

REVIEW: SCOTTISH FICTION BY KELMAN AND GRAY

Alex Thomson

H. Gustav Klaus, **James Kelman** (Writers and their Work), Plymouth: Northcote House, 2004. pb, 128pp, £11.99, ISBN 0-7463-0976-7.

Gavin Miller, **Alasdair Gray: The Fiction of Communion** (Scottish Cultural Review of Language and Literature), Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005. pb, 144pp, 30 euros/ \$38, ISBN 90-420-1757-0.

‘Imaginatively, Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels,’ suggests Duncan Thaw, the introverted aesthete and compulsive masturbator who may or may not metamorphose into the eponymous protagonist of Alasdair Gray’s 1981 novel **Lanark**. Thaw’s comments might be seen as something of a shibboleth for recent Scottish criticism. How you respond to Gray, and to writers such as Kelman who emerged in his wake, will to a large extent depend on whether you accept Thaw’s argument. For Eleanor Bell, in **Questioning Scotland**, ‘**Lanark** was written as a means of overcoming this imaginative lack’ (101); whereas for Cairns Craig, in **The Modern Scottish Novel**, Thaw’s claim is ‘undone’ by other elements in the novel (34). If Thaw is correct, your concern will be mostly with those questions of representation endemic in modern Scottish literary studies, as constituted in opposition to the kailyard: is this a true depiction of Scotland? If, as does Gavin Miller in **Alasdair Gray: The Fiction of Communion**, you correctly identify Thaw as a specimen of a particular type, whose aestheticism is a disease which obstructs his senses, you may be able to treat the whole problem of representation with the scepticism it receives from Kelman. You may also have a better ear for problems of tradition, defensively – or is it aggressively? – foregrounded in **Lanark** by way of the Index of Plagiarisms.

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Between the poles of these two responses to a single passage are distributed two entirely distinct ways of thinking about literature. The first assumes a relation of more-or-less transparency between the beliefs of a writer and the opinions expressed by his characters; the second permits an artwork its own imaginative weight and allows for something other than the simple transmission of a message, more like a principle of literary resistance. The former sees the work as a means to an end; in the latter view, what distinguishes an artwork is its autotelic quality – it is an end in itself. This is an important division to bring into focus because it is precisely the assumptions of the first, cruder, model on which political and cultural institutions currently base their distribution of patronage to the writer. As James Kelman notes, furiously, in his 2001 interview with William Clark in **Variant**, issue 12: ‘no one who is a serious artist, who has produced a real body of work, can ever apply for these grants. They’re premised on certain attitudes or values in relation to art that very few real artists could support There’s a certain way of looking at art, or what equals the “end” of the art project, it can be seen in the brochure/application thing. It’s a kind of end-means way of looking at art that I don’t think artists themselves really share at all’ (4).

This problem has a wider significance since academic work in the humanities is also increasingly called upon to justify itself in similar terms to those which Kelman judges to be philistine. If the recent tendency amongst literary theorists to face down the kinds of claims traditionally made on behalf of the aesthetic by artists serves to place them – against their intentions, no doubt – on the side of the managers, the challenge for the critic becomes how to respond to a literary work while doing as little such violence to it as possible. In the case of writers like Gray and Kelman, both of whose work is of so great an imaginative richness that it threatens to overwhelm any academic apparatus brought to bear on it, the danger is that commentators will offer reductive answers rather than sharpening its questions. My feeling is that both books under review, despite their professed sympathies, fail their subjects; and that the problems stem directly from this question of the peculiar extrinsic relation of the literary work to either political commitment, in the case of Kelman, or social theory, in the case of Gray.

H. Gustav Klaus’s book on Kelman is a contribution to the extensive and ecumenical series ‘Writers and their Work’ published by Northcote House and the British Council. If Kelman’s inclusion seems unsurprising, it may be because critical acclaim has long trumped the bemusement and outrage expressed by some cultural gatekeepers towards his perplexing texts. He is in

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any case no more controversial than a figure like Geoffrey Hill, also covered in the series, despite the gulf separating the two in most other respects. Although other authors have allowed themselves more room to expand their arguments, Klaus follows the formula for the series in offering a succinct chronological overview of Kelman's work, arguing that Kelman needs to be read not only as both a 'realist' and an 'experimental writer', but also as a committed political writer. (Although one wonders: committed to what, exactly, apart from *truth*; Klaus offers 'working-class libertarian-socialis[m]', underlining each term (53), but without an acknowledgement of the possible tensions between them.) Although Klaus argues that there is some development in Kelman's work, suggesting that women, and the domestic scene, move to the fore in later work, he allows the earlier writing to predominate, with the unsatisfactory result that the major novels, **A Disaffection** and the Booker prize-winning **How Late It Was How Late**, are shoehorned into 16 pages, alongside the startling extension of Kelman's technique (reserving the question of whether it constitutes a departure) of **Translated Accounts**.

This is a shame since it filters out the chance for a more detailed consideration of the aesthetic development of Kelman's work, the scrupulous way in which the conscience of the artist forces him to ever-denser and more economical explorations of the moral problems raised by language and narration in his short stories, compared with the tensions engendered by working with the longer form of the novel. Although the book is largely accurate (exceptions: Polygon was not part of Edinburgh University Press, but EUSPB, in 1983 (22), and 'comfortably middle-class Knightsbridge' should surely read 'Knightswood' (34)) there are some oddly uneven moments. Klaus is overwhelmed by emotion ('After this it is difficult to read on. And I imagine that it must have been hard for Kelman, too, to write on.' (74)) at a point in the story 'By the Burn' in which the very inelegance of Kelman's language ('Aw dear man aw dear it was so fucking hard so fucking awful hard, awful hard so fucking awful hard') points up the injustice done by style to grief, the interiority of the experience of loss and its betrayal by emotional reportage. Our inability to enter the speaker's heart is what gives force to the story's ending – that we die alone – and prevents it falling into pathos. Kelman is driven to show that there is something inhuman about literature which must always interrupt the sympathy it might otherwise be supposed to generate. Klaus rightly calls our attention to Kelman's published essays, but risks allowing these relatively direct statements of political intent to dictate his reading of the literary work, and to circumvent those difficulties with which

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Kelman's writing is most concerned.

Klaus spends more time on description than on analysis, and runs the risk of stripmining Kelman's work in order to derive it from a particular political position while playing down what seems to me something more like anarchism, a fidelity to literature itself which displaces (without necessarily disqualifying) any definite political stance. Klaus may well be correct when he argues that Kelman can be described as both an experimental writer and a realist, but we have to register the force of the tension between these two terms, which hints at both the resistance of reality to its circumscription in words, and the resistance of art to the kinds of paraphrase which Klaus offers. I am tempted to suggest that Kelman might have been better served by a minute and painstaking reading of a single short story, than by an overview which professes to lay open the body of his entire work for the kind of easy digestion which his fiction works so hard to obstruct. Perhaps this is the result of constraints imposed by the series format: but the sacrifices necessary to produce this kind of survey – that of singular attention to the unique – are precisely those on which Kelman's work takes its stand.

Gavin Miller has produced a book on Alasdair Gray which does not claim to be a survey, despite its pedestrian introductory outline of Gray's life and work that feels as if it was suggested by an editor trying to steer the book towards the kind of market which Klaus embraces. Miller focuses largely on **Lanark**, with some reference to **1982 Janine** and **Poor Things**, while nearly as much time is spent discussing Sartre, Laing and lesser-known Scottish psychoanalysts Suttie and Fairbairn, as on Gray. (Indeed, throughout the book the rudiments of an entirely different sort of project gesture from behind the discussion of Gray's work.) Where Klaus is clear that Kelman's attention to the local is a counter to the fudging of a national tradition, and that his models are wilfully cosmopolitan, Miller seeks to reclaim Gray from 'international postmodernism' on behalf of a neglected Scottish cultural context.

Certainly, Kelman's casting around for other traditions ('there were no literary models I could look to from my own culture' (cited Klaus p.60)) could be fruitfully contrasted with Gray's ostentatious embeddedness in Scottish tradition. Indeed, Gray's own extensive interest in literary precedents and forebears has done some of Miller's work for him, and the author's obviously generous responses to Miller's questions – for example on his relation to Laing – are also scattered through the book, which will make it a useful point of reference for subsequent critical work on Gray. However, Miller is wary of

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making more of his material than the evidence warrants, and his book advances only three, carefully circumscribed, claims: linking Duncan Thaw's moon goddess to that of Robert Graves (behind both of whom stands J G Frazer); comparing Gray's defence of fantasy to that of R.D. Laing; and putting Gray's concern with narrative and temporality into dialogue with the work of Sartre and Schopenhauer, amongst others.

What subtends all three discussions is an argument entirely of Miller's own; and of which Gray's work is merely the occasion. Miller is interested in a way of thinking which is concerned with the social basis of human life (in opposition to what he sees as a Cartesian dualism which offers us the alternatives of mind or body), may use fantasy to engage with rather than escape from the real world (this seems to me an entirely uncontroversial argument, and is one which Klaus also uses of Kelman), and is more interested in the freedom of the individual in the world than in any 'postmodern' celebration of the dissolution of self. What Miller calls a thinking of 'communion' is intended to replace modern thought's concern with the isolated individual with an emphasis on social relations. If this looks like a preposterously ambitious and overblown back-of-the-napkin sketch of modern thought; well – it is, and Miller makes numerous assertions (e.g. for the redundancy of all psychoanalytic literary criticism) which show little or no acquaintance with the disciplines in question. However, what might be of interest to readers of **Scottish Affairs** is the attempt to link such ideas to a distinctive tradition of Scottish thinking, represented by figures such as Laing, Suttee and Fairbairn, but also anthropologists like Robertson Smith, the appearance of whose ideas in George Friel's novels Miller demonstrates convincingly.

Miller has some feel for the work of the historian of ideas, and if cast on a more humble scale, his attempt to reinvigorate discussion of distinctive strands in Scottish thinking could be of great interest. But compared to his methodological concerns about the use of the concept of influence in responding to Gray's work, his readings of other traditions are often crude. Words like 'recognition' in Sartre, freighted with philosophical and intellectual baggage, become simple translations of Miller's favoured 'communion'; and one imagines that Kelman might have something to say about the claim that 'existentialists' 'depict human beings as essentially free' (88). Even if this were a true characterisation, is this a thesis that can be stated, rather than a problem to be examined? Is there a difference? For Miller there are no open questions but merely a writer's theories, right or wrong (or rather, patently correct or

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simply 'ludicrous', in the offhand tone with which he repeatedly avoids any real engagement with his opponents). As a result the distinction between scientific works which test and advance theories about the world, and works of literature, which can test everything yet advance nothing, starts to slip. Miller cites Gray's own comments on his relation with Laing, but they function just as effectively as a proleptic protest from the author of **Lanark** against his treatment by his enthusiastic critic: 'When one writer finds a second agreeable it is most certainly because number one has translated number two into number one's terms' (57).

Something of the texture of the two books under review here perhaps follows from the differences between their ostensible subjects. Kelman's elliptical and often cryptic writings might be read as not only a defiant project of resistance in particular social and political circumstances, as well as to cultural institutions which conspire with injustice, but also as deeply sceptical of theory itself, in so far as that still implies the idea of an impassive, impersonal gaze. The highly compressed surfaces of his work continually reflect back any light thrown upon them, demanding of the reader what right they have to make those judgements which the very same texts lead them to make. One of Kelman's distinctive idioms is that of using a particular word as a textual pivot: for example the way that in the long story 'A Situation' the phrase 'a good life' switches its meaning depending on its own situation, inviting us to bring political, moral or religious criteria to bear on the characters, but also challenging us to justify our own actions in doing so. The recalcitrance of Kelman's literary work stems from the way that such operations are so forcefully directed back to the reader, combined with a thrwn insistence on the political stakes of moving from any singular case to a broader generalisation. Indeed, this may explain the experience of discontinuity in turning to Kelman's collections of essays and political interventions, which unlike much left-wing criticism, acknowledge that the fight for justice must always involve an appeal to universal principles.

If Kelman deals almost compulsively with literature's direction towards the singular and the particular, Gray's work might seem almost entirely at odds with him, despite his equally salutary awareness of the peculiar commitments entailed by literature itself. For Gray's writing tends toward epic rather than lyric, and swallows whole other narrative explanatory modes: economic, historical, psychological or social. His work already presents itself as the kind of theoretical assemblage which academics are liable to bring to bear on it. Gray's books proceed by throwing out a whole series of interpretations of the

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world; sometimes loopy, sometimes luminous and genuinely profound gestures of understanding. That these are then confronted with the sceptical gesture of disruption which accompanies a specifically literary presentation may bypass eager interpreters: these exuberant fantasies remain open because they never seek to legislate. Miller and Klaus both remark on the mediating status of such fantasies, but neither recognises in them clearly enough the distinctive mode of thinking common to literary art.

Klaus's book is the less ambitious of the two, but, in putting forward what is effectively only a highly condensed overview of Kelman's work, it does perhaps the more urgently needed work – there is no other book-length work on Kelman widely available, although one is forthcoming (scheduled for autumn 2007) in Manchester University Press's 'Contemporary Writers' series. Gray has been more widely discussed, and Miller's somewhat eccentric work is more obviously a personal intervention into a continuing critical conversation. However, Kelman might have more to object to in Klaus's studied neutrality, having spent so much of his career demonstrating that there is no critical standpoint which does not involve judgement, and therefore symbolic violence; while Miller's more elaborate conceits are perhaps closer in spirit to Gray's own fictions.

May 2006