

JAMES KELMAN

MARGARINED:

CLASS, LANGUAGE AND THE AVOIDANCE OF BUTTER

By Simon Kovesi.

an Rankin is a rare novelist in admitting that his decision over what sort of fiction he would write was predicated upon a desire for paternal approval:

Rankin's first book owed a debt to Kelman in that the Edinburgh student publishing house, Polygon, brought out Kelman's first book of stories, which did well enough to fund Rankin's 1986 debut *The Flood ...* Rankin has said how impressed he was by Kelman's use of Scottish vernacular and how he enthusiastically showed Kelman's stories to his father. 'But he said he couldn't read it because it wasn't in English. Now my dad is from the same working-class linguistic community as Kelman writes about. If he couldn't read it, but half of Hampstead was lapping it up, that to me was a huge failure and I decided then not to write phonetically.'¹

Materially, James Kelman's success led to Rankin's. In terms of form, his avoidance of Kelman's 'huge failure' led to Rankin's sales success. Although from similar backgrounds, they follow very different literary trajectories: Rankin cruising snugly in a tight-boxed pop genre, Kelman ploughing the furrowed brow of his tarmac and concrete realism. Seeing Kelman rejected by Rankin senior, Rankin junior decides on a path safely approved by his father and the wider 'working-class linguistic community'. Far from being a model of rebellion, Rankin's representation of his early artistic choice is one of anxious conformity, seeking both paternal- and peer-approval. His Scottish dad will only read 'English'; Kelman's 'Scottish vernacular' is a foreign language 'phonetically' rendered and read only by English middle-class metropolitans. With this logic, Rankin asserts his triumph as the proud artist of the masses, while Kelman is the exoticised fetish of a southern middle-class. If Rankin rejects any father figure at all, it is Kelman.

'I was born in Glasgow and live there: this is what I work' is the bald passport of verification, identification and substantiation on the front cover of an early pamphlet containing short stories by Kelman.² In interview in 1985, he said:

language is the culture – if you lose your language you've lost your culture, so if you've lost the way your family talk, the way your friends talk, then you've lost your culture, and you're divorced from it. That's what happens with all these stupid fucking books by bad average writers because they've lost their culture, they've given it away. Not only that, what they're saying is it's inferior, because they make anybody who comes from that culture speak in a hybrid language, whereas they speak standard English. And their language is the superior one. So what they're doing, in effect, is castrating their parents, and their whole culture, and saying 'Right, that's fucking rubbish, because it's not the language of books. I speak the language

of books, so does everyone I meet at uni, so do the lecturers and so does my new girlfriend, whose father is a fucking book millionaire or something, and they all speak the real way.³

If Rankin's model for his choice of form is paternal approval, strangely enough so too is Kelman's, though the direction of intention differs. If Rankin wants to write *to* his father, and so have his work accepted by him, Kelman's model of origins writes *out* of his family, to make its culture and language accepted as legitimate by both itself and others. The image of 'castration' is highly charged and clearly masculine. Language 'is the culture', is the source of progeny, is the security of future identity, is the fertility of the male line. To wipe out paternal language with the alien 'language of books' is to deracinate, to betray, to make redundant, to de-bollock. Culture here is something quite fixed, something you should remain 'married' to, something that stays behind if the individual develops and speaks away from it; it is therefore social, community-based, familial. It is not portable or individually malleable. In this extract, there are two languages: the language of 'us', Kelman's culture; and the language of 'them' – the 'everyone at uni', extended into the stereotype of the daughter of a 'book millionaire'. There are two languages, and so there are two cultures: us and them. This model of language relations is that of a hostile class war; the hostility is all Kelman's, and what is being resisted is the authority of 'standard English', the supposed 'superiority' of 'the language of books'; because the 'language of books' only serves to de-legitimise, belittle and 'other' any other language.

Rankin's choice of standard English coupled with the crime plot has earned him a great deal of money, and he is now undoubtedly a 'book millionaire'.⁴ I don't mean to suggest Rankin's financial success necessarily compromises his integrity: after all, as Patrick Doyle says in Kelman's *A Disaffection*, 'Picasso was a multimillionaire communist. So what.'⁵ But early on in his career, Kelman detected a relationship between plot and economic security:

You don't need any beginning, middle and end at all. All you have to do is show this one day in maybe this person's life, and it will be horror. It will just be horror. You don't need any beginning, middle and end at all ... There's no need to be saying or thinking 'When's the murder or bank robbery going to happen?'. No such abnormal event will occur – the kind of event that seems to motivate almost all mainstream fiction whether in book or screen form. In reality these events are abnormal. The whole idea of the big dramatic event, of what constitutes 'plot', only assumes that economic security exists.⁶



Kelman's artifice is politically intended to wrest the fictional working-class individual from the opium of myth: there are no plots with pots of gold, no mysterious Magwitches bequeathing fortunes, just the occasional accumulator that comes in. Stories with neat endings, with overt denouements or cathartic events, or even with 'surprise' generated by playing within a form: all of these are products of a fictional world of material comfort. Kelman is the prophet of unsettling discomfiture because he claims as his subject matter ordinary working-class life. 'Ordinary' for Kelman is a socialist positive, not a snooty tool of condemnation. Ordinary is the subject for his literary project:

In our society we aren't used to thinking of literature as a form of art that might concern the day to day existence of ordinary women and men, whether these ordinary women and men are the subjects of the poetry and stories, or the actual writers themselves.⁷

When he started out, Kelman regarded classic British literature as being prejudiced against the ordinary, repressive of working-class identities, and demeaning of non-standard varieties of

English. George Blake's *The Shipbuilders* (1935) could be exemplary of what Kelman regards as being typical of the third-person narrative voice, which asserts its 'value system'⁸ even when its sympathies are nominally with the Glaswegian working class. Leslie Pagan is the son of a Glasgow ship-yard owner. The narrator follows and justifies Pagan's thoughts as he enters a pub which is full of his employees, who are unaware they about to be made redundant:

The house was busy, burly men in working clothes and dirty cloth caps two deep along the counter. The ugly tongue of Clydeside assailed his ears, every sixth word a fierce and futile obscenity; they spat much as they seemed to breathe. He saw the scene as one of degradation, and yet, understanding, he neither recoiled nor condemned. They were the men he knew – passionate, strong and true to the core.⁹

Determined to resist such romanticising, animalising, patronising stereotypes of a proletariat described and judged from *without*, Kelman claims to write from *within* that 'ugly tongue of Clydeside'. This is the foundation of Kelman's artistic project. What he decided to do to resist a largely unchallenged literary power structure was groundbreaking and is now well known. He described the politics of his chosen form clearly in 1997:

The establishment demands art from its own perspective but these forms of committed art have always been as suffocating to me as the impositions laid down by the British State, although I should point out of course that I am a socialist myself. I wanted none of any of it. 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, or 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? Not to challenge the rules of narrative was to be coerced into assimilation, I would be forced to write in the voice of an imagined member 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.¹⁰

This passage points to the aspect of his work about which Kelman is most consistent, and perhaps the stylistic feature which has granted him a uniquely influential position in literature: his decision to make his novels linguistically unified. As many commentators have noted, he attempts to flatten what he sees as the usual hierarchies that are inherent in narratives where

the omniscient or central speaker narrates through a standard variety of English. Characters' spoken words, by contrast, are usually placed inside inverted commas and further separated from the language of omniscience, of narratorial knowledge, by being evidently meant to be working class, inflected or accentual in some other way. Such a disjunction is evident even in the stalwart texts of twentieth-century working-class fiction, both north and south of the border, though of course there are exceptions which Kelman missed in his generalising assessment of literary history. The conflict between standard and 'vernacular' languages stretches all the way back to Dante, Chaucer and Cervantes, wherein national languages usurped Latin, the established language of law, governance, academia, faith and so, literary respectability. Linguistic diversity due to class and region within major tongues appears in poetry in the eighteenth century, and in fiction in the nineteenth century. But rarely are marginalised varieties of English, especially working-class forms, allowed a dominant position in fiction. Literary language and standard language have often been regarded as the same thing even by working-class novelists; to write in a 'non-standard' variety was to write a 'non-literary' English.

The most cited marker of this conflation is the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (started 1860; published 1933) which gathered quotations from literature. Tony Crowley and others¹¹ contend that it was the dictionary makers who established and codified the concept of a 'standard literary language'. The dictionary makers included words according to their literary and textual precedence, not their oral currency; in requiring quotations from printed sources as evidence for each etymological change, they had no choice. But the result was that 'standard' and 'literary' were conflated within the rationale and mechanics of this massively influential standard bearer. It is a testament to the progressive, developing nature of the *OED* project, and to the influence of critics of early lexicography like Crowley, that Kelman is now a cited (literary) source in the ongoing third edition for twenty-one words, including standard lexical items such as 'age', 'brilliant', 'giro', 'moonlight', 'mind', 'minute', 'monosyllable', 'minestrone', 'moaning', 'mockery' and 'lumber', together with non-standard forms such as 'manky', 'mawkit', 'midden', 'midgie', 'Tim', 'maw', 'blooter'.¹² Maybe the inclusion of these words is a testament to how much more linguistic diversity appears in literature now than in the early twentieth century. Or perhaps the inclusion of Kelman's terms in the central bearer of supposed standard English language suggests that the opposition of standard to dialect, of centre to region, is no longer a convincing map of the relationships between language varieties.

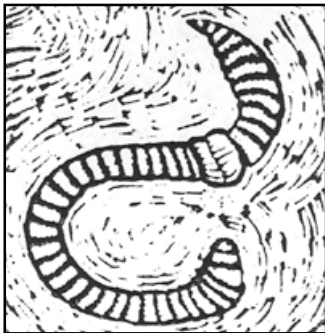
When Kelman assessed British literary history, he felt that the separation between language varieties was illustrative and reproductive of a divided society, of structures of power, of class stratification, and he discusses no Scottish exceptions. Lewis Grassie Gibbon opened up narrative use of a 'folk voice': as

Cairns Craig points out, Grassic Gibbon 'invented a radical narrative strategy which displaces the third person, omniscient – and Anglocentric – author in favour of a narration organised through the voices and the gossip of the folk themselves.'¹³ As early as the 1930s Grassic Gibbon was breaking what Kelman asserts were the usual 'rules of narrative'; W. D. Latto was doing so even earlier, from the 1860s onwards.¹⁴ If Kelman missed these two pioneers, he was very aware of James Joyce's resistance to inverted 'perverted commas', which separate spoken from narratorial discourse; Joyce opted to replace their function with dashes.¹⁵ But even a brief survey of twentieth-century fiction suggests that Kelman was largely correct about the separation between the language of a narrator and the language of a working-class or otherwise accented character; Latto, Grassic Gibbon and Joyce were exceptions. In 'realist' fictional worlds designed to be entirely sympathetic with working-class culture, in those novels polemically intent on revolutionary change, and even where the novelist was of an identifiably working-class background, narrator and character have entirely different linguistic platforms, separated by speech marks, separated by quasi-phonetics or regionalism: the long list of such novels would include Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, Edward Gaitens' *Dance of the Apprentices*, Alan Silitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and William McIlvanney's *Docherty*.¹⁶ Martin Amis' *Money* features a narrator who has misgivings about a working-class accent, and about how he might reproduce it in print:

Fat Paul, I would say, has few anxieties about his accent. He doesn't fudge or smudge. Every syllable has the clarity of threat. You could never do that voice justice, but here goes.

'I seen him in the street Sunday,' said Fat Paul. 'I said – Phwore! You just had a curry? He said, "Nah. Had a curry Froyday." I said – what you have today then? "Free spoyce pizzas and two Choynese soups." He's only on antiboyotics as it is, for this zit on his armpit and his impetoygo ...'¹⁷

Comedic though it is, the threat that this narrator admits to feeling at the accent of the Londoner inheres as a stylistic prejudice in the other novels listed above, where the voice of omniscience is granted an authorising 'language of power'. This can be complicated if, as in *Money*, the narrator is a morally-bankrupt, materially-indulgent, self-confessed slob. Even so, as a first-person narrator, he is still in charge, still in the most powerful position in the narrative, and his standard, if colloquial, language realises and enacts the assumption of that power. If we laugh at Fat Paul's voice as we are supposed to (as I did), we adopt the narrator's position, and the class politics of his judgement.



In stark contrast, Kelman's narrators and his protagonists use the same language in terms of spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, syntax and so on, usually merged in free indirect discourse. After experimental early short stories, he does not use speech marks or even Joycean dashes for either direct speech or direct thoughts. This means that narrator's voice and character's voice are so intertwined that it is often impossible to separate the two; direct speech and indirect speech, speech and thoughts, have fuzzy borders in Kelman. This merging effect is repeatedly deployed and has aesthetic and political implications. Aesthetically it often results in a fluidity of position for a merging voice which conjoins protagonist with narrator to the point where the first person is almost implicated,

without the concurrent limitations of the first person. It can also mean that conversations between characters are demanding to follow, without the usual or standard separation through speech marks, especially if there are more than two characters. For Kelman, neither voice of narrator nor protagonist should be dominant because that would mean someone's voice is lessened, is secondary. A dominant or omniscient voice would necessarily subject and subjugate other characters to its all-seeing eye. Kelman regards omniscience as a romantic fiction, a superstition, and so it has no place in the realist's toolkit. His narrative strategy is also confirmation of his foundational atheistic existentialism: he does not want for a moment to suggest either omniscience or essentialist notions of the generic narratorial voice. Voices are never omniscient because there is no god in Kelman's universe: the individual experience, or, to use Jean-Paul Sartre's terminology, 'the human reality', is the primary and the consistent focus.¹⁸ The hierarchical power of an omniscient narrator is also absent because of Kelman's anarchic anti-authority politics. In Kelman's polemics, authorities are not the locus or determinants of truth, so fiction should resist the ideological implications of recasting trusted governance in the shape of an omniscient narrator. Although the worlds he constructs are full

of alienating authorities and hierarchies, Kelman's narrative forms have no 'powers that be', no all-seeing eyes, no holders of a 'truth', no judges. By and large if a narrator can be discerned she or he will not summarise, contextualise, qualify or analyse the characters' outward actions or inner workings, and this is especially the case in his second novel *A Chancer* (1985). All of these important verbal administrative tasks will be carried out by the thoughts, spoken and unspoken, of the main character himself (and it is always a *him*); or, they will not be carried out explicitly, but will be left for a reader's own detective work and imaginative play. The neutralisation of the narrator dramatically opens up the role of the reader, as in the following quotation from *A Chancer*, which contains the wedding speech of the protagonist Tammás in its entirety:

Well everybody ... Tammás cleared his throat.
Another man called: A bit of order now for the best man.
Tammás waited until the talking stopped. Well ... He
cleared his throat again. I'd like to toast the bride. She's
the best looking bride I've ever
seen. He turned to her and said, Honest Rena, I really
mean that. All the best to the two of yous.
He raised the tumbler of sherry he had been given aloft.
There was silence, the faces in the room all gazing at
him. It was crowded. The door open widely and people
standing visible out in the lobby. Here's to Rena!
he cried, and he swallowed the sherry in a gulp.
Somebody called: To Rena!¹⁹

And that is it: Tammás says no more. The narrator does indicate action and dialogue ('he cried', 'he swallowed') but only in an abbreviated fashion. We are given a sense of Tammás' audience by the narrator as a little context, but the directions are perfunctory. No position is taken by the narrator on Tammás' performance, no judgement offered, and no guidance granted at all as to how we should react to Tammás' speech. The narrator is neutral²⁰ and withdrawn as much as possible. The withdrawn narrator does not put us inside the mind of either Tammás or his audience. The implied position for the reader is that of a guest at the wedding, knowing no more about Tammás' speech before he makes it than the audience does, because access to Tammás' thoughts is almost nought; the narrator is external, and so is the reader. But we also don't know for sure what the audience, 'gazing at him', think either as a group, or as individuals. We can guess that they are disappointed by the brevity of the speech, but the decision to interpret, indeed, construct their reaction in this way, and to judge Tammás for his performance, to be disappointed alongside Rena, is entirely our responsibility, our work and our choice.

This brief example of social awkwardness confirms the root source of Kelman's difficulty: the reader is never explicitly coaxed into a certain understanding of the processes of the novel by a close relationship with a narrator. It is through the absence of the narrator, through the gap that is left, that the sheer emotive force of Kelman's work emerges: the reader has to make sense, has to be active, has to inflect and re-inscribe the actions, words, emotions, that occur in the white spaces on the page. Intimacy with the narrator is just not available. Instead, a fully active engagement with the information on offer, normally focalised through the life of a male protagonist, is a necessity for any interpretation. The distinct lack of narratorial guidance and the interpretative free space that opens up, is the place where the awkward 'horror' of Kelman's world is fully realised. This neutralised narrative strategy gestures towards a world where



there is no plot, no grand narrative, no neat endings other than departures, no frameworks other than localised, fragile relationships upon which to pin hopes and sureties.

To express it more positively, Kelman's world is liberated from the shackles of determinism and plotted conventions; the individual, though often faced with insurmountable odds, is individually and psychologically free, and does not require explanation or rationalisation from a more powerful, more knowing other. The generalisation, essentialism, and evaluative panoramic vistas of omniscience are replaced with specificities, localities, orthographic and phonetic variety and robust psychological individualism. Kelman does not present us with a working-class world or society: he presents us with working-class *individuals* to interpret. His fiction does not present political or social problems which are digested, processed and solved by the agenda of the narrator, or by the devices, resolutions or social conscience of the narrative. Instead the short stories and novels present individuals to watch and to listen to, the spaces around them to be filled in by the coaxed, teased, frustrated, participation of the reader. Here is a section of dialogue from *A Disaffection*:

I apologise Alison.
What for? She frowned: You dont have to apologise to me.
He nodded.
. . .
. . .
. . .
. . .
He shook his head.²¹

The standard ellipsis markers are deployed here to graphically portray the extended suspension of conversation after a moment of communicative friction. The five ellipsis markers are bracketed by two simple but contradictory actions by the male, Patrick Doyle. In between these contradictions, there are only dots, for the reader to join up and form some sort of meaning.

* * *

Inevitably there are problems and tensions. If Kelman represents 'ordinary' life he is surely attempting as realistic a portrayal as he can muster, and if he likewise wants to use the language he hears about him, to convey his culture, as unaltered as possible, he will have recourse to 'real' language as opposed (and which he opposes) to the 'language of books'. But what if a 'real' term in common use is not acceptable to Kelman's politicisation of class relationships? Does committed writing about working-class life always have to be 'realist'?

A small but symptomatic and highly significant example of this crux of issues occurs in *A Chancer*. Unsurprisingly perhaps, characters in this novel eat bread, sandwiches and toast fairly regularly. At the end of the novel, Tammas is getting himself ready at 5am.

Before he leaves his sister's flat he has something to eat, outlined as follows:

There was enough milk for a bowl of cornflakes. But he did not make coffee or tea. He margarined a slice of bread then put some jam on it. He found a plastic wrapper to stick it into. Back in the bedroom he unzipped the side pocket once more and stuffed it in. He stepped to the window and stared out for a time.²²

One of the manuscripts to *A Chancer* includes a different version of the third sentence in this quotation, which reads instead: 'He buttered a slice of bread then put some jam on it.'²³ In pencil Kelman has crossed out 'buttered' and inserted the word 'margarined', and 'margarined' ended up in the published version. This is the only occurrence of the word 'margarined' as a verb in this novel. In the published version, 'butter' does not appear at all. Bread and toast appear with the adjective 'margarined', for example: 'On top of the table were the salt, the vinegar, and the tomato sauce, a teaplate of margarined bread'.²⁴ As an adjective 'margarined' is relatively common; as a verb it is surely rare.

The use of 'margarined' as a verb can sum up Kelman's language use: its three syllables are somehow awkward as a verb, it makes the reader double-take, and it is full of the politics of representing the economically marginalised and literarily neglected. The question is whether 'margarined' is a natural, expected or common usage. Is it instead an artful and artificial lexical substitution which makes a blunt point: margarine is more common on working-class bread, or at least on *this* working-class bread, than butter. It is a tiny change but it is a word voiced not by Tammas, but by the narrator I have described above as 'withdrawn' and 'neutral'. 'Margarined' as a verb is a derivation from the noun, but is an uncommon one; we might even say it is a *coined* derivation. It might be that the use of margarine as a verb is *not* commonly spoken by working-class Glaswegians. If so, why does Kelman use it? He repeatedly asserts that his written language is the language of 'his' culture, of 'his' class. So why the coined verb 'margarined' which might possibly come only from Kelman?

A little history would help here. Margarine was originally intended as a butter substitute for the poor. Its invention was stimulated by Napoleon III, who supposedly worried about his poor populace not getting enough energy through fat to survive both the severe working conditions of industrialising France and the looming war against Prussia. In 1866 his government launched a competition to invent a cheap fat substitute. When margarine was first produced in 1871, it was half the price of butter. Initially margarine could not compete with butter at all and it was not popular for a long time. In Émile Zola's *Germinal* of 1885, the novel about a French mining community, anxiety over a lack of butter is expressed frequently, especially by women gazing at empty cupboards, but no one mentions margarine.²⁵ Margarine wasn't

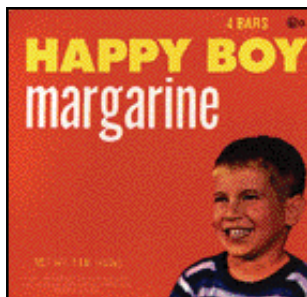
popular until the beginning of the twentieth century, at which time the source of the fat in production of margarine shifted from animal fat to vegetable oil. The quality and quantity of margarine consumed in Europe and North America developed and expanded rapidly, until today it outsells butter almost everywhere.²⁶

Today butter is considerably more expensive than margarine though government statistics on comparisons of consumption of these competing sources of fat suggest that there is no evidence for a class-based division between their use. If we can trust statistics, it seems it is no longer the case that affluent people consume butter and poorer people consume margarine.²⁷ But Kelman clearly, deliberately and – as the manuscript correction suggests – against his own instinctive initial use of ‘buttered’, forces a ‘margarined’ distinction. In *A Chancer*, margarine remains a butter substitute for the poor.

Even if there is a vexed complex of political reasons behind this odd lexical substitution, is the use of the verb ‘margarined’ ‘realistic’? One of the problems of representing working-class life in textual form can be explored through the use of ‘buttered’ as a generic verb to refer to the spreading of margarine or butter or any such fat spread; I would argue that ‘buttered’ is used in many working-class varieties (not just in Glasgow) when what is meant is the applying of margarine. However I should admit that this is anecdotal: I’m drawing here on my own experience and discussions with people who grew up, pretty much exclusively, on margarine. If the dominant mode of expressing the way we spread fat on bread is ‘buttered’, and that includes Kelman himself as the manuscript draft reveals, then the usage clearly includes but ignores the larger proportion of the spreading of margarine that goes on. Kelman forces an explicit, awkward and pointed assertion: butter is not a common feature of urban working-class life as he understands it, or as he wants to represent it. The problem is that the verb-form ‘buttered’ is much more common than ‘margarined’, so ‘margarined’ draws disproportionate attention to itself. Of course a standard Scots or English dictionary is exactly the place Kelman would *not* want us to go for ‘verification’. Sure enough, lexicographers only recognise margarine as a noun. So does its use as a verb come from ‘real’ life or from Kelman’s personal politics? Where do we go for ‘verification’ of his language use? How do we test the

verisimilitude, or veracity, of Kelman’s fiction? Indeed, should we even be ‘testing’ his language use against ‘real’ life?

The analysis above is determined to some extent by an expectation that



there will be a rationale for Kelman’s change of ‘buttered’ to ‘margarined’ which is somehow coherent and consistent. But to look for consistency in Kelman’s language use, as some have done,²⁸ is to ignore his intentions and systematic resistance to standard language practice. The following are ‘proofing notes for Dent paperback’, which was to be a reprint of *The Busconductor Hines* (1984). The notes summarise Kelman’s defence of his text and adjustments to be made to the original Polygon setting:

can the pages be centred? or at least positioned better than by Polygon?

general notes on text: all negations such as didnt, cant, wouldnt etc. not to have any apostrophes

capital letters seem to be missing from certain proper names, and capital letters seem to be tacked onto ordinary names – on occasion (i.e. do not look for consistency in it) certain

very occasionally the word ‘realize’ is realize and other times the verb realise is spelled realise; please leave as is, and do not seek consistency

occasionally the punctuation seems missing from end of sentences; just leave it like that i.e. missing²⁹

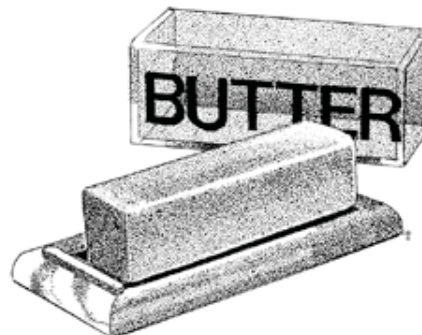
Kelman anticipates that Dent will try and regularise his language, and we can assume that this anticipation is born of his previous experience with other publishers.³⁰

In summary, the fronts on which he is defending his text are layout, punctuation, capitalisation and orthography: the fundamentals of print presentation. We might interpret the anticipated conflict as that between two varieties of English use: between the variety Kelman uses in this novel and the unitary or standard variety to which his publishers might be more accustomed. The repeated order to the editors to 'not seek consistency' reveals just how distant regularised standard print language is from the varying oral variety Kelman is defending.

The best guide to the nexus of issues we are encountering here is Kelman's close writing colleague, Tom Leonard. His prose poem 'Honest' (1976) starts with the speaker worrying over what to write about. An arbitrary decision to write about a fisherman is dismissed as a waste of both his time and his readers' time; the resultant book might end up as a book based on other books, serving only the purpose of informing other books still to be written. It would be a book derived from other books and only valuable for the creation of yet other books: its generation, its valuation, would be textual, not concrete; immaterial, not material. The title of the piece suggests that what the speaker is looking for is a sincere (realistic? true?) subject matter and manner for his writing, and the fisherman is clearly not that subject for our non-fishing speaker. Writing about himself also seems impossible as the resultant persona on the page is not recognised by the author as having anything to do with him: it 'wiz jis a lohta flamin words'. In other words, author and text are separated, not the same, distant. On the page, author is not author, but just text. In yet other words, there is no reality, nor any 'honesty', in the text. The language used to discuss the difficulty of creative beginnings, as in the following extract, is Leonard's own remarkable quasi-phonetic rendition of vernacular Glaswegian:

Yi write doon a wurd, nyi sayti yirsell, that's no thi way a say it. Nif yi tryti write it doon thi way yi say it, yi end up wi thi page covered in letters stuck thigithir, nwee dots above hof thi letters, in fact, yi end up wi wanna they thingz yid needti huv took a course in phonetics ti be able ti read. But that's no thi way a think, as if ad took a course in phonetics. A doant mean that emdy that's done phonetics canny think right – it's no a questiona right or wrong. But ifyi write down "doon" wan minute, nwrite doon "down" thi nixt, people say yir beein inconsistent. But ifyi sayti sumdy, "Whair a yi afti?" nthey say, "Whut?" nyou say, "Where are you off to?" they don't say, "That's no whutyi said thi furst time." They'll probably say sumhm like, "Doon thi road!" anif you say, "What?" they usually say, "Down the road!" the second time – though no always. Course, they never really say, "Doon thi road!" or "Down the road!" at all. Least, they never say it the way it's spelt. Coz it izny spelt, when they say it, is it?²¹

What Leonard is 'honest' about here is that it is impossible to convey *exactly* how anyone speaks in written form. The closest you can come to 'honest' rendition is through 'a course in phonetics', but the writer does not want to paint his work into such a tight, frighteningly unread, possibly elitist, corner (though as he is at pains to point out that 'it's no a questiona right or wrong', the elitist interpretation is probably all mine). What he wants to get on paper is both 'thi way a think' and 'thi way a say': thoughts and speech into printed text. The distance between what we expect, and what we allow, of spoken language, compared to what we expect and allow of written language, is then exemplified in the varying versions of the dialogue, in which both of the voices change their accent, their pronunciation, when not immediately understood, 'though no always'. That 'though no always' is exactly Kelman's point: language outside of standard print, Leonard, and by implication Kelman, seem to be arguing, is inconsistent. For these writers, speakers and narrators flip between pronunciations, registers, codes depending on all manner of shifts in contexts, intentions, moods and audience. Putting this multiplicity of localised shifts and changes into print – from the strategic changes to aid understanding as in Leonard's poem, to the rhythmical, arbitrary, whimsical, or humorous in so much of Kelman – is one of the key problems on Kelman's agenda. Kelman's defence of inconsistency is evidently meant to be anarchically liberating while also keeping faith with his understanding of oral speech and 'real' thought patterns. His albeit limited inconsistency within English is meant to gesture towards a liberation of author, narrator, subject and reader from the shackles of a language system which carries with it both the burden of formula and the possibility that when it is printed, standard language is at an inherent distance from reality as experienced by those who do not live their lives through this accepted language of power. When standard English surrounds and voices an omniscient



narrative position, the contrasting non-standard varieties render their non-standard speakers 'other', and made to seem unlike 'us' – that 'us' being the collusive narrator and reader. For some, such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the non-standard speaker is rendered so strange, so other, as to effectively become insane:

Forming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual the prerequisite for any submission to social laws. No one is supposed to be ignorant of grammaticality; those who are belong in special institutions.³²

Leonard, discussing radical anti-psychiatrist R. D. Laing,³³ delineates exactly the same process of othering of the non-standard speaker.

The dialect speaker tends to appear in a narrative like Laing's patient in a hospital: there is complicity between author and reader that that speaker is 'other', that the user of such language cannot be the person who has written or who is reading the work. It comes down to language, often the nature of the present tense. Laing demonstrated how language is used to invalidate the access of others to an agreed universal present supposedly shared exclusively by people in related positions of power. In other words, to deny people their full existence.³⁴

The 'agreed universal present' is something which both Leonard and Kelman problematise through their deployment of non-standard English at all levels of their narratives, Leonard in verse, Kelman in prose. '[A]greed universals' might be what the homogenous and consistent grammar and orthography of codified standard language enable, enact and support, in seemingly innocuous words like 'battered'. Leonard makes the point here that there are actually no 'universals' which are agreed – there is always already someone, some language system, some class, which is excluded (and exclude themselves) from the agreement process. 'Universal agreement' would require everyone to have a say, a vote, about language, which is a complex product of culture, not of a formal political process. With this model adopted from Laing, Leonard can claim that standard language cannot possibly speak for, or rather, voice, everybody, and if it does so, can do so only partially and is inherently compromised by the prejudices and the processes of positioning between a subject and an adopted language. If standard language claims to be all about repetition of similarity, regularity, dependability and sanity, then by contrast non-standard language is dissimilar, irregular, unreliable, and insane. This is not a binary opposition of equals, because standard language always has the upper hand, the political potency, the power of authority, the major position; it authorises, signs off, the instability of non-standard, inconsistent, forms and it 'others' them, forces them into a minor position. With this logic, if Kelman used standard language in his fiction, he would be othering his culture just as, he asserts, so

many other writers did and do:

Whenever I did find somebody from my own sort of background in English literature, there they were confined to the margins, kept in their place, stuck in the dialogue. You only ever saw them or heard them. You never got into their mind. You did find them in the narrative but from the outside, never from the inside, always they were 'the other'. They never rang true, they were never like anybody you ever met in real life.³⁵

In fiction, the marginalised are defined and controlled by the standard practices of omniscient narration. Kelman and Leonard have a moral agenda which works against the hegemony and hierarchies of standard language. Kelman writes a language which is a part and product of a tradition of resistance to the pervasive, invasive dominance of standard language (the sort of language in which this article is written). He resists standard language use for many reasons, but at the core is a belief that its adoption in creative work would necessitate a subservience to a way of understanding the world which is not indigenous to his own culture. He writes in recognisable English, but it is an English deliberately embedded with inconsistency, variation and awkwardness, which together power the political engine of his linguistic idiosyncrasy, the source of his abstruse difficulty. If Rankin foreclosed on such knotty problems early on, in Kelman's fiction they remain as raw and edgily unanswerable as ever, and that's probably no bad thing.

Footnotes

¹. Nicholas Wroe, 'Bobby Dazzler', *The Guardian*, 'Review', 28 May, 2005, pp. 20-23. Quotation pp. 22-23.

². *Writers in Brief No 11: James Kelman* (Glasgow and Wandsworth: National Book League, 1980).

³. Duncan McLean, 'James Kelman interviewed', *Edinburgh Review* 71 (1985), pp. 64-80. Quotation p. 72.

⁴. 'Rankin's book sales exceed 5 million copies in the UK alone' says the profile of the author on BBC2's 'Newsnight Review' website:

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/review/2016770.stm>>. Downloaded 26 October, 2005.

⁵. *A Disaffection* [1989] (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 169.

⁶. Kirsty McNeill, 'Interview with James Kelman', *Chapman* 57 (Summer, 1989), pp. 1-9. Quotation p. 9.

⁷. *An East End Anthology*, ed. James Kelman (Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 1988), p. 1.

⁸. Kirsty McNeill, op. cit., p. 4.

⁹. George Blake, *The Shipbuilders* (Edinburgh: B&W Publishing, 1993), p. 8.

¹⁰. "'And the judges said ...'", *"And the judges said ...": Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2002), pp. 37-55. Quotation p. 40.

¹¹. See Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1989), chapters 3 and 4, pp. 91-124. Crowley follows work by Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961) and *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), and by Roy Harris, *The Language Machine* (London: Duckworth, 1987). Their argument about the ideological implications of linguistic standardisation is squarely opposed by John Honey, *Language is Power: The Story of Standard English and its Enemies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 59-117.

¹². *OED* online: <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>. Downloaded 18 October, 2005.

¹³. Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 65.

¹⁴. Columnist W. D. Latto was pioneering the use of Scots for both narrative and direct speech. See John Corbett, *Language and Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 144-147.

¹⁵. Cited by H. Gustav Klaus, *James Kelman* (Tavistock: Northcote House and British Council, 2004), p. 2.

¹⁶. Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* [1918], (London: Harper Perennial, 2005); Edward Gaitens, *Dance of the Apprentices* (Glasgow: W. MacLellan, 1948); Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* [1958] (London: W. H. Allen, 1973); William McIlvanney, *Docherty* [1975] (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985).

¹⁷. Martin Amis, *Money* [1984] (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 146.

¹⁸. Sartre takes 'human reality' from Heidegger. Sartre writes: 'Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality.' Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), pp. 27-8.

¹⁹. Kelman, *A Chancer* [1985] (London: Picador, 1987), p. 217.

²⁰. The clearest analysis of Kelman's narrative voices is presented by John Corbett, *Language and Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 149-150 and 153-161.

²¹. *A Disaffection*, p. 169.

²². *A Chancer*, pp. 308-9.

²³. Quotation on p. 308 of a typed draft of *A Chancer*, in a box entitled 'Chancer 3', Mitchell Library ref. 775038 SR89.

²⁴. *A Chancer*, p. 227.

²⁵. Examples of the importance of butter to the French working-class diet appear in *Germinale*, trans. Havelock Ellis (London: Dent, 1946), pp. 13 and 15.

²⁶. Potted history of margarine gleaned from J. H. van Stuyvenberg, ed., *Margarine: an Economic and Social History, 1869-1969* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969).

²⁷. Information on fat consumption in Scotland taken from the following online sources: 'Changing patterns in the consumption of foods at home, 1971-2000: Social Trends 32' [Anon.], (London: National Statistics, 2002), <<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=5234&More=Y>>; Sally McIntyre, 'Socio-economic inequalities in health in Scotland', *Social Justice Annual Report Scotland 2001* (Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Department of Health, 2001), <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/social/sjar-41.asp>>; Andrew Shaw, Anne McMunn and Julia Field, eds., *The Scottish Health Survey 1998*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Department of Health, 2000) <<http://www.show.scot.nhs.uk/scottishhealthsurvey/>>. All downloaded 15 October, 2005.

²⁸. Macdonald Daly, 'Politics and the Scottish Language', *Hard Times* (Berlin), 64/65 (1998), pp. 21-6 (online <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/critical-theory/papers/Daly.pdf>>). Daly sets out to debunk what he sees as the myth of Kelman's realism. Kelman's rendition of Glasgow speech infuriates Daly because of 'an overall lack of consistency'. Edwin Morgan however sees much value in Kelman's variations: 'Glasgow Speech in Recent Scottish Literature', *Crossing the Border: Essays on Scottish Literature* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), p. 317.

²⁹. This Hines-related manuscript is in a Mitchell Library box labelled 'CHANCER: Novel Drafts and Play Drafts', ref. 775038 SR89.

³⁰. Other than the centring of the text on the page, I can find no evidence of any textual adjustments in the Dent edition: it looks like it is exactly the same setting as the Polygon edition.

³¹. Tom Leonard, 'Honest', *Three Glasgow Writers: A collection of writing by Alex. Hamilton, James Kelman, Tom Leonard* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1976), pp. 46-49. Quotation p. 47. Introducing a recording of 'Honest' Leonard says this 'was a thing written I think it was 1970'. *Nora's Place and Other Poems, 1965-1995*. Audio CD. (Edinburgh: AK Press Audio; 1997). 'Honest', track 7.

³². Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004. Original publication: *Mille Plateaux*, 1980), p. 112.

³³. Laing is discussed by Deleuze and Guattari; Guattari was Laing's French counterpart in radical anti-psychiatry. See *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London and New York: Continuum, 2004. Original publication: *L'Anti-Oedipe*, 1972), p. 143.

³⁴. Tom Leonard [untitled essay] in Bob Mullan, ed., *R. D. Laing: Creative Destroyer* (London: Cassell, 1997), p. 89-91. Quotation p. 90.

³⁵. 'Elitism and English Literature, Speaking as a Writer', *"And the Judges Said ...": Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002), p. 63.