

Scottish Literature, Devolution and the Fetish of Representation

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In October I received a flurry of messages informing me that James Kelman had changed his position on Scottish independence. (Big news in my world.) Speaking at the Radical Book Fair in Edinburgh, Kelman was quoted as follows:

No, I'm not voting. I'm in solidarity with those who want to change things by voting Yes [to independence]. But I come from the anti-parliamentary socialist tradition. I don't think you can ask for freedom. You take it. ...it's like on the shop floor. They want you to 'go to the ballot' in a dispute. No. You fucking walk out. (23 October 2013)

This clearly contradicted earlier statements, including one in a book I'd edited a few months before:

I cannot accept nationalism and I am not a Scottish Nationalist. But once that is said, I favour a 'yes or no' decision on independence **and I shall vote 'yes' to independence.**¹

I wasn't put out by the apparent u-turn. If you've studied Kelman's political writing the surprise here is that he ever seriously entertained 'going to the ballot'. Kelman is more of an anarchist than a socialist, and believes in direct action. The hero of his best-known novel, *How late it was, how late*, rejects the assistance of a lawyer who advises him to sue after being blinded by the police. Sammy – partly a re-writing of Milton's Samson – holds out for a personally authenticated struggle with his enemies, and refuses both lawyering and compensation as degraded, apersonal mechanisms of justice rooted in abstract equivalence. He insists on the contrary that his struggle is 'just personal' (232).² For Kelman there can be no order of the 'just' which infringes that of the 'personal'; representative bodies such as trade unions and parliaments fail the test.

But misreadings of Kelman's politics are not what interest me here. This anecdote typifies a general tendency to locate (and often confine) the politics of contemporary Scottish writers within the relatively narrow horizons of the constitutional debate they are credited with re-energising. The trope of 'representation' is central to what is misleading and even mystificatory in this pattern.

My point in a nutshell:

¹ James Kelman in *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence*, ed. Scott Hames (Edinburgh: Word Power, 2012), p. 121.

² See Scott Hames, 'Eyeless in Glasgow: James Kelman's Existential Milton', *Contemporary Literature*, 50.3 (2009), pp. 496-527.

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The key Scottish novels of the past few decades largely reject the politics of ‘representation’ enshrined in parliamentary democracy, yet they are continually presented as the models and cultural guarantors of Scottish devolution – or more accurately, a *culturalist* image of devolution – understood as the (incomplete) recovery of national agency and identity via representation. But it is equally possible to understand devolution as a highly conservative *state* process, one that openly figures ‘cultural representation’ as the containment and deferral of democratic empowerment. We as critics should be more skeptical not only about the politics of devolution, but about the limiting and distorting effects – both critically and politically – of reading Scottish literature by the terms of a self-congratulatory circuit of ‘representation’ (in which innovative literary novels modeled a political process which, in turn, delimits ‘the political’ in Scottish literature, most often by fixating on the display and recuperation of ‘identity’).

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‘In the absence of elected political authority’, wrote Christopher Whyte in 1998, ‘the task of representing the nation has been repeatedly devolved to its writers’.³ This is a commonplace and arguably dominant reading of recent Scottish writing. Presenting literature and politics as part of a common representative project, the cover of a 1999 issue of *Edinburgh Review* declares ‘There’s been a parliament of novels for years. This parliament of politicians is years behind’.⁴ It’s an uplifting story. But it is misleading about both the literature and the politics at issue. I’m only going to make three points about it here.

1. The Writing

Thematically, the key Scottish novels of the past three decades set little store by ‘representation’ on the parliamentary template. The formal innovations regarded as distinctive to Scottish literary fiction of this period – notably the prominence and authority of vernacular language, and the erosion of the normative or neutral status of Standard English narration – are broadly arraigned ‘against’ representation of the second-order vehicular kind, in which one voice becomes the authorized token for thousands of others. In his study of popular sovereignty Edmund S. Morgan observes that ‘the way in which any group of subjects was first persuaded to pretend that one of them could substitute for all of them is not altogether clear’.⁵ In *The Concept of Representation* Hannah F. Pitkin observes that ‘we speak of representation in connection with authority or rights or normative consequences only where the action is to be ascribed to someone other than the one who acts’.⁶ This is more or less the antithesis of Kelman’s ethical project. (I am here flirting with

³ Christopher Whyte, ‘Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 34.2 (1998): 274-85 (p. 284).

⁴ *Edinburgh Review* 100 (1999); Duncan McLean quoted on back cover. See also Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 307; Liam McIlvanney, ‘The Politics of Narrative in the Post-War Scottish Novel’ in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 181-208 (p. 183); Cairns Craig, ‘Scotland: Culture After Devolution’ in *Ireland (Ulster) Scotland: Concepts, Contexts, Comparisons*, eds. Edna Longley, Eamonn Hughes and Des O’Rawe (Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, 2003), 39-49 (p. 39).

⁵ Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 39.

⁶ Hannah F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), p. 54.

making Kelman 'representative' of recent Scottish writing; but his are the most influential *politics of form* in the body of writing at issue).

[There isn't time, here, to adequately support this general assertion about Scottish writing of the past few decades, but I've included extracts from 4 key texts on the handout if you want to follow this up later.]

2. The Politics

The state process of devolution is, right from the early 1970s, highly interested in the idea of cultural representation, *but for entirely cynical reasons*. Here a brief history lesson is required (and would be equally required for a Scottish audience). Alarmed by the emergence of the SNP as a credible electoral force, in 1969 Harold Wilson appointed a Royal Commission on the Constitution. Its report in 1973 (the Kilbrandon Report) set the process of devolution into deliberately retarded motion, and clearly envisions the problem at issue as one of form and affect: 'the question for us is whether in [Scotland and Wales] the existence of national feeling gives rise to a need for change in political institutions'.⁷ Indeed, an entire chapter of Kilbrandon is devoted to the nature, strength and implications of 'National Feeling'. The Commission is continually exercised by whether votes for the SNP reflect a desire for constitutional change, or mere recognition of nationhood.

While Scottish nationalism provides no evidence that the Scottish people as a whole wish to be separated from the rest of the United Kingdom, the nature and strength of the support it has attracted over the years suggest that a substantial body of people in Scotland would be likely to take a favourable view of a change to a system of government which did more than the present system to recognise their separate Scottish identity. (*Royal Commission*, I, 107-8)

Devolution is thus conceived as the management of 'national feeling' and its channelling into territorial forms of identitarian 'expression', leaving the structures of government – ironically, the traditional basis of a-cultural, 'civic' Scottish political identity – unchallenged and unchanged. In the minds of its architects devolution is not about 'the relationship between government and the people at large' – that is to say, democracy – but about enregistering sub-national difference within UK government structures, so neutralising its potential threat to those structures.

Reading Scottish literature in the terms of this containment logic tends **to release/lock Scottish cultural production into reified postures of 'representation' which leave uncontested the constitution of representative power**.⁸ (And to declare out of bounds the sorts of questions Kelman is raising in the first quote from the Radical Book Fair; what arrangements and whose authority are we affirming by 'going to the ballot'?) On this view

⁷ *Royal Commission on the Constitution 1969-1973*. 2 vols. (London: HM Stationery Office, 1973), I, 102.

⁸ See Scott Hames, 'On Vernacular Scottishness and its Limits: Devolution and the Spectacle of "Voice"', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 39.1 (2013): 201-222, with which this talk significantly overlaps. <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol39/iss1/16/>

the purpose of devolution is to re-legitimise rather than reform the inherited Westminster system – ‘a policy of a strikingly conservative character’, notes Vernon Bogdanor, concerned chiefly to ‘renegotiate the terms of the Union so as to make them more palatable to Scottish opinion in the conditions of the late twentieth century’.⁹ Such is the view from Whitehall.

But as the leading expert on Scottish constitutional reform observes, representation was also fetishised from another direction, *within* the priorities of the supposedly grassroots campaign for devolution led by the notables and worthies of ‘civic Scotland’ (the so-called ‘selectorate’). James Mitchell notes that

the emphasis amongst campaigners for devolution was to ensure that the Scottish Parliament would be a truly new representative institution, reflecting Scottish opinion to a greater degree than the Westminster system permitted, in order to ensure that Scotland did not suffer the imposition of policies it did not vote for again. [...] It was as if the creative energies of [the new parliament’s] supporters concentrated on questions of representation. All would be well so long as the new institution embodying Scottish interests was representative.¹⁰

(Mitchell’s point is to underscore a formalistic inattention to the *powers* of the new parliament.) Devolved institutions, in overtly ‘recognising’ the existence of national feeling, would assimilate it to the sphere of ‘representation’ – that is, the sphere of empty democratic spectacle evoked, for Kelman, by ‘going to the ballot’. As a representative project devolution effects the channelled release of ‘national feeling’ away from political agency and toward neutralised ‘identity’.

3. The Writing About The Politics

Precisely this fixation with representation is the target of Kelman’s satirical essay ‘Let the Wind Blow High Let the Wind Blow Low’, written in the aftermath of the 1992 general election, when the re-elected Major government restated its firm opposition to devolution despite the fact, in Kelman’s words, that ‘parties advocating Home Rule or independence had won the support of 75 per cent of the electorate and 85 per cent of the seats in Scotland’.¹¹ Kelman is scathing about efforts to resolve such a blatant injustice from within the horizon of parliamentary representation, and the ‘pragmatism’ counselled by the cross-party Constitutional Convention:

The current debate on self determination has degenerated into one of these Bipartisan Issues that crop up every now and again on matters of National Importance, such as wars and acts of god. ‘Pure’ politics are forced to the sidelines. It becomes bad form to discuss one’s differences. Unity is the watchword. It isn’t a time for awkward questions. Those who persist are shown up as perverse, slightly

⁹ Vernon Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom*, Rev edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 119.

¹⁰ James Mitchell, ‘Devolution without Self-Government’ in *Radical Scotland: Arguments for Self-Determination*, eds. Gerry Hassan and Rosie Ilett (Edinburgh: Luath, 2011), pp. 29-39 (p. 30).

¹¹ Tom Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 613.

bammy, crackpots – or occasionally as unpatriotic. What we discuss is what we are allowed to discuss.¹²

In other words, the ‘debate’ on self-determination requires its own negation. Kelman’s mordant parody of the gentlemanly constitutionalism of the official campaign highlights the shared emptiness of electoral ‘solidarity’ and the display of cultural ‘identity’:

Under the first-past-the-post system it is inevitable that Labour holds the overall majority [of Scottish seats] and that the opposition parties as a whole have a mandate. The Scottish people have given the opposition parties this mandate for years. And in exchange for accepting the mandate the combined opposition parties, spearheaded by Labour, have always demanded solidarity. And here [the Labour party] are demanding solidarity once again. We don’t know the precise form their demand will take. It seems the combined leadership is ‘waiting to see’. When this period of interregnum is at an end the People of Scotland will be instructed on the terms of solidarity required of them. We shall be advised of the proper way forward and that we must support this proper way forward at all costs. We shall be asked to retain our collective strength in a unified cross-party struggle, yielding not to easy options, nor to undignified posturing, nor to rash action, nor to impolite hectoring, nor to self righteous tubthumping; propriety will become the mark of the movement. When we march forward we shall march solidly, not breaking ranks; we shall comb our hair and wear smart leather shoes, dress in suits and shirts and ties – formal highland attire will not be frowned upon – this includes females and those from an ethnic background, for this way forward will unite everybody regardless of gender, race, creed or culture and will be led by a multifarious but patriotic group of notables: various party leaders, media personalities and constitutional experts; S.T.U.C. full-timers, representatives from the different religions – priests, ministers, mullahs, rabbis etc. – all striding arm-in-arm with bright-new-dawns glistening on our rubicund faces. We shall march on Westminster itself, the entire voting population of Scotland, and when we arrive we shall demand of U.K. ruling authority that they pay heed to our unified cry for self determination. Our demand shall be carried by our appointed representatives, appointed by and from the patriotic group of notables. With a dignity appropriate to the major historical moment of uniquely National Import our appointed representatives will accept an invitation to enter a smallish chamber inside the halls of Westminster. This invitation will have been extended by an assistant to an Under-Secretary of the Home Office Junior Minister-Without-Portfolio. But negotiation must begin from somewhere. Two members of Her Majesty’s constabulary (bobby division) will step gravely aside, making way for this our All-Scotland representation. (‘Let the Wind...’, p. 90)

As this scenario gains in outlandish momentum, the absurd quality of (tactically, gradually) ‘demanding’ national democratic recognition via proxies of proxies of proxies (e.g. a Constitutional Convention consisting mainly of elected MPs) comes to the fore:

¹² James Kelman, ‘Let the Wind Blow High Let the Wind Blow Low’ in *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), pp. 85-91 (p. 86).

And if Her Majesty's Government does not listen why then our All-Scotland representation shall further remind her Majesty's Government that a mandate exists, and what's more they have it [...] And if they don't pay heed to us now then this is our very last word and we cannot vouch for our continued participation in the rules and procedures of state as laid down in 1707 by Their Forefathers in association with Our Forefathers, the then ruling authority of Scotland. And by the Gude Lord Jasus the entire voting population would just damn well carry on waiting right there on this pavement and see what Her Majesty's Government was going to do about that! (ibid.)

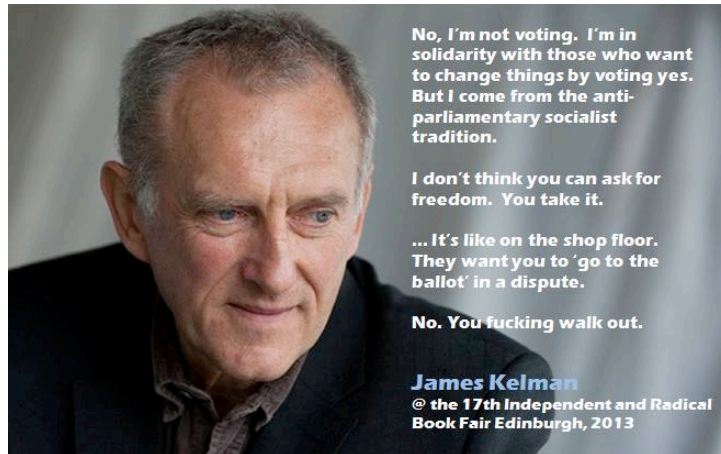
Despite the strength of their electoral mandate, those charged with 'All-Scotland representation' are figured as utterly incapable of extra-procedural *action*; the height of their defiance is to 'carry on waiting until they give us an answer, that'll show them the measure of our resolve' (p. 91). All the democratic energies invested in this mandate are seemingly exhausted by the request that it be acknowledged.

In the Scottish context political devolution is (and has always been) about the containment and deferral of nationalist *agency*; a prevention of action in favour of representation and mere 'activity'. The 'radical' vocal experiments and national-popular 'vernacularity' of the recent Scottish novel have become a way of disguising the limits of this process, presenting 'representation' as an empowering end in itself. But the instatement of an autonomous *order of representation* (in truth, an identitarian *extension*, a new particularist branch-office, of central authority) has very little to do with self-determination as a principle or lived struggle.

As several UK Home Secretaries have said in recent years, citing Enoch Powell, 'power devolved is power retained'. In the period of devolution Scottish literature has certainly had political influence considered as a *deployment* of representative power; but has it really contested the ground or basis of representative power, in the ways many of its characters and plots would seem to demand?

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'Let the Wind Blow High Let the Wind Blow Low', p. 90.

Nobody Else But Themselves: Recent Scottish Writing 'Against' (Second-Order) Representation

A Labour administration made him Secretary of State for Scotland, and arising in the House of Commons he announced his plan for a separate Scottish parliament: 'It is plain the vaster the social unit, the less possible is true democracy.' A stunned silence was broken by the Prime Minister denouncing him as a renegade. Thaw strode from the chamber and an amazing thing happened. All seventy-one Scottish MPs – Labour, Liberal and Tory – rose and followed him. On the terrace above the Thames he was turning to address them when McAlpin came in and said, 'Hullo. Having a long lie?'

Alasdair Gray, *Lanark* (1981; Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p. 289.

[*fantasy of national democratic representation; cf. Kelman's 'Let the Wind...', 1992*]

Let a writer have the authority to address any reader – and any reader to read any writer – without feeling that valid dialogue can only take place in a code acceptable to a transmitter of the code of governance – in other words, within the code of governance itself. Let a writer have the authority to be nobody else but themselves, if they so wish: to make direct reference to specific particulars of their own life, as lived, names and all.

Tom Leonard, *Radical Renfrew* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. xxvi.

[*authenticity and self-ownership*]

PEOPLE CAN TALK TO

'Yes. You meet people you can talk to and be yourself with. Not often, but you do. Are you yourself now?'

YES NO PILLS NO JAGS ALL MEEEE

'One hundred per cent James Watt. I'm honoured.'

FUC

'Away you go. You should learn to take compliments better, and you'll get more.'

FUC WON HUNNER PERCEN MEEEEEE

Which was all that seemed to matter at the time. She hopes no one manages to change that.

A.L. Kennedy, *Looking for the Possible Dance* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 191

[Scenario: disabled boy James Watt in conversation with protagonist on train from Glasgow to London. James is utterly dependent on others, communicates only through writing, and is enraged at not directing his own life. His evocative/ironic name, and role as the resistant passenger (outgrown his dependence but powerless to change it) link his Scottishness with the ethical problem of authenticity and self-representation]

What's the point of me in batting for ye if I know less than they do?

They'll no know everything. Sammy spat out in the street.

If I was you I'd assume it.

Aye well you're no me. There's a difference between repping somebody and fucking being somebody; know what I'm talking about, being somebody?

James Kelman, *How late it was, how late* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994), p. 241.

['repping' as denial of being]

A small voice near his toes was saying '...identify self. This is Provan Air Authority addressing the U-1 flight from Unthank. Repeat: will passenger please identify self. Over.'

'I am the Lord Provost of the Greater Unthank region,' said Lanark firmly, yet with elation, 'and delegate to the general assembly of council states.'

'Please rep—please rep—please repeat. Over.'

Lanark said it again.

'The U-1 flight from Unthank may proceed to Hampden as planned on beam co—beam co—beam coordinate zero fluz zero parahelion 43 minutes 19 po int nout 7 seconds epithelion [...] Message understood? Over.'

'It sounds like gibberish to me', said Lanark.

'Proceed as planned. Repeat: as planned. Repeat: as planned. Out.'

There was a click and silence. He lay thinking of how he kept being pushed into certain actions, and how people kept talking to him as though he had planned them. But perhaps the message had not been for him but for his aircraft. It had sounded very like a machine talking to a machine.

Lanark, p. 470

[political representation as erasure of self/agency; action determined by closed and sovereign 'system'; reification of voice/language]