KELMAN WRITES BACK

Literary Politics in the Work of a Scottish Writer
The books in this new series suggest that we live in an exciting age of explorations. We now have the great opportunity to chart the territories between disciplines and cultures, to map forgotten or as yet undiscovered areas of thought, culture and writing. The monographs and collections from Leipzig try to break out of unproductive oppositions say between East and West, North and South, humanities and sciences, or academic discourse and journalism. Instead we are encouraging the emergence of triangular constellations, such as between Newfoundland, Scotland and West Africa, or between travelogue, science and women’s writing, or between alchemy, prehistory and bicycles. Pioneer studies on contemporary authors will be another asset of this series. The focus of Leipzig Explorations is on literatures in English, albeit with a strong emphasis on comparative and interdisciplinary studies. We particularly encourage essayistic writing that combines academic knowledge with passion and curiosity.
Kelman Writes Back

Literary Politics in the Work of a Scottish Writer.
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Abbreviations

For the sake of brevity, I have used the following short forms of the titles of James Kelman’s works (for full details see the bibliography):

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<td>An Eastend Anthology.</td>
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<td>The Burn.</td>
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<td>Chancer</td>
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<td>A Disaffection.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essays</td>
<td>Some Recent Attacks. Essays Cultural &amp; Political.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giro</td>
<td>Not Not While the Giro.</td>
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<td>Greyhound</td>
<td>Greyhound for Breakfast.</td>
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<td>How Late</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plays</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel Industry</td>
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Acknowledgements

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Dr. Joachim Schwend of the Institut für Anglistik at the Universität Leipzig, who supervised and guided the work on the original text of which this book is a slightly amended version, as well as providing several academic sources for the study.

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The staff of Glasgow University Library and The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, for their unfailing help, and particularly the staff of the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, who supplied me with a large
folder of material on James Kelman from Scottish newspapers and magazines.

Alasdair Gray, for his kind permission to reproduce the portrait of James Kelman on the cover of this book. It appears as published in the short story collection Lean Tales by Kelman, Agnes Owens and Gray, London: Jonathan Cape, 1985, 10.

Last, but by no means least, my family and friends whose support in many respects made this study ultimately possible.
Preface

This study was first written in 1995 under the original title of James Kelman: National Identity, Nationalism, and Internationalism in the Work of a Contemporary Scottish Writer. Although I have slightly changed the title for publication, the content remains essentially intact. Therefore, the three terms ‘national identity’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘internationalism’ contained in the original title still form the starting point, backbone and guideline for the investigation of James Kelman’s work. This is so because I feel that the time that has passed between the conception of the work and the time of writing this preface (which is April 1999) has not marred the validity of the main arguments. Moreover, only one new work by James Kelman has been published in the meantime, namely his short-story collection The Good Times (1998), and this reinforces rather than contradicts my findings (which are based mainly on his novels anyway).

However, three or even four years is a considerable time-span, both in terms of developments in scholarship and of more general events in the realms of culture, politics and society which might have a bearing on the concerns of this study. Let me therefore take the opportunity of this preface to make a few remarks regarding these developments. The most important and obviously relevant recent event was certainly the successful referendum for the establishment of a separate Scottish assembly of September 1997. Now, at long last, the Scottish nation will once again have a certain amount of control over its own affairs. Although the basic malaise of being a nation without a state still remains and with it many of the problems mentioned in this study, this may well be the first step towards a brighter future. I would argue that this recent development and what will follow from it can indeed be regarded as an – at least indirect – outcome of the more confident mood in Scottish culture and especially literature of the past years and decades, which I have commented on several times in my investigation of Kelman’s writing. In fact, the concern of Kelman (and other contemporary writers) with Scottish national identity, which I found to be at the centre of his work, certainly played a part in bringing about this new situation. If the political development was thus somehow ‘foreshadowed’ in the cultural and literary developments described in my original work, I have nevertheless tried
to integrate a few references to the recent changes where it seemed appropriate.

Also during the past couple of years a number of new or formerly overlooked scholarly publications and articles regarding James Kelman or modern Scottish literature in general have come to my notice, among them Marshall Walker’s *Scottish Literature Since 1707* (1996), Susanne Hagemann (ed), *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present* (1996, including an essay on Kelman by Simon Baker), and *Imagine a City: Glasgow in Fiction* by Moira Burgess (1998). Whereas I have included most of them in the bibliography and referred to some of them in the occasional remark or footnote, it has not been possible to include their findings systematically into this study. Although the overall situation in Scottish literary studies was thus certainly further improved, the work of James Kelman seems to me still underrepresented in academic publications and at conferences. A case in point was the *Seventh International Conference on the Literature of Region and Nation* at Germersheim, Germany in August 1998, where there were several papers on contemporary Scottish writers, among them three on Alasdair Gray alone, but none – as far as I can remember – on James Kelman (the proceedings of the conference are forthcoming in the *Scottish Studies International* series of the Scottish Studies Centre of the *Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz* in Germersheim). It is not least this fact which lets me hope that the publication of this study will be worthwhile and perhaps generate some interest.

I would like to make two further remarks on the content of the study with the benefit of hindsight, as it were. First, some people may take offence at my use of the term ‘nationalism’ in connection with the work of James Kelman. However, my understanding of the concept probably differs from what is commonly associated with the term, as I try to explain in the first chapter of this study. Although I have decided not to use it in the title – mainly to prevent misunderstandings – it still remains central to my investigation of Kelman’s writing. I do think, in fact, that it is time to free ‘nationalism’ (in a literary context, at least) of its negative, chauvinistic undertones. Second, my treatment of the Scottish Literary Renaissance of the 1920ies and 1930ies in chapter two may seem a little simplistic at places, particularly if one takes into consideration
the recent ‘remappings’ of this period in Scottish literary studies. I would like to stress, though, that in the context of my study the aim was solely to point out certain lines of a literary tradition to which James Kelman is shown to be indebted. I am confident that part of this goal is reached through my remarks on the inter-war revival.

Let me refer in conclusion to the description of this series, Leipzig Explorations in Literature and Culture, by the general editors Elmar Schenkel and Stefan Welz in expressing my hope that this book might be regarded as one of the “pioneer studies on contemporary authors”, with all the vagaries and uncertainties such an exploration of largely uncharted territory might imply, and that it may help to “break out of unproductive oppositions”, such as nationalism and internationalism, or British and ‘New English’ Literatures.

Leipzig, April 1999

Dietmar Böhnke
Introduction

There is a literary tradition to which I hope my own work belongs. I see it as part of a much wider process, or movement towards decolonisation and self-determination: it is a tradition that assumes two things, 1) the validity of indigenous culture, and 2) the right to defend it in the face of attack. It is a tradition premised on a rejection of the cultural values of imperial or colonial authority, offering a defence against cultural assimilation. Unfortunately, when people assert their right to cultural or linguistic freedom, they are accused of being ungracious, parochial, insular, xenophobic, racist.

As I see it, it’s an argument based solely on behalf of validity, that my culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that right. They may have the power to dismiss that right, but the authority lies in the power and I demand the right to resist it.

James Kelman in his Booker Prize acceptance speech in October 1994

Approaching the Topic

“Kelman Writes Back: Literary Politics in the Work of a Scottish Writer” – the subject of this study implies issues of great relevance to the current literary developments in the English-speaking world, since its focus is on a contemporary representative of a small national literature trying to find its own voice in an international context. Terms such as ‘nation’, ‘national literature’, ‘nationality’, ‘national identity’, ‘nationalism’, and ‘internationalism’ are key concepts in the continuing debate about the state of English-language literature after the decline of the Empire. The debate is summed up succinctly in the words of Linda Hutcheon:

1 Quoted in Chadwick, 10.
The centre no longer completely holds. And, from the decentred perspective, the ‘marginal’ and what I will be calling [...] the ‘ex-centric’ (be it in class, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on a new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed. The concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way, as I have argued, to that of differences, that is to the assertion, not of centralized sameness, but of decentralized community – another postmodern paradox. [Hutcheon, 12]

But the relevance of these key terms is by no means exclusively restricted to literature. After the end of the Cold War and the political disintegration of many Eastern European states more and more small nations in all parts of Europe, and indeed the world, have increasingly asserted their claim to independence and self-determination. Countries that are presently struggling with regions aspiring to nationhood on the continent include Belgium, France, Spain, and – in a more violent way – Russia, to name only a few. The final stage in the collapse of the British Empire, however, already began shortly after the Second World War. As I hope to demonstrate, such developments invariably have repercussions for national literatures.

During the past two decades or so the impact of the devolutionary process has come to be felt strongly in English-language literature. If Nobel Prizes for Literature, Booker Prizes, and their shortlists are anything to judge by, this development can not be overlooked. Salman Rushdie’s famous slogan that “the Empire writes back” is surely also an expression of the growing self-confidence of what has come to be known as the “new (English) literatures”. This self-confidence is not at all unfounded:

...as the same social and political forces that created the new nations are also the energy behind the achievement of the writers from those countries, the attention given local authors and authors from other recently independent countries is indeed the study of some of the best contemporary literature. [King, 38]
In the same book which this quotation is taken from, Bruce King goes on to argue that there could be a special reason for that:

...the increasing acceptance of writers from the new nations as some of the best authors of our time is because the problems of the new nations reflect, or serve as metaphors for, the cultural confusions and anxieties of the West in recent years. [ibid., 221]

Together with the quality of the writing, this international dimension to the national accounts for the huge success of those writers:

[They] usually combine the characteristics of nationalist literature – such as the use of local character types, regionalism and linguistic variants – with a craftsmanship, formalism, ambiguity and frame of reference of a metropolitan and international literary tradition. [ibid., 215]

Nothing could be more true for James Kelman, as will be shown in this study. Thus, although Scotland can certainly not be regarded as a “new nation”, we may see Kelman in this context.

Given the special role of Scotland within the British Empire – being on the one hand part of its colonising force and on the other itself a nation colonised by the English – it may appear rather unusual to put it in the context of former British colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean; especially since it is still not an independent nation politically (even with the inauguration of an independent Scottish parliament close at hand). However, I will argue that in the field of culture and literature there are strong parallels, and that culturally we will have to regard Scotland as independent and distinct from the rest of the United Kingdom and from England in particular. Robert Crawford, in his excellent book *Devolving English Literature*, writes that the question of how a provincial (in the positive sense of the word) literature can preserve a sense of independence while being written in the language of another, dominant culture is not only “an issue [...] crucial to modern English-language writing world-wide, but that it emerges first, and is seen most subtly and constantly, in the literature of Scotland.” [Crawford 1992, 4] One is almost tempted to regard Scottish literature as the ideal model for any research into the literature of the former members of the British Empire, because it
presents itself as “the longest continuing example of a substantial body of literature produced by a culture pressurized by the threat of English cultural domination” [ibid., 8], and has indeed had an impact on the literature of countries such as the USA, Canada, and Australia, to cite some obvious examples.  

There are also striking similarities in the development of both the new English literatures and Scottish literature. The tradition of the so-called imperial or colonial abuse of Scottish culture (particularly the attitude towards the Scottish language or accent) by the English as a theme in Scottish writing goes back at least as far as Robert Burns and includes among others Hugh MacDiarmid and his Scottish Literary Renaissance of the first half of this century.

Discussing the new national literatures, Bruce King writes:

From the mid-1960s onward there is a different perspective among some new authors who write of local life from within their community. Such fiction is realistic, makes use of local speech, detail and characters, but its significance is not explained to outsiders. Its themes concern average people in their daily routines. Rather than the large issues of nationalism, the concerns are more with coming to terms with oneself, with adapting, or with the repressed part of an individual’s life. [King, 31]

Anyone familiar with contemporary Scottish literature and with the work of James Kelman in particular will readily identify the same preoccupations and methods there.

James Kelman sees himself very much as part of the literary movement of the colonised countries:

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2 Berthold Schoene examines the position of Scotland and Scottish literature in the postcolonial context in detail in his excellent article “A Passage to Scotland: Scottish Literature and the British Postcolonial Condition” [Schoene 1995]. Cf. also Freeman 1997.
In any colonising force the greatest weapon of the imperialist culture is to wipe out the indigenous people. Take away their language. Don’t let them speak it – or else inferiorise it. Call it a dialect, patois, ‘not fit for the page’. [...] I’m only one of many people from all over the world writing from our own languages. Language can’t be separated from liberation and political struggles. [Fleming 1995]

He frequently draws parallels between his own work and that of Irish, West Indian or black writers (compare also the above quoted extract from his Booker acceptance speech). It can be said that one of his greatest concerns – together with the related issues of class and language – is imperialism. And that includes literary or cultural as well as political imperialism of the English ‘colonisers’. Most of these issues are probably best seen in the character of his third novel, *A Disaffection*: Patrick Doyle, a schoolteacher frustrated at his position of representing the values of a society that he loathes. I will demonstrate that Kelman’s preoccupation – not to say obsession – with imperialism can be followed in his work to the very narrative techniques and use of language.

It is not only this concern with imperialism, however, that makes James Kelman’s work relevant in the context of nationalism, national identity, and internationalism, but above all it is his place in modern Scottish literature. Alasdair Gray once called him “the crown prince of the Scottish avant-garde” [Weinstein, 19], while he himself is rightly believed to be its leader. The two writers together have now become almost synonymous with the new revival of Scottish fiction since the 1980s. Although James Kelman can hardly be seen as representative for all aspects of Scottish life and letters, he doubtlessly is one of the most influential figures in contemporary Scottish writing. If the Booker Prize he received in 1994 must certainly be regarded as fairly ironic, given that it is awarded by the very literary establishment Kelman does not tire to attack, it is nevertheless an outward sign of his recognition as a major “British” writer of our time.

I hope that by examining the work of James Kelman as a contemporary Scottish writer issues will emerge that relate directly or indirectly to the larger context of the new English literatures, even if the connection will not always be made explicit.
Critical and Other Sources for the Study

It has often been lamented in studies on Scottish literature that the situation in literary criticism and theory in this field is far from satisfactory (cf. e.g. Malzahn, Murray, also the introduction to Wallace 1993a). This might well have been true until the mid-1980s. Now, in 1999, however, the situation appears to have changed considerably. In 1984, in *Aspects of Identity*, Manfred Malzahn was hinting at the problems that arise when writing about recent or contemporary Scottish fiction because there is no common denominator in criticism. However, he thought that steps towards a theory of Scottish fiction or the Scottish novel were clearly discernible then. Fifteen years later it is today obvious that these ‘steps’ have been further developed, although such a theory must still be regarded as being only in its infancy.

In my study I have certainly benefitted from this improved situation. Not only did I have access to such “classic” works (at least in the sense that they have been around for some time) as F. R. Hart’s *The Scottish Novel* or Isobel Murray and Bob Tait’s *Ten Modern Scottish Novels*, but I was also able to use some basic critical literature published during the past decade or so. This included above all *Volume 4 of The History of Scottish Literature*, edited by Cairns Craig in 1987, and the recent book *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, published in 1993 (Wallace 1993a), which contains among others one of the few longer studies of James Kelman’s fiction I was able to find. Some of the most informed studies on Scottish literature are in fact to be found in Germany. I am especially indebted to publications in the *Scottish Studies series of the Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz* in Germersheim, in particular nos. 2, 8, 10 and 19 (cf. Malzahn 1984, Drescher 1989, Schwend 1990 and Hagemann 1996). I also found the publications *Scotland: Literature, Culture, Politics*, ed. Peter Zenzinger, and *Focus On: Scotland*, ed. Manfred Görlich very useful. In addition, I would like to point to the French series *Études Écossaises*, published in Grenoble since 1992. Several more recent

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3 For fuller details of the books mentioned here see the bibliography.
studies, such as Walker 1996 and Burgess 1998 were already mentioned in the preface.

Since this study is about nationalism, national identity and internationalism in the work of a contemporary Scottish writer it will inevitably at places go beyond the field of Scottish literary studies and touch upon neighbouring fields such as other literary studies, cultural studies, and sometimes even politics. This is why the following works, although not primarily dealing with Scottish literature, have also been of importance for my work: the already mentioned *The New English Literatures* by Bruce King, and *Devolving English Literature* by Robert Crawford, and in addition the volume *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha. As I tried to suggest above, there remains in spite of all improvements achieved in Scottish literary studies over the past few years still a lot of work to be done. The work of James Kelman is a case in point here. Despite the importance of the writer for Scottish literature and beyond there is as yet no full-length study of his fiction and only a couple of essays devoted exclusively to his work in various collections. So, obviously, I also had to use quite a lot of articles and reviews published in newspapers and magazines. Several of these are included in the bibliography at the end of this study. Among them, the articles by Douglas Gifford certainly stand out for their thorough insight into the current literary situation in Scotland.

It is, of course, simply impossible to name each and every influence upon a literary study like this one. Besides the books mentioned – which I believe form the backbone of my secondary sources – and a fuller list of sources to be found in the bibliography, there are always likely to have been a whole lot of influences that I am not as readily aware of. These surely include lectures and seminars I have attended both in Glasgow and in Leipzig, people I have met and talked to, books I have read, and many less easily detectable sources. The most immediate and important sources, however, are always the

4 In this context mention should be made also of Tom Nairn’s recent collection *Faces of Nationalism*, which I became aware of in time only to include it in the bibliography. Although published earlier, the same holds for Christopher Harvie’s *Scotland and Nationalism*. 
primary sources. The bibliography contains a list of the works of James Kelman I have used – which are in fact almost all of his books. In my study I have mainly concentrated on the four novels, *The Busconductor Hines* (1984), *A Chancer* (1985), *A Disaffection* (1989), and *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994), as well as on some of his short stories (in brackets here the original dates of publication).

**Structure of the Study**

Looking at the (original) topic of this study, what first meets the eye are the terms ‘national identity’, ‘nationalism’, and ‘internationalism’. That is why I chose to have a closer look at the concepts behind these terms in the first chapter. As will very soon become evident they are by no means clear-cut and raise a series of difficult questions. However, the scope of the terms is restricted here to a literary and Scottish context. So the first step will be to examine the importance of these concepts for Scotland, which will be followed by a closer look at the relationship between them and literature in general as well as specifically in Scotland. I will conclude the first chapter by suggesting possibilities to detect the importance of these issues in the work of James Kelman, which will then be developed in the following chapters.

The second chapter will be devoted to the development of Scottish literature throughout the twentieth century, and to the importance some of the developments and traditions might have for Kelman’s work. The emphasis will again be on themes connected with national identity, nationalism, and internationalism within this tradition. Here I will mainly deal with the two phases of Scottish literary “Renaissance” in this century. The first of these is of course the literary revival in Scotland during the 1920s and after, which is very much connected with the figure of Hugh MacDiarmid and his commitment to the rebirth of a Scots literary language. By the second one I mean the recent flowering of Scottish literature since the 1970s, which has increasingly come to be known as the “new” or even the “real” Renaissance (cf. Gifford 1990). James Kelman is of course one of the central protagonists of the latter.
In the subsequent chapter I will try to investigate what Scotland, Scottish national identity and Scottish nationalism mean to James Kelman, and how these issues are expressed in his works. It will be seen that he is above all a political writer – as his preoccupation with imperialism hinted at earlier already suggests – and that he very much feels a spokesman for the so-called colonised, the working class, the inarticulate. Apart from his political – and literary-cultural – convictions, his ‘Scottishness’ is best seen in his character types and above all in his language, which I will try to prove in the second part of chapter three.

Chapter four will then take a look at the international dimension to Kelman’s work. I will attempt to show that this is represented on the one hand by the universal experience of the modern city with its incapability to communicate and its emotional frustration, that Kelman so singularly depicts. On the other hand, he is international through his literary relations, models and influences, which put him in a European rather than a British context. In any case I will argue that all ‘positive’ nationalism is the foundation for true internationalism.

So I hope that the conclusion of my study will show that the concepts of Scottish national identity, Scottish nationalism and internationalism are present in the work of James Kelman, that they are often very difficult to separate, and that they take an expression in Kelman’s work which is very much his own. It is not least this what makes him such a unique writer, as I believe.
National Identity, Nationalism, and Internationalism in Scottish Culture and Literature

Nationalism creates that which internationalism enjoys. The more varied and multiple your nationalism, the richer and profounder your internationalism.

Neil Gunn in “Nationalism and Internationalism”
[Gunn, 72-73]

What are ‘National Identity’, ‘Nationalism’ and ‘Internationalism’?

The underlying principle for these three terms is obviously that of ‘nation’. Therefore, when we want to investigate the meaning of the concepts behind them, we would have to start by asking the question ‘What is a nation?’ This question, simple as it may sound, has in fact been one of the most complex and controversial problems for writers, scholars and philosophers ever since the emergence of the nation-states in the early nineteenth century. As early as in 1882 it was raised by Ernest Renan in a lecture of the same title delivered at the Sorbonne.\(^5\) Significantly, almost the whole lecture was devoted to explaining what a nation is not. This negative definition is nevertheless useful because it excludes a number of issues from the concept of nationality that have continually been used by nationalists (especially, in the negative sense of the term, by national chauvinists).\(^6\) Renan says a nation is not created by race, language, material interest, religious affinities, geography, or military necessity. It is, by contrast, “a soul, a spiritual principle.” [Renan, 19] This

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\(^5\) For an annotated translation see Bhabha, 8-22.

\(^6\) Admittedly, it also excludes some aspects, such as language, which we do consider important.
“definition” of nation is still valid for much of contemporary critical writing. The vagueness inherent in this explanation may somehow be a reflection of the basic ambiguity contained in the concept of nation itself.

The terms ‘national identity’, ‘national consciousness’ and ‘nationalism’ denote similarly ambiguous concepts. ‘National identity’ or ‘consciousness’ is closely related to the concept of nation because it really constitutes the nation in the first place, it is the ‘spiritual principle’. It is almost synonymous with cultural identity, which again is a difficult term. Yet there seems to be a consensus about the basic principles that constitute national identity:

...identity goes beyond language to shared cultural traditions and social patterns developed over long periods of time; to our relationship with our natural environment and to the complex of ideas about human life which has gradually evolved from the coming together of varied yet related living experiences.7

What is of special importance here is the idea of a continuity with the past, a legacy of memories. This emphasis on the past, on tradition seems to be at the centre of national identity.

Nationalism, not surprisingly, is equally concerned with the past: “Images of a noble past will be used to overcome a modern sense of fragmentation and loss of identity.” [King, 42] Yugoslavia is only one recent example of how events and modes of thought of the past can come to have immediate – and sometimes catastrophic – effects on the present when used to nationalist goals. There is, however, a contrasting tendency within nationalism because “nationalism is in itself a means of modernising mass society, especially through the appeal of participation.” [ibid.] So nationalism comes with a built-in conflict between modernisation and authenticity. This might also account for the different connotations the term can have. Since the end of the Second World War it has increasingly been regarded as carrying negative meanings, and this is certainly also true for the

7 Introduction to Gunn by Margery McCulloch, 2.
present situation in Yugoslavia. However, reading statements made before the Second World War – as for example the above quotation by Neil Gunn taken from an article of 1931 – one cannot help noticing the essentially positive undertones. We will have to bear this distinction in mind: “Nationalism is as necessary to life as food and drink, but chauvinism is something else.” [Tom Scott, cited in Zenzinger 1989b, 144] Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson, in their book *Literature and Nationalism*, say about the role of nationalism in today’s world:

> Today, as we approach the end of the twentieth century, nationalism is still a powerful and ambivalent force in both politics and culture. Viewed positively, it can be an enabling factor in the self-fashioning and self-determination of individuals and societies; viewed negatively, it can be seen to encourage exclusiveness and xenophobia. [Newey, ix]

Nationalism, seen as “a growing and blossoming from our own roots” [Gunn, 44], is the base for true internationalism:

> And it is only when a man is moved by the traditions and music and poetry of his own land that he is in a position to comprehend those of any other land, for already he has the eyes of sympathy and the ears of understanding. [ibid., 74]

The ideal image of internationalism is that of a garden where every nation is a flower and in the variety of flowers lies the beauty of the garden. In the same way Renan in his lecture stresses the prevalence of human culture over French, German, or Italian culture – or any other national culture for that matter. As is the case with nationalism, internationalism also has another side to it. This other side is the danger of an ever increasing centralisation of power, which might lead to tyranny and imperialism. Both Gunn’s concept of ‘true internationalism’ and the dangers of centralisation of power appear equally pertinent today as the small nations of the former communist Eastern Block disentangle themselves from a faceless, centralised control and seek to rediscover their distinctive cultural roots, while the West moves somewhat uneasily towards greater European economic and political unity, simultaneously insisting on the preservation of individual national identity. [ibid., 6]
Obviously, the concepts behind the terms ‘national identity’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘internationalism’ are somewhat blurred. The question seems to be not so much what these concepts are, but what every individual understands by them. Not only do they contain a basic ambivalence, but they are also often used with contrasting connotations. Moreover, it is rather difficult to separate them clearly, as the following statement demonstrates: “National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.” [Frantz Fanon, cited in Bhabha, 4] The movement in literature and criticism, therefore, goes away from the problematic unity of the nation to the articulation of cultural difference in the construction of an international perspective. This is why, when investigating the concepts of ‘national identity’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘internationalism’ in a specific work of literature one should look at the texts concerned and try to find out how certain aspects in them relate to a specific culture, and in how far they and other aspects can be seen as belonging to a wider, an international, a human culture. This is what will be attempted here. Before we will concentrate on James Kelman and his work, however, it may be necessary to say a few words on the importance of these issues for Scotland and Scottish literature in general.

Scottish National Identity, Nationalism and Internationalism

Talking about Scotland the nation always involves the danger of evoking a whole cluster of stereotypes, set images, and (subconscious) associations. The search for a ‘national character’, for ‘Scottish types’ also somehow presupposes a static image, which can never mirror a living community accurately. We will try to avoid these pitfalls, but we are aware of the difficulties. Anyway, every stereotype is thought to contain at least a grain of truth in it.

Scottish national identity is characterized by the problematic status of Scotland being a nation without a state. This situation finds its expression in the following extract from Alasdair Gray’s Epilogue to his novel 1982, Janine:
In fact Scotland’s natural resources are as variedly rich as those of any other land. Her ground area is greater than that of Denmark, Holland, Belgium or Switzerland, her population higher than that of Denmark, Norway or Finland. Our present ignorance and bad social organisation make Scots poorer than most other northern Europeans, but even bad human states are not everlasting. [Gray 1984, 345]

It has often been asserted that Scotland has never been properly integrated into the cultural values of the British state, and this is doubtlessly true. Yet the political union with England now approaching its third centenary has resulted in a basic insecurity as to what really constitutes the distinctive Scottish culture.

After the anglicisation of the Scottish middle and upper classes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the rise of the print media, and especially the press, in the second half of the nineteenth century brought back for the first time the awareness of a distinct Scottish identity to the public. Following and reacting against the parochial Scottish image of the Kailyard, the nationalist movement of the interwar years set out on a quest for the real Scotland and the true Scot, trying to create a new wholeness, a Scottish myth. They turned to the Scots language, Gaelic culture, Calvinism (if often as a concept to be attacked), Catholicism, and the Enlightenment for source material. The Second World War and its aftermath necessarily pulled Britain closer together, which resulted in a certain neglect of ‘the Scottish question’. The matter of a Scottish identity again came up powerfully during the seventies, and gained political prominence in 1979 with the referendum on devolution. Despite its failure the reconstruction of Scotland’s sense of itself continued during the eighties and nineties, even though a second chance of establishing a separate Scottish Assembly passed in 1992 with the Labour Party’s narrow defeat in the general elections. However, this was turned into a landslide victory five years later and the Labour Party kept its promise. So, finally, in September 1997 a second referendum was carried out, and this time there was no mistaking the powerful decision of the Scottish people for their own parliament (and, much less expectedly, they even voted for it to have tax-varying powers). Thus, from the year 2000 on, Scotland will once again have its own national assembly and Scottish national identity is back on the
political agenda, even if an independent Scottish state is still Zukunftsmusik.

As we see, the search for the constituents of ‘Scottishness’ has very much been a history of reinventing identity. What consequently emerges is a cultural identity that has instability at its very core, the image of ‘Caledonian antiszyzygy’\(^8\), the self-divided Scot, the basic duality of Scottishness. Other concepts (or are they cliches?) connected with Scottish identity are its democratic nature, its identification with the lower or working classes, its relative closeness to Europe, and its being somewhere at the crossroads between melting-pot metropolitan and traditional rural values. Scottish national identity remains vague and subjective, and is probably best examined in its specific expression, such as works of Scottish literature.

The history of Scottish nationalism is closely connected to the search for a Scottish identity. Following the Union of the Parliaments in 1707 and the Battle of Culloden in 1746 nationalism was exclusively restricted to literature (e.g. Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott). Until the twentieth century it was expressed only among intellectual elitists or in the above mentioned Kailyard movement. During the economic depression following the First World War the search for political power to solve the Scottish problems started. In 1928 the National Party of Scotland was founded, which merged with the Scottish Party (established in 1932) in 1934 to form the Scottish National Party. A more immediate success was certainly the cultural nationalist movement led by Hugh MacDiarmid.

Scottish nationalism can generally be seen to be cultural and above all literary in its nature rather than political. It is mainly through writers and artists that there seems to be a Scottish future separate from an English one. Today there is still a strong political nationalism

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\(^8\) This term was first coined by G. Gregory Smith in his study *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) and subsequently taken over by MacDiarmid as one of the key terms in his concept of Scottish national identity. It is meant to describe the schizophrenic nature of the Scottish soul and the bringing together of opposites.
in Scotland, with the SNP holding quite a considerable share of the votes, and this was certainly important for the success of the 1997 referendum. Yet especially after the two disappointments of 1979 and 1992 it appears to have been above all the writers who secured the continuity of a distinct Scottish culture, and they will surely continue to do so even when the Scottish parliament has taken up work (one should not forget that its powers will be quite considerably limited).

There is a point to be made, in fact, for the 1997 referendum having been an outcome of, among others, precisely the cultural renaissance in Scotland since the (late) seventies. It is also in the literature and especially in the literature of the West of Scotland where we can see the preoccupation with the vernacular language most clearly, which has a special importance for Scottish nationalism: “The nationalist [...] attempts to reverse the status of local and standard English, seeing in the former the language of the people and in the latter the language of the coloniser.” [King, 53] It will be shown later that James Kelman in particular is very much concerned with this status of language.

Scottish nationalism is certainly also strengthened by the image of the Scottish nation fighting as one man against bad odds and opposing an external enemy, which are the English ‘colonisers’, the ‘Auld Enemy’. So in a way, the situation of stateless nationhood that seems to be at the centre of Scottish identity spurs rather than flaws nationalism.

Internationalism is based on a positive notion of nationalism, as we have argued earlier. Thus Scottish nationalism also has an international dimension. Charles Haws, in his study “The Dilemma of Scottish Nationalism in Historical Perspective” [in Drescher 1989], argues that there is a duality in twentieth-century intellectual nationalism in Scotland: on the one hand it is concerned with Scotland’s demotic roots but on the other hand its attitude is one of cosmopolitan opportunism. It is concerned with Scotland and its institutions but it expresses a ‘big picture’ as it transcends purely Scotland. The same ambivalent attitude has already been observed with the nationalists of the interwar Scottish Renaissance. There the concentration on personal liberation and the removal of old taboos went hand in hand with nationalist concerns such as the rediscovery of the Scots vernacular. Moreover, many of the protagonists of the literary revival sought their personal liberation outside Scotland,
among them Edwin Muir, Naomi Mitchison and Lewis Grassic Gibbon.

Scottish internationalism indeed has a much longer history. In the times of armed conflicts with England, Scotland was always looking to the continent for its allies, the ‘Auld Alliance’ with France being only the most obvious example. Since the beginning of the political domination of Scotland by England the coexistence of three languages – English, Scots and Gaelic – has very much contributed to Scottish internationalism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Scottish writers ‘invented’ British Literature as opposed to English Literature, as Robert Crawford has argued. Starting at about the same time (especially following the Highland Clearances of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), emigration and worldwide travel have now become a very common Scottish experience, bringing an international dimension into Scotland’s own sense of identity. With the industrialisation Glasgow and the West of Scotland became one of the most important industrial centres in Britain. This brought with it a variety of modernising and internationalising tendencies. Glasgow was then, and certainly still is today, closer to other industrial cities than to the rest of Scotland and housed a notably cosmopolitan, organic intelligentsia. This does not only apply to literature but to the other arts as well, if one thinks, for instance, of the Art Nouveau painter, designer and architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, who lived and worked in Glasgow at the turn of the century.

Seen against this background it is not surprising to find that many of the internationally renowned Scottish writers of the present, including Alasdair Gray and James Kelman, live in or around Glasgow.

It thus has been made clear that ‘national identity’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘internationalism’ are very much interdependent concepts, and maybe even more so in a Scottish context. It also emerged that they are not clearly separable into ‘political’ and ‘cultural’, but that,
conversely, culture and particularly literature is at times instrumental in keeping alive the national identity of a community. In the following the problems of how literature, and specifically Scottish literature, relates to the nation and connected issues will be dealt with in more detail.

### National Identity, Nationalism, Internationalism and Scottish Literature

There is no fine nationality without literature, and [...] there is no fine literature without nationality.

W.B. Yeats, 1889

*Nation and Narration* is the title of a collection of essays on the relation between nations and their literatures or discourses [Bhabha 1990]. It argues that this relation is an inter-relatedness, that it is impossible to divorce the nation from narration (the term ‘narration’ is roughly used in the sense of ‘discourse’), because at the very centre of the nation there is narration, there is the myth of the origin of the nation. The political concept of the nation itself has a fictional quality. Literature thus is nation’s alter ego:

Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role. And the rise of European nationalism coincides especially with one form of literature – the novel. [Brennan, 49]

Only through narration can the nation assert its identity. Thus nationalism is also largely dependent on literature. Simon During writes in his essay “Literature – Nationalism’s Other?”:

It is becoming a commonplace that the institution of literature works to nationalist ends. [...] nationalism is [...] the battery of discursive and representational practices which define, legitimate, or valorize a specific nation-state or individuals as members of a nation-state. [During, 138]
Similar parallels between aspects of the nation and literature have been drawn by a number of scholars. Commenting on John Gibson Lockhart, Thomas G. Richardson states that because of the spiritual nature of the nation

writers must turn to the associations of mind and feeling, turn to character [...] Literary character becomes a metaphor for national identity. [...] The truth of national character, then, [...] lies in the metaphors of literature built on associations rather than in political organization. [...] The process of reinventing identity comes through the art of literature, through the artist’s ability through his metaphors to get at depth of feeling, to stir the reader in a way politics, history, and economics cannot.

[Richardson, 119-20 + 125]

One of the most interesting remarks on the inter-relatedness of nation and literature has been made by Manfred Malzahn in his study Aspects of Identity: he compares the function of a literary work for the nation to the function of a dream for an individual. Being a product of an individual produced within the framework of a nation or community, the literary work can function, he argues, to restore the balance of national personality or consciousness or the national psyche.

[Malzahn, 16] It would be possible, then, to refer elements of individual works to an abstract national consciousness. This is also what we will try to do with the work of James Kelman. But first of all it needs to be examined how this inter-relatedness of nation and literature manifests itself in Scottish Literature.

Die schottische Literatur bietet sich in exemplarischer Weise als Ausgangsliteratur an, um der Frage nachzugehen, wie sich das Bemühen um die Wahrung und Stärkung nationaler, oder, einengend, regionaler, Identität, die Suche nach dafür geeigneten Ausdrucksformen, folglich die Legitimität kultureller und nationaler Eigenständigkeit im literarischen Bereich niederschlägt und manifestiert. [Drescher, 14]10

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10 “Scottish Literature is ideally suited as a starting point for a consideration of the way in which the struggle for the preservation and strengthening of national and regional identity [...] is manifested in the realm of literature.” (my translation, slightly abridged)
What makes Scottish literature so ideally suited for the study of national elements in literature is again, arguably, Scotland’s status as stateless nation. Since it is not a nation politically, its national identity has to find other ways of expression. And here, as we have argued earlier, literature presents itself as the ideal surrogate. It is of course not as simple as that, because if the idea that literature reflects a national identity is perfectly tenable, the idea that it should conform to it certainly is not. And moreover, the question of what actually constitutes Scottish Literature remains still unanswered. Yet the fact that Scottish national consciousness is somehow reflected in Scottish literature will hardly be debated.

It was through the literary nationalism of the interwar years that the Scottish question became a political issue for the first time since the Jacobite uprisings. It is today again through literature – and culture in general, if we think of the International Edinburgh Festival – that Scotland as a nation is noticed on the continent and beyond. At times, though, the task of the writer in finding expression for Scottish national identity seems to be a painful experience:

To find the cracked and strangled Scottish voice and lend it healing speech will take the Scottish novelist on a journey through a mental landscape disfigured by all the “horrors” of self-inflicted silences. But no matter where it is finally heard, the sound of that new-found voice will always be recognised as unmistakably ours. [Wallace 1993b, 231]

Yet it has been argued that it is precisely because of the divisions in Scottish reality that there is a fairly coherent body of fiction at present.

One field of literature where the importance of the national question is felt most strongly by the Scottish writer is the problem of the use of language. Cairns Craig writes in the introduction to Volume 4 of The History of Scottish Literature:

[For all Scottish writers, as for few English writers until recently, the issue of language has an overwhelming significance that sets their writing quite different problems from those posed to the English writer. Few Scottish writers are not bilingual and few have not experimented in writing in two of the country’s languages. The language of literature, for}
every Scottish writer, is a matter of choice, and those choices form an integral part of the act of writing. In some cases this can be a powerful limitation, a fissure in the web of imagination which the writer cannot overcome; but in others it is the source of a linguistic vitality which has become the hallmark of much contemporary Scottish writing. [Craig 1987, 3-4]

James Kelman clearly belongs to the latter group, and it will be shown that his handling of language is indeed at the core of his ‘nationalism’. It is not only the three major languages of Scotland that a Scottish writer has to choose from, but he must take into account – more than the English writer – a lot of different varieties such as traditional dialects, urban speech, Scottish English, Standard Scots etc., which all coexist and influence each other. At the same time he has to make a decision as to which audience he is trying to reach and consequently to which extent to adjust his language for comprehensibility’s sake. James Kelman has managed this tightrope walk masterfully.

For all the Scottishness of contemporary Scottish literature, it is by no means isolated from English and world literature, as it was demonstrated in the introduction to this study. Peter Zenzinger makes that point in his essay “Contemporary Scottish Fiction”, and goes on to exemplify it by hinting at the influence of Dickens on Robin Jenkins, of D. H. Lawrence on Anne Smith and of James Joyce on Kelman and Friel. Later he says:

The answer to the question of what are distinctly Scottish features, what constitutes the Scottish identity, depends on various factors, among them the individual author, the complexity of his writing and the audience he is trying to reach. [...] The eighties have shown, however, that Scottish writers have been well able to widen the aesthetic range of urban fiction and to adjust the focus onto major issues of the Thatcher era. [He concludes:] The experimental writers, in particular, have also shown that it is possible to be distinctly Scottish without excluding influences from abroad. In fact, Scottish literature has often been best when the national tradition was enriched by elements of foreign origin. [Zenzinger 1989c, 218 + 235]

Which leads us directly to James Kelman.
James Kelman and Scottish National Identity, Nationalism and Internationalism

The way ye mention Britain for instance.
What about it?
Just that there’s no separation up here. It’s always Scotland.
No just one minute and Britain the next.
What did I say?
Aw nothing really, it’s only the way ye say Britain all the time.
I didni know I was saying Britain all the time.
Aye, I mean like it was one country. See naybody does that here. Naybody.

[...] Ye talking about nationalism? Ye a nationalist?
Fin sighed. Christ Derek that’s hardly even a question nowadays I mean it’s to what extent. [...] I’ll tell ye something but; see down there, people wouldn’t know what you were on about. To them Scotland’s nothing at all, it’s just a part of England. No even a country man they think it’s a sort of city. Yous are all just paranoid as far as they’re concerned, a big chip on the shoulder.

from: “events in yer life” [Burn, 221-2]

This is probably the closest James Kelman has ever come to treating the question of Scottish nationalism overtly in his work. Usually the issues of Scottish national identity, Scottish nationalism or internationalism are much less obvious in his writings. He bears out the statement that “When a creative artist deals with a theme like national identity, the literary results will invariably present an elusive and multi-faceted picture. This is especially true for the novel.” [Malzahn, 15] This is also why many of the things that have been said above about the relation of nation to literature are not readily discernible in Kelman’s work at first sight. Saying ‘not at first sight’ implies that many of them are there all the same. He is definitely no political nationalist. In one newspaper article he is cited saying that he hates the exclusivity of all nationalisms, which in the end amount to “blood, soil and fascism” [Jack 1991]. Douglas Gifford even goes as far as to claim that to James Kelman and most of the other West of Scotland writers “the notion of communal identity, let alone Scottish
identity, is lost”. [Gifford 1985, 4] One can disagree with that, and it will be shown that Scottish national identity does manifest itself in Kelman’s writing. Moreover, it can be said that he has solved the key problem for any Scottish writer since MacDiarmid of how to be rooted in the Scottish tradition and at the same time belong to the avantgarde of world literature in his own unique way.

If the issues of national identity, nationalism and internationalism are not to be found overtly with James Kelman, how then can we try to detect them in his work? First, by turning to the past, to tradition – this concept so important for the nation and for nationalism. It will be attempted to sketch the Scottish literary tradition of this century, in which James Kelman is working, and find influences that could be of importance to his writing. Second, by having a closer look at his works and attitudes and how Scottish national identity and nationalism express themselves there. It will emerge that he can be seen as a ‘chronicler of the nation’ rather than a theoretical nationalist. And finally, by looking for the international dimension in his work, which will be found mainly in his rendering of the modern urban experience as well as in his international ‘relations’ which have ultimately brought him in the position of enclosing the universal in the local, which has rightly earned him fame in Britain and abroad.
James Kelman and the Tradition of Scottish Literature

We have seen before how important a sense of tradition, of a feeling for continuity with the past, is for a nation and for nationalism. The above quotation once again underlines that importance. Since we have further seen that literature is instrumental in keeping alive a sense of national identity, and especially so in Scotland, the tradition of Scottish Literature must certainly have implications for the work of any contemporary Scottish writer. In the case of James Kelman’s work, these implications are not strikingly evident. He himself has often asserted that he does not feel part of a tradition in this sense within his own culture: “As a young writer there were no literary models I could look to from my own culture. There was nothing whatsoever. I’m not saying these models didn’t exist. But if they did then I couldn’t find them.” [Essays, 82] For his purposes, it appears, literature might as well have been invented yesterday. On the other hand, the sense of there being no tradition seems to be a general characteristic of the Scottish writer. Douglas Gifford writes:

The dilemma of the Scottish writer – not just the writer from Glasgow – seems to consist in the fact that he exists – from Ramsay and Burns to Hogg and Scott to Stevenson and the Renaissance writers – in a literary environment which fails to inform him. [...] so another paradox results that there is a Scottish fictional tradition, but that that tradition is precisely about the writers repeated sense of their [sic.] being no tradition. [Gifford 1985, 8]
By looking at the development of twentieth-century Scottish literature and paying special attention to the themes of Scottish national identity, nationalism and internationalism, we hope to sketch that tradition and possibly detect some of the models for James Kelman that he says he could not find.

The Scottish Literary Renaissance

The Scottish literary revival during the interwar years has arguably been one of the most important and influential cultural movements in Scotland of this century. The question when it actually started is less clear. The steady decline in Scottish language and literature begun in the seventeenth century led at the beginning of the twentieth century to the discussion whether there was in fact anything like a Scottish Literature. Towards the end of the nineteenth century many saw Scotland as characterized by the parochial-nationalist pabulum of the Kailyard and the static, pastoral vision of national identity which this included. Until today Scotland has never been quite able to free itself completely from this image. Yet already at the beginning of this century there was a strong opposition against that situation among

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11 Marshall Walker explains the term (meaning ‘cabbage patch’) as follows: “Kailyard writing celebrates the parish minister and his flock of village worthies, the honest farmer and the everyday decencies of a church-going community. Although death, disease, and unacceptable outsiders intrude, the Kailyard world is remote from the tentacles of nineteenth-century industrialism with its poverty, alienation and high mortality rate. Essentially nostalgic, such writing is an idealized projection of early Romantic views of the beneficent power of nature over people who were disposed to live simply and morally in an achievable, detached Arcadia.” [Walker, 167]

12 This view is certainly not entirely justified, if we think of figures such as R. L. Stevenson (who besides being one of the greatest Scottish writers ever, was also notably and characteristically a great international writer) and others. But it remains true that the Kailyard dominated the image of Scottish literature and culture at the end of the nineteenth century.
writers and intellectuals. But authors willing to write seriously about Scotland faced a number of problems: the difficulty to find a Scottish voice, with the Scottish tradition being ultimately obscured; the lack of attention to social reality; the want of an audience interested in serious Scottish literature; in short, the difficulty to find a literary identity. In spite of these problems several novelists took the challenge, among them – despite the associations with the Kailyard in his work – J. M. Barrie (*Sentimental Tommy* and *Tommy and Grizel*, 1896/1900), Neil Munro (*Gillian the Dreamer*, 1899), George Douglas Brown (*The House With the Green Shutters*, 1901), and George MacDougall Hay (*Gillespie*, 1914). The movement became known as the anti-Kailyard, because these novels painted a deliberately bleak picture of Scottish society and projected the conflict between the Scottish community and the creative artist into fictional form. The use of such an anti-pastoral mode, however, involves the danger of becoming, through the detachment from Scottishness, as isolated, changeless and closed as the Kailyard itself.

After the First World War concerns about the loss of cultural identity, of customs and a traditional way of life, of the knowledge of Scottish history and literature, about the loss of language were very strong in Scotland. In 1919 G. Gregory Smith’s study *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* was published. It contained for the first time the concept of ‘Caledonian antisyzygy’, which was to become so influential not only for MacDiarmid and his philosophy but also for many Scottish novels written between 1930 and 1950 and which continues to make itself felt in Scottish literature and criticism to the present day.

If it was the method of the Kailyard to particularise the universal, then it can certainly be seen as Hugh MacDiarmid’s ultimate goal – and that of the Scottish Renaissance in general – to universalise the particular. Although the whole literary revival was essentially a nationalist movement (in 1922 Grieve said: “I believe in the future of Scottish literature just as I believe in the continuance of Scottish nationality”\(^{13}\)) it is characterized by the continuous conflict and

\(^{13}\) In: *Scottish Chapbook*, No. 2, Sep. 1922, 43.
successful interweaving of national and international concerns, as will be seen below.

The beginnings of the movement can be located somewhere around the publication date of the first issue of the Scottish Chapbook (August 1922) and C. M. Grieve’s conversion to the Scots vernacular and to the name of Hugh MacDiarmid with the poem “The Watergaw” in the third issue of the same magazine.\footnote{One could with some legitimacy go back to the end of the First World War for the first signs of the Renaissance, but the later date can be justified by the immense importance of MacDiarmid and the Scottish Chapbook in this context.} At the start it was an exclusively literary movement, but it soon became inevitably politicised. For at its centre was the concern for the Scots vernacular as an expression of the national psyche (again the notion of the ‘Caledonian antiszyzygy’), and thus it aimed at regaining “the independent cultural position of Scotland in Europe”. [Grieve, 15] Internationalism and nationalism again go hand in hand. The political involvement of the Renaissance is also exemplified by the relation of several of its protagonists with the Scottish National Party. Neil Gunn and R. B. Cunningham-Graham, for example, were members of the party, while Eric Linklater was a candidate for the National Party of Scotland in 1933. However, it was mainly through the concerns at the loss of Scottish culture that the nationalism of the Renaissance found expression. Not a heroic nationalism was the aim but the creation of a climate of self-confidence, the reclamation of Scottish history and literature, a general cultural revival. The political dimension of reclaiming a Scottish national identity still is the framework for much contemporary Scottish writing.

It has been implied already that the foregrounding of the Scottishness of Scottish Literature through the recreation of Scots as a literary language was at the heart of the Renaissance’s desire to stress Scotland’s originality and individuality as a nation in its own right. MacDiarmid’s demand to go back to the roots of Scots was the programme for his own and other Renaissance writers’ exploration of the possibilities of using the vernacular to their ends. He is said to
have arrived at his rediscovery of Scots by a process of language expansion that he derived from James Joyce. Here it becomes obvious that even the recreation of national identity is only made possible through international relations and developments. So it is not surprising that MacDiarmid thought Scots not only the ideal means of expressing the national psyche, but he also found it perfectly suited for his modernism: “The Scots Vernacular is a vast storehouse of just the very peculiar and subtle effects which modern European literature in general is assiduously seeking.” [Scottish Chapbook, March 1923, 210] Margery McCulloch concludes: “Clearly, for Grieve at this stage, the Scots language was now able to satisfy both the European orientation of the literary renaissance and the need to explore Scottish identity, both literary and cultural.” [McCulloch 1987, 123]

Not all Renaissance writers joined MacDiarmid in his plea for Scots as a literary language. Edwin Muir, basing his arguments on the notion of the basic division in the Scottish character (Scotsmen feel in the Scottish tongue and think in standard English), says: “a Scottish writer who wishes to achieve some approximation to completeness has no choice except to absorb the English tradition” because “in Scotland, he will find [...] neither an organic community to round off his conceptions, nor a major literary tradition to support him”. [ibid., 128] These views led to his breach with MacDiarmid and his reputation as an essentially international writer. It will be shown below, however, that he was considerably influenced by his Scottish origins. His contribution to the literary revival, moreover, is significant. He was also concerned at the state of Scotland and Scottish culture. His vision was different from MacDiarmid’s, though: he imagined a regeneration through socialism, not nationalism. The preoccupation with socialism or communism can be observed with other Renaissance writers too, notably Lewis Grassic Gibbon. The Scottish preoccupation with the lower classes, with the dispossessed, thus joins hands with the international developments of the time.

Although Neil M. Gunn, who in 1935 together with Muir took over the place in the foreground of Scottish literary and cultural criticism (when MacDiarmid was forced to become less active in the critical debate), wrote, like Muir, mainly in English, he was much more deeply rooted in Scotland and its tradition (cf. also the several statements quoted in this study). His position was that there could be
no vital literature of universal or international significance which disregards national origins. As a middle way in the language controversy between MacDiarmid and Muir he regarded the style of Lewis Grassic Gibbon, who succeeded in injecting essentially Scottish rhythms and speech into his narrative.

However different their approach, all of the writers of the Scottish Renaissance agreed on a notion of an older Scotland, a “dear green place”.

For them, a simpler and better community of Scotland had been destroyed, and they were trying to recreate a sense of a new Scotland, that was no longer a wasteland, from the past. This was usually represented by symbols in their works, often through a central figure, like the drunk man in MacDiarmid’s A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, Chris Guthrie in Gibbon’s A Scot’s Quair, or Finn in Gunn’s The Silver Darlings. Their aim was the recreation of a metaphysical Scotland that was no longer ashamed of itself. It is here where the importance of the past for nationalism, for the recreation of a sense of national identity, emerges most clearly. Douglas Gifford has shown in his study The Dear Green Place? that this image — although today with reversed implications — continues to haunt the contemporary Scottish writer.

The importance of MacDiarmid’s Scots poetry and his, as well as Muir’s and Gunn’s, criticism for the Scottish Renaissance is unquestionable. Yet it is by no means the whole story. Joachim Schwend remarks in his introduction to Studies in Scottish Fiction: Twentieth Century that “there is much more to Scottish literature of the early 20th century than is usually comprehended in the term of ‘Scottish Renaissance’.” [Schwend 1990, 12] This is particularly true for the novels written during that time. There might not have been a special ‘Novelist’s Renaissance’, but the output and quality of novels is certainly remarkable. In order to trace themes of national identity, nationalism and internationalism in those novels it is surely not

15 ‘The dear green place’ is the translation of the Celtic name of Glasgow, Gles Chu. It is also the title of a novel by Archie Hind, and Douglas Gifford traces its importance as a literary topos in his essay The Dear Green Place?: The Novel in the West of Scotland.
possible to regard each and every novel of the time, but a look at the
most important novelists and how they elaborate these issues will be
worthwhile.

Edwin Muir’s novels are commonly regarded as less successful
forerunners to his better known critical writings such as Scott and
Scotland. The Predicament of the Scottish Writer (1936). It is
nevertheless interesting to look at his relation to Scotland. In his life
and work, Scotland occupies an ambivalent place. His emphasis on the
importance of the tradition of English literature, his lucid English
style, his extensive travels to the continent, the influences on his work
including Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Dostoyevsky, and German
romanticism, and the universal context of the human journey so
frequent in his writings make him appear the prototype of an
international writer. This is also why he has been seen to belong to the
tradition of English Literature by many literary critics. Yet the
Scottish dimension is undeniably there: the ballad tradition, the use of
pastoral landscapes (Orkney?) as metaphors for human values, the
interest in traditional communities and his preoccupation with
religion, especially Calvinism (though rejected by himself). The latter
is particularly evident in the Fall-of-Man theme he often employs in
his fiction. Here the connection to Scotland becomes even clearer,
because Scotland’s loss of nationhood can be regarded as part of that
theme. The importance of the Scottish question in his critical writings,
in the 1930s in particular, manifests his concern with the Scottish
national identity. He is, then, an essentially international writer with a
Scottish background that should not be neglected.

Tellingly, the ‘internationalist’ Muir has often been compared to
the ‘nationalist’ Neil Miller Gunn. They are close in their English
styles, their concern for traditional communities, the use of the
pastoral mode, and their preoccupation with psychology and religion.
Yet Gunn is above all the Highland novelist, rooted deeply in the
Scottish tradition. Themes like the solidarity between man and nature,
the cyclical nature of time, ancestor worship, and the life-giving
power of woman mark him as the nationalist writer. Politically, as a
member of the SNP, his sympathies with Scotland the nation were
obvious. But the nationalist upsurge in his development is basically
confined to the early 1930s and includes his novels Morning Tide, Sun
Circle and Butcher’s Broom. Being a good writer, though, always
includes transcendence of the purely national. His use of symbol and legend, the characteristic tension between realist and mythmaker as well as the significance beyond the national he achieves in his articles and essays are all proof of the universal dimension in his work. Parallelisms with D. H. Lawrence, Rilke, and Wordsworth (in particular regarding themes like individual heroism and distinction or the awareness of the past living in the present), finally, not least testify to his international quality as a writer.

Lewis Grassic Gibbon has been characterised as nationalist and as anti-nationalist respectively. “One suspects that Gibbon was torn at heart between nationalism and what he variously called communism, revolution and cosmopolitanism.” [D. D. Murison, cited in Dixon, 203] What makes him different from the novelists mentioned so far and also most interesting in respect to the work of James Kelman, is his use and defence of ‘braid Scots’ as literary medium. In his principal work, the trilogy *A Scots Quair* (*Sunset Song*, *Cloud Howe*, *Grey Granite*), he effectively applies a Scots rhythm, as well as a unique modulation of narrative voices. This trilogy has been seen as a deliberate effort to produce a national epic or myth. Especially the novel *Sunset Song* can be regarded as an investigation of the real Scotland, the central protagonist Chris Guthrie expressing the tensions of contemporary Scottish identity. His real (nationalist?) commitment, however, was his social concern – which again is also one of the hallmarks of Kelman’s work. In *Scottish Scene*, a collection of essays he published together with Hugh MacDiarmid, he writes about the Glasgow slum-dwellers:

> The hundred and fifty thousand eat and sleep and copulate and conceive and crawl into childhood in those waste jungles of stench and disease and hopelessness, sub-humans as definitively as the Morlocks of Wells – and without even the consolation of feeding on their oppressors’ flesh. [Gibbon, 137-8]

His nationalism is surely not that of the political nationalists, which has no popular base:

> It will profit Glasgow’s hundred and fifty thousand slum-dwellers so much to know that they are being starved and brutalized by Labour Exchanges and Public Assistance
Committees staffed exclusively by Gaelic-speaking, haggis-eating Scots in saffron kilts and tongued brogues. [ibid., 146]

This is so reminiscent of Kelman’s radical and cynical voice that one could get slightly distrustful of his assertion when he says “I don’t read Grassic Gibbon. I haven’t read his novels.” [McLean, 66] Be that as it may, Lewis Grassic Gibbon is certainly, of all the writers of the Scottish Renaissance, closest to Kelman in style and conviction. His ‘social nationalism’ can be easily referred to Kelman’s work.

Other Renaissance novelists who are of minor relevance in our context and thus cannot be dealt with in detail here include Eric Linklater, Naomi Mitchison, Fionn MacColla (a nationalist of the extreme variety), and Willa Muir.

The writers of the Scottish Renaissance, as will have become evident, are basically international nationalists or nationalist internationalists. The preoccupation with the recreation of a Scottish national identity is at the centre of their concerns. They either look to England and Europe for their literary models or else they feel part of some wider social or political context. However varied their genres, styles, themes, and methods may be, they joined forces in constituting in little more than twenty years a coherent and multifaceted body of literary works that brought back a Scottish literary tradition – if it was ever absent, that is – and laid the foundations for a lasting cultural revival.
The Tradition of the Glasgow Novel

Glasgow is a special city. Hardly anybody who has lived there or written about the place would disagree. The key to its literary tradition lies in the particular, and in many ways terrible, nature of the urban experience Glasgow stands for.

[Whyte, 317]

By the end of the First World War living in urban conglomerations far from traditional roots had become a common experience for most Scots. Although the Renaissance writers’ quest for a Scottish national identity somehow mirrored this loss of roots, the bleak reality of that experience only began to be reflected in Scottish literature by the mid-1930s through a tradition that has since come to be known as the Industrial or Glasgow Novel.

Edwin Muir’s Poor Tom (1932) and Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s Grey Granite (1934) can be seen as forerunners of the genre, already establishing a number of themes. The first prototypical Glasgow Novel, however, is George Blake’s The Shipbuilders (1935). Here and in James Barke’s Major Operation (1936) the possibility of the transcendence of class barriers is investigated. What emerges is an allegory of the failed marriage of the classes, which can be interpreted in the Renaissance context of a search for wholeness, mediation between opposites, healing. A basic problem of the Glasgow or Working-Class novel is seen quite clearly in these two novels: the language does not follow the leap over class boundaries, thus triggering the lasting conflict between realism and gentility, between condemnation and glorification of working class manners.

In the two novels mentioned above most of the basic themes and features of the Glasgow novel are already visible: realism is its classic mode; it shows mature adults trapped in estranged marriages, which results in a polarisation of male and female principles and ultimately in the icon of the ‘hard man’ (which establishes itself as a Glasgow stereotype in Alexander McArthur/H. Kingsley Long’s No Mean City (1935)); it depicts life during the working hours; the threat of unemployment is a crucial concern; there is no treatment of any making or operation of art; sexual guilt and socialist illusion are basic
themes; and the authors try to show us – in the worst case didactically – the appalling injustice of so much that is happening around us. This is what Beat Witschi in his study of Alasdair Gray’s fiction *Glasgow Urban Writing and Postmodernism* called the “Glasgow school of crisis”. It was in the Glasgow novel of the 1930s and after that the economic depression, which had hit the industrial parts of Scotland particularly hard, was echoed most clearly.

This tradition was continued after the Second World War by novels such as Edward Gaitens’s *Dance of the Apprentices* (1948), Archie Hind’s *The Dear Green Place* (1966), George Friel’s *Mr Alfred M.A.*, Alan Spence’s *Its Colours They are Fine* (1977)\(^{16}\), and the novels of William McIlvanney (*Docherty*, 1975, *The Big Man*, 1985 etc.). The themes of fatalism, capitulation and escape become ever more pronounced, being increasingly accompanied by the vision of imagination as a survival technique. This relates of course to the developments in Western fiction in general, yet there is a specifically Scottish variation to it. The failure to find personal expression and voice which characterises so much of Glasgow writing relates to what the writers feel is a genuine West of Scotland identity. Forms and styles, however, are mainly taken from nineteenth-century Europe.

If it is true, then, that the post-war authors forcefully reiterate the problems raised earlier in Glasgow fiction, and without the political idealism of those years, one is led to ask:

> Had the war and its aftermath left the Glasgow predicament substantially unchanged? Or had its literary tradition made so little impression on city life that subsequent writers felt they had to start over again? Only examination of the work of Hind, Kelman, Gray and their colleagues can offer convincing answers to such questions. [Whyte, 332]

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\(^{16}\) Though this is actually a collection of short stories, it comes close to being a novel by the interconnectedness of the stories and the re-appearance of characters throughout the book.
This brings us back to James Kelman, to his place in the tradition of the Glasgow novel, and to the literary revival in Scotland starting in the seventies, the "new" Scottish Renaissance.

Alasdair Gray and James Kelman – the “Real” Scottish Renaissance?

It has become commonplace to observe that the past two decades have proved the most productive and challenging period in Scottish literary culture since the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the profusion and eclecticism of creative talent across all genres and all three of the nation’s languages has led some to speak not simply of revival, but of a new – perhaps even more ‘real’ – Scottish Renaissance.17

Although Isobel Murray and Bob Tait, in 1984, discern “an ongoing Scottish Renaissance in fiction” [Murray, 9], the process has not been an entirely continuous one since the Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. Instead, there was a certain crisis in Scottish fiction during the fifties and sixties. Some writers such as James Kennaway or Muriel Spark were appropriated by the English tradition, many others, as for example Naomi Mitchison, Neil Munro, Nigel Tranter, Dorothy Dunnett, Hunter Steele, Robin Jenkins, or George Mackay Brown, turned to history in their search for the Scottish identity, and there was, of course, the stream of cynical and deterministic urban realism with its myth of a barren Scotland and its exploration of the already ossified image of the ‘hard man’. The problems Scottish writers of the 50s/60s had to confront included the familiar question of the audience to address, the problem of how to depict ways of life (such as urban industrial working-class life) that had been ignored, undervalued or sentimentalised in the past, and the difficulty of using and elaborating

17 Wallace 1993a, 1. The remark about the ‘real’ Renaissance goes back to Gifford 1990.
precedents that were scarce or dangerous in their own literary tradition.

But still, in those otherwise discouraging years for Scotland the nation – the Scottish question being largely absent from the political agenda following the Second World War – literature and art did much to keep a Scottish national identity in being. Maybe it was the discovery of the existence of North Sea oil off the Scottish coast in the seventies, and with that the prospect of an independent Scottish economy appearing more plausible, what can account for the sudden upsurge of Scottish nationalism during the seventies. For the cultural and specifically the literary revival that emerged simultaneously the situation is certainly more complex, although we have seen that cultural and political nationalism are always intertwined in one way or another.

During the past two decades or so the ‘Scottish novel’ has not only become a distinctive literary force, but at the same time it has developed into a viable critical concept. Despite the still scarce existence of book-length studies dealing with contemporary Scottish writing (cf. the introduction) a good deal of criticism is now being done on the Scottish novel and the Glasgow novel in particular (the two main protagonists of the revival in fiction, Alasdair Gray and James Kelman, being Glaswegians). The critical attention bears witness to the huge amount of creative energy at work in Scottish fiction at the moment. Considering the – in some respects – still rather bleak political, social and economic situation of Scotland today, there is indeed “a sense in which Scottish fiction prosers in inverse proportion to the difficulties of the cultural and political situation which it confronts.” [Wallace 1993a, 2] The same was true for the Scottish Renaissance of the 20s and 30s, taking place in the midst of the economic depression. So in retrospect it could be suggested that the relative decline in Scottish fiction in the 50s and 60s was precisely due to the slight sense of recovery making itself felt in the Scottish industries following the Second World War.

The growing self-confidence in contemporary Scottish fiction is again seen as giving a new impulse to the continuous recreation of a Scottish identity. While a greater awareness of a Scottish national literature is developing, the writers at the forefront of the Scottish
novel, notably Alasdair Gray and James Kelman, are trying to use the fictional tradition as well as to transcend it. Not only are they looking beyond Scotland to England or the continent for models – Kafka and Joyce for Kelman, for instance – and using international developments to their own ends – as Gray does with postmodern techniques and Kelman with the *nouveau roman* – they also elaborate Scottish traditions such as the working-class urban realism very creatively. Together with more recent writers like Janice Galloway or A. L. Kennedy they try to show escape routes from the Scottish malaise of damaged identity.

The attitude of the writers of the recent revival towards the earlier Scottish Renaissance is ambivalent. The new Scottish novel is opposed to the Renaissance’s preoccupation with myth, archaism and symbolic ancestral historicism.\(^{18}\) Yet the novelists have clearly benefitted from the explorations of phonetics, the ironic juxtapositions of standard English and Scots, and the linguistic subversion ultimately made possible by MacDiarmid’s process of language expansion. Language is again at the heart of the new revival. The two traditions of writing – on the one hand Anglo-Scottish and on the other hand vernacular Scots – originating in the revival of the twenties are still present today, and together they account for the huge variety of original writing in Scotland. Interestingly, and maybe indicative of the growing recognition of these developments outside Scotland, the prototypical representatives of each branch, George Mackay Brown

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\(^{18}\) Douglas Gifford, in his essay “Imagining Scotlands: The Return to Mythology in Modern Scottish Fiction” [Gifford 1996], on the one hand points out the continuity of this mood of distrust in Renaissance ideology and mythology since the end of the Second World War and sees the culmination of it in the works of Robin Jenkins, George Friel and James Kelman. On the other hand, he diagnoses a change in direction during the eighties (associated especially with the works of Gray, Edwin Morgan and Liz Lochhead) towards a more positive, creative thinking about identity in Scotland. For him, therefore, the ‘urban-fixated anti-historicism’ à la Kelman is a kind of cul-de-sac. Whereas we agree with Gifford’s overall argument, it is our aim here to show that Kelman’s writing does in fact owe quite a lot to tradition as well as being not a little concerned with Scottish national identity.
for the Anglo-Scottish and James Kelman for the vernacular tradition, rubbed shoulders on the shortlist for the 1994 Booker Prize, which was then awarded to James Kelman.

The quality of the new literary revival is identifiably ‘native’, it is rooted in Scotland but not confined to Scotland. There is an alertness to issues of past political and historical experience, to the limitations in the Scottish myth of dualism, to alternative linguistic representations, to ossified stereotypes of community, class and gender that is unequalled in the history of Scottish Literature. This might be the sign for a change in “a culture in which the dissonant duets may at last be giving way to a healthier polyphony.” [Wallace 1993a, 7] In any case, the “new” Scottish Renaissance once more testifies that

...by its very political and cultural nature, Scotland has produced and continues to produce a complex literature which accords with conflicting conceptions of what precisely constitutes ‘Scottishness’, let alone nationality. [ibid., 6]

It is beyond doubt that Alasdair Gray is the ‘father figure’ and the central protagonist of the new literary Renaissance in Scotland. The publication of his novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* in 1981 was almost a historic moment for the Scottish novel. It has been compared to such literary landmarks as MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) and Grassic Gibbon’s *Sunset Song* (1932). Gavin Wallace praises it in his introduction to *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*:

Here was an epic, formally adventurous, thematically profound novel synthesising realism and fantasy, in ways made familiar by – and with much of the dexterity of – writers such as Borges, Marquez, Rushdie, Grass, Pynchon et al.; yet remaining wholly faithful to a specifically Scottish tradition. And to Scottish places, or one place in particular: Gray’s science-fictional and naturalistic projection of Glasgow/Unthank marked a culmination of the creative nucleus which Glasgow, and the urban west of Scotland, had provided for novelists for much of the century, as well as providing new points of departure. [ibid., 3-4]
So once again the hallmark of the best Scottish fiction seems to be the capability to combine a sense of place, a firm rootedness of characters in a social reality with the imaginative power to transform this experience of a particular world into a vision of the nature of reality, in short: the combination of the local with the international. By applying postmodern techniques such as metafiction and inter-art discourse and by a re-vision of past models of Glasgow writing, Gray succeeds in defining Scottishness as part of a western industrial community. Although this Scottish identity remains fragmented – and it may be precisely this fragmentation what makes Gray’s postmodern techniques so ideally suited for representing it – he points out where to look for an exploration: “The world is only improved by people who do ordinary jobs and refuse to be bullied.” [Lanark, 554] And:

I had been taught that history was made in a few important places by a few important people [...] But the Famous Few have no power now but the power to threaten and destroy and history is what we all make, everywhere, each moment of our lives, whether we notice it or not. [1982 Janine, 340]

There could hardly be any better programme for the fiction of James Kelman, who is above all concerned with “people who do ordinary jobs” and is almost obsessed to make us notice the drama contained in “each moment of [their] lives”.

Coming back to the beginning of this chapter and the question of the influence the Scottish literary tradition of the twentieth century might have on James Kelman’s work, there seem to emerge – now, after having sketched that tradition – three main fields of influence that can be traced, more or less clearly, in his writings.

First, the legacy of the Scottish Renaissance, however much denied by James Kelman himself, is certainly discernible. The search for an authentic voice characterises James Kelman’s fiction as much as it did Hugh MacDiarmid’s poetry. It is interesting to note, in this connection, that MacDiarmid in the 1930s spoke of a project (though it was never developed) to write a collection of urban-industrial poems in Scots which would, he suggested, “cut out purely intellectualist pyrotechnics” in order to articulate without condescension an authentic urban working-class experience. [cf. Wood, 339] James Kelman can be said to be at last carrying out this project in his novels.
and short stories. The similarities between Kelman and the Renaissance novelist Lewis Grassic Gibbon have been hinted at earlier. The breaking down of the distinction between narrative and dialogue, which is one of Kelman’s and Gibbon’s central technical devices, has indeed a longer tradition. It was employed for the first time at the beginning of the century by George Douglas Brown and subsequently taken over by Grassic Gibbon and – to a lesser extent – Naomi Mitchison. Above all, however, it is the peculiar interplay of nationalism and internationalism so typical for the Scottish Renaissance that is echoed forcefully in James Kelman’s writings, as will be shown in the following chapters.\(^\text{19}\)

Second, and maybe more obviously, the tradition of the Glasgow novel is of importance to James Kelman. He is indeed often subsumed under that tradition: “As for directions [of the Glasgow novel], I don’t think we’ll have many better realist novels than James Kelman’s *The Busconductor Hines.*” [Lindsay, 4] In talking about the importance of this tradition for James Kelman we will have to differentiate, though. It is above all the negative example of that tradition and the reaction against it which make it important. In the same essay from which the quotation of James Kelman’s feeling of relative isolation within his own culture was taken (cf. the beginning of this chapter), we also find the following passage:

How do you recognise a Glaswegian in English literature? He – bearing in mind that in English Literature you don’t get female Glaswegians, not even women – he’s the cut-out figure who wields a razor blade, gets moroculous drunk and never has a single solitary ‘thought’ in his entire life. He beats his wife and beats his kids and beats his next door neighbour. And another striking thing: everybody from a Glaswegian or working-class background, everybody in fact from any regional part of Britain – none of them knew how to talk!

\(^{19}\) Margery Palmer McCulloch points out additional parallels of Kelman’s writing (especially in *A Disaffection*) with – for example – MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and argues in general for a view of the current revival in Scottish literature not as a “new” Renaissance but rather a second phase of the early twentieth-century revival. [McCulloch 1994]
What larks! Every time they opened their mouth out came a stream of gobbledygook. Beautiful! [Essays, 82]

Now that of course is nothing else but a perfect rendition of the stereotype of the Glasgow 'hard man', established by the novel *No Mean City* and reiterated so many times in the history of the Glasgow Novel. By arguing so strongly against it, James Kelman not only acknowledges – if unwittingly – his knowledge of exactly that tradition he felt so excluded from, but he also points to the importance it has on his work: his rejection of the image of the 'hard man' is borne out in his own characters, who are a subversion of exactly that stereotype. This is why Christopher Whyte, in the essay “Imagining the City: The Glasgow Novel” asserts:

> The strength and cohesion of the Glasgow tradition emerges most clearly when viewed from its recent expansion in the work of Gray and Kelman. Nothing could be more mistaken than to see in Gray [or Kelman, for that matter] a flame of genius inexplicably lifting a provincial tradition to international level. His work builds on the precarious triumphs and noble failures of earlier Glasgow writers and nourishes itself on similar problems. [Whyte, 317]

Kelman uses but transcends all previous writing about the working classes: he manages to depict humanity’s existential condition through the alienation of “people doing ordinary jobs”.

Third, as the last remark reminds us, there is the contemporary tradition of the new literary revival. James Kelman is less hesitant in acknowledging its importance for him: “It was only later on, after I had started writing, that I had the good luck to meet up with folk like Alasdair Gray, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead and others.” [Essays, 82] It is of course extremely difficult, if not impossible, to pin down the importance of such recent developments, apart from the above mentioned quotations from Gray maybe, and an encouraging sense of a general literary revival. One particular influence was that of the Scots poetry of Tom Leonard. After reading some pieces by him
Kelman gave up the idea of writing phonetically, because he saw, as he himself acknowledged, that there were other people who obviously did the same thing better and were much more involved than himself. It is not easy to say whether James Kelman would have been as successful as he is today without the context of a more general revival in Scottish culture, but it may be doubted.

If we now see the above mentioned influences as placing James Kelman in a wider context of a Scottish literary tradition, and if we presume the importance of such a tradition for the Scottish national identity, then we might conclude that Kelman’s place in that tradition constitutes not a small part of his ‘nationalism’.

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20 He had tried to do that – and not unsuccessfully – in the short story “Nice to be nice”, published in Giro.
The Scottish Chronicler: Subject Matter and Language in Kelman’s Fiction

... only inside his own tradition can a man realise his greatest potentiality; just as, quite literally, he can find words for his profoundest emotion only in his own native speech ...

Neil M. Gunn in “On Tradition”

Speaker for the Inarticulate – Kelman’s Political and Literary Convictions

James Kelman is basically a political writer. As we will see in the following, he is not only deeply concerned about the dispossessed of British society, he also enacts this concern in his literature, to be observed in his characters and subject matter, in his narrative techniques, and in his use of language. It will be examined at the same time in how far we can regard this political concern as being in any way ‘Scottish’ or even ‘nationalist’. It will emerge that he is a ‘chronicler of the nation’ – or of that considerable part of the nation which are the lower classes in the (post)industrial centres of the West of Scotland – rather than a ‘nationalist’ in the strict sense of the word. The forming of – or at least the search for – an identity for that part of the nation is clearly his aim. To be able to understand better what James Kelman is trying to do in his writings, we will have a look at his political and cultural convictions first.

Seeing James Kelman as a political writer does not mean that he is active in Scottish or British politics. On the contrary, he denies any interest in ‘Scottish problems’ as such, and says about his relationship to party politics: “Scotland’s broad Left is happy with social realism; unless you’re doing social realism they get a bit worried, and can’t

21 In: The Scots Magazine, XXXIV, No. 2, Nov. 1940, 133.
really handle you” [Jamie 1989]. Yet in any other respect he is a political animal, a radical, an anarchist, far to the left of any party’s lines. This inevitably influences his writings: “By writing about your culture”, he says, “you can’t help but be political.” [Durrant’s Monthly 1991, 21] Essentially, for him, “that’s the difficulty – keeping [the politics] off the page.” [McNeill, 8]

In the area of the Clyde, a quarter of the population is unemployed, 67% of which live at or below the poverty line. State bureaucracy and oppression are an integral part of everyday life. This is the world of Kelman’s characters, the world of Rab Hines, of Tammas and Sammy Samuels, the world Patrick Doyle comes from and still identifies with, even if he is no longer part of it. People like them are not very often the material of serious literature. James Kelman’s artistic programme is to be their voice, to show the rest of society, who refuse to see what is going on, that “for hundreds of thousands of people throughout Great Britain the last decade or more has been a form of nightmare.” [Steel Industry, 12] He has been, for most of his life, part of that ‘working’-class culture (it is only during the last decade or so that he has been able to make a living by writing) and it is certainly this experience that lends his writing its power:

Other Scots have portrayed working class life, but no one has done it so faithfully. Kelman is writing from within, and so strong is this first sympathy that you feel he must have experienced what he writes about, even if the character in question is twice his age. In this way, he has given a voice to the inarticulate, making art out of their everyday life and work, and, most especially, out of a faithful representation of their speech. [MacDougall, 499]

Such representation of the dispossessed in literature has always raised issues of class, language and artistic control, which is why Kelman will never “keep the politics off the page”.

Apart from being an essentially political writer, James Kelman also lives his convictions. He has been involved for the past couple of years in a campaign for victims of asbestosis which took most of his time without earning him any money. He was active in the 1990 Workers’ City campaign which was directed against the promotion of Glasgow as European City of Culture, which he believed to be elitist
and doing Glasgow more harm than good. He never tires to take up
the case for "people doing ordinary jobs", as in his pamphlet *Fighting
for Survival. The Steel Industry in Scotland*. In his life and work,
Kelman can be said to bear out the observation that

> At a time when re-orientation of social and communal values
has become a necessity for the creation of a more humane
society, when cultural and/or social identities, both of
majorities and minorities, have to be re-defined there can be
no 'balanced view' in writing.  

Kelman’s obsession with imperialism that was hinted at earlier and
that is expressed so strongly in his concern for the dispossessed of
British society is directly important for his literary work, because it
has a cultural and specifically a literary dimension. He believes in a
cultural imperialism of English Literature which consists in the fact
that “90% of the literature in Great Britain concerns people who never
have to worry about money at all.” He goes on to complain:

> It would be nice to believe that ordinary women and men were
being given every available opportunity to create a literature
of poetry, prose, drama and song about homeless folk having
to survive out in the streets or living off the edges of rubbish
dumps; a literary art being created out of life on
supplementary benefit, concerning itself with drug addiction,
glue sniffing, alcoholism, young people of 18 being forced
onto the streets; stories, poetry and song about old people
surviving the outrageous costs of medicine, heating and public
transport; the latest round of humiliations being endured in the
offices of the DHSS or the Gas Board or the Housing
Department or wherever the daily humiliation happens to be
occurring this morning; police brutality, trades union
corruption and political corruption, and everything else that
comprises what reality actually is in this country. Are we
really surprised that these things cannot be found in the
literature promoted in schools and in the media generally? The
fact is that we are consistently encouraged to accept that they
have no place in English literature. [Anthology, 4-5]

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22 Witschi, 238. The reference of ‘balanced view’ is to Hart 1978.
This is no less than James Kelman’s artistic credo concerning subject matter of literature. He realises it in his works, “the latest round of humiliations being endured in the offices of the DHSS” by Sammy in How Late it Was, How Late, as well as “police brutality”, which leaves him blind; the problems with the “Housing Department” being explored in the short story “Nice to be nice” [in Giro]; “young people of 18 being forced onto the streets” in “Ten Guitars” [ibid.]; “trades union corruption” being depicted in The Busconductor Hines; in short: by portraying the everyday life of ordinary men and women.

Kelman argues – certainly polemically and not always objectively – that the cultural imperialism of English Literature is not only visible in the subject matter. The very narrative technique symbolises it: “this ‘third party voice’ they use to tell their stories is totally biased and elitist, economically secure, eats good food and plenty of it, is upper middle class paternalist.” [McNeill, 5] There is a dialogue going on between author and reader, he implies, where they know more about the character (and especially if it is a working-class character) and his world than he himself. Kelman violently rejects that. For him the only possibility is absolute immediacy, absolute intimacy with his characters in order to achieve absolute authenticity. We will see how he solves this problem of the narrative voice in his very own way. In doing so, he is fully aware of the political implications: “Formally, I know that my work is extremely political because of the way that I use narrative, the way that it interferes with standard English literary form, that in itself is a very political act.” [Durrant’s Monthly 1991, 21] It is by no means a negation of literature, as it has been remarked by one reviewer, it is only a negation of what he takes as the values of English Literature. The voice of English Literature is, he believes, “totally barren; because it gets rid of people and produces culture, the voice of A culture.” [McLean, 68]

Much along the same lines, Kelman thinks that language is not represented truthfully in English Literature. Standard English always is the superior language, and the characters aspire to a ‘proper usage’ of it, local speech invariably being represented in phonetic transcription and looked upon as being inferior. It is what he calls the “big paper bag of English Literature of How Do You Talk.” [ibid., 72] In his own works he reacts against that as forcefully – and creatively – as against the other manifestations of English literary imperialism. His
use of language is one of the hallmarks of his fiction, as we will see. Taking the extent of Kelman’s hatred of English Literature into consideration, it will be no surprise to find that he should arrive at a statement like the following:

I mean the mainstream writers, it’s total rubbish. Just look at the stuff that’s being produced, take the great contemporary English writers of say the last forty years – they’re all fucking hopeless! – I mean they’re embarrassing, people like Golding and that, they’re total second-raters, Waugh and Graham Greene and all them, they’re fucking second rate, you know. You’d be laughed out of world literature if you were to put forward things like Philip Larkin and all that: it’s junk, total second rate junk. [ibid., 68]

It is important to keep Kelman’s radical views, as they are expressed in statements like this one, in mind to be in a position to understand why he does certain things in his fiction.

The strategy underlying Kelman’s writings and expressing the above mentioned views is one of subversion. A subversion of any kind of conventional (English) literary practice whatsoever, including plotting, scene-setting, atmospheric description, the structure of beginning-middle-end, and ‘British’ value systems of good vs evil, niceness vs nastiness etc. In a way, he is a literary terrorist, for he asserts that “a crucial aspect of terrorism, in a sense, is subversion, is art.” [McNeill, 3] One aspect of this subversion and an important part of his ‘terrorism’ is the conscious effort to elevate everyday life, to create art out of the daily routines of ordinary people. His challenge to the middle class reader is to see the drama contained in those lives, and to empathise sufficiently to accept the validity of – for example – the hierarchy in Glasgow’s billiards and snooker world as equally meaningful as anybody’s, say the footballer’s, writer’s or lawyer’s (cf. his short story “Remember Young Cecil” in Giro).

Kelman renders the dramatic quality of the most ordinary person’s life in different ways. One way is to show the danger involved in many industrial jobs, where people are used to having to avoid serious injury or even death several times a day. This is seen, for instance, in his novel A Chancer, when Tammas tries to start a new job in a copper rolling factory and only narrowly escapes being seriously hurt
when his shoe bursts into flames. Another example is the short story “The Bevel” (published in Giro). The best example of the rendition of a similar experience in Kelman’s work so far is certainly the short short story “Acid”, which, because of its shortness, can be quoted here in its entirety:

In this factory in the north of England acid was essential. It was contained in large vats. Gangways were laid above them. Before these gangways were made completely safe a young man fell into a vat feet first. His screams of agony were heard all over the department. Except for one old fellow the large body of men was so horrified that for a time not one of them could move. In an instant this old fellow who was also the young man’s father had clambered up and along the gangway carrying a big pole. Sorry Hughie, he said. And then ducked the young man below the surface. Obviously the old fellow had had to do this because only the head and shoulders – in fact, that which had been seen above the acid was all that remained of the young man. [Giro, 115]

Another of Kelman’s devices to bring out that drama of the moment is his punctuation. He once commented on the opening sentence of The Busconductor Hines, and why it is formed by two sentences separated by a comma:

The principle part of that sentence is the first one which is ‘Hines jumps up’. [...] Why did he jump up? It so happens he jumps up because his wife is about to lift over a pot of boiling water – an inadequate pot. That is the spark of life. In terms of drama that is all that is necessary, nothing else. It can’t be a semi-colon, cause that puts too much emphasis onto it. It’s got to begin in a really unemphatic way; even a semi-colon makes it emphatic, you know. It’s got to be something that’s so everyday. [...] But that’s exactly the kind of thing I was after, that drama, the drama of that moment, from something that was so mundane, so everyday. [McLean, 77-8]

Similarly careful punctuation can be observed in the opening sentence of How Late it Was, How Late: it contains no less than six semi-colons, one colon and four commas. It is always the minute details that convey this sense of drama to the reader. Here in his latest novel there is an additional device to make the reader aware of the details: Sammy’s blindness takes on the function of a magnifying glass,
Letting us perceive each of his actions as in slow motion. Kelman says that it is only through the concrete that you get the terror, and it really never quite comes out directly. Douglas Gifford sees Kelman’s essence exactly in this “suggestion that to bring the full horror out other than indirectly would be to face the impossible to accept.” [Gifford 1991, 6]

The importance of Kelman’s (more or less radical) political and cultural views for his literary work can hardly be overestimated. Indeed, most of the features that distinguish him as one of Britain’s major writers can somehow be traced to his underlying convictions. In the following we will see how his writings mirror in particular his rejection of conventional practices of subject matter, narrative voice and use of language.

Musing and Surviving: Kelman’s Characters and Subject Matter

In James Kelman’s novels we hardly ever find anything like a ‘real’ plot. Nothing much ever happens. This led one reviewer, in a rather polemical article that tried to imitate Kelman’s style, to complain: “Oan it goes, is it must tae be a book, fur, fuck me, three hunnern thirty seven pages a tripe like this. Nae real story, mind you, nuthin ye could analyse in a properly Proppian way.” [Daly 1993, 14] Kelman has always been a controversial writer, and people believing in the values which he so fiercely attacks obviously will not be among his admirers. While plot is virtually absent from his books, Kelman’s subject matter is – apart from the daily routines hinted at earlier – above all represented by his characters.

With Kelman, character is not merely plot, but texture, movement and tone itself. Reflections are everything, actions or development nothing. There might be a strong Scottish element in this emphasis on character and reflection. James Hogg’s Confessions of a Justified Sinner is often mentioned in connection with Kelman’s work – one
critic said it “serves as an apt summary for Kelman’s oeuvre”\textsuperscript{23} – and Thomas G. Richardson quotes John Gibson Lockhart:

The essence of all nationality, however, is a peculiar way of thinking, and conceiving, which may be applied to subjects not belonging to the history of one’s own country, although it certainly is always most in place when exhibited in conjunction with the scenery and accompaniments of Home...

[Richardson, 118]

He concludes from this – as we have seen earlier – that “writers must turn to the associations of mind and feeling, turn to character [...]. Literary character becomes a metaphor for national identity.” [ibid., 119] Taken that Kelman’s characters thus may reveal some sense of Scottish national identity, it is interesting to read what Kelman thinks are Scotland’s distinct philosophical and literary concerns: “Kelman defines these as being ‘to do with the self-centredness of character and existential domination’.” [Lawson 1991] The characters in his novels, notably Patrick Doyle in \textit{A Disaffection}, are certainly very much self-centred, and the dominance of their day-to-day existence – and of existentialism – is strongly felt.

Character has been seen as a strength of British literature in general, and especially so if it is open-ended, because it is something taken from life, not invented. [cf. Watson 1991, 191ff.] This meets Kelman’s dictum of authenticity, which is why his characters are ‘open-ended’ in a special, sometimes puzzling way. They are disaffected, alienated, isolated, ordinary human beings, who are most of the time almost but not quite at the end of their tethers, who batter on, hold on despite the horror of their daily lives, who seem to fight impalpable powers; they are questers after being, characterized by a deep restlessness; yet in all that there is an underlying decent tenderness, a humanist core in Kelman’s vision, that lends the characters a deeply-affecting voice, makes the reader wholly empathise with them. Partly, the ambivalence of Kelman’s characters is due to his narrative technique of not allowing the reader or author more knowledge of his protagonists than they themselves disclose.

This quality is most pronounced in *A Chancer* (which was published as his second novel but was actually written much earlier than *The Busconductor Hines*), where, for Kelman “it wasn’t a possibility to get inside Tammas’ head” and which “isn’t written from his viewpoint so much as from over his shoulder.” [McNeill, 7] So one can agree with Edwin Morgan when he writes: “Perhaps Kelman’s characters do not have to be described: they reveal themselves, entertainingly and often very movingly, through voice, through speech, through punctuation and syntax.” [Morgan 1993, 95] We will examine the characteristics of those features later.

The destruction of the tradition of Scottish industries and consequently the decimation of traditional working-class life is mirrored in the characters’ knowledge of the illusoriness of solidarity:

> Like bus drivers on one-man buses, it is every man for himself; like schoolteachers who try to liberate, they are part of the prison they are trying to help their wards escape from; like the gambler, they know that everything has a chance but that there is little in their lives that they can actually control. [Craig 1993, 101]

Isolated as they are, they can never escape their alienation because the world around them does not change. They are trapped like Sisyphus figures in an endless repetition of rolling cigarettes, putting the kettle on, and having a pint or ten. They are a negation, when it comes down to it: Hines thinks that “when all is said and done he is a negation. Being a negation is peculiar.” [Busconductor, 202]

One basic question presents itself here: is the alienation of the characters essentially an expression of the damage done to the community or does the fault rather lie in themselves, as some crazy aspect of all humanity? There will be no definite answer except that they belong, with this inherent ambiguity, in a very long Scottish tradition of division, of ‘Caledonian antiszygy’, and that with their failed struggles to articulate an adequate sense of self-identity they reflect the difficulties in the search for a Scottish identity.
I was born and bred in Glasgow
I have lived most of my life in Glasgow
It is the place I know best
My language is English
I write
In my writings the accent is in Glasgow
I am always from Glasgow and I speak English always
Always with this Glasgow accent

This is right enough

James Kelman in *Three Glasgow Writers*

Besides the characters and the details of everyday life, there is another aspect in James Kelman’s subject matter that deserves our attention. This aspect is the city of Glasgow. In an essay with the title “The Importance of Glasgow in My Work” Kelman renounces any major importance of the town where he lives and works:

I could maybe start by saying why Glasgow isn’t important. That might leave some sort of residue which has to do with the positive aspect, of why it is important, but it may be that there is nothing whatsoever ‘special’ about it, and I suspect the latter will be the case. [...] I could have been born anywhere in the world I suppose. [Essays, 78]

There is a certain contrast between this quotation and the one from *Three Glasgow Writers*. It has to be added, though, that in the above-mentioned essay – despite its title – Kelman basically does not say anything about the importance of Glasgow in his work. Glasgow obviously is important for Kelman, as we will see.

In Glasgow Kelman finds the whole tradition of twentieth-century Scottish Literature and especially the tradition of the Glasgow Novel, whose importance was shown in the preceding chapter. It is here, furthermore, where he experiences the atmosphere of a general cultural revival and meets people that are influential for his work (cf. the dedication of How Late: “Alasdair Gray, Tom Leonard, Agnes Owens and Jeff Torrington are still around, thank christ”). His Glaswegian – and with that Scottish – background is the base and reason for his radical political and cultural views. The class division
which is so important for his work is commonly seen as a central feature of Scottish society, and it is especially Glasgow’s high rate of unemployment and poverty which supplies the background for his grim picture of society. It is not by chance that all his four novels are set in Glasgow.

In Kelman’s writings Glasgow is omnipresent: “Kelman’s landscapes will be familiar to anyone who knows the inner cities, their housing schemes, wastelands and tenement buildings. [...] Kelman’s world is far from mystical. It is often all too real, not to mention realistic.” [MacDougall, 499] But most importantly, there seems to be an emotional bond of his characters with the city:

How d’you fancy a potted history of this grey but gold city, a once mighty bastion of the Imperial Mejisteh son a centre of Worldly Enterprise. The auld man can tell you all about it. Into the libraries you shall go. And he’ll dig out the stuff, the real mccoy but son the real mccoy, then the art galleries and museums son the palaces of the people, the subways and the graveyards and the fucking necropolises, the football parks then the barrows on Sunday morning you’ll be diggin out the old books and clothes and that... [Busconductor, 90]

His characters are evidently rooted in this place, and Kelman’s search is for a Glaswegian identity rather than a Scottish one. The first is of course part of the latter and might sometimes represent it, but it is not the same:

The city’s relation to the rest of Scotland is problematical. As an industrial metropolis, it came into being at a time when Scotland had for more than a century ceased to be an autonomous political or cultural unit. This means that Glasgow has never experienced an independent or organically functioning Scotland. It is the child, not of nation, but of empire, which alone can explain the savagery of its expansion and decline. This makes Scotland an inappropriate context for understanding Glasgow, and the distrust is often mutual. [Whyte, 318]

This might explain on the one hand Kelman’s ambiguous attitude towards Scotland as a nation, and on the other hand his obsession with
imperialism. In any case, it only emphasises the importance the city of Glasgow has for the work of James Kelman.

**Language and Style in James Kelman’s Fiction**

*Language is the culture – if you lose your language you’ve lost your culture.*

James Kelman in an interview with Duncan McLean
[McLean, 72]

We have seen before how important language is for a nation and for nationalism. This is not only true theoretically but clearly also for Scotland’s literary tradition, for the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s as well as for the new revival of the past two decades. The above quotation already indicates its importance in the work of James Kelman. For him, language is part of his politics: “It is very hard to be a writer within this community, you have to fight to find the language and that is a real political struggle.” [Trotter 1994] This political struggle is above all a Scottish one. The Glaswegian writer Janice Galloway reacted strongly to the following statement by the editor Ian Jack: “I think the more accessible any piece of writing is to many people, the better it will be, really. Anything that gets in the way of that, like the use of another variant of English, I would be wary of.” She responded: “This is not a language argument [...] It is a basic right-wing elitist way of looking at the world.” [Chadwick, 9-10]

James Kelman’s views are very much the same, as we have seen before. He made his response in his Booker acceptance speech quoted at the beginning of this study. By using the language of ordinary people of their communities, Kelman, Galloway and other writers deliberately draw attention to the political situation:

> It is when writers become aware of the changing society round about them, or of the wider sense in which ‘the times they are a-changin’, that certain themes, and indeed literature itself, may snap into life. One of these awarenesses in recent years has been the awareness of language. [...] the point [...] is [...] that there is something dangerous, or desperately wrong, about a system which forces children to unlearn or to give up the
language they naturally talk. [...] There is no easy means of resolving Scotland’s language problems. [...] It is not reportage that is wanted, but perhaps something like what the American poet Charles Bukowski has done with American speech, using a racy and outspoken colloquial basis but deploying it with the tact and subtle movement of high art. [Morgan 1990, x]

It is no coincidence that James Kelman has been compared to Charles Bukowski by literary critics, and it is very much the awareness of language that makes his literature “snap into life”, as we will see below.

Kelman’s concern with the dispossessed of society, with the lives of ordinary people living in Glasgow is echoed in his use of language. He writes in a Glaswegian patois which was described by Archie Hind in his novel The Dear Green Place (1966):

This gutter patois which had been cast by a mode of life devoid of all hope or tenderness. This self-protective, fobbing off language which was not made to range, or explore, or express; a language cast out of the absence of possibility; a language cast out of a certain set of feelings – from poverties, dust, drunkenness, tenements, endurance, hard physical labour; a reductive, cowardly, timid, snivelling language cast out of jeers and violence and diffidence; a language of vulgar keelie scepticism. [Hind, 226]

Only that in Kelman’s works this language is the identity of his characters, and his point is that it is as valid as any other mode of expression, indeed as valid as “high literary language”. which is exactly why he makes it his literary language. Consider the following passage from How Late it Was, How Late:

Where am I now by the way. Fucking story of Sammy’s life. Ye see a brick fell on his head. That was actually true for fuck sake except it was a boulder. It was intentional as well. Three guys held him down and this other yin stood up above him, just holding it steady, taking aim. Like playing bools. Ye stared up seeing this big fucking jaggy boulder. Then ye didny see it and wallop. The bridge of the nose. Since that day he’s never been the same. There's another song. Life's full of songs. Maybe god’s a singer.
When Samuels went blind
A smell of beer. It was a dream. Even yer nose plays tricks on ye!
Ye couldnay trust nay cunt but.
One guy he could trust
nah he couldnay. Everybody blabbed. The world was made up of blabbers. Blabbers and spooks and fucking grasses. That was it about life man there was nay cunt ye could trust. Not a solitary single bastard that ye could tell yer tale of woe to. So ye just blundered about the place bumping into walls and fucking lampposts and innocent members of the community out for a fucking stroll. Auld Helen man
gone but not forgotten.
gone but not forgotten
Sammy didinay even know if that was a song. One thing he did know
naw he didinay, he didnay even know that. [How Late, 250–1]

This is Kelman’s – or Sammy’s – Glaswegian version of similar reflections about the meaning of life, god, human isolation and love we find everywhere in literature – take Hamlet’s soliloquies or Eliot’s Wasteland, for example.

In this extract we find the essence of Kelman’s prose: there is his character, whose musings we follow as if inside his head; there is the horror brought out all the more shocking for its understatement (consider the passage: “Then ye didnay see it and wallop. The bridge of the nose.”); there are the daily problems (bumping into people and things, the beer etc.); there is the stream-of-consciousness-like train of thoughts, including reflections about that awful experience with the boulder, about life, god, songs, about Sammy’s girlfriend Helen who has disappeared, about the impossibility of trust and knowledge; there is Kelman’s special use of narrative (observe the constant shift between first person, somehow interiorised third person and self-referring second person “ye”); and there is, above all, the language. Let us have a closer look at the last aspect first.

Maybe the most striking feature about Kelman’s language is its unliterariness, its register, the expletives it contains. This was also the one feature discussed at length in the media when he was awarded the Booker Prize. The above extract contains, to be precise, six “fucks” or
derivatives thereof, two “cunts” and one “bastard”, which is, by Kelman’s standards, rather below average. For him, these words are not swear words, they are not even ‘bad language’. Indeed, he argues, there is no such thing as bad language. Just as the lives and problems of the dispossessed are as valid as anybody’s, so is their language. And it is, as the quoted passage shows, vital and capable of expressing varied thoughts. ‘Expletive’ here really has to be seen in its double meaning of on the one hand ‘swear-word’ and on the other hand ‘filler word’. Essentially these words are used as fillers, as rhythmic devices in Kelman’s prose, much as they are in present-day speech in Glasgow and many other parts of Britain. In an interview he suggested that they are not very different from the words ‘and’ or ‘wall’ – if you want to use them very frequently as a writer you will have to do it very well. Which he certainly does. It is again a question of being authentic, of minimal authorial intrusion. With his transliteration in phonetic orthography – he might not be as radical as Tom Leonard, for instance, but the rhythms are essentially there – Kelman tries neither to patronise nor to dignify the actuality of Glaswegian speech. This closeness to speech gives his writings an oral quality which has always been central to the Scottish literary tradition. Roderick Watson suggested in an essay that “Scottish identity has become vernacular, and vernacular identity has become the voice of the commons.” [Watson 1992, 192] In this sense Scottish identity is echoed in every line of Kelman’s novels.

It is of course not only the social variant – what one could call sociolect – which is interesting in Kelman’s work, but also the regional variant, the dialect. The two are, however, closely interrelated, as we will see. Caroline Macafee writes in her study on the Glasgow vernacular [Macafee 1988] that it is especially the working-class speakers who remain broad-spoken nowadays and that this maintenance of dialect is indicative of the stability of the working-class character of the area. She even suggests that the traditional dialect is part of the moral capital of the lower classes. They are dispossessed in many ways but they are not dispossessed linguistically, is the underlying argument. James Kelman strongly reinforces this argument by his writings. There are many regional elements in his literary language. In the extract quoted above we find expressions such as ‘the now’ for ‘now’, ‘ye/yer’ for ‘you/your’, ‘yin’ for ‘one’, the negation ‘didnay’ for ‘didn’t’ and ‘couldnay’ for
‘couldn’t’, ‘nah’ and ‘naw’ for ‘no’, ‘auld’ for ‘old’. In his work, Kelman uses many other regional words and devices such as ‘gony’ for ‘going to’, ‘aye’ for ‘yes’ or ‘always’ or ‘o.k.’, ‘wean’ for ‘child’, ‘the morrow’ for ‘tomorrow’, ‘mind’ for ‘remember’, ‘no’ used instead of ‘not’, past participles like ‘fuckt’ and ‘telt’, and other Scottish words like ‘sodjers’ (‘police’, originally ‘soldiers’) or ‘wee’. These are all common enough Glasgow expressions, the difference to standard English being grammatical, lexical or merely phonetic respectively. Whether we can therefore regard Kelman’s language as ‘Scots’ will be investigated below. In any case, there can be no doubt that the language is authentic, that it is true to what Kelman regards as his community. Moreover, it demonstrates that his characters are much more articulate in their own terms than it might appear at first glance.

There is another important aspect of Kelman’s prose which is essentially due to his language and which not least contributes to his quality as a writer: his humour. Kelman’s novels and short stories are, despite the bleak and often horrible existence they depict, extremely funny. To a large extent his language can be credited for this humour. It is effected mainly through colliding registers, on the one hand in the speech/thoughts of the characters themselves and on the other hand between the speech of the characters and usually a specimen of officialese language. The first type is clearly seen in our extract: consider the passage “Not a solitary single bastard that ye could tell yer tale of woe to. So ye just blundered about the place bumping into walls and fucking lampposts and innocent members of the community out for a fucking stroll.” One would hardly expect expressions like “solitary”, “tale of woe” and “innocent members of the community” in the context of this speech. Yet they give it that special touch which makes the characters so affecting to the reader and their musings so ultimately funny. Apart from that there is again a political point in that. Because the speech-patterns of the characters are presented as normal, and because the more ‘literary’ or ‘articulate’ expressions thus take on an alien quality, the latter are reduced in importance and are ultimately ridiculed. The second type of collision of registers emphasises this aspect even stronger. Some of the best and funniest parts in How Late it Was, How Late come from Sammy’s encounters with the authorities, especially when he tries to get his blindness registered as “sightloss”. Although the implication in those scenes is
really tragic, they are at the same time very funny because through the contrast of the registers and the reader’s empathy with Sammy the official speech-patterns of the authorities become completely ridiculous. Here is Sammy at the doctor’s:

Sammy [...] sat down, he heard the doctor writing. Eh I was just wondering...
Yes?
D’ye think this is temporary?
What?
My eyes.
Your eyes?
I’m talking about this being blind, if ye think it’s gony be temporary or what?
I’m afraid I can’t answer that. But I would advise you to exercise patience. Are you prone to psychological or nervous disorders?
Naw.
Anxiety?
Naw, not at all
Panic-attacks?
Eh naw.
You do understand what I mean by a panic-attack?
Sammy sniffed. I understand what ye mean but I dont understand how come ye’re asking me about it.
Do you know a Doctor Crozier?
...
In fact he wrote a medical report on you some nine years ago. He describes you as prone to anxiety, that you seem inclined toward attacks of panic.
...
I have a copy of his report in front of me. Are you disagreeing with his clinical assessment?
Yeh.
You are?
Yeh. Well I mean it’s no so much I disagree it was just cause of the circumstances, I felt him that at the time – a guy I knew got found dead.
Are you therefore disputing Doctor Crozier’s assessment?
I’m no disputing it, I’m just saying it was an unusual thing. [How Late, 221-2]

In this exchange, the person who is really seen as inarticulate is the doctor. It is he who speaks a lot without saying anything that relates to
KELMAN WRITES BACK

Sammy’s situation, whereas Sammy says the things that matter. This could be taken as an essence of Kelman’s work. It is in passages like this one where his claim for the validity of lives like Sammy’s manifests itself most clearly and where he shows that people like Sammy are as articulate in their own terms as – or maybe even more articulate than – anybody else.

We have not yet dealt with the question whether we can regard Kelman’s language as Scots. The question of what Scots is in the first place and where Scottish English ends and Scots starts is in itself a controversial topic. Thus James Kelman has been seen as one of the new advocates of Scots in literature and the first Scottish writer since Lewis Grassic Gibbon to merge Scots speech into his narrative on the one hand, and as writing in standard English with a few local words on the other. Part of the problem is certainly that Scots as a written language has steadily declined in importance since the seventeenth and especially since the eighteenth century, which is also why there is no standard orthography or grammar for contemporary written Scots. This leads us directly to one of the central features of Scots: its orality. It is also the essentially oral quality that accounts for its identification with the local and the domestic, yet also with the lower classes and the ‘impolite’, the ‘rough’.

As a modern literary language Scots is essentially an urban invention. During the new literary revival it has become closely connected with Glasgow. Historically, the Glasgow dialect has been seen as a debasement of both English and Scots:

Glaswegians, in their native habitat, have succeeded in debasing both the English language and the guid Scots tongue. What is left is city-slang at its worst, without an ounce of linguistic beauty to glean amongst the dross of Scottish-English-Irish-American verbiage.24

Seen less polemically, this mixture of influences is indeed one of the central characteristics of the Glasgow dialect. Because of the different

dialects that meet in Glasgow, there is a levelling tendency towards Standard English as a *lingua franca*, as Caroline Macafee has observed. [Macafee, 34] This might explain some of the confusions as to Kelman’s language. The result of this development is that

...the distinctively Scottish element in the vocabulary of speech has clearly declined in importance. Literature which imitates present-day speech, especially urban speech, is therefore likely to be relatively thin in distinctively Scots lexical elements compared to parallel imitations in the previous century, although a number of distinctively Scots terms do remain. In such texts there is also a certain amount of Scots grammar and idiom and, above all, a lot of Scots spelling. [Tulloch, 175]

Can we then, seen against this background, regard Kelman’s language as Scots? He himself calls it “straight Glasgow English, the whole gamut of Scottish Gaelic and Irish Gaelic right in there inextricably” [McNeill, 8] and asserts that he only occasionally uses Scottish words intentionally. Yet Macafee shows that the Glasgow dialect is an urban variety of West Central Scots and lists a number of characteristics: ‘-in’ for ‘ing’, ‘-it/-t’ for the past participle, the enclitic negative particle ‘-nae’, ‘no’ for ‘not’, and a number of phonetic and spelling features. [Macafee, 318ff.] Most of these can be found in Kelman’s literary language. We can conclude from this that his language is indeed a variety of Scots. This is reinforced by an argument about the close relation of swearing and Scots:

Swearing is the phatic communion of the factory, the barracks, the pub, the street. A sign of violent and impoverished masculinity, disenfranchised youth, socialised labour. ‘Fuck’ is both taboo and totem, it is both unspeakable and unduly fetishized. The focus on context has to include the nation. As well as a class context, and an urban context, there is a national context. Like Hamlet, we must ‘speak of country matters’, because swearing and national identity are intimately bound up together. The Booker controversy saw critics line up to defend or denounce Kelman on the strength of his language, and it was often stated that swearing was a special property of Scots, of Kelman’s national language, or local dialect. [Maley, 107]
This also clearly stresses the function of Scots for Scottish national identity, which is further emphasised by the following quotation (taken from an article which belongs to a project in which scholars write about Scots in Scots): “And this leid [...], it’s bean yased to gie the Scotch vizzy, to refleck oor ain weys o daein, to threip oor national identitie.” [Low, 186] The Scots vernacular as used by James Kelman can thus be described as ‘a tongue which seems to speak for many-sided ‘orality’ as opposed to the role of standard English, as the centralising discourse of cohesion, ‘academy’ and ‘empire’.” [Watson 1992, 192] By this it not only mirrors his political and cultural views, it also reflects his search for a Scottish national identity and is part of his ‘Scottish nationalism’.

James Kelman’s narrative voice is a special device and can indeed be regarded as one of his major literary achievements. It has again been the cause of some puzzlement among literary critics. Thus his narrative technique has variously been described as ‘third-person as alienated first’, ‘free indirect discourse or style’, and ‘stream-of-consciousness’ or ‘interior monologue’. He himself does not make matters any clearer by saying (about The Busconductor Hines): “...there is an ‘I’ voice about three times in the book ... eh ... in reference to the main character, or perhaps it’s the narrator, I don’t know. [...] I could describe it as a first person novel written in the third person.” [McLean, 65] However, we have already seen that the ultimate goal of his writings is to get rid of the ‘God voice’ of English Literature, to eliminate all but the essential experience of his characters, to protect them from any irony or different viewpoint or value-structure on the part of the author and reader. Kelman has often emphasised how extremely difficult it is for a writer to arrive at that perspective and how laboriously he has had to work to achieve it.

The development of his narrative voice is clearly visible in his four novels. In the first one, A Chancer, he tried to achieve total objectivity, a value-free text, by presenting only facts: “It had to be something that is so cold, so straight black and white that no-one can deny it as fact. So in a sense, getting rid of the narrative voice is trying to get down to that level of pure objectivity.” [McNeill, 4-5] We are not even allowed a glimpse of Tammas’s thoughts. The novel is written in the third person throughout, yet it is not an omniscient narrator who tells the story but it is written, as we have seen earlier,
“from over his shoulder”. Here is the passage where Tammas breaks with his girlfriend Betty:

He was shaking his head. Naw, he said, and he sighed quite loudly. Betty ... He rubbed his eyes. This is out of order. I’m sorry, I really ... He touched her on the arm, just beneath her shoulder, then turned about and strode off across the street, and down the way, without looking back. [Chancer, 39]

This is the closest we get in the novel to a glimpse of Tammas’s feelings. With The Busconductor Hines, Kelman makes the leap inside the character’s head that has since become his tour de force. It is again mainly written in the third person but the shift has been made from total objectivity to total subjectivity of the character, which nevertheless guarantees a text free from any external value-system. Here is an example of this narrative technique, which lends the novel much of its humour and the character much of his tenderness:

The Busconductor Hines has yet to get the boot. This should be remembered. As should the following proposition: The longer one remains in a job the more difficult it becomes to get sacked. They keep him in the job. Mayhap they have resigned themselves to the fact of Hines. He is already a fixture. In the years to come, when one-man-buses rule the roost, they will have him cast and hoisted above the garage exit, as an example of The Busconductor. Before leaving he touched Sandra on the shoulder but decided against taking a look in on Paul – too sentimental. Life is difficult. [Busconductor, 112]

In his third novel, A Disaffection, Kelman develops this narrative technique further. Much of it is again written in that somehow self-referring third person, but there are many more shifts to the first person when the central character Patrick Doyle is speaking to himself in interior dialogues, which are certainly an expression of his emotional and psychological state of paranoia and almost schizophrenia, always hovering at the brink of a nervous breakdown:

Funny how come so many officers-of-the-law crop up these days. Patrick appears to be surrounded by them. Everywhere he looks. Even if they are all jovial big chaps, it doesn’t matter. And how come they are all seven-foot-high I mean I don’t want
to get paranoid about it christ though there again the big yin that gave the warning on the tax disc was okay, he was cheery and seemed good-natured for christ sake you could see it in his eyes, the way he was giving Master Doyle the telling-off, more a jocular comment, the sort that occurs between good neighbourly acquaintances. Ergo: not all policemen are bad chaps; not all policewomen are bad chappesses. Only those who work for the government in such and such a way and do not perform in this that and the other fashion, know what I mean, tap the nose and say nothing, there’s too many clicks on my telephone these days. [Disaffection, 209-10]

With *How Late it Was, How Late*, finally, Kelman reaches his most sophisticated handling of narrative voice to date. It is no longer the interiorised third person that dominates most of the book but a self-referring second person ‘ye’. However, the third person and the first person are still there and Kelman switches from one perspective to the other without the reader even noticing. Though maybe ‘change of perspective’ is a wrong term here, because essentially the perspective does not change but stays with Sammy despite the change of persons. This is probably Kelman’s greatest achievement. In the extract examined earlier for language features we can observe this clearly:

Where am I the now by the way. Fucking story of Sammy's life. Ye see a brick fell on his head. That was actually true for fuck sake except it was a boulder. [...] Ye stared up seeing this big fucking jaggy boulder. Then ye didmay see it and wallop. The bridge of the nose. Since that day he’s never been the same.

The passage starts off in the first person, but changes to the third with the second sentence. Then further down it switches to the second for two sentences and back to the third. This is done so subtly, though, that the reader hardly notices it. With this technique, Kelman has achieved a use of narrative voice that is highly sophisticated, and it is meant to mirror the sophistication of his characters which he so fiercely defends.

James Kelman has acknowledged the development in his prose himself. He comments on *How Late it Was, How Late*:
All I want to do is to write as well as I can from within my own culture and community, always going more deeply into it. It’s therefore just logical that I should write a novel like this, becoming more at home with these linguistic rhythms.\textsuperscript{25}

In the same article this quotation is taken from the journalist concludes: “We need to listen to those rhythms: they beat from a vital part of the nation’s heart.” Which takes us back to the expression of Scottish national identity in James Kelman’s work.

We have seen that through his use of language and narrative Kelman asserts an identity of the Glasgow working class, this “vital part of the nation’s heart”. Yet by his use of Scots and his narrative technique – it has been shown that closeness to speech in literature is an old Scottish tradition and that there have been Scottish authors before Kelman who tried to break down the distinction between narrative and dialogue (Grassic Gibbon also happens to have used the self-referring ‘you’) – this search for identity acquires implications beyond Glasgow for the Scottish nation in general. In the following words, Ian Bell sums up the Scottish dimension in Kelman’s work and takes us back to his concern with politics which stood at the beginning of this chapter:

Kelman has found a way of writing which lives up to the responsibilities of politics, which can articulate the particular tensions and contradictions of contemporary Scottish culture. In his brilliantly-realised characters’ persistent gestures of refusal, and in their small comforts, Kelman has produced fiction more urgent and pertinent than any other contemporary British author. If the state of Scotland imposes specific and rather daunting responsibilities on its writers, then Kelman at least is living up to them. [Bell 1990, 22]

Yet at the same time there is a markedly international dimension to Kelman’s technical experiments. The critical dissociation from

\textsuperscript{25} From a newspaper article on How Late, March 1994. Unfortunately, I was unable to trace either the author of this article or the newspaper it is taken from.
traditional realism and from concepts such as chronology, omniscient narrator, or plot is commonly regarded as the most characteristic feature of postmodern fiction. In this sense James Kelman – who at first sight certainly does not appear the prototype of a postmodern author – claims his place in the international literary context of postmodernism. Moreover, he himself has acknowledged that he was influenced in his strive for total objectivity, for a value-free text by the French *nouveau roman*. In other words, it is exactly the attempt to get always deeper into his own community which ultimately lends James Kelman’s work its universal significance. This will be elaborated in the following chapter.

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26 On the other hand, it should have emerged that he also sits quite comfortably in a *modernist* tradition [cf. for this also the section “Relations” in the next chapter]. But this context is no less international, and the connection between modernism and postmodernism is a very close one anyway (as indicated in the term itself), to the point that many authors and critics do not even make a clear distinction.
It has certainly emerged from what has been said so far that James Kelman is by no means a merely local writer. The question is of course what makes literature which is essentially concerned with a geographically limited community take on universal significance, what makes it rise above the merely local. In a panel discussion in the British Council in Leipzig with the title “Region and Nationality in Fiction” Malcolm Bradbury suggested that it is artistic value, literary worth which ultimately makes a piece of literature international. This is plausible enough, but the problem only shifts to the question what literary worth is. Obviously people associated with the London-based literary centre of Britain will have different views from people writing from the margins like James Kelman. Edwin Morgan writes in his introduction to *Identities: An Anthology of West of Scotland Poetry, Prose and Drama*:

> Good writing can come from any sort of experience and any sort of place, but it has somehow to produce that shock of surprise that jumps us beyond our comfortable expectancies, in addition to presenting us with a well realized world which we can relate to the world we know. [Morgan 1990, ix]

Taking this as a point of reference, we can definitely regard Kelman as an international writer, for in his work we find that “well realized world”, the world of the Glasgow underclass, as well as “that shock of surprise that jumps us beyond our comfortable expectancies”, as anybody reading Kelman for the first time will certainly confirm.

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27 This discussion took place on 5 November 1995 as part of the “Festival of New Writing from Britain”, which was organised by the British Council and held in Berlin, Leipzig and Köln from 5 to 14 November 1995. It featured the British writers Malcolm Bradbury, Philip MacCann, Adam Thorpe and Hilary Mantel.
Yet there has to be another dimension to the internationalism of a literary work, something that people in other parts of the world can relate to, some issue of universal human relevance – although that again might also be a prerequisite for literary value. Or maybe also some sense of belonging in a wider context, of being part of an international movement or community. For James Kelman the latter has already been proved by his putting himself in the context of the new national literatures, of people around the world who fight for the right to write in their languages and for the recognition of the validity of their communities. With regard to the first precondition, the international relevance, it can be assumed to be present in Kelman’s writings as well, but it is certainly worthwhile to investigate it further. It consists above all in the universal experience of the big city, with its anonymity, its lack of communication and its absence of human warmth. Secondly, it can be said to enclose Kelman’s international literary relations, the artistic framework that he feels part of. These two aspects will be examined in more depth in the following.

Glasgow as Postindustrial City – the Urban Experience in Kelman’s Fiction

The importance of the city of Glasgow as a theme in the fiction of James Kelman has already been examined in the preceding chapter of this study. We have seen that, as the world of his characters and as the basis for his use of sociolect and dialect, it is an integral part of both his subject matter and his literary language. In this sense Glasgow is essential for the ‘Scottishness’ of his writings. Yet it has been indicated at the same time that Glasgow is in other respects not a suitable context for understanding Scotland and vice versa, as well as being in many ways related to other industrial and cultural centres in Europe and the world. The latter was acknowledged in 1990 with the choice of Glasgow as European City of Culture. This international quality of Glasgow – reinforced by the large number of immigrants and thus different languages that have come to Glasgow, particularly during the last hundred years – must have repercussions for the work of any author writing from and about Glasgow. These repercussions are evident in the fiction of James Kelman.
It has been asserted that “Kelman has emerged in the 1980s as the Scottish chronicler par excellence of the other side of Thatcherite Britain, the waste land of inner-city dereliction, soul-numbing boredom and violence, and lives lived without hope.” [Lewis, 41] Obviously, the topics that he raises are not restricted to his local community – although they are first and foremost concerned with this community. They seem to contain implications for “Thatcherite Britain” (and ‘Majorite’ or even ‘Blairite’ Britain for that matter) and maybe even beyond.  

We will see below how those topics of “boredom and violence”, of alienation, of communicative collapse and of the incapability to love, which are fundamentally connected with the urban experience, are represented in Kelman’s work. He has pointed out Glasgow’s melting-pot identity and thus its basic internationalism (particularly with regard to the language) himself:

> There is nothing about the language as used by the folk in and around Glasgow or London or Ramsgate or Liverpool or Belfast or Swansea that makes it generally distinct from any other city in the sense that it is a language composed of all sorts of particular influences, the usual industrial or post-industrial situation where different cultures have intermingled for a great number of years. [Essays, 84]

So in that sense, “Glasgow can be any other town or city in Great Britain, including London, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Cambridge, Newcastle or Ramsgate.” [ibid., 80] Yet it has to be doubted whether Kelman would find a Cambridge background as suitable for his fiction as the Glasgow one. The experience of the (post)industrial city is central to the condition of alienation that haunts most characters in Kelman’s stories and novels.

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28 Simon Baker exemplifies the international dimension of Kelman’s “concentration on the dynamics of post-imperial, deindustrialising urban life as it is lived in all the decaying, abandoned cities and towns of the English commonwealth” by contrasting it with the failure to transcend the local (or even the parochial) in contemporary Welsh urban realism. [Baker, 238]
A strong basic human interest has been observed in the writing from the Glasgow area over the last two decades. We have seen before that Kelman’s protagonists are characterised by a certain ‘decent tenderness’ or ‘unsentimental sensitiveness’. However, this basic human interest is maybe most evident in the depiction of the bleakness of the lives the characters lead struggling against adverse circumstances in a postindustrial landscape of dereliction and decaying industries, and in the sympathy for the characters this depiction induces in the reader. In a world like this, dreams are suffocated and ambition is snuffed out. What remains is basically loneliness and an endless repetition of drinking, smoking, gambling and betting, or dull working routines.

The impossibility of communication is a recurring theme in Kelman’s fiction. This relates to the failure to find a personal expression or voice which has been shown to be at the centre of the literary tradition of Glasgow. The futility of communication is clearly seen in dialogues in Kelman’s novels, where the characters are not able to articulate – in contrast to some of the inner monologues or dialogues – what they think or feel. This aspect is most evident in the novel *A Chancer*, because there we remain outside the character’s head and can only try to figure out what he thinks. Here is a representative passage:

Tammas brought out the cigarettes and lighted one, sipped at his beer. Aye, he said. He was looking at Rab, and he added:  
You okay man?  
Okay?  
What’s up?  
What’s up? Rab was frowning at him. Fuck all up.  
Tammas nodded.  
Naw I mean...  
It’s alright.  
Naw I just eh ... Rab sighed. I can’t be fucking bothered man.  
What d’you mean?  
Ah nothing.  
Tammas sniffed, inhaled on the cigarette and he exhaled to the floor. [Chancer, 196]

If communication is not impossible altogether here, it is certainly extremely limited. This might in fact also be one reason for Kelman’s extensive use of expletives, symptomatic of a communicative
collapse, as in the following extract from the title story of *Greyhound for Breakfast*, where the central character Ronnie worries about his son who has just left for London:

> London for fuck sake, what could happen down there, things were bad down there, weans on the street, having to sell themselves to get by, the things that were happening down there, down in London, to young lassies and boys, it wasn't fucking fair, it was just fucking terrible, it was so fucking terrible, it was just so fucking terrible you couldn't fucking man you fucking Jesus Christ trying to think about that it was Christ it was so fucking terrible, it was so bad. [Greyhound, 230]

The endless repetition of obscenities is not only indicative of a communicative crisis, it also implies a wider crisis, a deeper obscenity in society at large.

There is a strong critique on Kelman's part here of a repressive society which has made "the ideal city community [dissolve] into isolated and terrorised individuals, who in turn are dissolving into fragmentary and multiple identities, an inner disharmony to match the outer chaos." [Craig 1993, 112] Yet it is not specifically the Scottish or British society he is criticising, it is rather the international society of capitalism, which has created similar circumstances in various communities all over the world. It is also this society which is the ultimate reason for the deep restlessness of Kelman's characters: "They shuffle back and forth, desperate for a rest, but unable not to go on refusing to become part of the polis, continually resisting arrest – and a rest." [ibid., 113] Indeed the figure of the busconductor in *The Busconductor Hines* can be seen as an emblem of modernity, travelling restlessly to and fro but never arriving anywhere.

The complaint about the dehumanized world in cities is not new: looking for international or universal themes in the work of Edwin Muir and Neil M. Gunn, Margery McCulloch found that they lamented the machine-like impersonality of modern society and with that the diminution of personal and political freedom as well as the loss of the communality of human experience. [McCulloch 1982, 248] Nor is this complaint restricted to Scotland. It is indeed a familiar one in all industrialised countries. However, it has been found to take on
an extremely bitter manifestation in Scottish literature. This may have
to do with the decline of traditional industries such as shipbuilding,
which hit the Clyde area particularly hard and thus created
unemployment and poverty for a large part of the working class. On
the other hand the joylessness of Scottish life has also often been
attributed to the Calvinistic heritage, with its emotionally crippling
effects. The resulting inability to love – also a tenacious literary topos
– aggravates the sense of loneliness and isolation felt by the modern
urbanised Scot to the point of neurosis. In Kelman’s works, this is felt
most strongly in the novel *A Disaffection*, where the central character
Patrick Doyle is always on the edge of insanity due to the lack of
affection which is expressed in the very title of the book. The
loneliness of Glasgow life is also the topic of many of his short
stories, such as “Home for a Couple of Days” [Greyhound].

All of Kelman’s characters are essentially loners. This is true for
Tammas as well as for Hines, for Patrick as well as for Sammy
(remember the sentence “That was it about life man there was nay
cunt ye could trust.”) There is no longer any solidarity, it is everyone
for themselves. This feeling is again by no means a purely Scottish
one, it is known all over the industrialised world. It can be detected in
other literatures than the Scottish one just as easily. George Watson
writes in his book *British Literature Since 1945* (which is in fact
almost exclusively about English literature):

[T]here are those who discover that in the end they need no
one but themselves, and that solitude is more than enough.
That acceptance is perhaps more grim than smug, but as a
comment on a modern post-industrial state it is, after all,
quietly and sensibly realistic. [Watson 1991, 15]

Kelman’s characters might not always accept their condition of
loneliness and alienation as sufficient in the way the above quotation
suggests, yet the condition itself is obviously a universal – or at least
urban – human experience.
Relations – Kelman’s International Sources

A writer never works alone, he is never completely isolated. There will always be other writers, past and present, whose influence is felt more or less strongly; there will be ideas, traditions, movements that influence his views or writings in one way or another. James Kelman acknowledges his international affiliations much more readily than he does his Scottish predecessors. Scottish authors have in fact always looked abroad for their models. Examples such as Hugh MacDiarmid, Edwin Muir, but also Alasdair Gray have already been mentioned. These examples already show that being an international writer does not mean that one ceases to be a Scottish writer. On the contrary (referring back to a passage already quoted before):

The experimental writers, in particular, have also shown that it is possible to be distinctly Scottish without excluding influences from abroad. In fact, Scottish literature has often been best when the national tradition was enriched by elements of foreign origin. [Zenzinger 1989c, 235]

James Kelman is not an exception here. He has been influenced by American, French, German and Russian literature in his writings. The list of writers he has been compared with by critics comprises at least twenty of the most illustrious names of literary history, among them Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Kafka, Kerouac, Carlos Williams and so on and so forth. Most important seem to be the names of Joyce, Beckett and Kafka. There is, however, a problem involved in comparisons like that:

These efforts to find a niche for Kelman in a gallery of familiar literary “giants” seem to [...] suggest nervousness in the face of a talent which is recognisably large but which is also, and quite openly, engaged in a long-standing struggle against the very values which lie behind such judgments. [Coe 1991]

James Kelman, however, acknowledges a number of these influences himself: American writers like William Carlos Williams and Jack Kerouac, French and Russian existentialism, the nouveau roman, and above all, Kafka. Kafka seems to be some sort of high-cultural icon for Kelman. His interpretation of the writer may seem a little unusual,
but it tells us a lot about his own use of this particular influence. In a review he called Kafka

the greatest realist in literary art of the 20th century. His work is a continual struggle with the daily facts of existence for ordinary people. Kafka’s stories concern the deprivation suffered by ordinary people ... whose daily existence is so horrific other ordinary people simply will not admit it as fact.29

This sounds very much like a description of Kelman’s own writings. There are in fact specific similarities with Kafka in some of his works. In his story “In With the Doctor” [Greyhound] he is constantly alluding to Kafka’s “The Country Doctor”. In “A Nightboilerman’s Notes” [Lean Tales] there is a strong Kafkaesque sense of menace, and the narrative method of A Chancer – sitting like a monkey on the back of the character – is also reminiscent of Kafka.

Kelman has taken in a lot of different literary traditions and is using them very creatively to his own ends. Being a spokesman for ordinary people relates to American authors like Carlos Williams, Sherwood Anderson and Jack Kerouac; the obliteration of the narrator and the seemingly random nature of existence can be traced to the nouveau roman; his irony connects with the existential tradition. It is not surprising, then, that his novel A Disaffection for instance has been seen as a big ‘European’ work and that critics do not tire to connect him with different literary traditions and philosophies. Yet it is almost an irony that it is precisely this internationalism which forms part of his Scottishness, for it links him with the Scottish tradition of looking to the continent for inspiration. It has to be seen in this context when one reviewer draws the conclusion from Kelman’s international relations: “The allegiances of Elizabethan times still hold true, then; Scotland looks not southwards to England but reaches out to France, Germany and Russia.” [Lawson 1991]

29 In a review on Alex La Guma in the Edinburgh Review, quoted in Spufford, 23.
There is one peculiar aspect about Kelman’s literary influences that stands out – at least at second sight. The writers who are most frequently related to Kelman’s work – Kafka, Joyce, Beckett – all lived and worked at a time commonly referred to as ‘modernism’ in British Literature (Beckett can at least be regarded as modernist in some ways). If we also take the influence of the Scottish Renaissance of about the same time into consideration, there seems to be some sort of parallel here between the work of James Kelman and some of the developments of those years. Even if this may seem a little construed, it is certainly interesting to take a closer look at that connection.

In his study of Kelman’s fiction Cairns Craig suggests that

Kelman might be said to be fulfilling Virginia Woolf’s assertion that the novel ought to examine ‘an ordinary mind on an ordinary day’, exploring the ‘myriad impressions’, the ‘incessant shower of innumerable atoms’ that ‘shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday’.

Not only does Kelman realize this modernist programme in his writings, but he is also close to modernism in many other respects. Modernism was essentially foreign to the English literary tradition. Henry James and T. S. Eliot were Americans, Joseph Conrad came from Poland, and James Joyce was an Irishman. But it was foreign to the English tradition in other aspects too:

Drawing so strongly on both anthropology and dialect, and aiming to outflank the Anglocentricity of established Englishness through a combination of the demotic and the multicultural, Modernism was an essentially provincial phenomenon. [Crawford 1992, 270]

We have seen that “to outflank the Anglocentricity of established Englishness” is also at the centre of Kelman’s concerns. But we find

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another important legacy of modernism for Kelman in this quotation: the use of dialect.

It was with the work of Hardy and D. H. Lawrence that dialect began to be used in literature with different implications than it had been before. In Hardy’s regional novels the dialect of the ‘rustics’ was presented for the first time as the norm, standard language being the deviation, the foreign element. It is interesting to note – in connection with the importance that might have for James Kelman – that the working class has been seen by several scholars and critics to be the contemporary version of Hardy’s ‘rustics’. D. H. Lawrence in his novels, above all in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, develops the philosophy of a private (regional) language embodying a vitalistic principle, whereas the standard language is seen as the embodiment of a death-in-life principle. Apart from regional variants modernism also frequently used ‘strong’ language. Talking about the word ‘fuck’ in contemporary literature, Robert Crawford points out that “Modernism [...] made such language acceptable once again as the stuff of art”. [ibid., 275] Kelman draws very strongly on that kind of tradition, as we have indicated. Modernist experiments in language expansion can indeed be said to be of fundamental importance to many writers of the present. For Kelman it is – apart from the influence of MacDiarmid already mentioned earlier – above all the techniques of Joyce which are important. He sees in him the same strive for immediacy that is so characteristic of his own writings:

[T]hat type of immediacy, that is what is obtained, that is the goal, that is what has always been the goal. That’s what leads Joyce into *Finnegan’s Wake*. Honestly, there’s nothing else apart from that. To obliterate the narrator, get rid of the artist, so all that’s left is the story. [McLean, 80]

Moreover, Kelman’s stream-of-consciousness technique is basically a modernist invention. This leads us to another ambiguity in Kelman’s work. Many people have difficulties in bringing together these techniques that Kelman uses and the somehow opposed concept of ‘realism’ which at the same time is often connected with his
writings. It is again Joyce who we can take as reference point for a similar kind of ‘realism’ as it is seen in Kelman. Joyce – particularly in *Ulysses* – depicts a great number of trivial everyday events such as eating, drinking, working and sleeping. He is also carefully realistic in terms of topography (to the point that today you can do a James Joyce Walk through Dublin as a tourist, following the sites of *Ulysses*, which are marked by small metal plates quoting the relevant passages from the novel) and chronology. In this respect Kelman is as realistic as Joyce, relating all the petty little details of every day and referring to specific Glasgow streets and above all pubs. However, Joyce only uses these realistic techniques and transcends them by his modernist techniques, pointing out that the former are just one way of looking at the world. And so does James Kelman. Both search for that immediacy, their realism being best expressed in Kelman’s programme of ‘authenticity’. Yet this realism is by no means the realism of the Victorian novel. They transcend it through the use of modernist techniques such as language expansion and stream-of-consciousness narrative. There seem to exist, then, undeniable parallels between James Kelman’s work and the international movement which is known as modernism. We shall try to suggest some reasons for this.

There seems to be some relation between modernism and the British colonies and thus between modernism and the new English literatures. Terry Eagleton points out that

Modernism and colonialism became strange bedfellows, not least because the liberal realist doctrines from which modernism breaks free were never quite so plausible and

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31 His writing has been described as a “reimagining of urban realism” by “an abandonment of the traditional narrative structures and plot motifs of urban realism” [Baker, 236 + 238], or, in more drastic terms mirroring Kelman’s own use of language, as “realism fucking realism”: “His writing is offensive not just in its impoliteness, but because it attacks the very assumptions which underlie the linguistic and cultural order on which social realism is founded. Grimly authentic, Kelman’s portrayals are fucking real; but they also dissect the conventions of realism: his realism fucks realism.” [Freeman 1997]
entrenched on the colonial edges as they were in the metropolitan centres. [Eagleton, 322]

Similarly, Bruce King quotes an example from India, where P. Lal created a modernist poetic style at the time of independence to explore the national identity. [cf. King, 27] Robert Crawford also argues that there is a modernist influence in most of the ‘provincial’ or ‘colonial’ writers of our time, and asserts that this is also true for those who are explicitly or implicitly opposed to the Modernist movement. The latter can certainly be said of James Kelman, who regards particularly T. S. Eliot as the representative of The Voice of English literature which he so much hates.

Apart from the general influence of modernism on writing of the kind Kelman can be associated with there is another reason why modernism could be particularly attractive for Scottish writers. Modernism seems to have been strongly influenced by ideas of Scottish origin. Nineteenth-century anthropology in Britain was dominated by Scots such as Thomas Carlyle and James Frazer. Both knew and were influenced by the writings of Sir Walter Scott, especially his cultural explorations in the Waverley novels. James Frazer in turn became influential for modernism, especially with his twelve-volume work *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915). T. S. Eliot himself acknowledged that particular influence in an essay called “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923):

> Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method, [which involves] manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity. [cited in Crawford 1992, 238]

The same influence has also been noted for Joyce:

> ...wie T. S. Eliot (in *The Waste Land*) verarbeitete Joyce auch die Theorien der Cambridge School of Anthropology,
There may also be a relation between T. S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) and G. Gregory Smith’s study *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) – the influence of which on MacDiarmid has already been mentioned – which Eliot reviewed just one month before he wrote his essay, as Crawford points out. Seen from this point of view Kelman’s affiliation with modernism might be understood in terms of a similar background – namely that of a Scottish intellectual tradition – rather than as a direct influence. Be that as it may, the fact of striking parallels between several modernist writers and Kelman’s work is not to be overlooked.

There can remain little doubt that James Kelman is an international writer in more than one sense of the word. He is part of an international literary movement of ‘colonised’ or newly independent nations trying to find their own literary voices, he depicts the universal experience of the big city with its dehumanising tendencies, he draws on international literary sources, most notably the in itself international movement of modernism, and he is above all a good writer. A good writer never is purely local or national, he somehow transcends his nationality to become international. This does not mean that he ceases to be national or local. Conversely, with a good writer nationalism and internationalism are ultimately interdependent. James Kelman is a case in point for this. We have seen that the international elements in his work in their essence go back to national aspects: the urban experience to his attempt to go deeper into his community, and part of his literary influences to a Scottish background or tradition. He is an inter-national writer in the sense of Gunn’s assertion that “nationalism creates that which internationalism enjoys”.

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32 Erzgräber, 190: “… like T. S. Eliot (in *The Waste Land*), Joyce also used the theories of the Cambridge School of Anthropology, and especially the views put forward by James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough*.” (my translation)
Conclusion

What sort of prose can the colonised write; what sort of language is allowed; who permits a culture to survive and who denies its existence? This is both regional and international, political and, necessarily, personal. With Kelman and a few others, the dispossessed of Eng Lit return to claim their place.

[Bell 1994]

James Kelman is a contemporary Scottish writer who lives and works in Glasgow and whose work acquires relevance beyond Scotland and Britain. It has emerged from this study that he is concerned about a Scottish national identity, that in this sense he can be regarded as a Scottish 'nationalist', and that he is an international writer in many respects. However, it has become clear at the same time that his 'nationalism' in particular is not expressed openly on the page but that it is rather found in specific aspects of his views and works that relate to Scotland the nation. There is quite a simple explanation for that:

There is [...] a reason why creative writing and nationalism usually only meet as ideals, reactions and protest. The writer is part of international culture. The language, conventions and genres of his work have been shaped by tradition, by past art, by centuries of European culture. His work is an evolution from such a heritage. Local culture can provide subject-matter, themes, myths, a perspective and speech as a basis for a new style, but cannot offer an alternative to what are essentially forms of communication that have been developed by western culture. [King, 231]

This is why those issues must take a very individual expression in the work of any creative writer. This study has shown the rather individual and special expression they take in the work of James Kelman, and a brief summary as well as a conclusion from that will be given in the following.
James Kelman and the Scottish Nation

James Kelman is not primarily concerned with the Scottish nation or Scottish problems as such, and he even hesitates to use the term 'nation' in connection with Scotland, when he talks about the problems for a writer in wanting “to address a ‘truly serious’ matter, i.e. one that somehow isn’t merely political but concerns the nation as a whole (given the idea that we can refer to Scotland as a nation).” [Steel Industry, 8] Yet he lives in Scotland and is one of the most important contemporary writers there. So if we take into consideration the close relation between the nation, national identity and nationalism on the one hand and literature on the other hand, and if we furthermore consider that the Scottish literature in particular is said to be a prime example for the expression of a national identity in literature (because it is not a nation politically), we might conclude that Scottish national identity and nationalism must somehow be reflected in Kelman’s work.

The first aspect of Kelman’s ‘nationalism’ was found to be his place in the tradition of Scottish literature. He has denied particular influences, but he is aware of the tradition:

I see myself very much as part of a tradition, and the idea of being regarded as an ‘original’ writer I actually find embarrassing. I’m only involved in tradition, through prose, maybe through Scotland, in a way that people are perhaps not used to. It’s been going on for 120, 140 years, since, say, James Hogg – earlier. [McNeill, 4]

Consciously working within a literary tradition so preoccupied with the national identity as the Scottish one can indeed be seen as an act of ‘nationalism’. Carl MacDougall has pointed out possible reasons for this unusually strong Scottish concern:

Scottishness and the reality of Scotland has been a constant theme in our fiction, and perhaps it is our status as a small nation, or a culturally occupied territory, that has led us to be so very aware of what our country is, or what it might be. [...] James Kelman [and] J. M. Barrie seem to speak from utterly different communities, and yet they all describe a Scotland
which is, in one aspect or another, more than recognisable to most of us. [MacDougall, 3]

James Kelman has indeed become so much a part of that tradition that today some already see in Scottish literature a “danger of ‘political correctness’ which encourages social narrowing in favour of a working-class, left-wing, vernacular authorship” and thus “denies the full identity of the country” [Dunn, 150], which is clearly a remark in Kelman’s direction and shows how much contemporary Scottish literature is identified with his work and that of writers working along the same lines.

Underlying Kelman’s use of subject matter, narrative voice and language are his sometimes radical views regarding political and cultural imperialism and his concern for ordinary people, for the dispossessed. Not only does he assert his Scottishness by arguing so strongly against the English, their literature and cultural imperialism, but he also enacts his views in the choice of his subject matter (the details and drama of everyday life, his characters, the Glasgow setting), in his narrative technique (by obliterating the narrator to achieve absolute immediacy and authenticity) and above all in his language. The use of language is indeed central to the search for a Scottish national identity and to Kelman’s ‘nationalism’. He has been seen to use an urban variety of Scots and to try to imitate the cadences and rhythms of working-class speech in Glasgow. But is he also concerned for the nation as a whole while portraying this – admittedly important – part of it? His answer is that people are the nation, that it is the individual that counts: “What do we actually mean when we talk about the ‘interests of the country as a whole’? At what point do the interests of the individual citizens who actually live there enter the argument?” [Steel Industry, 11] And the language of the people is their identity, it is what they are left with, being dispossessed in almost any other sense. But in their own terms they are just as articulate and their lives are just as valid as anybody’s. This is maybe Kelman’s strongest ‘nationalist’ statement and his most accurate portrayal of Scottish national identity.
James Kelman the International Writer

The distinct character of Scottish literature does not mean that it is isolated – from English literature, for example. Similarly, Kelman’s Scottishness does not mean that he is isolated from international developments. His work is indeed often viewed as belonging in a European tradition rather than in a British one. There are basically two reasons for his internationalism.

First, it is his attempt to examine and make sense of the basic principles that govern our existence as human beings. Do people have the fundamental right to freedom? By what authority does one person, or group of people, control another? Is there a case for assuming responsibility over the social and spiritual life of other adults? When does ‘teaching’ become colonization? Can one culture ever be ‘better’ than another? Is the attempt to deny your right to exploit me ‘unconstitutional’?\(^{33}\)

It becomes clear here that ‘nationalism’ and ‘internationalism’ cannot be divorced easily, for it is exactly these principles which underlie Kelman’s ‘nationalism’. Yet they are international insofar as they apply to communities in many parts of the world. As does Kelman’s depiction of the “existence of human beings” in the big city, showing the dehumanising processes of a communicative collapse and of human “dis”-affection in particular. This social experience is “focused principally around the decline of the traditional industries which were the foundation of the world’s first industrial economy”, which in turn encloses “themes whose significance is far from merely local.” [Craig 1987, 8] Kelman presents alienation as the essential modern condition and argues that man is not fundamentally a social being. It is one of his greatest achievements to do this by portraying everyday life of ordinary people, which becomes completely effective in pointing out the existential conception of the meaningless of life. As for the human nature, we can take the two central characters of his play *Hardie and Baird* as reference point:

\(^{33}\) Foreword by James Kelman to Davie 1991.
CONCLUSION

Baird is the realist, refusing to speak to minister or authority of any kind, so great is his disgust; Hardie the visionary, believing in God and redemption as well as seeing this world as comic farce. These are for once symbols of what Kelman presents as the two permissible human types. [Gifford 1991, 6]

Kelman “clearly identifies with these very different figures whose chief similarity is a huge integrity.” [ibid.] These universal human merits are presented once again in a Scottish context: Andrew Hardie and John Baird were the leaders of the Weaver’s Rebellion of 1820 in Scotland, and the play portrays them as they await execution in their prison cells.

The second reason for Kelman’s internationalism is his connection to a European – or indeed international – literary tradition. We have seen that he takes in and creatively uses multiple influences from different literatures of the continent and America. In looking beyond England to Europe he sits in a long Scottish tradition. His main influences include American writing of the end of the nineteenth century as well as Kafka and Joyce. The last name points to the specific importance of modernism for his work. It has been shown that there exist notable parallels to various developments and writings of that time. We have suggested that the reason for this is on the one hand the apparent suitedness of modernist techniques for ‘provincial’ or ‘colonial’ writing (certainly to do with the attempt of the modernists to find the universal in the particular, in the local) and on the other hand the debt of modernism to Scottish intellectual movements – and via that to the writings of Sir Walter Scott. It is indeed Scott who can be seen as “the greatest novelist of Britishness” [Crawford 1992, 110] because he used his Scottish background to bring into English literature a new dimension which gave it a greater relevance, thus ‘inventing’ British literature. This legacy is still vividly felt today in Scottish literature, where a number of accomplished writers – among them James Kelman – continue to refuse to be subsumed under the English literary tradition, thus adding to it a wider dimension. This is what makes them join the front rank of contemporary British writers.
Nationalism as Internationalism

I am a Scotsman, touch me and you will find the thistle; I am a Briton and live and move and have my being in the greatness of our national achievements; but am I to forget the long hospitality of that beautiful and kind country, France? Or has not America done me favours to confound my gratitude? Nay, they are all my relatives; I love them all dearly: and should they fall out among themselves (which God in his mercy forbid), I believe I should be driven mad with their conflicting claims upon my heart.

Robert Louis Stevenson in “The Silverado Diary”

It has emerged in this study that the concepts behind the terms ‘national identity’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘internationalism’ – apart from being ambivalent in themselves – cannot be separated completely, and even less so when examined in the context of Scottish literature. It seems that nationalism of the positive kind can be seen as exploring the national identity of a country by using its history and literary traditions creatively in order to assert the place of the nation in a larger international community. It thus contains an internationalist dimension from the very start. Nationalism is necessarily global, because “The twentieth century since 1945 has become the first period in history in which the whole of mankind has accepted one and the same political attitude, that of nationalism.” [Hans Kohn, cited in Brennan, 59] This leads to the fundamental interrelatedness of nationalism and internationalism: “While, from an administrative and economic point of view, distinct nations are multiplying, the mutual awareness and interlocking influences of global culture begun by imperialism is still increasing.” [ibid., 60] Considering this as well as the modern communication systems and the fact that all borders are at the same time places of communication and exchange, we can conclude that we will really have to view internationalism as that

which the term expresses: as the relations and manifold contacts
between nations.

For the creative writer the same interdependence of the terms
‘nationalism’ and ‘internationalism’ holds true. The best writing
always combines the local with the international cultural movements
of the time. For any writer the regional, the local, his or her own
experience is always the point of departure. This became strikingly
evident in the panel discussion with British writers mentioned earlier
(cf. the beginning of the previous chapter), where all participants
strongly asserted the indebtedness to their regions. Yet the good writer
somehow has to make that leap to the international, to a universal
significance of his work. That the fundamentally local can come
across internationally was shown in the discussion by Adam Thorpe,
who pointed out that his novel Ulverton, which is very much
concerned with one particular English region seems to appeal just as
much to audiences outside this region and indeed outside Britain, as
its translation into six languages demonstrates. The international
dimension, it seems, is achieved through literary quality. A good
regional or nationalist writer will ultimately gain in literature what the
national schools of Smetana, Janacek, Grieg and Sibelius achieved in
music: the recognition as artists of international or universal
significance. This study has tried to argue that James Kelman can be
regarded as an international Scottish writer in that sense.

We will now come full circle in trying to establish the connection
between the work of James Kelman and the current literary
developments in the English-speaking world. It will have become
evident that he is certainly part of the ‘ex-centric’, of the movement of
the new English literatures:

The liberation of the voice into the varieties of accent and
dialect and alternative language which the collapse of the
English literary imperium made possible has provided Scottish
writers with renewed energies deriving from the actual
linguistic possibilities of their situation. [Craig 1987, 8]

Moreover, one of the most striking aspects in Kelman’s work, which
indeed – as we have seen – underlies everything he writes, namely the
political character of his literature links him to the other ‘ex-centric’s’,
because “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is
rather that which a minority constructs within a major language”, and it is partly due to the pressure exerted by the major language “that everything in them is political” and that they have a particularly strong sense of collective cultural identity. [Deleuze and Guattari, cited in Crawford 1992, 6] This is true for Kelman as well as for most writers of the new English literatures, thus possibly establishing the strongest connection between them. When we now take a look at the title of the book quoted above, we suddenly understand the importance of one of Kelman’s major influences: it is called *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. It is the minor literatures in this sense that are the focus of critical attention in “English” Literature today. Indeed the ‘nationalist’ messages of the peripheries move across the globe, thus becoming ‘international’. The truth is – to refer back to Linda Hutcheon’s words – that not only does “the centre no longer completely hold” but the peripheries themselves increasingly become the centre. James Kelman is thus part of the new centre, claiming – by the international quality of his work – a place at the front rank of authors writing in English today, but at the same time, and most importantly, defending the claim (in his own words) “that my culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that right.”


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