

‘Maybe singing into yourself’:

James Kelman, Inner Speech and Vocal Communion

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Abstract

The achievement of James Kelman is often linked to the recovery of communal voice and representative power. (This is particularly the case in Scottish critical contexts.) On the contrary, the social value of Kelman’s fiction lies in its wary resistance to ‘voice’ as a medium for the display of pre-given community and identity. His art subtly repudiates the ardent singing of readymade peoplehood, which often figures as a threat to the self-emancipation of the individual. This chapter explores a range of Kelman’s recent (post-2008) novels and stories in this light, with particular attention to the central importance – and the complex sociality – of un-expressed ‘inner speech’. Detailed close readings trace the unraveling of vocal solidarities premised on a bad or empty *witness*, and – from another angle – the pulling inward, and partial redemption, of the lyric subject’s fretful relation to external groupness and the illusion of consensus. Key insights of V.N. Volosinov (‘inner speech’), Benedict Anderson (‘unisonance’) and Étienne Balibar (on individual/collective emancipation) help to frame these explorations, which offer a new approach to Kelman’s politics of voice.

Keywords

James Kelman; voice; inner speech; solidarity; interiority; vernacular

James Kelman is the pivotal figure in the emergence of *vocal democracy* as a key motif of Scottish literary debate since 1979. His writing and influence are most often discussed with reference to demands and techniques for vernacular self-representation, and nearly all Kelman criticism (rightly) takes its bearings from the wider relationship between language, community and conflict.¹ So strong is Kelman's association with this terrain, we can easily lose sight of how frequently his writing runs counter to the politics and aesthetics of demotic togetherness. While Kelman's essays are animated by a range of generous solidarities – his collection “*And the Judges Said*” is prefaced ‘Unity chops elephants – old African proverb’ – his fiction is overwhelmingly centred on individual struggle and self-experience. Not only does his fiction generally eschew moments of collective identification, it goes out of its way to scramble and corrode them, pulling at their internal torsions and modelling a wary detachment from pre-given modes of ‘community’ and voice. We should resist the temptation to explain away the radical individualism of Kelman's art, and take seriously the refusal of his writing to affirm the register of vernacular we-ness commonly associated with his influence. On the contrary, Kelman's writing can be seen to puncture and repudiate the forms of readymade peoplehood evoked by the assertion of ‘identity’. This chapter examines scenes of vocal combination and communion in Kelman's recent fiction, with special attention to the introjection of the communal cry and the lyric-social function of ‘inner speech’.

An agonistic relation between individual and society is the norm in Kelman's fiction, and though central to his ethical stance – ‘I wanted to write and remain a member of my own community’ – the means and experience of collectivity are

¹ See Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

notoriously difficult to recognise in his art.² Critics sympathetic to Kelman's socialist politics have often worried that the strong introversion of his prose flirts with endorsing, even exalting, the bogus universality of the bourgeois subject. Kelman prefers to locate his work in an existential tradition 'that asserted the primacy of the world as perceived and experienced by individual human beings' – a 'primacy' which often seems to flirt with solipsism, before gradually revealing a more layered and dynamic relation between inside and outside.³

Take the following passage from Kelman's 2012 novel *Mo said she was quirky*. The narrator, Helen, is recalling her daughter's precocious infancy.

Sophie had been fourteen months when she started walking and even then, when she looked at you, it was as though she saw into you, and was asking, Who are you? Are you my mother? But these questions were within herself and the answers came from within herself. Are you my mother? Sophie asked the question and gave the answer, Yes, you are. It is you, you are my mother.⁴

Here the very foundation of the social is in the gift of an autarkic toddler. The process of 'primary attachment', far from constituting the infant ego, is managed and narrated by a fully fledged rational subject, within her own perimeter and by her own lights. And yet, we gradually register, this passage is the *mother's* speculative view of the toddler's perception – it is Helen who voices the crisp questions and answers

² James Kelman, 'The Importance of Glasgow in My Work', *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), pp. 78-84 (p. 81). See Willy Maley, 'Denizens, citizens, tourists and others: marginality and mobility in the writings of James Kelman and Irvine Welsh', in *City Visions*, ed. by David Bell and Azzedine Haddour (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2000), pp. 60-72.

³ James Kelman, 'And the judges said...', *And the Judges Said...: Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002), pp. 37-56 (p. 39).

⁴ James Kelman, *Mo said she was quirky* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), p. 140.

suggested by the look of Sophie, Helen who is the sovereign ‘you’ affirming her own imagined recognition. The speaking gaze projected onto the daughter by the mother, ‘as though she saw into [her]’, is a means by which the narrator seizes the controls of the piercing, closed-circuit look which seems to deny her own input.

Kelman excels in subtle and protracted shifts of this kind, dragging inner speech from one space or mind to another. Helen and Sophie look intensely into one another without ever inhabiting the same perceptual moment; the intimate wonderings of the mother concerning the unfathomable mental process of the child bring their inner worlds into a delicate tangle, but of a purely ideational and speculative character. And yet these intricate second-guessings are the very real ground of Helen’s loving attachment, the solid substance of her worry and hope. In Kelman’s hands these conjectures acquire the dramatic force of events, episodes in an immanent emotional process ‘involving’ both characters but never on the plane of inter-subjective experience. It seems that Kelman’s artistry is increasingly focused on this shifting and reframing of immersive subjectivity, so that we double back to notice the stark non-connection it harbours within and against itself.

As we consider the political implications of such effects it becomes apparent that Kelman’s fiction, and its treatment of ‘voice’, is marked by a paradox of modern individualism. In the précis of Étienne Balibar, post-Enlightenment citizenship becomes identified with ‘the task of self-emancipation from every domination and subjection by means of a collective and universal access to politics’.⁵ The ‘humanity of human individuals becomes determined by the inalienable character of their “rights”’ – rights ‘always *attributed to individuals* in the last instance’ but ‘achieved

⁵ Étienne Balibar, ‘Subjection and Subjectivation’, in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1994), pp. 1-15 (p. 12).

and won *collectively*, i.e. politically'.⁶ A key 'ethical proposition' emerges in this claim to a universal dignity and equality: 'the value of human agency arises from the fact that no one can be liberated or emancipated *by others*, although no one can liberate himself *without others*'.⁷

The first part of this formula – 'no one can be emancipated by others' – nicely condenses the dominant note in Kelman's fiction, and his primary investments in anarchist-existential thought. Think of Sammy Samuels refusing the help of his would-be lawyer in *How late it was, how late* – 'He had nay intention of using a rep [...]. Nay cunt was gony get him out of trouble; nay cunt except himself' – or the titular hero at the climax of *The Busconductor Hines*: 'to be perfectly fucking honest with yous all, I dont want anybody going on strike on my behalf. I want to do it on my tod'.⁸ This is a joke, but also not. In Kelman's fiction, personal integrity can never survive its mediation by representative regimes (such as parliament, political parties or trade unions), and the pursuit of justice or solidarity via institutions (the law, state bureaucracies) raises, at best, a derisive smile.

This uncompromising demand for ethical autonomy snags on the second part of Balibar's formula, which is my main focus here. How can the Kelman hero achieve emancipation 'with' others while scorning all the conventional structures of political association and joint action? The problem is made more acute by Kelman's politics of form, since these characters move in a fictive universe expressly designed to abolish that bulwark of imagined community, 'the shareable space of realist reportage in a

⁶ Balibar, 'Subjection and Subjectivation', p. 12.

⁷ Balibar, 'Subjection and Subjectivation', p. 12.

⁸ James Kelman, *How late it was, how late* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994), p. 245; *The Busconductor Hines* (Edinburgh: Polygon/Birlinn, 2007), p. 244.

standardised language’.⁹ As Aaron Kelly observes, Kelman’s literary practice seeks to negate ‘the foundational ground of realism – an overarching consensus through which the social totality becomes visible’, and declares war on the universalist narrative space where selves and interests may be discursively reconciled or set in their ‘proper’ places.¹⁰ In this respect Kelman has no truck with the Habermasian public sphere conceived as the ‘intersubjectively shared space of a speech situation’, a stance which severely limits the role of consociation and reciprocity in his writing.¹¹ This is not to argue that Kelman’s work advocates a withdrawal from the arena of social contestation, or retreats to a ‘sovereign’ interiority beyond the reach of hegemonic power. My approach here is guided by V. N. Volosinov’s insistence on the full interpenetration of private consciousness and the determinations of social reality:

There is no such thing as thinking outside orientation toward possible expression and, hence, outside the social orientation of that expression and of the thinking involved. Thus the personality of the speaker, taken from within, so to speak, turns out to be wholly a product of social interrelations. Not only its outward expression but also its inner experience are social territory.¹²

The inner speech of Kelman’s narrators is washed through with voices not their own, palpably formed by ‘external’ discourse and conflict, while nonetheless embodying

⁹ Michael Silverstein, ‘Whorfianism and the Linguistic Imagination of Nationality’, in *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics and Identities*, ed. by Paul V. Kroskrity (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2000), pp. 85-138 (p. 126).

¹⁰ Aaron Kelly, *James Kelman: Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 152.

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. by William Rehg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 361.

¹² V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (London: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 90.

the lyric particularity of unique – and uniquely social – individuals. Mitch Miller and Johnny Rodger note that

Kelman’s characters, through language and their own internal commentaries on their surroundings, seize the right to redefine and reconstruct the world according to their own perceptions, yet do so in social spaces and interstices that insist upon their relationship to others, their close connections with class and kin, and of mutual dependence on each other.¹³

I would further emphasise the effective *internalisation* of these social interstices, their incorporation into the space of subjective reflection and speculation. Kelman’s ‘interiorizing bastards’, in the self-description of the protagonist of *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*, gain an inner toehold of resistance to objective unfreedoms, but via narrative forms which register the hard limits and social contouring of their scope for liberation.¹⁴ These narrators materialise an inner territory partly emancipated from the public world of witness, but profoundly marked by its interpellative pressures. I want now to examine several striking moments of vocal communion (and its unraveling) in Kelman’s recent fiction, highlighting its resistant posture toward reified groupness and the collective utterance. I will suggest that *witness*, in Kelman, can only be realised in the domain of inner speech, the socioscape dragged inward to be re-figured in the space of lyric *witness*, empathy and self-experience.

¹³ Mitch Miller and Johnny Rodger, *The Red Cockatoo: James Kelman and the Art of Commitment* (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2011), p. 68.

¹⁴ James Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004), p. 178.

All people were with us: *Kieron Smith, boy*

Peter Boxall observes that Kelman's post-2000 novels modulate singular experience into 'untensed' continuities that stretch feeling and narration beyond the living moment and the restricted self; this writing 'does not suggest a community to which Kelman's writing strives to give a voice. Indeed the forms of collectivity that are imagined in these works are closely, intimately entwined with a sundering, a cloven alienation between narrator and narrated'.¹⁵ *Kieron Smith, boy* contains the most sustained example of this effect, in scenes marking an exception to the absence of massified communal affect from Kelman's fiction.

The description of a football match early in the novel finds young Kieron swept up in thrilling mass experience. To a boy of five or six, the force and grandeur of the Rangers crowd is spellbinding:

People all were singing now, more and more, and shouting, Oh oh oh and all what they were singing, all the words and ye just felt the best ever ye could feel and with them all being there, just everybody, crowds and crowds, all different and all the boys too, or just it was everybody, that was what ye felt, it was just the greatest of all.¹⁶

It is the noise and not the lyrics that prove seductive here, a contact with intense social energies scarcely containable in speech. 'Oh oh oh' can be heard as a wordless chant, Kieron reproducing the indistinct roar of the crowd, or as the exclamatory kick-starting of Kieron's breathless narration, as he sets about describing what he is almost

¹⁵ Peter Boxall, 'Kelman's Later Novels', in *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, ed. by Scott Hames (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 31-41 (p. 40).

¹⁶ James Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008), p. 53.

too excited to relate. The ‘allness’ of this sound and feeling is vastly potent, and as the passage continues we hear Kieron eagerly knitting himself into the vehement being-in-common of the Rangers crowd. (His enthusiasm may have something to do with his ‘pape name’, the Irish-sounding Kieron, and the doubts it raises about his true place and identity.) As he gradually picks up the words our attention turns from the expressive force to the verbal ‘content’ of this defiant togetherness, the group utterance Kieron struggles to make his own:

[I]f that other team wanted a fight well we would give them it, anytime, anyplace we would fight them fight them fight them, ooohhhhhh till the day is done we would and just fight them and never never surrender, we would never do that if it was dirty Fenian b★★★★★ds, well it was just them and if they wanted their go we would give them it till the day is done, we would just follow on and never surrender if it was up to our knees and that was their blood we never ever would surrender if we were ever cowards, we would never be, never ever.¹⁷

The boyish hunger of Kieron’s emotional investment in these songs yields an extravagant identification with the ‘we’ and its traditional grievances. But the very excess of this passion erodes its own supposed basis in common feeling. We hear Kieron rushing to internalise the freighted icons of this groupness, but as undigested tokens of a tribalism he can manifest only as borrowed affect – something put on rather than let out. A thick slurry of unearned bile floats on the surface of Kieron’s

¹⁷ Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy*, pp. 53-54.

words, and the canned fervour of the ‘we’ cannot be smoothly incorporated into his own self-narration.

The resulting friction allows the reader to perceive the dubiety and violence of Kieron’s ‘subjectivation’ – his internalising of group norms and codes – without recourse to any supervening layer of narrative commentary or normative judgment. Without an ‘objective’ point of orientation to Kieron’s inner speech, we become highly attuned to its internal dissonance and tonal movement (the chief technique of characterisation in the novel). As we hear Kieron coaxing himself to feel the lurid passions he recites, his inner speech cannot meet the historic-fabular scene evoked by the songs (‘It was for our hearts and shields, we would never surrender’) on the plane of his own experience (his faltering confidence in being a ‘best fighter’ on the school playground).¹⁸ The result is an awkwardly jointed voice intended to bridge an anxious gap between the ‘we’ and the ‘I’, but in fact stretching zealous attachment to the point of falsity:

It just made ye angry, if they thought that, if we would be cowards oh we would never be cowards, and it was just everybody, oh who wants to fight us because ye shall die, we will kill yez all we will never give in, never, never never, never shall there be one to give in. We would die first and all people were with us if it was big boys and men and who else just if they were there, and everybody if it was the wee boys it was just everybody there and all helping and you would be beside them all and yer pals too if they were there and it was for King Billy too and if it was for the Gracious Queen oh against the Rebels if we are, oh we are,

¹⁸ Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy*, p. 54.

if we are, oh we are. So what is the cry? a man was shouting, Oh and we were all shouting back, The cry is No Surrender, No Surrender or ye will die.¹⁹

Rather than supplying ethno-religious anchorage for his own lived fraternities, the colourful plate-glass realm of King Billy and the Rebels feels all the more unreal when placed in proximity with the domain of ‘big boys’ and ‘yer pals’. The more directly and urgently they are invoked, the more violently alien and thing-like do these shibboleths resound, clotting the fluid energies of Kieron’s giddy chatter. Gradually the excitement of the scene sours: as Kieron parrots the reified affect of the chants, their collectivising function is reversed. We hear not the ecstasy of unifying song but the staged and wilful quality of its constituent vocal props. Kieron’s living experience of elation – of being swept up into the surging social body – is slowly but completely displaced by pre-given codes of group allegiance and antipathy.

In a celebrated passage from *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson writes of

[A] special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – above all in the form of poetry and songs. Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance. Singing the Marseillaise,

¹⁹ Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy*, p. 54.

Waltzing Matilda, and Indonesia Raya provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community.²⁰

But what we hear in these passages, I would argue, is not the voicing of a latent unity. Any sense of ‘simultaneity’ in Anderson’s sense – of occupying a communal moment – is drowned out by the much louder echo, in Kieron’s mouth, of words palpably not his own, and the false quality of a communion effected purely by means of its internal ritual coherence (as a coded order of ethno-historic references). This ‘bad’ unisonance inducts its vocal bearers into a fixed, iterative groupness which destroys the spontaneous fraternity it seemed to herald:

A man beside me was smoking and it was going in my face. He was smoking it fast and laughing and what he said, Follow follow, and a man beside him was just looking and he said it, Follow follow, and then he spat down on the ground and did not watch for people’s feet.²¹

Instead of a dormant inner unity being released in affirming song, we hear the serial reproduction of tribal verities, their singers reduced to mere carriers of an ‘identity’ which floats free of the social moment. It is different with Kieron. The very immediacy of his narration – its ardent ‘following’ – grants the boy a saving ironic distance from what he keenly absorbs. Ingested wholesale, the vocal emblems of wholeness – the constellation of in-group references, songs and slogans – ‘stick out’ the more faithfully they are incorporated. In Kieron’s inner speech, clogged with public cries it cannot dissolve but with which it fails to coincide (see his inner censoring of

²⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 145.

²¹ Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy*, p. 55.

‘bastards’), Kelman establishes a space of vocal agency defined by non-identity with the group utterance.

Just as good as anyone: ‘justice for one’

A more recent story explores this theme overtly. We might almost read ‘justice for one’, from Kelman’s 2010 collection *If it is your life*, as a dramatisation of Balibar’s dictum ‘no one can liberate himself *without others*’. The story begins *in medias res*, with the adult protagonist struggling to find his place at a large protest march:

They were marching already when I fought my way to the meeting point up the hill. Now there were voices all around, and of every kind. I was blundering about not understanding what I was to do. How did they know and I did not? [...] On all sides folk were walking past. They moved quickly. Some were coming so close I felt a draught from their body, going to bang into me. Somebody said, The army are there and they are waiting for us. I shouted, I beg your pardon!²²

An ‘I’ who experiences the rhetorical ‘us’ as an invasive ‘they’, this character is immersed in the social body but set apart from its constitutive motion, equally unable to dissolve into the group or to escape its aggregative pull. Warned that the army are ‘coming in our direction’, he cannot process the witness of his position in spatial terms (‘Did you say our direction? I said’), and fails to orient his own voice and

²² James Kelman, ‘justice for one’, *If it is your life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), p. 249-50.

agency within that of the disparate crowd.²³ Confusion and indifference reign until the assembly gains focus and coherence through a kind of song:

Then the chanting began:

Justice for one justice for all.

I looked for the woman but she too had gone.

So many people, they just started chanting, and these slogans. There was nothing wrong with these slogans. I tried to say the words aloud and succeeded. I was pleased. I said the words again. I was laughing, just how I could say them, just as good as anyone.

We all were marching. Armed forces march and so do people. We marched over the brow of the hill. I knew the terrain.

I listened to the slogans and knew them as fair. These were good words, except the way I said them they sounded different, they sounded as though different, as if in some way singular, they became words to actually decipher, as opposed to a slogan, the sort that one marches to. I tried to pick up that latter rhythm, the way everyone else had it. Justice for one justice for all. Great rhythms, great slogans but could I do it? Or was I only emulating the passion of these other people?²⁴

Denise Riley notes that ‘one precondition [...] for effective solidarity may well be that critique of an identity which rises from within it’.²⁵ This faltering assembly and its insipid demand for justice recall, with Balibar, that rights are achieved and won

²³ Kelman, *If it is your life*, p. 250.

²⁴ Kelman, *If it is your life*, pp. 253-54.

²⁵ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 8-9.

collectively but exercised by individuals. Enervated by the social vacuum between ‘one’ and ‘all’, this character’s self-emancipation proceeds according to a logic and motivation figured as self-given, but arising from the negotiation of collective political demands made in the name of the universal. ‘Words to actually decipher, as opposed to a slogan’: here is the condition Kelman’s writing constantly presses for, alongside and despite its mobilisation of vernacular forms which seem to affix to every utterance a defiant claim to cultural self-representation.

In the march, something like the opposite occurs: the collective shout rings both peculiar and trite, a cry of dissent indistinguishable from the smooth self-justifications of power. To demand ‘justice for one justice for all’ is to re-describe the abstract rights and ideals already baked into modern citizenship. This cry empties into a forceless rehearsal of its own premises, issued as a demand for recognition rather than disruptive action. Rather than disturbing the way of the world, this slogan seeks ‘identity’ between the operation of power and its pious claims to legitimacy – and to form a collective subject eligible for reciprocal speech ‘with’ the powers that be. This utterance collapses the rhetorical distance between ‘one’ and ‘all’ to a civic space rinsed clean of social contestation, leaving no traction for genuine commitment or solidarity. As the army moves into view, it is left to the ‘singular’ individual to realise the friction and non-identity necessary to dissent:

But what does it all mean? I said. I never ever work it out, I was never able to.

What did you say? The woman seemed irritated.

Dont take it too seriously, I said.

A couple of younger fellows rushed past now, arms laden with stones. That meant the army right enough, there would be a pitched battle. That was how it

went. History showed us this. It did not require demonstration upon demonstration and does not entail actual changes in how we live our life. I had to go with them, I shouted and ran ahead.²⁶

Here the story ends. The banality of these gestures, and their indifferent meaning and motivation, contain a judgement on the communal political project as well as its theatrical objectification. Grand moral demands are decoupled from ‘how we live our life’ – though it remains tentatively ‘ours’. We find Kelman’s writing ‘flouting the regime of identification by which subjects agree their expression’, as Kelly puts it, but clinging to the prospect of togetherness.²⁷ The central character acknowledges his place (and ultimately accepts his duty to act) *within* but not *with* the group, moving for and against the collectivity whose interpellation he resists. The hero seems to accept the last-ditch claims of a groupness in which he neither belongs nor believes, but refigured as his *own* principle of action and necessity: ‘I had to go with them, I shouted and ran ahead’.

Maybe singing into yourself: ‘If it is your life’

Thus far we have examined the assembly of vocal solidarities premised on a bad or empty witness. I want now to explore the reverse pattern: not the self-falsifying expression of readymade collectivity, but the pulling inward, and partial redemption, of the individual’s fretful positionality within and against ‘community’.

The long title story of Kelman’s *If it is your life* explores vocal communion in a context divorced from mass identification. The central character is a student returning home to Glasgow from his English university. His sense of vocal affiliation

²⁶ Kelman, *If it is your life*, p. 255.

²⁷ Kelly, *James Kelman*, p. 93.

with his fellow bus passengers is all the more powerful for its latent and incidental character:

But what was striking about the Glasgow bus home, right at that minute in time, and you noticed it immediately, and you could not help but notice, that everybody, every last person on the entire bus, each single solitary one was Scottish, they all had accents and were ordinary accents; none was posh. The woman next to me as well, she did not smile or even look at me but I knew. I did not find it relaxing; I do not think I did. I was the same as them but on the other hand was I? Maybe I was not. And what if there were others in a similar situation? It was like we were each one of us disconnected, each one of us, until we were on the bus home, and starting to become Scottish again, Scottish working class. My father would have said that, never to forget it, because they would never allow it.²⁸

This association, and its political import, gradually crystallise out of common experience. It is the cheap bus fares and not the accents that assemble this group, and their mode of connection is not staged as a pre-given script. The homely voice, here, is something overheard and silently recognised, an ambient noise marking out a living social envelope the passengers cohabit (but largely apart). In these conditions the protagonist feels comfortable in his own voice – unlike at university, where he must constantly negotiate the expectations and prejudices of others. Asked by his girlfriend Celia to take part in a dramatic reading of Ibsen, his identity is reduced to vocal performance and national stereotype:

²⁸ Kelman, 'If it is your life', *If it is your life*, p. 128.

I knew it was the Scottish accent, ‘rough and ready’. [...] I nearly did go but then no. I could appreciate the play and it was a laugh doing it. I did the English accent and got it quite good. But why did it have to be the English accent if it was Norwegian, why not Scottish? ‘I am sorry Mrs Hedda, but fear I must dispel an amiable illusion’.

People would smile when I said it. But why? If it is Norwegian it is Norwegian, so it should be any language.

Because I was the only Scottish person.

That was not much of an argument.²⁹

His own difference and otherness, in this context, exert a twin pressure to assimilate (to adopt the English voice he is surrounded by, and which is valorised in literary culture) and to reify his natural speaking voice, rendering it up as a vocal ‘role’ he can put on and take off, advantageous to deploy in some theatrical settings but marking his own lack of place in others.

In these conditions the character becomes preoccupied with *not* speaking, and the denial of those codes and hierarchies which attend vocal ‘identity’, rendered up for the empirical ear. Indeed, this long story is an extended meditation on the inward versus the outward voice. The central character is acutely embarrassed by the antics of a friend who sings in public:

If you were singing you were not listening. Maybe singing into yourself. Not out loud. A lot of people did that. They walked along the road singing away to

²⁹ Kelman, *If it is your life*, pp. 140-41.

themselves. Eric Semple was the worst, an old pal of mine. He sang out loud. It was like he was on stage. You would not have minded if it was walking along the street but he did it at other times too, like on the bus. People could hear him. Talk about embarrassing. That really was. I thought so anyway. He did not. Him and Celia were the same there. It was only me. I was the one that worried.

Why? Why worry about other people. It was not a pleasant trait and I wished I did not have it. People should be allowed to get on with their own lives without others butting in. Ones like me.³⁰

It seems impossible for this character to co-occupy the public world and remain true to his own nature and perception. These reflections trace a circle by which social sensitivity is always already a damning sign of personal oddness and egocentrism; where what connects one individual to another is the shame we feel on the other's behalf – a shame to which we have no rightful claim. His 'worries about other people' anchor and authenticate this character's relationships, but also mark the limits of his ethical autonomy, where my scrupulous listening impinges on your scope for free expression. This fretting over his right to feel embarrassed about the self-realisation of others expands into a wider reflection on how we orient the separateness of our inner lives to the universal 'right' to truth and freedom:

It might sound daft but maybe doing philosophy worked against me. I was aware of myself too much and what I thought: what did it matter what I thought; but it did, and in the world too, how my thought mattered in the world; how it mattered to other human beings, and the one source of truth and the absolute

³⁰ Kelman, *If it is your life*, p. 121.

base, that was all humanity, and I was part of it and of course Celia herself, what we two thought as separate human beings. She was so honest but if she said something and it was not what I thought I had to say it or else just not talk, better not to talk, so it was better I did not talk.³¹

This character's thoughts 'matter in the world' only in an abstract and general sense, vis-à-vis his 'humanity', but shifting to the more tangible and emotionally resonant plane of his romance with Celia, these 'separate human beings' can only be grasped in their intransigent difference. It seems impossible, here, to maintain a relation to 'the world' which sustains the meaning (or mattering) of one's thought as mediated by the social, as though even this couple's intimate, small-scale commonality can and must be posited (at the level of philosophical verities), but can never be realised as intersubjective experience. The unspeech of this character – his suppressed utterance – becomes the means of orienting his personal truth to 'the world' while resisting its determinations. But the medium of this apparent autonomy is, in fact, thoroughly permeated by the demands of the social. In the words of Volosinov, 'the expression of an experience may be realized or it may be held back, inhibited', but 'even in the original, vague form of glimmering thought and experience, it had already constituted a social event on a small scale and was not an inner act on the part of the individual'.³² The very evasions (of stereotype, of romantic discord) which affect this character 'from the outside' inscribe the pressure of the social on his inner speech: 'it is a matter *not so much of expression accommodating itself to our inner world but*

³¹ Kelman, *If it is your life*, p. 142.

³² Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, p. 90.

*rather of our inner world accommodating itself to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions’.*³³

As the story reaches its conclusion, the question of how to behave with others becomes a meditation on the outward traces of self-experience:

Not only did I appreciate her [Celia’s] own lack of self-consciousness I began noticing it in others. Those that had it seemed satisfied with themselves. Not in a bad way. I did not see them as ‘smug’. They were content with themselves, or *within* themselves. Maybe it was an illusion. I saw them out and about and their lips were moving. They were not phoning, not texting. Some had earphones and actively engaged with the music, whether singing along or performing actions with their limbs. Others sang on their own account. They were not listening to anything except out their own head. Or in their own head, inside it. From inside it. Inside within it. You listened to things inside your own head, from inside.

Or did you? Did people listen inside or from outside?³⁴

As though taunting critics of his individualism, Kelman positions this mascot of technological atomism, sealed ‘inside’ by earphones, as the model for healthy social presence. The search for inner freedom, and the total escape from social anxiety, concludes in a tableau of Cartesian *listening*, an inward digging for that kernel of total self-presence anterior to the traffic noise of inner speech, though occupying the same lyric-perceptual locus. Is our inward singing heard ‘with’ or ‘within’ its point of origin? For Volosinov, the answer must be ‘with’: even our self-audiencing trades in material signs absorbed from the outside. It would be easy to emphasise the

³³ Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, p. 91.

³⁴ Kelman, *If it is your life*, p. 120.

‘decentred’ quality of this subject, and the (half-conceded) illusory nature of its existential self-presence, where the mighty truths available ‘from inside’ reduce outward expression to absurd, puppet-like behaviour (‘performing actions with their limbs’). But pause to notice the character’s (and, I would suggest, Kelman’s) sincere investment in this figure, and the appeal of its singing on its own account. A genuine and unironic emancipation is to be sought ‘inside within’ – beyond all experience of witness.

Conclusion: Ones like me

I have elsewhere argued that ‘voice’ acquires a special representative valence within the context of Scottish devolution, the core logic of which is neatly summarised by Alex Law and Gerry Mooney: ‘symbolic legitimacy for the devolved state in Scotland derives from a trans-class people-nation’.³⁵ Rhetorics of vocal difference, suppression and communion are central to the construction and institutionalisation of this people-nation, and in this domain it seems Scottish literary politics really have participated in the refashioning of Scottish political community.³⁶ There is no doubt that Kelman’s writing and influence played a key role in these developments, but we badly misread his art when fitting it to the literary-political narrative traced *through* these developments, which presents Kelman’s achievement as the recovery of communal ‘voice’ and representative power. On the contrary, the social value of Kelman’s fiction lies in its wary resistance to ‘voice’ as a medium for the authentic display of pre-given ‘identity’, and its undercutting of the collective utterance that symbolically reconciles ‘one’ and ‘all’.

³⁵ Alex Law and Gerry Mooney, ‘Devolution in a “Stateless Nation”’: Nation-Building and Social Policy in Scotland’, *Social Policy & Administration* 46.2 (April 2012), 161-77 (p. 172).

³⁶ See Scott Hames, ‘On Vernacular Scottishness and its Limits: Devolution and the Spectacle of “Voice”’, *Studies in Scottish Literature* 39.1 (Autumn 2013), 203-24.

For Adorno, ‘the subject forms itself to collective experience all the more intimately the more it hardens itself against linguistically reified expression’.³⁷ Kelman’s singing into yourself achieves a vocal communion marked and mediated by the social, but realised in the space of personal truth and being. At the Rangers match we hear Kieron parrot the tribe into himself, as the direct incorporation of violent codes of belonging premised on what rather than who he is. Self-falsifying, the fraternal roar stiffens in his mouth, bloody pledges of ‘identity’ sounding as dead ciphers. The unassimilated hero of ‘justice for one’ unravels the collective subject and its universal rights and entitlements. Injustice will not be overcome by piously rehearsing power’s own self-justifications, or by mirroring its claims to totality in evacuating the terrain of lived struggle and solidarity. The collective utterance of this ‘we’ sealed into a circuit of affirmation, it is left to the individual – ‘as though different, as if in some way singular’ – to generate the friction and difference necessary to dissent, acting faithfully ‘within’ while confuting the claims of witness. The hero of ‘If it is your life’ shrinks from self-performance and the agonies of interlocution, seeking freedom in silence and the depths of self-experience. Seeking, like Kieron, to orient his inner truths to a space of witness in which they are capable of mattering, he sings the problem of witness into himself in a medium both socially constituted and lyrically expressive.

‘The narrow path of emancipation’, writes Jacques Rancière, ‘passes between an acceptance of separate worlds and the illusion of consensus’.³⁸ This is very much the terrain of Kelman’s art: particularising the individual subject on terms which scorn the irenic public sphere and that liberal realism ‘that continues to build and

³⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 220-21.

³⁸ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. by Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 50.

render unto Caesar this miraculous world in all its empirical and verifiable splendour’, in the words of Jerry in *You have to be Careful*.³⁹ The point of resisting this objectification is clear, but what is the positive value of the unexpressed utterance, this singing into yourself? Kelman’s profoundly Romantic art aims for the lyric ‘stretching’ of inner space to engulf and remake, as true and free, the bad determinate world outside.⁴⁰ True and free, that is, as reflective *experience*, judged by standards of authenticity crystallised out of its own witnessing.

The redemptive potential of inward expression becomes clear later in *Kieron Smith, boy*, as the adolescent hero strives for communion of a more traditional and transcendent kind:

I said prayers into myself but it was just not good. God would not know. He could not hear everything in the world. If it was inside yer head, He could not hear it. Because if ye were not speaking it, just thinking it, then if ye were not and it was just there.

How could he hear things in yer head if they were just there and ye were not thinking them? Maybe He did but maybe He did not, maybe He did not.⁴¹

Even the ultimate witness cannot meet thought unaddressed to any listener in the space of witness and communion. Prayer that falls short of interlocution is not prayer, but an inert collection of ‘stuff in yer head’ waiting to be spectated (and reified) by an all-hearing Caesar. No reciprocal speech is possible with the only possible audience for this swallowed supplication; even at the spiritual level there is

³⁹ Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*, p. 178.

⁴⁰ See also Scott Hames, ‘The New Scottish Renaissance?’, in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, ed. by Peter Boxall and Bryan Cheyette (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 494-511.

⁴¹ Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy*, p. 289.

no prospect of do-it-yourself communion. Glossing Volosinov, Jean-Jacques Lecercle writes that ‘consciousness is not irreducible individuality but an in-between, an effect of the sociality of interlocution’.⁴² To refuse, with Kieron, the public character and reality of ‘inner speech’ is to erase the lyric agency of the subject, reducing the small ‘social event’ of consciousness to unmotivated ideation that ‘was just there’, residues of mental behaviour with no prospect of mattering in the world.

⁴² Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2009), p. 109.

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