

REVIEW

H. Gustav Klaus, *James Kelman*, Tavistock: British Council/Northcote House, 2004. ISBN 0-7463-0976-7.

H. Gustav Klaus' *James Kelman* is an admirable addition to the British Council's *Writers and Their Work* series. Klaus is well-placed to write this introductory overview of Kelman's work as he has published many books and articles pertaining not only to Kelman but also to working-class literature more broadly from the industrial age to the present. This book ably sets Kelman's writing in the context of the enormous social dislocations of late capitalism, de-regulation, the so-called Free Market, Thatcherite and Blairite Britain, all of which signal an assault upon traditional forms of working-class identity, community, and experience. And it is of course precisely that assault and its effects with which Kelman's work grapples. Klaus' survey is lucid and comprehensive, offering brief but detailed and considered appraisals of all of Kelman's novels and short story collections, in addition to Kelman's plays – which sadly often escape critical attention – and Kelman's essays which themselves offer a key means of understanding his motivations and interests. Klaus' study is impressive in its capacity to understand and illuminate both the political commitments and backdrop of Kelman's writing and its literary and aesthetic skills, techniques and influences. For, as Klaus observes, Kelman's provocative work is often either dismissed or celebrated in the very broad terms of media-generated controversy and the supposed issue of "bad" language that can result in Kelman's actual writerly skill being unconsidered or at best undervalued. In addition to offering a knowledgeable and engaging affirmation of the importance of Kelman's work that enables the reader to think deeply about its literary and political context, Klaus' book contains a valuable annotated secondary bibliography which will particularly help students and researchers as well as the interested general reader.

Klaus' account is especially strong in its in depth appraisal of the politics of language in Kelman's writing, clearly distinguishing it from other less radical forms of working-class literature which accept Standard English and thereby imply that a working-class writer's own voice and culture must be jettisoned. The insinuation of that style of writing, in which the vernacular appears only as dialogue or as local colouring, is that it is Standard English which has a monopoly on thought, on psychological insight or emotional complexity, in short on the narrative itself, whereas the vernacular is supposedly incapable of such complexity. So too, it is implied that for the working class to become writers they must renege upon their own culture and voice and instead adopt the values and language of bourgeois society. Kelman's writing has always resisted that hierarchy between Standard English and the vernacular, in keeping with a specifically Scottish tradition of democratic intellectualism in the vernacular which is embodied in the work of George Davie whom Kelman admires. Klaus traces Kelman's formative short stories in which he attempted to mirror the phonetic style advanced in Tom Leonard's poetry but which Kelman then dispensed with due to it seemingly merely a second hand copy of Leonard's style. Instead Kelman chose a hybrid English infused by a vernacular voice which still dethrones the primacy of Standard English. Klaus offers a clear and convincing analysis of that technique throughout Kelman's work and he also pays due attention to *Translated Accounts* which for some critics seems an odd departure for Kelman. But Klaus's study makes plain that rather than being an unconvincing deviation of Kelman's style, *Translated Accounts* in many ways actually intensifies Kelman's attention to the deep relations between language and power, its broken English and broken narrative forms allowing us to consider the horror and suffering of the undesignated regime, the difficulty in articulating that traumatic experience in defiance of its official misrepresentation. It is notable that *Translated Accounts* was Kelman's first major work after the achievement of a devolved parliament in Scotland in May 1999. *Translated Accounts* resists a straightforwardly affirmative account of that process and the mainstream political fanfare that greeted it, for it does instead forces Scottish culture to consider its own implication in globalized networks of power and injustice and it casts profound doubt on the representative limits of freedom and democracy by filtering through its fragmentary languages the constitutive oppressions that haunt a new global dispensation in the world today. That more global reach is of course continued in *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the*

Free and Klaus provides a good summary of the importance of that novel in terms of US hegemony in the post-September 11 world.

Klaus' book is also really helpful in considering Kelman's relationship to realism, particularly given that realism is supposedly the main literary form for political or working-class art. Kelman's own critical essays make explicit the enormous influence of Franz Kafka upon his work, and this influence in turn makes problematic the assertion that he is himself a realist writer. For, in what is possibly the most famous and canonical advocacy of realism in the twentieth-century – Georg Lukács' *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* – Lukács drew a distinction between what he considered a fruitful critical realism, which he felt was embodied by Thomas Mann, and what he dismissed as a 'decadent bourgeois modernism' that he projects onto Kafka. So, for Lukács, Kafka is the very antithesis of realism, a writer pandering to a bourgeois obscuration of reality as such rather than confronting it. In these kinds of terms, Kafka would seem an odd influence for Kelman as his own stated aim, as outlined in *And the Judges Said*, is to achieve a realism that is 'the detailing of day-to-day experience'. However, Lukács's sense of a critical realism inherits what is fundamentally a bourgeois faith in the ability of the writer to depict society and reality as some sort of cohesive and reassuringly integral totality that ultimately attests to an idea of history as progress and reformist development. By contrast, Kafka is perhaps the first writer to comprehend how power really operates in a society since his fiction is driven by a dialectic between the *presence* of the reality of power and its oppression for his characters and the simultaneous *absence* of the sources and institutions of that power from people's lived experience. Kafka's work grants Kelman a template for his own writing and moment in history, wherein democratic institutions are exposed as increasingly unrepresentative, wherein power retreats ever further into the anonymity and remoteness of financial bodies, the boardrooms of multinational companies, and the privileged, sequestered settings of global summits such as the G8.

In contrast to Lukács' reassuring realist totality in which the novel can depict all aspects of a society in a shared continuum of experience, Kelman, like Kafka before him, confronts the non-democratic nature of power by highlighting the discrepancy between the presence of the lived, daily grind of its effects and

enforcements and the absence of the locus and source of its vast systemic reach. Fragmentation and disjunction are the realities of that power rather than cohesion but Kelman's writing is still driven by a stringent confrontation with power in all its forms, even as those forms seek simultaneously to overwhelm us and to withdraw from our grasp and understanding completely. Kelman's use of paranoia, threatening conspiracy and other imaginative means by which his characters can try to envisage the hidden sources of power that withdraw from the immediate grasp of ordinary people certainly do not conform to the conventional definition of realism and its presumption that society can simply be reflected directly and consensually. However, Klaus brilliantly uses Brecht's essay on realism, in which Brecht argues that we need a more open-ended sense of realism that allows for the use of fantasy, expressionism, the grotesque, satire and parody, in order to explain how Kelman's writing does not confirm to realist orthodoxy but is still attuned to dealing with the realities of society in a manner that ultimately serves to undermine the scope of conventional realism and its narrow definition. A writer as skilled and committed as Kelman deserves sustained critical attention and Klaus' survey is a duly worthy and informed reading of his work. It not only provides a clear summary for the uninitiated or general reader but also proffers an intelligent and suggestive analysis that opens up the means by which to consider Kelman's relationship to working-class writing, decolonizing literature from the Caribbean and Africa, North American and European existentialism or realism, and Scottish culture. The reader is furnished throughout with a thorough sense of historical, social and literary context in which to place Kelman's writing and Klaus is also able to provide a concentrated illumination of Kelman's style and technique. This accessible but engaging introduction is an indispensable contribution the fields of literary criticism on Kelman and Scottish and British culture and society more broadly.

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