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**The Writer as Tactician: James Kelman's Everyday
Practice**

In this essay we set out to show how a deeper understanding of the coherence of the political and social vision which informs the work of writer James Kelman can be gained through a reading of the French philosopher Michel De Certeau, and in particular the latter's most influential work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.¹ In that book De Certeau (1925-86) brings interdisciplinary learning and techniques from philosophy, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, social theory, and history together to show how individuals and communities can and do incessantly undermine and reinscribe conventional paths of social power. However, before making a comparison of De Certeau's understandings and techniques with those found in Kelman's work, we examine why it is necessary at all to look to the question of 'coherence' in Kelman's writing.

The work of James Kelman is rarely free from controversy. His 1994 Booker Prize, awarded for *How Late It Was, How Late*, drew down the wrath of Booker judge Rabbi Julia Neuberger who described the decision as a 'disgrace'.² Three days later, commenting on the same decision in *The Times* (where Neuberger's reaction was also cited), Simon Jenkins accused Kelman of 'acting the part of an illiterate savage' who revelled in the sordid aspects of poverty.³ However, Kelman is himself prone to robust public statements aimed at what he perceives to be the literary establishment – most recently at the pre-eminence of 'writers of fucking detective fiction' in Scotland.⁴ Such statements are taken by his enemies to characterise a critical and political approach that is abrasive, unsubtle – and worse – irredeemably parochial, full of resentment for and rejection of any concerns not immediate and local to Kelman's own. Whereas his supporters praise the delicacy and nuance of his fiction, even they make exceptions where his essays and public speeches are concerned. In assessing his non-fictional output, Terry Eagleton accused him of 'truculent self indulgence'⁵ while Mia Carter characterised his non-fiction writing by the 'rigid certainties of Kelman's rhetoric

on the page'.⁶ Writing in the *Edinburgh Review*, Alan Freeman developed an influential characterisation of Kelman's writing that emphasised a gulf between his carefully-wrought fictions and his crude and simplistic factual writing: 'Whereas his fiction fuses human worth with individual and local detail, his polemics sweep aside specificity, preclude political or moral nuance.'⁷

The critical response to the publication in 2008 of Kelman's latest novel *Kieron Smith, boy* seemed to confirm this notion of a fundamental incoherence between these two aspects of Kelman's work as the standard view. In a *Sunday Times* interview Joan McAlpine (now an elected MSP), notes that Kelman's personal 'political certainty stands in stark contrast to his alienated, often insecure characters'. McAlpine distances Kelman's creative fiction from his political views. While she admits Kelman's fiction is 'informed' by his politics, she draws attention to the cognitive dissonance caused in listing the political sins of his non-fiction work, and contrasting that with the achievements of his fiction which is 'never hectoring or judgemental. It is supremely subtle.'⁸ A year before that, the *Guardian's* Theo Tait lost patience with Kelman's 'exaggerations' of the English literary establishment and an arch-political viewpoint that 'makes modern Glasgow sound as if it's under occupation'.⁹

This critical dichotomy between overt (if not unproblematic) admiration for his achievements as a novelist and writer of short stories, and the taboo nature of his critical and political essays, holds up so firmly that the author today finds himself in the supremely ironical position of being recommended purely as a bourgeois, non-ideological novelist, despite his own insistence that his political commitment and adherence to independent working class radical traditions are absolutely integral to his fiction. In our book *The Red Cockatoo: James Kelman and the Art of Commitment* we examine the relationship between Kelman's polemics, his political engagements and activism, his language, and his fictions, and argue that they can in fact be placed in one continuous and indivisible, if finely graded, spectrum.¹⁰ We would also argue here in this essay that the nature of Kelman's Glasgow milieu has been fundamentally misunderstood. It is the careful articulation of territorial and spatial dimensions of *a place called Glasgow* within Kelman's work that makes his parish a universal one, and, crucially, allows further understanding and appreciation of the fit between his politics and his art. To demonstrate this, we will focus here on Kelman's nonfiction writing to

demonstrate how philosophical ideas akin to those articulated in the work of Michel de Certeau, and directly transmitted through his reading of Noam Chomsky, have shaped him as a literary artist.

Kelman's essays and public talks demonstrate that he sees himself as writing out of a fusion of many different traditions which, through analysis of his fiction, and through readings of his collected critical writings, we can find the scattered evidence of his influences. These include libertarian left wing and grassroots politics – particularly in the Glasgow industrial and workerist traditions – Scottish Common Sense philosophy, existentialism, working class literature, the political criticism and the postcolonial traditions of Frantz Fanon and his successors. One consistent thread that runs through all the differing aspects of these antecedents could be characterised as an anti-establishment ethos concerned with individual rights and freedoms, at once both international in provenance and scope of its humane attachment to first principles, while firmly rooted in the local.

Perhaps the most powerful demonstration of this confluence in Kelman's concerns was seen in his role in co-organising the 'Self-determination and Power' conference in Glasgow in 1990. Noam Chomsky appeared as keynote speaker together with the late George Davie (then the foremost authority on the Scottish Common Sense tradition), and amongst the three hundred or so attendees and speakers were writers, activists and educationists from Scotland and all around the globe, including leftist and anarchist groups, black power and black rights movements from England, the Caribbean and Africa. Kelman is eager to have these formative influences acknowledged. Yet when he faces serious negative or hostile criticism, this criticism has often been grounded in Kelman's perceived failure either in making a coherent case for yoking together such diverse political traditions,¹¹ or for the aforementioned inconsistency perceived by some readers between his insistence on humane and detailed fictional work (and the evident craft and care in depicting the complex, and often contradictory inner lives of his protagonists), and the supposed emotive and unsubstantiated claims and assertions of his critical and political writings.¹²

In order to move beyond the notion of the 'incoherent' Kelman, his work can be put in the context of the ostensibly diverse activities in politics and linguistics of Noam Chomsky, of whom Kelman is a long-term admirer and collaborator. The parallels between the two are brought into sharpest focus when viewed through the work of the theorist Michel De Certeau.

De Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* is, in his own introductory words, an 'investigation of the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate'.¹³ De Certeau is very precise in his use of this term 'user' to describe what he calls the 'dominated element in society', where he claims the truth of this element's operation is 'concealed by the euphemistic term "consumers"'.¹⁴ De Certeau concludes that users are not just passive, not merely pawns at the mercy of agents whom Kelman calls 'those in control',¹⁵ or of the structures of Foucault's disciplinary society, but by their tactical consumption everyday users create and produce culture themselves. De Certeau uses the example of indigenous peoples under Spanish colonisation who '*made of* the rituals, representations and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respects and ends foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept'.¹⁶ By a range of tactics those everyday 'users' divert imposed order and discipline, and this operation by everyday tactics is 'characterised by its ruses, its fragmentation, its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity'.¹⁷ This characterisation of everyday 'users' as non-passive producers of culture is strikingly similar to Kelman's views on the same topic, which he sees himself holding in common with Chomsky and in line with the Scottish Common Sense tradition. In one interview he says, 'Chomsky's thesis, and that of the Common Sense philosophical view in general, is the apparently obvious point that people can think for themselves'.¹⁸ And again in a long discursive article on Chomsky and the Common Sense Tradition, Kelman writes:

It is absolutely central to Chomsky's thesis that 'there is no body of theory or significant body of relevant information, beyond the comprehension of the layman, which makes policy immune from criticism'. Everybody can know and everybody can judge. Unless we are mentally ill or in some other way disadvantaged all of us have the analytical skills and intelligence to attempt an understanding of the world. It just is not good enough 'to be bad at mathematics'.

The skills demanded of an elderly person for playing several cards of bingo simultaneously or for studying thoroughly the form for a big sprint handicap in the 'heavy going' at Ayr Racetrack in an effort to pick the winner; the skills demanded of parents on welfare trying to cope with a family of young children, just seeing

they stay healthy from one week to the next: all such skills are there to be developed and could be applied to any subject whatsoever.¹⁹

As we hope to show, this centrality of the non-passivity of 'everyday users' (Kelman for example, refers to 'ordinary women and men'²⁰) is also suffused throughout Kelman's fiction and non-fiction, most recently in his novel *Kieron Smith, boy*, and the latest collection of short stories *If it is your life*. And furthermore, evidence of 'ruses' and of activity which is 'clandestine' or unseen by 'those in control' is also found there in Kelman's fiction, and can be explored and expressed through various techniques, including visualising underlying spatial elements of Kelman's writing.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau sets up and analyses a range of dualistic oppositions through which he articulates aspects of this struggle between those who are dominated, and those who dominate, between the 'devious' and 'dispersed' creativity of consumers in using products of advanced capitalist life in their own idiosyncratic way in the face of the controlling, channelling efforts and ethos of the mainstream organised producers in that society. Besides the more obvious post-Marx antagonism of consumers and producers, he borrows from military writers (principally Von Clausewitz) the distinction between strategy and tactics, where strategy is the planning carried out from a place, from a base in the case of military commanders and from those who have power, whereas tactics are those manoeuvres planned from those who have no place of their own, on the battlefield, in the face of the enemy and who become practised in how they use and consume their surroundings.

From this point of view we can see what De Certeau means by 'poaching' and 'ruses' in the sense of tactics used by the weak in order to achieve their own goals by refusing, avoiding, diverting, and detouring around official legislation, planning, control, and order. As mentioned above, De Certeau sets up numerous of these dualisms with the same contrast between those who have a place and are supposedly 'in control' and those who are supposedly weak, have no 'place' and no formally recognised power. These include consumption and production, strategy and tactics, place and space, competence and authority, and perhaps most significantly in the case of Kelman, the tour and the map. With regard to this latter dualism, De Certeau outlines how in the scientific project of the West from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century the map of the space planner, the urbanist, the

cartographer with its objective, bird's eye view of places, gradually disengages itself from earlier graphic descriptions of journeys which were attached to tours, points of view and itineraries of individuals (e.g. pilgrimages) on the ground. This is related to De Certeau's comparison (in the chapter 'Walking in the City') of the everyday inhabitant's use of the city walking (on tour) through it, to the conceptions of language developed by Saussure and subsequently Chomsky – 'the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language'.²¹ In other words, just as in Chomsky's system where native speakers from an idealised knowledge of, or ability with the language (competence), compose with freedom (and not completely at the mercy of this imposed ideal) their own individually created actual utterances (performance), then so the walkers in the city, by using it through their own personal connection of sites of interest and importance in their life, through shortcuts and detours, improvise their own city from that ideal created by town planners, architects, city authorities, legislation and byelaws.

De Certeau also establishes links, conscious or otherwise, between the individual and the collective through 'the exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric', a concept echoed in much of Kelman's fictions, with characters who have traditionally, to paraphrase De Certeau, written an urban text without being able to read it. These texts crisscross and combine into understandings that can be held in common or remain as individual and personal as those understood by characters such as Doyle in *A Disaffection*, Sammy in *How Late it was, how late*, or Kieron in *Kieron Smith, boy*. What is important, and significant, is that none of these texts have been programmed or defined by any guiding authority, but derived and decided at ground level. Nor need they, to any degree, be mutually exclusive. *Kieron Smith, boy* is told through, and expressed in the juvenile inner voice of its titular character; one of the novel's central themes is the dislocation of young Kieron from the familiar spaces of Glasgow tenements to one of the new housing schemes built to rehouse working class families in the 1950s and 60s, where he must familiarise himself with new spaces and locations. In Kieron's personal tour of the landscapes of tenements and schemes we find much that is clearly rooted both in his own personal, ongoing reverie of his surroundings, but also a great many terminologies and understandings he shares with other children and the grown-ups that allow him to map his own territory, be they the backcourts and middens, or the new

landscape of the scheme, with its gun site, 'squatter's camp' and, particularly, the verandas or balconies that each family has adjoining their apartment:

Pat called it veranda, ye were out on the veranda. Other ones called it that. No just RCs. So if it was a kitchenette balcony it was a kitchenette veranda. My maw did not like veranda. It was a balcony to her. So I just said balcony.²²

For Kieron this part of the flat is important as it is informally 'his' and he claims it in his mental apportioning of the territory in the flat – his brother Matt claims the bedroom, his father the living room and his mother the kitchenette and master bedroom. Yet on reflection, and in awareness of various other terminologies for other, identical spaces among his friends, he chooses allegiance to his mother's terminology and has no interest (or presumably, concept) of what the original architects or planners or council authorities may have called it. The subtlety here is that Kieron is able to be simultaneously individualist and collectivist. He has 'poached' the balcony for himself in any case, but has also learned what his friends and neighbours name theirs in contrast to his mother, and come to his own decision. As shall be seen, this is just one of many passages in the novel where Kieron shows his growing independence and maturity through his ability to craft his own turf – spatial and linguistic – out of territory owned and controlled by others.

The frictions of family life and Kieron's relationship with his brother also have a particular impact on the way he apprehends and 'poaches' his own territory that also prompts him into bids for limited autonomy and relative independence. Here, Kieron describes the new room he and his brother have to share:

I was not to go into his side of the room. Oh it is a house rule, it is a house rule. Who said? Me. Who is me? Him. He made the rule, and it was for the complete house. Then came the new beds. But the way they fixed things all was wrong and just not fair. It was the exact same sides. He for the window and I got the door. So if my side of the room had the door he always went in it when he came in. Then he went out, so that was him in my side again. But I was not to set foot in his. Oh keep to yer own side, do not set foot in

mine. But if his side had the window? So how come? I was not to look out the window. What if it was mine? If he had the door and I had the window. He would have wanted to look out. But if it was me coming in the door and it was his side, how did I come in. If I was going to my bed. Oh ye cannot come in my side. Oh if ye get a ladder to climb up. Because he would not have let me through. That was my house. How bad it was. Going to yer bed at night, ye would have to go outside and climb up a ladder [. . .] He made all the rules, he just made them up.²³

What is interesting here is Kelman's articulation of *layers* of use and practice. Formally Mattie and Kieron's room, Mattie, the older and more powerful brother, puts his own layers of house rules onto the space. Kieron is thus compelled to add his own layer of tactics and tricks to carve out his own usable space within their room that lessens the degree of control and sanction put on his movements. It is tempting to see in this passage Kelman's attitude to 'established' political and social organisations among the working class in microcosm, and his (and Kieron's) solutions to these attempts at control – although whether these amount to solutions, or an admission of defeat is perhaps in the eye of the beholder:

I made all fidgeting noises and just was a complete pest, that was what he said [. . .] But I found out how I could read in the bedroom and not lie on the bed. It was a wee place down between my bed and the wall where the door was. The bed was pressed against the wall but ye could just squash down and under. My da kept all suitcases under my bed but I shifted them the gether and it was easy to squash in [. . .] If it was after tea and Matt was going in to swot, I just went in first and got my place comfy. I had the book against the wall and it got the light. When he came in he knew I was there but he did not say nothing. Because if it was my side of the room.

I liked it there. Nobody saw ye and it was yours. But Matt did not like me doing it.²⁴

This tactic against regulation not by ultimate authorities such as Kieron's parents (or even further along the line, their landlords at Glasgow Corporation) but someone very close to him in the 'power structure', who was nonetheless determined to test the bounds in exertion of power and control,

seems to strike very close to Kelman's perception of power structures and relationships, particularly with the 'establishment' Left such as the Labour Party or Socialist Workers Party.²⁵

This in turn puts Kelman's use of narrative voice in a new light where analysts such as Alan McMunnigal and Gerard Carruthers have noted the 'fluidity' in his use of language in his fiction.²⁶ Kelman does not write in any standard form of dialect: instead he uses elements of dialect and working class speech alongside various other registers, tones and idiolects his protagonists find to hand in order to create an idiosyncratic language which is both literary and adapted to the human expression of each separate individual. He achieves this to such an extent that the distinction, standard language/dialect, with its 'metropolitan assumptions of universalism'²⁷ is rendered irrelevant, and as Simon Kovesi says of Kelman's prose, 'the fluid heteroglossic hybridity of language in his novels brings into question the comfortable definition even of language typologies'.²⁸ In other words, Kelman's characters and his narrators use a range of linguistic tactics in order to poach territory from those who would be in control of language.

Kelman is also concerned to 'flatten out the usual hierarchies'²⁹ used by narrators of working class characters by not having the narrator speak a different language – i.e. Standard English' – from the character; in this way the narrator is not presented as in some way superior, even as an all-seeing, omniscient being. There is in fact no formalistic separation between the characters' voices and the voice of the narrator, as seen here in this excerpt from *The Busconductor Hines*:

Hines raised his right foot to take off the boot: the tobacco tin toppled off the arm of the chair, the lid had been lying off. He picked up the tobacco and put it back inside. Sandra was looking at him. Naw, he said, of course I don't mind you going full-time – the wages I'm earning you'd have to sooner or later. Be better off on the bloody broo so I would. At least till the O.T. picks up again. I heard a whisper right enough, a couple of conductors're supposed to have got working their days-off this week.

Sandra nodded.

Big deal eh!

We could do with the extra money Rab.

I know . . . aye. Heh, he smiled, maybe save a few quid for a holiday or something.

Sandra had her arms folded; she stepped to his chair. We could though. I was thinking if we managed to live on your wages then we'd be able to put most of mine into the bank. God it'd be great. And instead of a holiday . . . we could maybe start thinking about saving for a house. She unfolded her arms and bent to put her hand on his arm. We could, there's no reason why not.³⁰

Kelman thus seems, by heightening awareness of voice, to create another one of those De Certeau'sque dualisms (i.e. dialogue and narrative), and one which encapsulates the nature of the relationship between those in control and those who are dominated, writing in one essay:

In prose fiction I saw the distinction between dialogue and narrative as a summation of the political system; it was simply another method of exclusion, of marginalising and disenfranchising different peoples, cultures and communities. I was uncomfortable with 'working class' authors who allowed 'the voice' of higher authority to control narrative, the place where the psychological drama occurred. How could I write from within my own place and time if I was forced to adopt the 'received' language of the ruling class. I saw the struggle as towards a self-contained world. This meant I had to work my way through language, find a way of making it my own.³¹

Thus Kelman's flattening prose technique consists of various experimentations whereby such a hierarchy with its social exclusivity and disenfranchisement has no place: it is exemplified by a narration given in the same language as the characters' direct speech, and the direct speech is not separated from the narration by inverted commas or dashes.

It is a significant point here that when we examine, for example, Kelman's political writings and his fictional characters' engagement with space and place in terms of both their descriptions of places and their movements through these places, we find that this resistance to the conventional, standard or established view is consistently there. If journalism and academic discourse are taken to be analogues of the authoritative, all seeing, or bird's eye views mentioned by de Certeau, then it is hardly surprising that Kelman should opt to forge links between his own individualism and collective ideas and responsibilities in his essays through methods that eschew formal conventions of form.

In his political writings and criticism, Kelman irritates many critics (see, for example, opening paragraphs of this article) by refusing to play the game by the 'rules' of discursive writing, or by allegiance to formal modes of political engagement, such as elections or political parties. One example of this is his evident rejection of the notion of proof, often disdaining to provide back-up, reference, and evidence for his assertions – for example, the brusque and bruising dismissals of Evelyn Waugh or Joseph Conrad as fascists and racists: 'There is no question that Joseph Conrad was a racist. And the onus of proof is not on me.'³² The point is of course that Kelman is operating as a tactician here, he manoeuvres in the face of his enemy – 'those in control' – and refuses to play the game their way. Like those other two master tacticians in whose footsteps he follows, Niccolo Machiavelli and Frantz Fanon, he assumes all rulers are corrupt, and he adopts tactics accordingly. In his Booker Prize winning acceptance speech, for example, he commented:

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 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.³³

Another example of this knowing deployment of tactics would be Kelman's activism itself, such as the Self Determination and Power conference or the Clydeside Action on Asbestosis campaign.³⁴ In both cases grassroots media recorded and documented these activities in explicit rejection and subversion of the academic and media mainstream. Through working in what could be called 'the tactician's tradition' Kelman and his cohorts create spaces where they are free to manoeuvre and need not submit to agendas inimical or damaging to their own.

The traffic between this discursive use of tactics and the fictive seems to flow back and forth, as it becomes clear he is working simultaneously on either front, as well as shifting frequently from individualist to collective

interpretations of the world and language. In his novels, Kelman uses ruses, name-calling and satires to undermine authority and control. In a lengthy passage discussing the Glasgow we find in Kelman's fiction, Simon Kovesi refers to an early manuscript of *The Busconductor Hines* where Kelman writes a brief foreword thus: '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'.³⁵ Hines, not only an inhabitant but a bus conductor travelling daily through the city, is required to make a daily exodus through the city, and in so doing adopts his own shorthand for its geography: 'the district of D', 'Y', and 'High Amenity Zone K', a playful renaming or, as Kovesi observes, 'denaming' that frees this version of Glasgow from official and political monickers, opening up an important gap between a textual and an actual Glasgow.

Given the blurring between narrative and dialogue in *The Busconductor Hines*, this gap offers crucial space for characters such as Hines to define the nature of their city without resorting to the de Certeau'sque Bird's eye view. Kelman's interest in the actual life is often expressed through characters who grapple with the environment directly, such as Sammy, the principal character of *How Late it Was, How Late*, recently turned blind and driven to grope and feel his way around suddenly unfamiliar streets. As these streets are never specified, the reader is similarly 'blinded' and dependent on Sammy's impressions, and articulations of them. From the very moment where Sammy, in his police cell, realises he is blind, this method of feeling through the world becomes a necessity as he places his palms on the floor and feels his way into understanding where he is. As Kovesi notes, Sammy has a recurrent technique of responding to his environment that strongly resembles de Certeau's notion of the consumer as an active, independent user: 'He assesses his physical situation: his pains, his damage; then through simile, and then memory, he tries to express, ostensibly to himself, a conception of what he is experiencing'.³⁶ Bereft of visual cues and instructions on how to interpret where he is and what is happening, Sammy must draw his conclusions based on the touch, taste and feel of what is around him, more directly and intimately than before – as Kovesi notes of the text: 'the day-to-day stuff, the minute-to-minute points of order. The actual living.'³⁷ A Glasgow based on what his consumption of the material, concrete, literally 'in your face' city can tell him. This is never more important than when he has to find his own routes through the city, which becomes a

serious of moments, risks, achievements and further challenges:

There was the steps. He poked his foot forward to the right and to the left jesus christ man that's fine, to the right and to the left, okay; down the steps sideways and turning right, his hands along the wall, step by step reminding ye of that patacake game ye play when ye're a wean, slapping yer hands on top of each other then speeding up.³⁸

Although vulnerable as a direct result of the intervention of the authorities, Sammy is able to fall back on imaginative ruses that counteract his sudden disadvantage. The reader's comprehension of Glasgow in the novel is entirely subject to Sammy's craft and skill in adopting these ruses. Kovesi's useful distinction of a 'textual' and an 'actual' Glasgow recalls the dualism in De Certeau's characterisation of the reader and the writer, where the former makes his own contexts and set of associations found in a text (the city), and the latter attempts to guide and control those readings of diversity, complexity, agency and autonomy.

This is satirised in *The Busconductor Hines*, when Hines – definitely not in authority, although his inner voice is purposefully merged with the narration – 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:

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 $\frac{1}{3}$ 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.³⁹

This pseudo-scientific language morphs back into Hines own, ground level perspective, that of someone who is not hygienically removed. 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, almost always cut across or disrupted by workmates, wife or his son Paul. Although deeply personal these lines of personal inquiry are necessarily curtailed and directed by the surrounding ‘domestic reality’, the ‘everyday’.

This satirical approach remains intact, some 20 years later in ‘as if from nowhere’, a short story in Kelman’s latest collection *If it is your life* (2010), where a nameless character deals with his hospitalisation, oncoming ‘melancholia’, the highly regulated atmosphere of the ward, and his fears that certain truths are being kept from him through the ruse of keeping a notebook through which he makes his own observations (just as the medical staff are observing him). His notepad and pencil become important daily practices, the objects themselves becoming almost totemic, the space on his notepad the only territory he can poach, protect and retain. Similarly, his adoption of the language of authority is idiosyncratic:

I used a notebook to monitor the situation, noting symptoms, physical changes, thoughts, feelings. Anything at all. Wee doodles and drawings. Any damn thing I pleased. It was my damn notepad and my damn situation; my physicality. Drawings. Any damn thing . . .

Where was the pencil? My thought of the moment as pictorial representation: set it down set it down set it down. Urgency urgency fucking pencil the nurse had removed the damn thing as per fucking usual stop swearing . . .⁴⁰

These ruses are critical to how Kelman develops his narratives and crafts his characters, but also how he operates as a critic and activist. De Certeau’s work attempts to ‘make explicit the systems of operational combination which also compose a culture’, and we argue that all the forms in which Kelman practices, and all the aspects that constitute his art – fiction, philosophy, criticism, political activism and urban engagement – are linked together by him as part of one broad communicative and coherent language system. The roots of this practice can not only be contextualised satisfactorily within a wider theoretical context of a ‘tactician’s tradition’ but that it can be adopted and pursued in a range of different forms and formats – activism, film and even drawing.

Locating Kelman within the ‘tactician’s tradition’ through Chomsky, in

a form of parallel evolution with de Certeau means that we cannot 'fix' him within any one viewpoint or *modus operandi*. Nor is this to say that Kelman is merely an enactor of theory either; he finds his own 'path' through his own idiosyncratic reading of Chomsky, and of the linguistic and physical landscape. Indeed, this essay is in itself merely an act of poaching on Kelman's own territory. Of course we are aware we are poachers; the problem with so many critics of Kelman, *pace* Julia Neuberger, is that there are none so parochial as those who cannot redraw the maps of their own parish.

As for Kelman's own parish he is open to and sanguine about the 'exoduses that intertwine and create' not only an 'urban fabric' but the living and changing social and political one too. The spatial complexity of the Glasgows Kelman describes as above in *The Busconductor Hines*, *Kieron Smith, boy*, *How Late it Was, How Late*, and *If it is your life*, is given yet another dimension – this time more straightforwardly autobiographical and genealogical – in a talk/critical essay he felt compelled to write about 'The Importance of Glasgow in My Work':

There is nothing about the language as used by the folk in and around Glasgow or London or Ramsgate or Liverpool or Belfast or Swansea that makes it generally distinct from any other city in the sense that it is a language composed of all sorts of particular influences, the usual industrial or post-industrial situation where different cultures have intermingled for a great number of years. In the case of my own family we fit neatly into the pattern, one grandparent was a Gaelic speaker from Lewis, another was from a non-Gaelic speaking family in Dalmally, up near Oban, another grandparent came from the east coast, the Macduff region; a great grandparent came from Northumberland [. . .] All of these are at play in my work, as filtered in through my own perspective, a perspective that, okay, is Glaswegian, but in these terms 'Glaswegian' is a late 20th century construct. Apart from direct experience I have access to other experiences, foreign experience, I have access to all areas of human endeavour, right back from the annals of ancient history; in that sense Socrates or Agamemnon is just as much a part of my socio-cultural background as the old guy who stands in the local pub telling me of the reality of war as experienced by his grandfather in the Crimea War.⁴¹

What seems important about this is a process of consumption and re-use according to immediate needs and requirements – just as Sammy uses a technique he compares to the children’s game patacake to negotiate suddenly alien and foreign streets, so Kelman draws from a repertoire of experiences and perspectives – both as a novelist and as a critical writer and polemicist. For as a true tactician, Kelman always espouses a pragmatic approach: he may draw for intellectual sustenance on scholarly sources like the Scottish Common Sense tradition, but at the same time he is wary of the professionalism implicit in a purist or academic approach to intellectualism. Kelman is equally distrustful of purism in style, manoeuvring through the realism of *The Chancer*, the social comedy of *A Disaffection*, moments of ‘urban gothic’ in *The Busconductor Hines* (notably the generations of rats hidden in the walls and floorboards of Hines’ home⁴²), and satirical treatments of the language and methods of authority in short stories such as ‘as if from nowhere’. What this suggests is a tactician’s ethos common to Kelman’s creative writing with his critical output. It is hard to pin down or standardise, but is nevertheless, much more coherent than might at first appear.

In an essay on Chomsky, Kelman quotes approvingly from the occasion when the professor was asked a question from an audience about Marxism and ‘dialectical materialism’ and its place in his analyses. The professor gave the tactician’s answer, claiming that ‘personally he has never understood it (but) if other people find it useful then fine, use it.’⁴³ Chomsky is also a consumer, or rather, a ‘user’; he too has his repertoire, his ‘ruses’, and his ‘tireless but quiet activity’, and so do all those who inhabit Kelman’s singular literary universe.

Notes

- 1 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1984).
- 2 Dalya Alberge, ‘Booker Judge says Winner is a Disgrace’, *The Times*, 12 October 1994, p.1.
- 3 Simon Jenkins, ‘An Expletive of a Winner’, *The Times*, 15 October 1994, p.20.
- 4 Alison Flood, ‘James Kelman launches broadside against Scottish literary culture’ in *The Guardian*, 27 August 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/27/james-kelman-scotland-literary-culture> (last accessed 3 August 2011).

- 5 Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent* (London: Verso, 2003), p.264.
- 6 Mia Carter, 'Kelman's Critical and Polemical Writing' in Scott Hames ed., *Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p.59.
- 7 Alan Freeman, 'The Humanist's Dilemma: a polemic against Kelman's polemics', *Edinburgh Review* 108, 2001, p.40.
- 8 Joan McAlpine, 'How the Booker bust James Kelman' *The Sunday Times*, 5 April 2009. http://timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article6035337.ece (last accessed 7 January 2012).
- 9 Theo Tait, 'In his words', *The Guardian*, Saturday 12 April 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/apr/12/featuresreviews.guardianreview22> (last accessed 7 January 2012).
- 10 Mitch Miller & Johnny Rodger, *The Red Cockatoo: James Kelman and the Art of Commitment* (Dingwall:Sandstone Press, 2011).
- 11 See the critique by historian James D. Young in the *Glasgow Herald*, 18 January 1990, and in *The Very Bastards of Creation* (Glasgow: Clydeside Press,1996), p.309.
- 12 See for example critics Alan Freeman, Laurence Nicholson, (both in *Edinburgh Review* 108, 2001); and Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent*, Verso, 2003, pp.263-67.
- 13 De Certeau, p.111.
- 14 Ibid. p.xii.
- 15 See, for example, James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks* (Stirling: AK Press, 1991), p.28; James Kelman ed., *An East End Anthology* (Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 1988), p.4.
- 16 De Certeau, p.xiii.
- 17 Ibid., p.32.
- 18 Interview with James Kelman 'On Sense and Freedom' in *Variant*, Issue no. 8, 1990, p.22.
- 19 James Kelman, 'A Reading from the Work of Noam Chomsky and the Scottish Tradition in the Philosophy of Common Sense' in *And The Judges Said . . .* (2002: Edinburgh: Polygon, 2008), p.140. The quotation in the cited excerpt is from John Lyons, *Chomsky*, Fontana/Collins, 1970.
- 20 In Kelman's introduction to *An East End Anthology* (Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 1988), p.4.
- 21 De Certeau, p.97.
- 22 James Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 2008), p.135.
- 23 Ibid., pp.97-98.
- 24 Ibid., pp.99-100.
- 25 In 'Afterword' in James Kelman, *An Old Pub Near the Angel* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007), p.126, Kelman stated, only half in jest, that the patrician attitude of an S.W.P member to what was valid debate and discussion (in this case, the position of horse racing in the revolutionary struggle) dissuaded him from joining the party, Indeed, while Kelman has lent his support to some political party initiatives, he refrains from party membership.
- 26 Alan McMunnigall and Gerard Carruthers, 'Locating Kelman: Glasgow, Scotland and the Commitment to Place' in *Edinburgh Review* 108, 2001, p.58.
- 27 Simon Kovesi, *James Kelman* (Manchester:Manchester University Press, 2007), p.167.
- 28 Ibid.,p.167.
- 29 Ibid., p.12.
- 30 James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines* (1984: Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007, pp.20-21.
- 31 'And the Judges Said . . .' in James Kelman, *And The Judges Said . . .*, p.41.

- 32 See 'Artists and Value' in James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), pp.8, 9.
- 33 James Kelman, 'Elitist Slurs are Racism by Another Name' [Booker Prize Acceptance Speech], *Scotland on Sunday*, 16 October 1994, Spectrum Supplement, p.2.
- 34 See *The Red Cockatoo: James Kelman and the Art of Commitment* pp.157-212 and pp.106-08 for respective details on the Self-Determination and Power event, and the Clydeside Action on Asbestos campaigning group.
- 35 Kovesi, p.55.
- 36 Ibid., p.140.
- 37 James Kelman, *How Late it Was, How Late* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994), p.258.
- 38 Ibid., p.33.
- 39 James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines*, p.88.
- 40 James Kelman, 'as if from nowhere', in *If it is your life* (London: 2010), p.42.
- 41 James Kelman, 'The Importance of Glasgow in My Work' in *Some Recent Attacks*, p.84.
- 42 James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines*, p.88.
- 43 'A Reading From the Work of Noam Chomsky' in James Kelman, *And The Judges Said . . .*, p.144.

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