

James Kelman

Politics and Aesthetics

Aaron Kelly

PETER LANG

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY
AND CULTURE OF SCOTLAND



This study argues that James Kelman's work should not be construed as a resigned capitulation to capitalist domination or to the fracture of a once unified working-class collective purpose. Politics are to be found not only in the content but also the form of Kelman's work. The radical aspect of his style is that rather than pandering to a ready-made identity, he remains antagonistically non-identical to the prevailing logic of capitalism by contesting its supposedly shared worldview and modes of perception. Instead, Kelman's fiction continually disputes the notion of consensus by revealing the voices of those excluded, those who are unaccounted for in that false consensus. His work uncovers a stark contradiction in the governing logic of our times: we are asked to accept that class has disappeared at the same time that we are told the system that causes it in the first place – capitalism – is inevitably here forever. Even the most alienated individuals in his stories remind us that isolation can transcend itself by returning us to the social conditions that are its cause. We find politics in Kelman's aesthetics, as his work formally contests who has the right to feel, to think, to speak.

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James Kelman

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*Dedicated with love
To the memory of my father
Jim Kelly (1936–2008)*

*For you who were made homeless, but gave us the best of homes.
For you who lost your childhood to the war but made our childhood
the best.
For you who lost your father but were the best father we could want.
For you denied an education who gave me mine.
For you who turned the imposition of the world's hatred into love for us.
It is the ultimate testimony to your generosity of spirit to be able give
to others the very things denied to you.*

I am sitting at Church Green on a lovely day, and thinking of you.

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Abbreviations

<i>AC</i>	<i>A Chancer</i>
<i>AD</i>	<i>A Disaffection</i>
<i>AO</i>	<i>An Old Pub Near the Angel</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>The Burn</i>
<i>BH</i>	<i>The Busconductor Hines</i>
<i>GB</i>	<i>Greyhound For Breakfast</i>
<i>GT</i>	<i>The Good Times</i>
<i>HB</i>	<i>Hardie and Baird & Other Plays</i>
<i>HL</i>	<i>How Late It Was, How Late</i>
<i>II</i>	<i>If It Is Your Life</i>
<i>KS</i>	<i>Kieron Smith, Boy</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>Not Not While the Giro.</i>
<i>TA</i>	<i>Translated Accounts: A Novel</i>
<i>YH</i>	<i>You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free</i>

The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting... Yet this suffering, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.

— THEODOR ADORNO

No, rather than art should live this poor, thin life among a few exceptional men, despising those beneath them for an ignorance for which they themselves are responsible, for a brutality that they will not struggle with – rather than this I would that the world should indeed sweep away all art for a while.

— WILLIAM MORRIS

They don't want libraries, give them a circus.

— LORD SALISBURY

The only education is an education *by* truths.

— ALAIN BADIOU

INTRODUCTION

Class Matters

This book engages James Kelman's fiction as part of a wider insistence that issues of class are constitutive of literature. It holds that literary form and literary aesthetics are political, while, at the same time, politics takes place in both literature and in aesthetic forms (though far from exclusively of course). Through a consideration of Kelman's writing, I wish to affirm the continuance and importance of class against two prevailing positions that would deny it. Firstly, in terms of society, we have supposedly arrived at a juncture where class is no longer a fractious, divisive factor and we are all now stakeholders in a consensual capitalism. And secondly, under the rubric of literature, an emerging body of critical work advocates the singularity of art, its irreducible particularity which is resistant to political approaches to literature that are dismissed as sociological abstractions and generalities. According to this aesthetic purism, ideas of a working-class literature or context for literature, as well as projects such as literatures of decolonization or feminist writing, are all crass, imprecise impositions on the absolute, autonomous specificity of literary forms. This new aesthetic turn in literary studies is, to a large extent, a reaction to its own creative reading of various kinds of theory which passed for politics in the last decades of the twentieth century. In certain cases, it is no bad thing that some of these approaches to literature are debunked given that the 1980s and 1990s did witness a number of key figures using a tokenistic version of identity politics, or turning good causes into flags of convenience, to appear all the more interesting and right on. As such, there is always a danger of a kind of intellectual Ben Elton-ism, of using 'a little bit of politics' to give you a voguish edge when mainstream society requires it to delude its own conscience. Such gesturing dissent is always already the reassurance that power is looking for. Having reduced politics to the entrance badge of mainstream

society's roomy false conscience, you can safely remove it – having done your bit – and salute the Queen. This kind of posturing is not of course the preserve of the entertainment industry or academia for that matter. Successive governments are filled with self-styled ex-radicals capable of giving up what they regard as politics as easily as they can glibly recall the silliness of their pot-smoking youth. Both politics and marijuana become moments of madness excusable for those whose careers can afford them posterity's rose-tinted glasses. Politics becomes quarantined as the licensed waywardness of a privileged education. More substantially, it is notable that in today's world of a proclaimed global war on terror and a massive political realignment caused by the USA's renewed assertion of its hegemony, figures such as Christopher Hitchens, who were sanctioned as dissenting voices, returned to the fold without really changing their views. In times of crisis for a global order, notional dissent is unmasked by the capitalism which generates it. The veneer of apparent radicalism degrades into the liberalism that unceasingly was and is capitalism's ineffectual bad conscience. More widely, all those who treat oppositional politics as a kind of extended gap year will always finally accept their deferred but kindred invitations to join privilege's dinner party with reassuringly fashionable lateness.

Thankfully not all politics can be withered in this way. This book addresses Kelman's fiction and projects of working-class writing in terms of a very different order of politics and focuses upon how aesthetics and literary form enable certain kinds of emancipatory energies. I am not concerned with reconstructing James Kelman's own political beliefs: he is more than capable of asserting these for himself. Rather I am interested in the politics of form in his work as it connects with or complicates issues of class and literature. Most particularly, I wish to stress the literary nature of Kelman's work. This may seem a rather obvious detail but more often than not Kelman's writing is received in a manner that diminishes its literary and aesthetic distinctiveness. And my overarching point is not that this literary and aesthetic quality needs to be recuperated in its own self-contained terms from the sully of politics but rather that the literary and aesthetic *are* political. In fact, the politics of aesthetic forms permit a different kind of recovery of Kelman's writing from its dismissal, by some, as a mere tally of the sequestered pessimism of lonely individuals.

My key approaches for outlining the politics of aesthetics in Kelman's writing, and in working-class literature more widely, will be elaborated through the lenses of T.W. Adorno and Jacques Rancière. In the case of both of these thinkers, their political engagement with aesthetic form also allows some distance to be put between my own method and that of the new turn in critical theory that would pursue an artistic purism beyond politics or social contamination. The current postmodern Sublime, or what is now claimed as a New Aestheticism or turn to the aesthetic in critical theory, and which most immediately follows Jean-François Lyotard's version of literature as an autonomous event, all propose an aesthetic utopianism that would escape the mechanized rationality and standardized banality that characterize contemporary capitalism, in addition to scorning Marxism and other projects of collective emancipation which supposedly oppose capitalism but which the postmodern aesthetes would charge with being as equally prescriptive and dominative as the thing they oppose.¹ The new aesthetic turn to some degree reworks Kant and Romanticism, via Lyotard. Oddly though, in this admixture of idealism and Romanticism, such thought finds in literature a neo-Kantian Sublime which Kant himself located *beyond* literature or art. Rancière has saliently identified the contradictions in Lyotard's effort to assert an aesthetic Sublime outwith the degradations of enlightened modernity by discerning how it conflates Kant's moral (and extra-artistic) Sublime with Edmund Burke's poetic Sublime.² Supposedly in literature there is found a Sublime which escapes the circumscription of social standardization. In the chapters that follow I will offer a more extensive critique of this approach in regard to Kelman but, for now, in order to delineate my own approach to aesthetics and the diminution of class in the postmodern Sublime, it is noteworthy that Kelman has found himself in the firing line from the new aesthetic turn. Thomas Docherty, a fellow Glaswegian, has rounded on Kelman for purveying

1 For a lively, engaging collection of essays propounding a New Aestheticism, see John J. Joughin, and Simon Malpas, (eds) *The New Aestheticism* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003).

2 See Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007) 109–42.

a homogenizing working-class identity which impedes what Docherty terms *aesthetic democracy*. Class, or for that matter the politics of race, colonialism, feminism or sexuality, to give just a few examples, can only ever propagate a self-sustaining politics of identity that is incommensurable with the transformations of the self wrought by true literature. According to Docherty, literature is a means by which the self becomes other than itself rather than a space of self-ratification. It is an experience of alterity or otherness so that identity is disrupted or made better and more generous by the sublime singularity of aesthetics. Any literature or reading of literature undertaken in terms of a politics of identity, Docherty claims, are gross reductions of aesthetic potentiality that ultimately fail to win the status of culture proper. As Docherty puts it:

criticism should not be prescribed by dogma, or by the Self or by the subject. If criticism is to respond adequately to its object, then the critic must be prepared to be changed by that object, to allow herself or himself to become other in the face of the object; and this to place the object at the source or origin of a new and changed subjectivity. The word that we give to this is *aesthetics* (2006, 3).

It should be said, as his term *aesthetic democracy* indeed implies, that Docherty's aesthetic purism is not just a question of art. Docherty feels that where contemporary consumer capitalism – and the identity politics which either facilitate or supposedly resist it – can merely offer packaged, degraded and standardized identities, then the only place where democracy can escape the false freedom of consumer choice is now and finally in aesthetics. Docherty contends that aesthetic democracy:

requires an act of representation whose function is not to identify the self but to alter it; and such a representation, therefore, is akin to that characterisation of the postmodern as a moment when representation becomes a predicament. In aesthetic democracy – which is now the only genuine democracy that is possible – representation becomes an event and not a condition or a state of affairs (2006, 158–9).

According to this argument, the only resistance left to consumer capitalism, and hence the only genuine democracy, can be found in the transcendental potential of aesthetic contemplation. Docherty's position – that acts of aesthetic appreciation by a privileged subject can escape the deprivations

of capitalism – simply reworks the anxious call by Kant and others for a republic of the learned in the wake of the French Revolution, and the shock that it is not only philosophers who can think about or transform the world. Additionally, Docherty's aesthetic democracy reserves any opposition to the market for a cultured elect and thus it not only denies the status of culture to any art which diverges from such aestheticism but also, politically, arrogates any possible resistance to capitalism (collective action, armed struggle and so on) other than the oxymoron of a privileged democracy of art. By making freedom the preserve of an aesthetic democracy, oppressed groups must collectively give up their own liberation which is then renamed someone else's culture. But art is not so pure. And this is why one of my own main aims is to stress the Marxist basis of Adorno's aesthetic given various attempts by the new aesthetic turn to appropriate him. To fully understand Adorno's theory of art, it is necessary to reclaim the Marxian strands of his thought rather than cast him as a detached aesthete in which guise he is then made to prepare the ground for the latter day Romanticism of the present which finds in literature a Sublime that escapes the supposed contamination of the social and political. Someone, such as Adorno, who can look down his nose at jazz music (of all the things to pick upon in the context of commodification!), has surely made snobbery – perhaps aptly enough – a fine art. But equally, Adorno's work provides a forceful methodology by which the politics of aesthetics in Kelman's fiction can be unfolded. While Adorno advocated the formal autonomy of art he also insisted that it remained a part of the world to which it nonetheless resides negatively or critically. In contrast to Docherty's aesthetic democracy of pure freedom, Adorno's work instructs that culture exists precisely because what it promises does not. That is, the freedom and autonomy promised by art are not freely available to all but bought at the price of unfreedom and inequality. As Adorno argues: 'all culture shares the guilt of society. It ekes out its existence only by virtue of injustice already perpetrated in the sphere of production' (1967, 26). So too, then, culture as Docherty and the New Aestheticism would define it exists precisely because freedom does not. In a world of inequality art is always complicit in what it would criticise, given the inequalities embedded in the making of both culture and society. So rather than moving towards

a universal freedom, such a privileged aesthetic democracy serves only to preserve a freedom chained to its own opposite.

While this book examines the deep interrelation between aesthetics and politics, my interest in the aesthetic is therefore less that its democratic potential is currently realizable and more that it discloses the impossibility of its universality, the limits of the freedom and good life that it pledges. Given this study of Kelman's work seeks to draw upon the importance of aesthetics in his fiction, it is worth stressing that my own dispute with aspects of this new aesthetic turn does not emerge from a hostility to aestheticism *per se* but to a particular kind of latter day Romanticism that pursues an artistic purism. As already outlined, some of the major targets of the new aesthetic turn are certain kinds of theory which have, it is alleged, contaminated the formal and aesthetic singularity and specificity of literature with politicized abstraction from the 1980s to the present. Supposedly the literariness of literature is lost in the pursuit of great intentions, for which detail and meticulousness are not permitted to get in the way of generalized posturing. On one level, as I readily acknowledge, it is no bad thing that some of the more embarrassing affectations of tokenism over the last few decades in critical theory are unmasked as an insult to politics proper. But, at the same time, the New Aestheticism can only seem to cast politics as posturing and resultantly make literature and politics separate realms in which each is its own tautology. Docherty and others proposing an aesthetic democracy appear to have given up on the world – or at least the capacity of anyone other than a coterie of aesthetes to be able to offer a challenge to the way of the world – so that literature is reconciled with itself while simultaneously this self-contained aesthetic vouches for the quarantining of society and the vast majority of people who live therein in its defiled, consumerist standardization of itself. My insistence on class cannot find in art the transcendence of the degradation of the social since the escape supposedly offered by art is already socially mediated by the world's constitutive inequalities that make both society and art possible in their current forms. It is not only consumer culture that would feign to distract us; so too aesthetic purism would forget the suffering which helps brings art into being even as art promises to assuage it. As Adorno puts it:

The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting [...] Yet this suffering, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it (1977a, 188).

Thomas Docherty, in his effort to assert that the whole notion of a working-class literature is an affront to the sublime potentiality of literature, is not the first person to try and deny James Kelman's work the status of culture. In fact, he joins a long queue. To his credit, Docherty's thesis is more sophisticated and sustained than most, and this makes it, and the broader aesthetic turn in critical theory which it exemplifies, all the more in need of a cogent rebuttal. Above all else, therefore, granting Kelman and working-class writing the standing of culture is not just a defence of its dignity and skill but also a commitment that a concentration on art's formal particularity is both aesthetic and political, rather than a deployment of the former to transcend the latter. For his own part, Kelman used his Booker Prize acceptance speech in 1994 to insist on the literariness of his work which he advances against the notion that when engaging with it you are merely listening to someone speak rather than reading a novel or short story:

A couple of weeks ago a feature writer for a Quality Newspaper suggested that the term 'culture' was inappropriate to my work, that the characters peopling my pages were 'pre-culture' – or was it 'primeval'? I can't quite recall. This was explicit, generally it isn't. But – as Tom Leonard pointed out more than 20 years ago – the gist of the argument amounts to the following, that vernaculars, patois, slangs, dialects, gutter-languages etc. etc. might well have a place in the realms of comedy (and the frequent references to Billy Connolly or *Rab C. Nesbitt* substantiate this) but they are inferior linguistic forms and have no place in literature. And *a priori* any writer who engages in the use of such so-called language is not really engaged in literature at all. It's common to find well-meaning critics suffering from the same burden, while they strive to be kind they still cannot bring themselves to operate within a literary perspective; not only do they approach the work as though it were an oral text, they somehow assume it to be a literal transcription of recorded speech (Kelman 1994, 2).

Kelman has also insisted in interview that his work is not just 'naturalistic' or the passive reflection of the way people speak (quoted in Gardiner 2004b, 101). Certainly, there is an oral, sounded dimension to Kelman's fiction but

this is only one component of its literary technique and textual modality. During the controversy surrounding the award of the Booker to Kelman it was striking how the letters pages of many newspapers printed apparent defences of his fiction by well-meaning contributors which claimed that *How Late It Was, How Late* was justifiable because Sammy Samuels's supposed bad language did tally with the experience of actual Glaswegians. Furthermore, James Wood, a Booker judge involved in Kelman's 1994 award, praises the 'authenticity' of Kelman's fiction yet also – apparently contradictorily – interprets it as 'stylized'. Ultimately, to Wood, Kelman produces, figuratively, 'a kind of prison literature', a fiction which depicts 'the prison of life'. Wood concludes: 'Yes, Kelman is a limited artist, who, like Nabokov's ape, tends to draw again and again the bars of our cage' (Wood 1994, 9). Again there is an effort to make a case for Kelman yet a persisting assumption that his work is limited by its own content, that its range and merit is circumscribed by the depleted sphere which it reflects. This kind of defence of Kelman's fiction enacts the same logic as the lazy attacks upon it: this is just a transcription of a given situation and constituency.

Hence, Wood's sense of limitation – however 'authentic' or real – unwittingly corresponds with the rationale of those who would deny cultural esteem to Kelman's fiction. One of the most forthright attacks on Kelman came from Simon Jenkins in *The Times*. Jenkins not only accused Kelman of 'literary barrenness' and 'literary vandalism' but also strove to deny Kelman's work the accolade of culture. Jenkins attempted to structure his pejorative response to Kelman's fiction by way of an analogy with an apparent encounter on a train with a drunken Glaswegian. Jenkins tells us:

I once found myself alone in a no-smoking compartment of a corridor train to Glasgow. An ambassador for that city lurched into the compartment and crashed down opposite me. He took out a bottle of cider, rolled himself a cigarette, lent across to me and belched, 'Ye git a light, Jimmy?' For almost an hour I humoured him, chided him, remonstrated with him, fearful for the safety of the Indian conductor who I knew was coming down the train (and who wisely passed us by). My reeking companion demanded attention like a two-year-old. He told me his so-called life story, requested [...] Reading Mr Kelman's book was a similar experience. I refuse to play his 'colonialist' game by dismissing the work out of hand. He is welcome to transcribe the rambling thoughts of a blind Glaswegian drunk, though my drunk

had more humour than his. In the book's first half, the hero Sammy fights some policemen, finds himself blind in a cell, goes home, makes a cup of tea and takes a bus to the DSS office to claim benefit. I am reluctant to cheat readers of the excitement of the second half. Suffice to say that Sammy comes back from the DSS office, returns to the police station, goes home, has an overdue bath and, in a rare moment of embourgeoisement, gets a taxi (1994, 20).

For a start, it is difficult not to feel sympathy with the Glaswegian, however apocryphal he or his depiction by Jenkins might actually be. Notably, Jenkins sets himself up as the defender of liberal values and the protector of the conductor from a racism which never occurs, or for which there is no evidence, but which, it is insinuated, Glaswegians hold on to as resolutely as their alcohol. In particular, Jenkins claims that reading Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* is similar to this brush with a man who only possesses a 'so-called life story'. There can be no better means of establishing the sheer necessity of Kelman's working-class existentialist voice than as a counter to Jenkins' desire to deny this Glaswegian an existence and a means of articulating his existence (a culture in other words). For Jenkins, a poor diminished life produces a poor diminished culture; in fact, it produces no culture at all. Kelman's work is able to engage and affirm the existence of those whose lives take place outside the liberal consensus of Jenkins' notion of both life and culture. Without really intending to, Jenkins' account of his boredom in reading *How Late It Was, How Late* because nothing much happens therein, actually returns us to an awareness of how class and culture are intertwined, how certain kinds of literary forms are made possible by class positions and prevented by others. Country house weddings which neatly resolve novels with due social import, daring trips to exciting new lands where travelogues trace the burgeoning development of the sophisticated soul, dramatic exchanges in the decision rooms of military history which stage the thoughtful good intent of powerful men: all these things do not embody a culture created by the preserve of a better rank of person, they instead instantiate merely the privilege, money and ease necessary for the plot, content and form of such culture to take place. Down and out Glaswegians on the receiving end of the state do not lack a culture or imagination. Rather, they are denied access to the means by which certain cultural forms are made and this exclusion at the same time

serves to help enshrine those dominant cultural forms as culture *per se*. It is precisely because Sammy Samuels lacks money that *How Late It Was, How Late* assumes the form that it does and it is no less literary or cultural for that. So it should additionally be stated that this awareness does not mean that Kelman's writing is limited because the life of his major characters is prescribed socially. Instead it is simply that the form and mode of Kelman's writing is determined by, and either engages or resists, the social, economic and historical conditions in which it is produced just as much as does Jane Austen's, Evelyn Waugh's or Martin Amis's.

Furthermore, Jenkins, like a number of disparagers, objects to the supposed bad language of Kelman's prose and he charges Kelman with an overuse of the word fuck on account of not possessing the verbal range of a good writer:

Mr Kelman is totally obsessed with the word. He sometimes writes it over and over again when he cannot think of anything else to fill a line. His language is not Older Scottish, or Scots English, or Lallans, or any dialect of Burns's 'Guid Scots Tongue'. *The Guardian* called it 'the authentic voice of Glasgow', a libel on that city. I would call the language merely Glaswegian Alcoholic With Remarkably Few Borrowings (Jenkins 1994, 20).

Jenkins' inability to cope with the working-class, Glaswegian voice embedded in Kelman's work is evidenced by his insecure recourse to what Joep Leerssen terms *allochrony* (1996, 50): the denial to a culture of a living present by displacing it in an unthreatening and redundant pastness that may merely be archived as a historical curio. That is, Jenkins seeks to supplant from Kelman's urban voice a socio-political presence and relevance by judging it not merely in accordance within irrelevant pastoral and spatially peripheral notions of Scottishness but also with supposedly literary standards that are *temporally* displaced and hundreds of years out of date.

Aesthetics and Politics

Against such efforts to deny the status of culture to Kelman's fiction, this book intends also to deal with the aesthetic specificity of Kelman's style and technique. One of the key aspects of Kelman's fiction that will be addressed is the position and perspective of the individual. It is the aesthetic form taken by the individual in Kelman's fiction which is political in that it remains non-identical to the dominant espousal of individualism in contemporary society. To some degree, this critique remains negatively immanent in Kelman's fiction in spite of rather than because of his own beliefs. That is, Kelman retains a fierce commitment to individual freedom and the integrity of the dissenting self, yet it is precisely the inability of his characters to find narrative forms in which they can assert themselves freely and fully which points to the limits of individualism in a class society, to the social mediation of individualism, and the ultimately unrealizable promise of universal freedom for all in society and culture as they are presently constituted. I will argue in the chapters that follow that the politics of the aesthetic in Kelman's writing is ingrained in the dislocation of subjects and objects, in the lack of a narrative space in which his characters can reconcile the individual with itself or with society. In the fiction of a writer who believes so fervently in individual freedom, the pervasive politics of individualism in consumer society are indicted by the aesthetic disjuncture of subjectivity, wherein the individual remains bindingly incommensurate with the freedom promised in its name. Additionally, there is something of an irony in attacks upon Kelman and working-class writing by postmodern aesthetics given that Kelman in fact shares aspects of the reworked Romanticism of the aesthetic turn in critical theory and its creed of the imaginative recuperation of the individual self. Kelman has himself referred to 'the romance of being a writer' (Kelman 1992, 15). Correspondingly, Kelman finds in literature a means to challenge power that has been extirpated elsewhere in society and its outlets of expression:

What's at stake is not only political integrity but public honesty as well. If there isn't to be an honest media, right, no truthful media, no honest radio, no honest television, no honest film making, no honest theatre, then writing and reading of books becomes a possible centre of resistance against the multiplying corruptions in present day public life [...] Other than book publication there are no mediums available which can offer anything else but a feeble token resistance to the blight of censorship and anti-radicalism (quoted in Torrington 1993, 21).

So where postmodern aesthetes would make Kelman the purveyor of crass, standardized identities, his own construal of literature as dissent is, in fact, in keeping with the Romantic legacy of art to which the New Aestheticism wishes to establish itself as the true inheritor.

Moreover, Kelman is often attacked from some left-wing perspectives for his Romantic individualism and lack of a collective project. To the renowned British Marxist, Terry Eagleton, it is exactly this tendency – what Eagleton terms 'Kelman's Romantic delusions' (2003, 263) – that spurs ire and scorn in a review of Kelman's critical essays:

At the centre of James Kelman's passionate, ill-crafted essays lies the Romantic myth of the artist as fearless truth-teller, besieged on all sides by soulless administrators, mean-minded censors, self-appointed experts. Artists are Dionysian, dangerously subversive types devoted to justice, freedom and telling it like it is, whereas the rest of the world consists largely of abstract dogmatists, fancy theorists and buttoned-down bureaucrats who are out to shut them up (2003, 263).

The result of this Romantic myth, according to Eagleton, is that Kelman joins the ranks of gesture politicians – from both Left and Right – who can only ever engage in bland, sterile and simplistic slogans best suited to the posturing of writers, media celebrities or establishment figures who would feign dissent but in fact require the apolitical maintenance of the status quo:

The political declarations of most artists, including left-wing ones, are usually as piously platitudinous as those of pop stars and UN Secretary-Generals. In some of his moods, Kelman recalls this sobering truth. But he is not a man for nuanced judgements, and finds swingeing generalisations a lot simpler (2003, 263).

So too Alan Freeman discerns a tendency to humanistic generalization in Kelman's thought in which an absolute freedom of the individual simultaneously mirrors a sweeping, totalizing notion of the power that threatens