, in the final statement. In his work Kelman's signature use of free indirect discourse creates a vacillating boundary of selfhood, not a socially constructed automaton but not wholly a self-defining agent either; this technique bears comparison with Woolf's radical literary form in her texts of "high modernism". The contradiction projected by the combination of this pejoratively labelled bourgeois style—notwithstanding its presentation of working-class language and culture—and Kelman's politically committed working-class image produces consternation and denial in some quarters.

Contradiction is no stranger to the Scottish tradition which, as hinted above, is stereotypically contrived to hone itself out of oppositional creative modes and has made serious play with the destabilising of generic boundaries. This was previously seen as the mark of an inferior tradition, but in what is now known as the devolutionary period this changed.

Devolution, or the transfer of powers from the Parliament at Westminster to a Scottish legislative assembly, was put to the vote in Scotland in a referendum in 1979, which failed, and in 1997, which succeeded, paving the way for the re-instating of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 for the first time since the Act of Union in 1707. In the interim, devolutionary stage between the referenda, Scottish writing embraced and even exaggerated the hybridity of the tradition "in what, retrospectively, appears as a deliberate act of artistic devolution—if not, indeed, as a declaration of cultural independence".[5] Writers revelled in an experimental freedom which broke down the boundaries of the text generically, formally and typographically, taking inspiration from Alasdair Gray's epoch-setting novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981). Here, with a heady deliberate mixing of realism and fantasy, traditionally conceived novelistic form of progressing time and plot gave way to a radical refashioning: Book Four followed Book Two which came after Book One which was placed after the opening Book Three; the Prologue occurs at the end of Book Three and the Epilogue in the midst of Book Four, where the author appears and argues with the protagonist as to the resolution of the narrative, accompanied by an "Index of Plagiarisms". Such hectic experimentalism has since been relished as exemplarily postmodern, a new exulting in the instabilities and fragmentations of Scottish identity and culture which in themselves could now be thought of as positively and fashionably postmodern.

In *Lanark*, however, Gray's message was also a political one; at the heart of the novel is a critique of the destructive effects of capitalism. As Linda Hutcheon argued in a significant and apt critical intervention, contradiction is central to postmodernism, but it is also "unavoidably political".[6] In the Scottish context the outburst of literary experimentation in devolutionary fiction was never less than politically motivated, expressive of an ethical impulse to represent the marginalised and the outsider and give space to their suppressed voices. As Kelman said,

expressing the sentiments of many other writers, "I wanted to write and remain a member of my community".[7] Cairns Craig proclaims that "the explosion of writing in Scots after 1984 was effectively a devolution of the word, asserting at the level of culture an independence as yet unachieved at the level of politics".[8] The embrace of the insights of a postmodern sensibility arguably transformed the reading of Scottish novels, as well as the writing of them, into acts of radicalism.

The new century, however, has instituted a sobering of attitudes casting doubt on the integrity and even possibility of a political postmodernism. A backlash against the discourse has become more vocal in the last decade and books such as Jose Lopez and Gary Potter's *After Postmodernism* (2001) and Klaus Stierstorfer's *Beyond Postmodernism* (2003), for example, conceive of the cultural phenomenon insistently in the past tense. There is a perception, or a desire even, that we are *beyond postmodernism*. Such a scenario raises crucial questions for a Scottish cultural scene which, as we have seen, has much invested in the analytical power and sensibilities of the discourse. With the authority of a blandly instituted postmodernism now undermined, the question arises whether emergent cultural forces in writing and publishing posit a return to more uncomplicated representational tenets such as those of a conservative realism? Such fears were voiced by Kelman himself in 2009 in a rare appearance at the Edinburgh International Book Festival when he attacked the dominance and media hype of genre fiction; he polemicized that "If the Nobel Prize came from Scotland they would give it to a writer of fucking detective fiction",[9] a reference to the popularity of crime writing in Scotland. Kelman's intervention caused a gleeful media outcry and split the literary establishment. However, his outburst prompts critical questions about the ethical implications of cultural strategies, especially one known for its radical relativism and experiments in anti-realism.

Certainly a major constituency of Scottish writers continues to advocate experimenting with formal and thematic possibilities. Kelman himself in *Keiron Smith, Boy* (2008) and authors such as Alan Warner in *The Stars in the Bright Sky* (2010) produce thoughtfully constructed and complex meditations on the radically defamiliarizing power of language, particularly here in relation to the world of young people. The challenge to the fixity of identities implicit in anti-realist textual strategies remains a fundamental concern of much contemporary writing. As Glaswegian Suhayl Saadi says about his own work, "I aimed to promote syncretism, liminality and heteroglossia in order to dynamise ideas of social class, ethnicity, history, musicality, geography and consciousness".[10] Ali Smith, a writer who is often not associated with a Scottish context, maintains a Scottish presence in her vividly original novels. For example, in *The Accidental* (2006) the mysterious figure Amber, the disruptive force who creates havoc in the middle-class family she unaccountably lands in, is Scottish, preserving the unsettling effect of the disquieting romance facet of the Scottish tradition. And her latest novel, *There But For The* (2011), opening with a Scottish character, continues to pose philosophical questions regarding the nature of storytelling and representation in a teasingly metafictional exploration of memory and communication, intersubjectivity and belief. Connecting these writers is a commitment to a politics of representation which involves challenging complacent ways of seeing and portraying the world. Though we may not refer to this as a unified postmodern body of work, all these authors deploy strategies associated with the iconoclastic impulses of postmodernism.

These concerns are foregrounded in A.L. Kennedy's writing which highlights the dilemma that has come to surround the ethics of postmodernism. Though her narratives are praised for her deft rendering of her metafictional preoccupations with the purpose of writing, this appraisal is often quickly qualified by reference to the ethical seriousness of her method and

intent; her stylistic expertise is not "an empty technical exercise or a display of postmodern knowingness, but rather works in the service of some more traditional, humanistic purpose".[11] The imputation here of the lesser moral intent and effect of postmodern writing implies that an ethical discourse can only be adequately realised in more humanist modes which deal in a recognisable world of referents and values, and a shared reality. Kennedy's fiction, however, does not promote the return to a straightforward humanist discourse but employs the techniques of postmodernism to counter its own most radical effects. Her work does not present a singular, indisputable reality or truth, but invites us to arrive at an ethical interpretation of an ambivalently depicted situation; postmodern literary writing enables this precisely because of its privileged doubleness and irony. An emotive example is found in the story "As God Made Us" from the collection *What Becomes* (2009). Here a teacher berates a group of amputees, survivors of recent and ongoing military campaigns, for attending a swimming pool, telling them their disabilities cause upset. She has told her school-children the men are "as god made" them,[12] a distortion of the facts of their plight which suppresses the violent reality embodied in the men. However, depending on your political and spiritual beliefs (you may view current conflicts as modern "crusades", for instance) the teacher's is not a completely inarguable position; it is, though, ethically unsustainable as her treatment of the men as less human, as monstrous, explicitly determines.

Kennedy rejects the language and sensibility of postmodernism when she asserts that literature is a redemptive and humanising practice. Because of its potential as a point of communal unity, an occasion for communication, togetherness and contact between individuals, it provides an opportunity to overcome the postmodern relativism and disconnection which Kennedy perceives as structuring the world. Yet this is not because of its presentation of

enduring truthful depictions of that world, but because art is an occasion of contestation—of meaning and interpretation. Kennedy promotes belief, or faith even, in this power of art, an attitude which places her contra both the rationalism of humanism and the aversion to grand narratives which characterises postmodernism. The magic, Kennedy would aver, is not in the message of a text but in its prompting of human communication and convergence, an awareness and experience of intersubjectivity. In her latest novel *The Blue Book* (2011) she makes the theme of magic central by depicting a fake medium, a symbol of the writer with the power to create convincing illusions. This can be done for morally correct or questionable reasons—the addressing and possible alleviating of individual trauma or the medium's personal financial gain—highlighting the crucial ethical choices at the heart of the illusionist's craft. Though not grounded in a stable singularly understood reality this art of faking creates the opportunity for the experience of coherent selfhood and community, a delusion of humanist truth and intersubjective understanding which, even if it is only momentary, provides a basis for the good life.

All the works referred to here are examples of a Scottish writing scene which challenges the humanist premises of realism but employs a postmodern sensibility, if not postmodern literary strategies, to highlight the ethical dilemmas left in the wake of the dismantling of certainties enacted in recent decades. Their yearning towards stability and truth is expressed through acceptance of the impossibility of that quest. In the near future we may be describing such work with new terms such as "metarealism"[13] or "metamodernism".[14] For the moment I will simply pay tribute to the restless experimental spirit which displaces these texts beyond easy limitation and labelling and confounds categories and categorisation in line with the best custom and practice of the Scottish tradition.

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Notes

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[1] Berthold Schoene. *The Making of Orcadia: Narrative Identity in the Prose Work of George Mackay Brown*. (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), 270.

[2] Ibid.

[3] James Kelman. *How Late It Was, How Late*. (London: Vintage, 1998), 1.

[4] Virginia Woolf. "Modern Fiction." In *Selected Essays*, edited by David Bradshaw. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

[5] Cairns Craig. "Devolving the Scottish Novel." In *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, edited by James F. English. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 128.

[6] Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1999, 1.

[7] Kelman, James. "The Importance of Glasgow in My Work." In *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political*. (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), 81.

[8] Cairns Craig. "Devolving the Scottish Novel", 135.

[9] Phil Miller. "Kelman blasts mediocrity of boy wizards and crime bestsellers." *Herald*, 27 August, 2009.

[10] Suhayl Saadi. "In Tom Paine's Kitchen: Days of Rage and Fire." In *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, edited by Berthold Schoene. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 29.

[11] Kaye Mitchell. *A.L. Kennedy*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 146.

[12] A.L. Kennedy. *What Becomes*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 122.

[13] See, for example, Philip Tew. "A New Sense of Reality? A New Sense of Text? Exploring Meta-Realism and the Literary-Critical Field." In *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessment in Literature, Theory and Culture*, edited by Klaus Stierstorfer. (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyer, 2003). 29-49.

[14] See Timotheus Velmeulen and Robin van den Akker. "Notes on Metamodernism." *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2 (2010): 1-14.