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Iain Banks, James Kelman and the Art of Engagement:  
An Application of Jean Paul Sartre's Theories of Literature  
and Existentialism to Two Modern Scottish Novelists

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a study of the key novels of Iain Banks and James Kelman in the light of Jean Paul Sartre's theories of existentialism and literature as set out in his 1949 literary manifesto *Literature and Existentialism*. By comparing and contrasting these two contemporary Scottish writers with reference to Sartre's ideas, valuable insights into their fiction and their Scottish literary context may be gained. Sartre's existentialism is primarily concerned with the potential of the apparently alienated subjective individual to influence and affect wider society. His theory of literature focuses specifically on the relationship between the writer, the reader and the social context of both, so the thesis will consider not only the novels of Banks and Kelman but also the social context of their writing and the critical reaction to it. The thesis is structured as an examination of Kelman and Banks in terms of their depictions of class, politics (both economic and social), gender, religion and ideas of morality.

The introduction explains the reasons for choosing Sartre's *Literature and Existentialism* as the critical basis of the thesis and the context in which his theories were formed. A brief overview of existentialism precedes consideration of the specific argument that Sartre proffers in terms of the relationship between his existentialist thought and literature. As a novelist himself, as well as a politically committed intellectual and existential philosopher, Sartre believed that there was a strong connection between literature and philosophy. His ideas about literature and existentialism therefore have the authority of a novelist's experience of writing as well as those of a philosopher and critical thinker. I subsequently explain why I have chosen Iain Banks and James Kelman as the literary focus of the thesis. Both are pre-eminently novelists who have expressed political and, in some senses, philosophical, ideas that link them implicitly to Sartre's writings. Neither makes extensive or overt acknowledgement of Sartre, but approaching them and their work from the Sartrean perspective is illuminating because it highlights what drives their main protagonists as well as their own motivation for writing. Using Sartre's claims for the importance of literature as my starting point I consider not only their writing but also what has inspired their work in terms of their political, social and

ethical beliefs, examining the reaction to their work, both from critics and in their own self-reflective comment.

Chapter One examines in greater detail the ideas set out in the introduction, with reference to the idea of the 'engaged writer'. This is a specific term which derives from Sartre's claim that the 'engaged writer knows his words are actions'. The chapter examines Sartre's definition of the writer and the writer's role in society. This definition is applied to Iain Banks and James Kelman with reference to their artistic reaction to the world post 9/11 in Banks' novels *Dead Air* and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* and Kelman's *You Have to Be Careful in the Land of the Free*. The chapter analyses what can be gleaned from their differences and similarities when writing about the same subject and concludes that both writers, for all their apparent contrasts in terms of style and aesthetic, understand that the relationship between reader and writer is one which can promote social and political change, thus fulfilling Sartre's definition.

Chapter Two focuses on Banks' and Kelman's reaction to a specific political situation and widens the scope to look at the political climate that both Banks and Kelman deal with in their fiction. Kelman (born 1946) and Banks (born 1954) are of a generation of Scottish artists who have reacted to a particularly volatile time in Scottish politics. By looking at their personal comment upon it I investigate the culture that produced their writing, and how relevant their respective reactions were. For this, particular attention is paid to Banks' *Complicity* and Kelman's *How Late it Was, How Late* in a discussion of the role of the writer in political debate and in wider society. In these and other novels both writers not only provide reportage on the politics of the time, but, through their fiction, as 'engaged writers', directly challenge the mainstream contemporary political ideology.

Chapter Three moves on from questions of politics to consider the writer and morality. For Sartre, the question of personal morality is central to the writer's reason for writing. He believed not only that an individual writer's moral sense is evident in their fiction, but also that the reader likewise learns about the environment that created that moral sensibility, specifically in their respective community. In this chapter questions are

therefore asked about the transmission of ideas and ideals through the act of Banks' and Kelman's writing, as well as questioning what the nature of morality is. In their fiction Banks and Kelman deal with the individual, the collective (with reference to religion, art, class and philosophy) and further related questions of social and political morality by placing their characters outside the socially accepted norm, and offering a critique of those norms in their depiction of those characters' circumstances and actions. In ways that invite comparison with Sartre's stated ideas about the link between an individual's writing and personal morality, both writers offer considered moral, social and political ideas and ideals that they believe will change the individual reader, and the wider collective, for the better.

Chapter Four examines the question of Scottish masculinity and femininity as expressed in the novels of Banks and Kelman. This examination is related to the ideas discussed in the previous two chapters with reference to how portrayals of men and women in literature reflect the connection between gender and a nation's political and social systems in a Scottish context. Said depictions interrogate the politics, morals and aesthetics of the writers' work. Banks and Kelman offer different, but related, critiques of the masculine and feminine stereotypes in Scottish, British, and Anglo-American conventions. Their creation of male and female characters thus exemplifies the politics and aesthetics of their writing and the nature of their 'engagement'.

Chapter Five looks more closely at Sartre's theories with specific reference to the individual writer's aesthetic, the individual reader's aesthetic and the idea of shared aesthetic values between both. This is done with close analysis of how Banks' and Kelman's writing has changed over the years, and in doing so this analysis asks to what extent one writer can be said to be 'artistically superior to', or more 'aesthetically pleasing than', another. The expectations of the reader and the writer are discussed with reference to Sartre's specific definition of the writer's aesthetic, and this definition is applied to Banks and Kelman to ascertain what we can learn from their respective aesthetics. Both writer and reader are required to create an 'objective reality', a process by which Banks, Kelman and Sartre implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, propose the recognition of 'human freedom' as its ultimate aim.

Chapter Six posits that comparison with a number of their contemporaries will demonstrate that, while Banks and Kelman are novelists who notably benefit from such critical exposition, Sartre's ideas are perennially relevant and insightful when considering writers in a political, social and ethical context. Amongst modern Scottish writers Banks and Kelman are pre-eminently 'engaged' writers with moral responsibilities, as Sartre believes all writers should be, and their engagement remains morally, politically and aesthetically committed and challenging, yet open to further revision and development. Over and above applying Sartrean literary philosophy to Banks and Kelman this thesis therefore also offers a model of literary criticism that can be applied to a number of other contemporary Scottish authors.

In conclusion, this thesis suggests that Sartre's theories of literature can assist in the attempt to better understand the value of the writer in society, and of Kelman and Banks in particular. The comparison and contrast between Banks and Kelman makes clear the importance of contextualising the individual writer not only with the work of their contemporaries, but with the time, place and position in which they are writing. The intention of the thesis is to discover how Sartre's ideas of existentialism and literature can be applied to writers and their work in a way that allows 'the critic' to analyse both the novelist's fictional technique and to gauge the value of their role in society – in other words, how Sartre's theories allow us to better understand the individual writer in a social, political and moral context, both nationally and internationally.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgment.....	vi
Declaration.....	vii
Introduction: Existentialism and the Writer.....	1
Chapter 1: The Engaged Writer.....	17
Chapter 2: The Political Writer.....	38
Chapter 3: The Moral Writer.....	57
Chapter 4: The Writer and the Representation of Women and Men.....	89
Chapter 5: The Writer's Aesthetic.....	114
Chapter 6: The Contemporary Scottish Novelist.....	151
Conclusion.....	164
Bibliography.....	172

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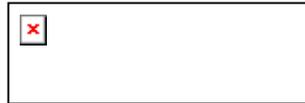
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I also thank Iain Banks and James Kelman.

This thesis is dedicated to Norman Mortimer.

### **Declaration**

Except for quotations, information and ideas as I have attributed to other sources this thesis is entirely my own original work.



## **Introduction: Existentialism and the Writer**

A fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics. The critic's task is to define the latter before evaluating the former. (Jean Paul Sartre, 'On the Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of Faulkner' (1929))<sup>1</sup>

Existentialism is a word that avoids easy definition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following:

**existentialism:** a doctrine that concentrates on the existence of the individual, who, being free and responsible, is held to be what he makes himself by the self-development of his essence through acts of the will (which, in the Christian form of the theory, leads to God).<sup>2</sup>

The *Chambers Dictionary* definition is:

**existentialism** *noun* a philosophy that emphasises freedom of choice and personal responsibility for one's own actions, which create one's own moral values and determine one's future.<sup>3</sup>

Such definitions are of limited application, although they do point to the key aspects of all existential thought, namely the existence of the individual, that the said individual has free will, and is therefore responsible for his or her actions. These three 'existential truths' make evident that existentialism is concerned with freeing the individual from society's apparent constraints.

Further understanding can be found by brief examination not only of what the existentialists believed, but what they were against: 'Existentialism is generally opposed to rationalist and empiricist doctrines that assume that the universe is a determined, ordered system intelligible to the contemplative observer who can discover the natural laws that govern all beings and the role of reason as the power guiding human activity.'<sup>4</sup> If there can be said to be a unifying central idea that applies to all existentialists it is that it is a mistake to concentrate on discovering objective truths about man's place in the world as that world is singularly defined by the subjective individual, and as such – according to existentialism - the examination of the self must be primary. Philosophical terminology is often problematic, especially when it involves an attempt to group individual philosophers together. In the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* the situation, with specific regard to existentialism, is addressed as follows:

A philosophical movement is often named not by the philosophers who are taken to be its representatives, but rather by its opponents, by those who observe from outside a community of thought amongst certain thinkers, and who give name to what they regard as a trend in order to be able to refute or attack it.<sup>5</sup>

Groupings are often made in terms of place and time, for example the Ancient Greek philosophers or the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, or literary groups such as the Hobsbaum group or the Chemical Generation, but this takes little account of what the individual members of these groups actually believed and the variety of their approaches, which are often fundamentally different. Once a definition or statement regarding a philosophical movement has been made, the tendency is to apply the term not only to philosophers of the day but also those who came before, and to force inclusion upon them. This reflects a common desire to show that the history of ideas follows a linear pattern where all the dots can be joined together in more or less an ascending line of knowledge. History shows that there is a general tendency to group disparate philosophers and their theories under one convenient umbrella. This is a particularly keenly-felt problem with the 'existentialists', many of whom would have argued keenly about their individual beliefs and ideologies. The existential label is one which implicitly allows for such a breadth of ideas. As set out in the definitions at the beginning of this introduction, existential theory is primarily concerned with the existence of the individual, and the freedom that accompanies said existence, and this became a convenient label with which to apply to philosophers, writers and artists who did not fit easily into other ideological and artistic categories:

Existentialism was never an organized movement, but was a loose grouping of like-thinking people who found that analyses given by the writers discussed (Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre) were appropriate to the historical circumstances in which they found themselves. In one sense there have been as many existentialisms as existentialists.<sup>6</sup>

This individualism of thought, which speaks of an ideology that belongs exclusively to the self, is only to be expected. Freedom of will for all means that every individual's choices make them unique, but this opposes man's natural wish to belong, which encourages individuals to look for similarities rather than embrace differences. This paradox is at the heart of existentialism and its application to the world, but it should not

stop us from examining what were the differences and similarities of those who were considered existentialists.

It is believed that French philosopher Gabriel Marcel first coined the term 'existential' in 1943,<sup>7</sup> although the term has been applied retrospectively to include thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger; it has also been applied to Marcel's peers Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus.<sup>8</sup> (Camus certainly did not consider himself an existentialist, although this did not stop others from doing so. Sartre originally preferred the term 'phenomenological ontology', although later he embraced the term).<sup>9</sup> Some commentators also include the phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Marcel Merleau Ponty. There are marked differences between all of the above. Some, such as Kierkegaard and Marcel, were devoted Christians, while others, including Heidegger and Sartre, were avowed atheists. Since existentialism is concerned with the individual, such differences should not only be expected, but can be considered necessary to the philosophy. The possibilities for difference are innumerable.

It can be argued that all existentialist philosophy can be traced back to René Descartes and his belief that the only thing he could be certain of was his own existence. Descartes' claim, first expressed in *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, that '*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true, every time I express it or conceive of it in my mind' has been simplified to the pithy 'I think, therefore I am'.<sup>10</sup> Taking this certainty as 'truth' the philosophers that followed used it as a starting point to examine what, if anything, could be said about 'the human being', 'human nature' and the existence, or otherwise, of a God. In his book, *The Sartre Dictionary*, Gary Cox describes how Sartre acknowledged the debt he and other existentialists owed to Descartes:

Perhaps the major preoccupation of Continental philosophy since Descartes has been to identify and overcome the problems of his dualism and offer a more coherent philosophy of mind. Sartre is part of this tradition. He describes himself as a post-Cartesian, acknowledging Descartes as the founder of the debate in which he is engaged.<sup>11</sup>

To oversimplify the issue, we might say that the common theme to all of the existential philosophers and writers is that they are concerned with 'existence' and 'truth'.

'Existence' may refer to the individual alone, whereas 'truth' is intrinsically a universal proposition, addressing the 'existence' of all individuals. It is in the overlapping relationship between the notions of 'existence' and 'truth' that existentialism escapes the twin accusations of being purely a solipsistic enquiry and advocating moral relativism. This philosophy of existence became the basis of the existentialist's concerns, no matter whether they considered themselves part of such a collective or not. The philosophical questions that concerned 'the existentialists' were addressed, at least by some, not only in philosophical writings but also in fiction, drama and, to a lesser extent, poetry.

Fiction was the form that seemed best suited to the artistic expression of existential ideas, which is apt given that Sartre gives it primary importance as the most suitable way of transmitting an individual's ideas and ideals, something which will be examined at length in chapter one. Among the most notable existential writers was Sartre himself whose work as a novelist and playwright, particularly with his *Roads to Freedom* trilogy and the plays *The Flies* (1943) and *Huis Clos* (1944), explored, through the prism of literature, many aspects of his existential ideas.<sup>12</sup> Other famous 'existential' novelists include the aforementioned Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Scottish novelist Alexander Trocchi and the term was applied retrospectively to Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky. The uniting feature of all of these writers was that their work expressed the individual angst that comes from the realisation that man is free and responsible for his own actions. Camus' 1942 novel *The Stranger* is perhaps the clearest example of this, where the central character of Meursault murders a man who is unknown to him. Despite being tried and found guilty Meursault shows no remorse, and embraces incarceration as he is physically constrained from acting, a state he welcomes. His apparent indifference to his actions mean that he is a stranger not only to society, who cannot understand the reasons, if there can be said to be any, behind the murder, but also from himself.

Other famous texts, such as Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1953)<sup>13</sup> and Trocchi's *Young Adam* (1957) have similar concerns. In the former it is the fear of what free will and responsibility mean to the individual that causes the inaction of the central characters of Estragon and Vladimir to remain in a daily stasis as they await their instructions as to what to do from the never present Godot. Trocchi's novel sees another

murder and trial, but this time the guilty man, narrator Joe, escapes punishment and is content to watch the trial of the man who is convicted of his crime. Again it is the lack of emotion or remorse that is striking as Joe, like Meursault, apparently lacks any moral imperative to act in a manner that society would deem morally suitable. The linking theme in all of these texts is that if man is free and responsible then only he can decide what the concepts of right and wrong are and therefore judgment comes from the individual alone. This echoes one of Sartre's central tenets: 'I am responsible for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation for my being. Therefore everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible.'<sup>14</sup> Such literature portrays a bleak existence that suggests the existential life is a painful one which must be suffered alone, and this is a state which Sartre explicitly acknowledges:

I am *abandoned* in the world, not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water, but rather in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant.<sup>15</sup>

These novelists exemplify this belief and it is understandable that Sartre saw literature as the most appropriate form for the exchange of ideas. It has proved to be the form which has best expressed his philosophy so it is no great leap to his theory, as set out in his literary manifesto *Literature and Existentialism* (1949), that it is best placed to transmit an individual's ideas.

My thesis is founded upon Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy, explicitly his theories of existentialism and literature. To refer back to my epigraph, it can be seen that Sartre believes that the writer expresses their 'being' through his or her writing, and it is important to try and decipher how Sartre believes this can be discussed with practical application. Sartre mentions the role of the critic without stating what sort of critic he has in mind, and it is important to try and clarify who he is referring to. In fact, it would appear that there are two separate types of criticism involved here, literary and philosophical.

It could be argued that the literary critic's task is predominately to examine the novelist's technique. The philosophical critic's task may be defined as examining the

novelist's metaphysics. However, Sartre states that 'the critic's task is to define the latter while evaluating the former' and this reference to a single critic appears to be deliberate. For Sartre, 'the critic', at least in terms of literature, is one whose task is to examine both what the writer writes and try and discover why they write it, to discover *how* meaning is created rather than what meaning really is. Sartre's critic is defined by what he or she criticises, but cannot be considered to be fulfilling their role unless they engage with metaphysics. Both are not only required but necessary.

One of the core beliefs at the heart of Sartre's existential philosophy is that 'existence precedes essence'. In *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946) he outlines what he means by this statement:

What do we mean by saying existence precedes essence? We mean that first of all man exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man, as the existentialist sees him, is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. [...] Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.<sup>16</sup>

More specifically, that is the first principle of Sartre's existentialism, and it is reliant on his atheism. Since God does not exist, man is not 'created' to any plan. The comparison that Sartre uses is between man and a paper knife.<sup>17</sup> A paper knife is created to do a specific job. Its essence, its reason for existing, is decided before its existence. Man is born with no such 'plan' in place, therefore he creates his own essence, he, through the free choices he makes, creates himself. If this is the case, then the writer is primarily creating his essence through his or her writing and the critic can discover more about the individual by examining both the writing and the reasoning behind it.

In *Literature and Existentialism* Sartre deals specifically with the individual writer, his or her work, and the relationship with the reader. He believed that it is in this relationship that literature becomes concrete. In a similar way as the individual reveals 'being' by their relationships with the world, so the reader is necessary for literature to 'be': 'Authors need the reader's freedom for their work to exist authentically. Without it, they will cease to function as authors and their work will fall into obscurity, unread'.<sup>18</sup> The freedom of the writer and that of the reader create an imperative for change.

As a novelist Sartre was in the rare and privileged position of being theorist and creative writer. As Stephen Priest states in his edition of Sartre's *Basic Writings*: 'Literature is the form in which Sartre expresses his own philosophy.'<sup>19</sup> Sartre believed that all actions are free actions, and that writing is an artistic expression of this freedom. Indeed, Sartre believed that the writer cannot do other than to express this freedom; it is in the nature of the action, as Iris Murdoch explains: 'Since the novel is an appeal to freedom, since it presupposes as reader a free man, there would be a sort of contradiction involved in using the novel to advocate enslavement. "The writer, a free man, addressing free men, has only one subject – freedom".'<sup>20</sup> Literature is the perfect vehicle for both the individual writer and reader to recognise their own freedom and that of each other. Sartre believes that this relationship between writer and reader is one that promotes further change in a social context. In his essay 'What is Literature?' he says: 'The "engaged" writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change'.<sup>21</sup>

I examine in detail Sartre's idea of 'the engaged writer' in chapter one, but, to summarise briefly, we can say that when he or she makes the free choice to write, the writer is choosing what they believe to be for the best, both for themselves and for all, and, if the writer's actions are convincing, and if those who read the writing believe in it, then they may be influenced by the writing to change how they view the world, and their place in it. This embodies the paradox at the heart of Sartre's philosophy: the existentialist is a singular, solitary, self; but writing is an intervention, an address to a social and trans-historical collection of individuals. Writing presumes both the individual and the possibility of social change. In 1947 Sartre wrote the essay 'We Write for Our Own Time' for the French magazine *Les Temps Modernes*. As Sartre comments in *Truth and Existence* (1989), this essay was open to misinterpretation: "'We Write for Our Own Time" has been understood to mean writing for our *present*. But no, it is writing for a concrete future defined by each and everyone's hopes, fears and possibilities of action'.<sup>22</sup> This explanation itself is perhaps a little unclear. Sartre believed that the 'engaged' writer does not write for the present, but does write *about* the present in the hope that he can help define this concrete future. As Bernard Henri-Lévy says in his biography of Sartre:

The committed writer is the one who, with firmness, resolution and clarity, decides to address himself, not to some future, distance and thus fantasized period, but to the very time whose contemporary he is. He is the one who, not satisfied with speaking *about* this time which is his, takes the decision to speak also *for* it.<sup>23</sup>

This concentration on the contemporary is one of the major reasons for choosing to examine James Kelman (born Glasgow 9/6/1946) and Iain Banks (born Dunfermline, Fife 16/2/1954) in this thesis. Using Sartre's claims for writing as my starting point I will examine these two contemporary writers who write for their own time, in 'our own time'. I will apply Sartre's ideas to their work, considering not only their writing but also what has inspired their work in terms of their political, social and ethical beliefs. I will examine the reaction to their work, both by critics and by the writers themselves.

James Kelman has often been described as an 'existential' writer. Cairns Craig, in his book *The Modern Scottish Novel*, states: 'In Kelman's novels, the realism of working-class life is the basis for an engagement with the philosophical legacy of existentialism'<sup>24</sup> and Simon Kövesi, in his 2007 study of Kelman, says: 'His narrative strategy is also confirmation of his foundational aesthetic existentialism: he does not want for a moment to suggest either omniscience or essentialist notions of the generic narratorial voice'.<sup>25</sup> The term 'existential' is as problematic when applied to a writer as it is when applied to a philosopher, as it prejudices what is expected in his or her work. One might argue that Kelman also is concerned with 'existence' and 'truth'. His characters suffer as they attempt to negotiate day to day living, but it is also the background to their existence that Kelman is exploring. We read of their lives through consideration of their intensely individual experiences; they are isolated, lonely, alienated characters. Alienated from each other and silenced in the social world, they might seem like descendants of the creations of another 'existential writer': Samuel Beckett's disembodied voices. However, their lives are represented in Kelman's fictional world, contextualised in a society where political, economic and moral authority must be taken into account. Kelman believes he is giving voices to those in society who are rendered silent. Like Sartre he believes that social change can occur through literature:

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

writers themselves. It is something we do not expect. And why should we? There is such a barrage of elitist nonsense spoken and written about literature that anything else would be surprising.<sup>26</sup>

Kelman's writing fits Sartre's model of the 'engaged' writer and this affinity is the principal reason I chose him as one of the writers under examination. But it is a mistake to think that Sartre's literary theories are only applicable to those writers who may be described as characteristically existential. Those theories can be, and are meant to be, applied to any writer whose work has a political, social and/or moral dimension. To demonstrate this I want to compare Kelman to a writer who is apparently different to him in terms of class, place, technique, content and what might loosely be described as 'philosophical attitude'.

Iain Banks would not be primarily considered an 'existential writer' as he does not, at first glance, deal with the suffering of 'human being' even when he is dealing with the suffering of human beings. Whereas Kelman concentrates on the individual, Banks is concerned with society and politics in a wider sense. His characters, even the central characters, are usually depicted in a context of complex inter-relationships and rarely as the severely isolated individuals found in Kelman's fiction. But that does not mean that Sartre's theories should not be applied to Banks. Again it may appear that the term 'existential' is constricting rather than all-embracing. Banks comes from a different background and has a different aesthetic to Kelman, but he also writes novels which are politically and morally motivated. Indeed, the depiction of 'individual', isolated existences in Banks' novels bears initial comparison with those of Kelman. Banks is equally concerned with specific political, economic and moral contexts.

By comparing these two contemporary Scottish novelists, the application of Sartre's theories can yield valuable insights not only into their writing specifically, but can provide a context to examine other writers. If Sartre is correct in saying that all writers are writing for their own time, then we can look at how two different writers foresee a better future, and how they believe such a future may be attainable. This will not only give insight into the local and national, but universal. This process is described by Iris Murdoch: 'It is an inevitable part of the task of the novelist, not only to exemplify

this liberating creativity of art, but (since he cannot, from the nature of his subject-matter, avoid commenting on society) to advocate a community of free beings'.<sup>27</sup>

Of the two writers Banks is perhaps the most explicitly 'engaged' in his fiction, as he uses his words to endorse and encourage direct action. In many of his novels he has expressed his political and moral views directly to the reader through his characters. However, it would be a mistake to think that Kelman is any less 'engaged': it is rather that he demands more work, more 'commitment', from his reader. Both writers address specific social or political situations, but where Banks' characters engage directly with such situations by trying to change them, or by voicing their opposition to them, Kelman's characters are oppressed by the situations and it is the description of their lives that invokes reaction from the reader.

It is this relationship between writer and reader that is ultimately under consideration in this thesis. Sartre examines this relationship in his essay 'Why Write?' where he says: 'For the reader, all is to do and all is already done; the work exists only at the exact level of his capacities; while he reads and creates, he knows that he can always go further in his reading, can always create more profoundly, and thus the work seems to him as inexhaustible and opaque as things'.<sup>28</sup> If we accept the role of the reader as a creative one then what does this in turn say about the readership for whom the writer writes? Sartre goes on to say:

The author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there; he also requires that they return his confidence which he has given them, that they recognize his creative freedom, and that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. Here there appears the other dialectical paradox of reading; the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognize that of the other; the more he demands of us, the more we demand of him.<sup>29</sup>

This helps explain criticism of a writer when he or she fails to live up to the increased expectations of their readership, as has happened in the reception of some of Kelman's and Banks' novels. It is a relationship built on more than trust, it is one that involves reflective recognition. That is to say, both writer and reader become aware of each other and have reciprocal expectations of each other. However, these expectations do not take place in a vacuum where aesthetic priorities rule, but rather in a literary marketplace,

national and international. It is an important consideration in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that the success of a writer in gaining a readership is almost necessarily defined by commercial success in the international marketplace. Writers have to market themselves in a particular way in order to both get their ideas across and to sell books. The successful writer needs to be read otherwise he or she fails and becomes an irrelevance. The two factors go hand in hand. The relationship, at least as Sartre sees it, is clarified by David Caute:

The thesis is clear: literature, properly employed, can be a powerful means of liberating the reader from the kinds of alienation which develop in particular situations. By this process the writer also frees himself and overcomes his own alienation... It is the writer's mission to dispel inertia, ignorance, prejudice and false emotion.<sup>30</sup>

This thesis will therefore be primarily focused on examining how James Kelman and Iain Banks, two 'individual' writers who differ greatly in terms of fictional technique, accept the obligations of this 'mission' by liberating their readers and themselves. It is this relationship between the individual writer and their collective readership that allows the writer to escape accusations of solipsistic enquiry, the existentialist to examine the world objectively while still concentrating on the individual, and the critic to contextualise the writer, their writing and their readership in a wider cultural sense. Although it would be justifiable to examine Kelman and Banks individually with reference to Sartre, nevertheless the two are clearly comparable in terms of gender, age, body of work, years of writing, critical success and their shared national context as writers engaged by life in modern and contemporary Scotland. Therefore questions about both can raise answers that only come when they are considered together. I have not included Banks' science fiction novels or the screen adaptations of his work and have put aside the plays and short stories of Kelman, not only because I wish to concentrate and focus on their mainstream novels, but also because I want as tightly fitting a comparison as possible. Banks has only one collection of short stories, some of which are science fiction, while Kelman's fiction has remained earth bound and resolutely in the present day.

By concentrating on these novels I am also taking into account the importance Sartre places on 'prose' above other art forms. He calls prose 'the empire of signs' and says:

The art of prose is employed in discourse; its substance is by nature significant; that is words are first of all not objects but designations for objects; it is not first of all a matter of knowing whether they please or displease in themselves, but whether they correctly indicate a certain thing or a certain notion.<sup>31</sup>

He then comments on the writer: 'Thus, the prose writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure'.<sup>32</sup> I will argue in due course that Sartre overstates the importance of prose, particularly over other forms of writing, however in the context of this thesis as a whole I wanted to stay as close to Sartre's definition of the 'engaged' writer as possible.

The desire for a direct comparison is also the reason that I am not dealing with, for instance, Janice Galloway, A.L. Kennedy or Irvine Welsh, to name three writers who are comparable in terms of profile, success and cultural engagement. Nor do I wish to compare Kelman and Banks with Scottish writers of a different, if overlapping, era, such as Robin Jenkins or Alasdair Gray, as this would take my study too far in a different direction. By referring almost exclusively to Kelman and Banks I am aware that the thesis risks the accusation of a 'masculinist' approach. I should therefore qualify my argument at the outset by saying that I am aware of the limitations of not dealing with the work of women novelists, but have chosen this focus deliberately for the reasons stated. I shall briefly discuss other Scottish contemporary writers, both male and female in chapter six. However, I shall, when referring to 'the novelist' henceforth, be referring to Kelman and Banks as 'he' or 'him'.

As 'engaged' literary artists both Kelman and Banks are committed to the exposition of a world of negotiation and contingency. This shared world-view is another reason that they should be considered together. Both are self-confessed atheists, as Sartre was, and as with Sartre it is central to their work and world view. Their fiction is an attempt to find a language that opposes fundamentalisms or unquestioned belief systems at a time when the latter are increasingly in evidence in the world. This helps move these writers beyond those who simply comment on isolated individuals in a particular time

and place to address universal questions. They are both, in different and revealing ways, concerned with 'existence' and 'truth'. This also places them in an ideological and political, as well as a literary, lineage with Sartre, and the specific nature of this connection will be discussed in chapters two and three.

By challenging, and developing, critical understanding of these two important Scottish writers, and applying an existential consideration of their work, further insight into the current critical considerations that concern Scottish literature can be gained and this will be examined in chapters five and six. There are aesthetic considerations which are intrinsically linked with the cultural, moral and political and these can all be placed in a Scottish literary context. Scottish critics, such as Cairns Craig, Simon Kovesi, Laurence Nicoll and Michael Gardiner, have discussed the fiction of James Kelman with reference to existentialism, but he has been an isolated case study, with the notable exception of the work of Alexander Trocchi, and I will refer to their criticism throughout this thesis.

As yet, no critic has applied the theories of existentialism to the work of Iain Banks, or indeed any other contemporary writer, to any significant degree. Discussion of Banks has focused on the split between his mainstream fiction and his science fiction, gender depictions, religion and genre. There is nowhere near the level of criticism that has been applied to Kelman, and this is understandable, but a more insightful examination of his work is desirable. As stated, Banks is not thought of as an 'existential writer', but that does not mean that existential theory should not be applied to his work. It is a mistake to think that the two should be mutually inclusive. Indeed it is the contention of this thesis that an examination of Banks benefits from just such an investigation. Moreover, there are further insights to be had in applying such criticism to other Scottish writers and this has an effect which is two-fold. It validates Sartre's central belief that his theories are applicable to all engaged writers, using his own definition, and it places the work of James Kelman at the centre of Scottish literary criticism as the theories that those critics have applied to his work can be reappraised with reference to other Scottish writers. The comparison with the work of Iain Banks that is the focus of this thesis is one which can be extended further to other culturally significant Scottish writers.

This thesis is thus an examination, through the prism of the existential theories of Sartre as set out in this introduction, of Kelman and Banks in terms of their depictions of class, politics (both economic and social), gender, religion and ideas of morality in their novels. It is an examination of their reasons for writing, how they write, and an attempt to discuss literature in a way that can include the subjective individual and the objective collective. Sartre's theory of literature places the individual writer at the centre of social and political change, and that covers politics, morality, representations of women and men, the local, and the universal. Sartre's philosophy and fiction concerned the specific situation of France as he was writing, but was international, indeed universal, in its ultimate scope. He believed the answer to the question 'For Whom Does One Write?' is: for the biggest possible readership, and, ultimately, everyone: '[...] one writes for the universal reader, and we have seen, in effect, that the exigency of the writer is, as a rule, addressed to *all men*'.<sup>33</sup> The same can be claimed for both Banks and Kelman. They both write for Scotland in the present day, even when their settings and characters are placed outside the country. Their fiction may give us insight and comment on specific times and places, as Sartre sees as of primary importance for the writer, but what they have to say should reach beyond these specifics. It is because their fiction is 'of its time' that makes them ideal subjects for this thesis. Their ideas and ideals are intended, often explicitly but always implicitly, to be of relevance to every individual beyond national boundaries.

Theories and theorists have their day, and then critics move on to the next. Often that means that they get relegated to the history of ideas. I believe that Sartre's ideas deserve to be reconsidered and are still relevant today. As notions of nationality and belonging are under revision and in flux, with an increasingly global perspective encouraged, Sartre's theories allow critics to contextualise writers beyond such apparent boundaries. The enquiry of the thesis will be to discover if Sartre's ideas of existentialism and literature can be applied to writers and their work in a way that allows 'the critic' to analyse both the novelist's metaphysics and his fictional technique, and moreover, to evaluate his role in society and beyond.

Notes:

1. Jean Paul Sartre, 'On The Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of Faulkner' *Literary and Philosophical Essays*. Annette Michelson, trans. (London: Rider, 1955), pp 79-88, page 79.
2. *The Oxford English Dictionary: Second Edition Vol V* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), page 543.
3. *Chambers Giant Dictionary*, (London: Chambers Harrap Publishers, 2006), page 260.
4. *Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Pan Books, 1979), pp 115-116, page 115.
5. *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas Volume II*, Wiener, Philip.P. (ed.) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), pp 189-195, page 189.
6. Ibid. page 195.
7. Christine Daigle, *Existential Thinkers and Ethics* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006), page 5.
8. Ibid. page 4.
9. Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre, who Camus had seen as mentor and friend, had a falling out over the former's philosophical novella *The Rebel (L'Homme Revolte)* which appeared in 1951 and seemed to oppose the Marxist principles that Sartre and others of the non-communist left were enthusiastically embracing. The two never spoke again. Although their falling out was political at heart it did not prevent Camus from attempting to distance himself from any association with Sartre and the French existentialists. In one of his notebooks he wrote 'Existentialism. When they accuse themselves, one can be sure that it is always in order to condemn others.' (Albert Camus, *Carnets III*, Gallimard, Paris, 1989, page 147.) This quote suggests the disagreement may have been more personal than ideological. Despite such protests Camus is still viewed as an existential writer and his novels, which were as important as any other texts in popularising the philosophy, are testament to such a view.
10. Rene Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp 102-112, page 103.
11. Gary Cox, *The Sartre Dictionary* (London: Continuum, 2008), page 60.
12. The *Roads to Freedom* trilogy include the novels *The Age of Reason* (1945), *The Reprieve* (1945) and *Iron in the Soul* (1949). There was a fourth volume started in 1949, *Drole d' Amitie*, but Sartre abandoned the project to concentrate on his political and philosophical writings.
13. Although first performed in 1953 Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* it was written between 1948 and 1949.
14. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, [1943] 1998), page 555.
15. Ibid. page 555.
16. Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen, 1948), page 28.
17. Ibid. page 26.
18. *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Peter Simon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), pp 1333-1349, page 1334.
19. Jean Paul Sartre, *Basic Writings*, Stephen Priest (ed.) (London: Routledge, 2001) page 258.
20. Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Vintage, 1999), page 98.
21. Jean Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, page 23.
22. Jean Paul Sartre, *Truth and Existence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1989] 1995), pp 1-80, page 10.
23. Bernard Henri-Lévy, *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century* (Polity Press 2003), page 66.

24. Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp 75-116, page 106.
25. Simon Kövesi, *James Kelman: Contemporary British Novelists* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp 1-35, page 19.
26. James Kelman, *And the judges said...* (Edinburgh: Vintage, 2003), pp 57-74, page 65.
27. Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, page 99.
28. Jean Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* page 46.
29. Ibid. page 51.
30. David Caute, 'Introduction' to Jean Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, [1948] 2001), page x.
31. Jean Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, page 20.
32. Ibid. page 23.
33. Ibid. page 67.

## Chapter One: The Engaged Writer

In my introduction I referred to Jean Paul Sartre's idea of the 'engaged writer', and in this chapter I will examine the concept further. Sartre's claim, made in *What is Literature?*, that the 'engaged writer knows his words are actions'<sup>1</sup> needs to be understood clearly. Sartre states his belief that writing is the artistic method which is more successful than any other in transmitting ideas and ideals. He sees prose writing in particular as a means of expression that is open to all and one that is in turn recognised and understood by all and it is the utilitarian use of language that is behind this idea. Language can be poetic and aesthetic, but it is primarily functional. Sartre discusses his view of language: 'Thus, regarding language, it is our shell and our antennae; it protects us against others and informs us about them; it is a prolongation of our senses, a third eye which is going to look into your neighbour's heart. We are within language as within our own body'.<sup>2</sup> Sartre is giving language physical properties, and it is the mutual perception of language by the writer and reader that is the foundation of the writer/reader relationship.

The claims that are made for the writer and their use of language also need clarification. It is not that writing is more aesthetically pleasing than other art forms, but that it is the form of writing that is the most immediate and functional in its use of language and therefore allows for the greater possibility of success in the exchange of ideas, and lends itself more than any other art form to the individual influencing wider society. As Gary Cox explains:

For Sartre, the purpose of writing, the purpose of literature, is not to provide an apology for the way things are or to flatter the powers that be. Such writing is opposed to freedom and deeply inauthentic. Literature provokes rather than sedates, it is a stimulant that is capable of bringing an individual, a group, a whole social class, out of a state of alienation into an awareness of freedom.<sup>3</sup>

The solitary acts of writing and reading are the ostensibly simplest and most direct form of transmitting ideas and ideals, and are recognisable to both writer and reader alike. Sartre claims that prose writing in particular deals in a relatively straightforward way with language, and makes clear that he sees it as separate from other forms of art, even other forms of writing. For example, Sartre attempts to make a clear distinction between prose and poetry: 'The empire of signs is prose; poetry is on the side of painting,

sculpture, and music'.<sup>4</sup> Sartre argues that this is not a question of aesthetics, but one of transmission:

It is true that the prose writer and the poet both write. But there is nothing in common between these two acts of writing except the movement of the hand which traces the letters. Otherwise, their universes are incommunicable, and what is good for one is not good for the other. [...] The art of prose is employed in discourse; its substance by its nature is significative; that is, the words are first of all not objects but designations for objects; it is not first of all a matter of whether they please, they correctly indicate a certain thing or notion. Thus, it often happens that we find ourselves possessing a certain idea that someone has taught us by means of words without being able to recall a single one of the words which have transmitted it to us.<sup>5</sup>

Sartre is implying that where the prose writer is involved in the world, the poet merely reflects it. This is something which David Caute examines in his introduction to *What is Literature?* (1947): 'Prose, he [Sartre] argues, is capable of a purposeful reflection of the world, whereas poetry is an end in itself. In prose, words are significant; they describe men and objects. In poetry, the words are ends in themselves'.<sup>6</sup> But, while the reasoning behind this distinction is strongly argued, I believe that the distinction is, despite Sartre's protests to the contrary, essentially an aesthetic judgment. Both poetry and prose are dealing with language and often there is a blurring of the lines between the two, or the incorporation of both within a single text. It should be noted at this juncture that Sartre himself was a novelist, and no poet, something which Gary Cox also alludes to: 'As an engaged and committed writer of literature, Sartre wrote to respond to history and to shape history through his impact on his readership'.<sup>7</sup> So it can be said that fiction suited Sartre as he tried to convey his philosophy. This begs the question: did Sartre become a writer of literature as he saw it as the artistic method with which to change the world, or did he find that his skill in writing prose led him to proclaim the success above all others of the art form that he practised? It is not such a leap to imagine that, if his muse pointed him towards poetry, he would not necessarily have seen it as an 'inferior', or at least less functional, art form.

However, Sartre is not the only existentialist who believed in the primary importance of fiction. In the introduction to *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett*, critic Edith Kern explains this:

From its inception, existential thought has felt itself at home in fiction. Because of its intense “inwardness” and the “commitment” of its proponents, it has expressed itself more strikingly in imaginative writing than in theoretical treatises. Entranced by the beauty of speech “when it resounds with the pregnancy of thought,” Kierkegaard listened to his own sentences many times until “thought could find itself completely at ease in the form.” According to modern existentialist thinkers, the paradox and absurdity of life can be more easily deduced from fundamental human situations portrayed in fiction than described in the logical language of philosophy which is our heritage.<sup>8</sup>

If we accept that a central tenet of existentialism is that ‘man creates himself’ then it makes peculiar sense that a creative medium is best placed to express existential thought, although Kern does not make the distinction between prose and poetry that Sartre does: ‘Existentialism’s abhorrence of rigid thought systems as being alien to life and existence has equally pointed toward a preference for poetry and fiction’.<sup>9</sup> Despite his protestations of the superiority of prose it might be just as revealing to apply Sartre’s literary theories to poets and their work.

Leaving styles of writing aside, it is clear that the relationship between writer and reader is a close one. Sartre, in his essay ‘Why Write?’, further examines this relationship, which he sees as one of mutual commitment:

To write is thus both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader. It is to have recourse to the consciousness of others in order to make one’s self be recognized as *essential* to the totality of being; it is to wish to live this essentiality by means of interposed persons; but, on the other hand, as the real world is revealed only by action, as one can feel oneself in it only by exceeding it in order to change it, the novelist’s universe would lack depth if it were not discovered in a moment to transcend it.<sup>10</sup>

Closely considering the opening sentence of this quote allows real insight into the writer/reader relationship. The writer’s actions cause reaction in the reader. This is an attempt to influence the reader’s subsequent actions and ideas. The writer discloses the world as they see it, or how they believe it should/could be, and hopes, by the action of writing, to convince others of his ideas through the re-action of reading.

Sartre believed that the result of this transmission between writer and reader was liberation for both parties, a recognition of their mutual freedom:

For, since the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men. And since readers, like the author, recognize this freedom only to demand that it manifest itself, the work can be defined as an imaginary presentation of the world in so far as it demands human freedom.<sup>11</sup>

For Sartre, if writing failed to achieve this aim, or at least aspire towards it, then it could not be considered a success. He believed that the worth of a novel had little to do with any perceived aesthetic value but rather with how faithfully it adheres to its role in the recognition of freedom: 'Thus there are only good and bad novels. The bad novel aims to please by flattering, whereas the good one is an exigence and an act of faith'.<sup>12</sup> The problem of such a statement is that it appears to merge ideas of aesthetic worth and moral worth, and this is a question I return to in chapters three and five.

It is clear that Sartre believed in the power of literature to change the world. He thought of the art of writing as a political action that, at its best, is capable of informing, illuminating and affecting others: 'Our great writers wanted to destroy, to edify, to demonstrate'.<sup>13</sup> An explicit example of this desire is to be found in Iain Banks' novel *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* (2007), where the central character, Alban McGill, is attacking American business-man Fromlax after the American attempts to justify the Iraq war by linking it to the 9/11 attacks on the USA:

'The Iraqi state had nothing to do with nine-eleven, if that's what you mean. Just nothing, and if you want to "give these people" a chance of a better life, get the hell out of their country. Stop interfering.' Alban could see Fromlax was about to reply, but he just kept on talking; warming to his theme if you were being polite, or just having got to a straw/camel's back tipping-point of extreme impatience with naive Americans if you were being honest. 'Jesus,' he said, 'you're constantly making fresh mistakes to compensate for the mistakes you made before, aren't you? You don't like the left-wing nationalists elected to power in Iran so you stage a coup and put the Shah in charge, then get all upset and surprised when the Iranians don't like unelected US-supported despots and so the mullahs take over; you turn a blind eye to the barbaric, medieval bastards of Saudi Arabia for decades because they happen to be sitting on a desert full of oil and you don't bother your sweet asses they're using their slice of the profits to promote their dingbat fundamentalist Wahhabiism across the whole Muslim world, then you have the cheek to be stunned with fucking amazement when it's cockpits full of Saudi zealots who fly into your buildings on nine-eleven; you back Saddam Hussein against the mullahs in Iran and

can't see how that might go wrong; you back the mujahidin in Afghanistan and you get Bin Laden'.<sup>14</sup>

There has to be art involved in such writing. It is a creative process, and the more successful the art the more persuasive the argument will seem. Ideas and arguments are never enough, and I will discuss the aesthetic of the writer in chapter five. In the extract above, Banks' anger is expressed through the character of Alban McGill, but the writer wants to balance this anger with knowledge and reason, and as a result the writing is both passionate and rational. In *Dead Air* (2002) the thoughts of the narrator Ken Nott seem to reflect how Banks views, and uses, his fiction: 'All the things I'll never get to say. All the rants I'll never get to rant. There was one shaping up about context, about blindness, about selectivity, about racism, and our intense suckerhood when it came to reacting to images and symbols, and our blank, glazed inability to accept and comprehend reality in the form of statistics'.<sup>15</sup> Nott is a 'shock-jock' DJ, and Banks is seen by some as a 'shock' novelist, but both character and novelist are shocking for what they see as good reasons. They see their 'rants' as the opportunity to change their listeners/readers and try (perhaps in what both consider a losing battle) to change the world.

Such passages as the above are written to reflect Banks' world view and express it, and they are always backed up with detailed knowledge of the situation under discussion. Banks is a political writer in a very specific way, and in a very different way to James Kelman. Banks takes specific political situations, such as the Iraq War, and carefully argues his point of view. The arguments of his protagonists often closely mirror his own. Whilst promoting *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* Banks spoke of an episode where he sent his ripped passport to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair in protest against the same war in Iraq: 'I was so angry about the illegality and immorality of the war. And this was me – a comfortably off, white Caucasian atheist from a vaguely Protestant background. If I thought it was disgusting, what would Muslims think about how their co-religionists were being treated?'<sup>16</sup> It can be seen that in this particular novel Banks' questioning of the moral and the political are expressed aesthetically. The two quotes above could be interchangeable between the fictional character of Alban McGill and Banks himself. There are many other parallels between the two, and Banks' actions are reflected in Alban's words from an earlier passage in the novel: 'Personally, I believe that when faced

with an imperial power – and let's not kid ourselves, that's exactly what the USA is – one ought to do everything non-violent that one can to resist it, just on principle'.<sup>17</sup> Looking closely at this passage we deduce Banks' own views, and certain words hold particular resonance: 'Personally', 'imperial power', 'non-violent', 'principle'. All these words could be applied to a man whose method of protest at what he sees as a 'white Caucasian' and 'vaguely Protestant' attack on a foreign country and ideology is to destroy his passport to express, and publicly announce, his disgust at what he describes as an illegal and immoral war.

*The Steep Approach to Garbadale* was not the first of Banks' novels to react to the world post 9/11. In *Dead Air* Banks deals with his thoughts about the attack on the World Trade Centre, or if he does not do so explicitly, then certainly that is the cloud hanging over the novel. The original hardback cover featured a plane flying over the 'twin towers' of London's Battersea Power Station. Late in the novel its protagonist Ken Nott faces the reader with a statistic, one which is delivered in a similar tone to the earlier proclamations of Alban McGill and Banks:

Every twenty-four hours about thirty-four thousand children die in the world from the effects of poverty; of malnutrition and disease, basically. Thirty-four thousand from a world, a world society, that could feed and clothe and treat them all, with a workably different allocation of resources. Meanwhile, the latest estimate is that two thousand eight hundred people died in the Twin Towers, so it's like that image, that ghastly, grey-billowing, double-barrelled fall, repeated twelve times every single fucking day; twenty-four hours, one per hour, throughout each day and night. Full of children. We feel for the people in the towers, we agree with almost any measure to stop it ever happening again, and so we should. But for the thirty-four thousand, each day? Given our behaviour, and despite the idea we're supposed to love our children, you could be forgiven for thinking that most of us just don't give a damn.<sup>18</sup>

Such representation is often apparent in Banks' fiction. He is deliberately, and directly, trying to affect the reader through the action of his chosen words. Again, such impassioned language, allied to Banks' own political views, leads us to believe that Nott's point of view is the same as that of Banks. Indeed if you compare this to the earlier quote from *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, they could be spoken by the same person, which in a very real sense they were. Banks is projecting his ideas and ideals through the

protagonists of his novels. Such a technique fits with Sartre's idea of 'the engaged writer', which he discusses in *What Is Literature?*:

The prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure. It is therefore permissible to ask him this second question: "What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?" The "engaged" writer knows that his words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change. He has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition. Man is the being toward whom no being can be impartial, not even God. For God, if He existed, would be, as certain mystics have seen Him, in a *situation* in relationship to man. And He is also the being Who can not even see a situation without changing it, for His gaze congeals, destroys, or sculpts, or, as does eternity, changes the object in itself.<sup>19</sup>

Banks appears to epitomise this idea of the 'engaged writer'. He uses his words as actions, and is aware of their power. He reveals, in his writing, what he sees as important, and wants change by making others aware of his view, a view that he believes should be held universally, creating a better society. Banks understands that to opt out of interacting with questions of politics, if not necessarily with party politics, leads to a loss of influence in shaping society. He realises he can use not only his writing, but his fame as a writer to try and change people's attitudes. An example of this can be seen in an article Banks wrote for *The Guardian* newspaper's 'G2' section in 2007 entitled 'Why I Traded in My £100,000 Car Collection to Save the Planet'. A famed car enthusiast, Banks sets out his new goal in terms of driving: 'What I would really like is an all-electric car that is a reasonable size. I am getting a wind-turbine if I get planning permission, and the ideal thing would be to power a car from purely renewable resources, not the national grid'.<sup>20</sup> This is a direct attempt to affect other people's actions and belief. If it was not, then why feel the need to announce this situation in a national newspaper? Interviews with Banks are rarely simple exercises in selling books. He often uses them to deal with whatever political or social problem is concerning him at that particular time. What is crucial to consider is that the above article could be taken, as written, from one of his novels, adding to the feeling that Banks and many of his protagonists are as one.

In another example of this, an interview with *The Herald* newspaper in 2010, Banks once again proved that he remains a politically passionate individual:

“There ought to be a cultural and educational boycott on Israel and it’s time to revisit that idea,” he says matter of factly. “I called my agent yesterday and said don’t accept any deal from Israeli publishers – it’s just got to that sort of stage where they’re obviously not listening.

“It is a form of collective punishment, but if people won’t be reasonable and listen to anything – UN resolutions or human decency – then unless you turn to violence you have nothing else”.<sup>21</sup>

But, as with his protest against the Iraq War, Banks falls short of advocating such violence:

Underneath all those intellectual theories and passionate opinions, there is a softer side to Iain Banks. He doesn’t like confrontation and would do anything to avoid violence – even put aside his own political views.

“There is a case for Scotland being so profoundly different in the way it behaves and the way (its people) want to live. It’s not an emotional nationalism – I had nothing against the English people – it’s a pragmatic, political, attitude.

“As long as it doesn’t involve bloodshed, as long as we can live in peace together. I’d far rather we had an amicable staying together than a disastrous bloody parting. Call me old-fashioned but I think violence is bad”.<sup>22</sup>

This pacifistic stance may seem at odds with the violence in his fiction, but Banks makes it clear that it is the ideology behind the violence in his novels that is important. There is a high level of the fantastical to all of Banks’ novels, and to concentrate on the violence in itself is to miss the point of his writing.

To examine how different aesthetic techniques are applied by different writers it is worth comparing Iain Banks’ and James Kelman’s artistic response to the same political events. Kelman’s literary reaction to a post-9/11 world is very different from Banks, as is his method of writing, but it is no less politicised. But if Banks can be called an engaged writer it is harder to make such a claim for James Kelman, at least at first inspection. Kelman’s novel *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004) is set in a post 9/11 New York, but his writing avoids the personal politics of Iain Banks’ characters. The narrator, Jeremiah Brown, is a Glaswegian living in New York, and we pick up his story at an apparent crossroads in his life: ‘I had been living abroad for twelve years and I was gaun hame, maybe forever, maybe a month’.<sup>23</sup> Such an opening is a typical stylistic technique of Kelman’s. His writing follows his narrators at a particular moment in time, but not necessarily an exceptional moment in time. His writing does not deal in dramatic

twists or red-herrings. It is as if the reader is being allowed a glimpse into a life that has progressed until this point, and that will go on changed in only small ways once the reader's gaze has passed. His characters could be described as trapped in their situations and in their own existential crisis.

Jeremiah Brown wants to go home to Scotland, but he also wants to stay in the USA to try and make a life with his ex-partner, Yasmin, and their un-named four-year old daughter. Caught between these two opposite stated desires he does nothing but continue his existence of work, and, when he is allowed to, drinking and gambling. Jeremiah never mentions 9/11, nor do any other characters, but it is the backdrop to this novel. The paranoia of America and the fear of the foreign sets the tone, with a sign in a taxi highlighting that Jeremiah is in a less than friendly place: 'S Yore Right To Smoke In Here, 'S Ma Right To Shoot Ya.'<sup>24</sup> Such detail not only gives the reader the sense of unease but showcases James Kelman's often overlooked sense of humour. Jeremiah is asked to produce his Red Card in every office, and even every bar, that he visits, adding to the feeling that he doesn't belong. This classification reduces him to a list of attributes, as he explains: 'a non-assimilatit alien, Jeremiah Brown, nothing to worry about, Class III Redneck Card carrier, aryan caucasian atheist, born loser, keeps nose clean, big debts, nay brains, big heid'.<sup>25</sup> It is this classification that Jeremiah believes is holding him in this life of purgatory. The Red Card he holds represents a classification between the Green Card, which Jeremiah craves, allowing him citizenship and the promise of a better life, and deportation, which would at least force him home. He is defined by his official status, and this definition is negative: 'I am a registerrred fucking non-intigratit cunt with the wrang fucking politics, the wrang philosophy of life man, the wrang this and the wrang that. The Red Card is a marked card'.<sup>26</sup> Kelman is concentrating on the individual to inform the reader about the wider world, but in a very different way to Iain Banks. Whereas Ken Nott and Alban McGill use statistics and direct information to change the reader, it is Jeremiah Brown's predicament, his life, which is used to affect the reader. It could be said that where Banks tells, Kelman shows.

Jeremiah's situation is a reflection on a society where constant monitoring is increasingly a way of life. As the novel unfolds the concentration is on the tension that grips a nation as a result of this particular crisis, with Jeremiah used as the conduit as he

comes across the increasingly strict security methods and red-tape and tries to fulfil his (apparent) desire to return home to Scotland. Jeremiah's work in airport security, one of the few jobs his Red Card allows him to do, gives both Jeremiah and the reader an insight into an aspect of American life that had taken on greater significance after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. As he waits for his interview for the airport job he reads some PR materials and sums up their philosophical position, at least as he reads it:

True change could take place in society if the entire world were true believers and evil cast asunder. Until then folks would just have to get on with things, assisted by a variety of humane structures; some freshly created; others passed down through the generations whether by common assent, divine support or state intervention by either peaceable decree or the democratically-enabled force of arms.<sup>27</sup>

In his 2007 book on Kelman, Simon Kövesi looks closely at the portrayal of Jeremiah and how this reflects Kelman's 'existential' world view:

For Jeremiah, alien by birth, by politics, by accent and by faith, the United States can only offer repeated reinforcement of that alienation, can only make him aware of the fragility of his existence, of his subjection to rules and stipulations of immigration management, unless of course he shifts his subject position to one which is acceptable to the state authority. Jeremiah's first-person narrative could signal Kelman's raising of the possibility that only 'I's can exist in the United States for those who are new to the country. Indeed Jeremiah's encounters with the state seem only to be about securing his identity, ensuring every natural-born American knows, and has a right to know, who he is and what he might threaten America with, all in the name of domestic national security.<sup>28</sup>

Jeremiah's battles in America, while often with himself, are largely due to the fact that he will not be allowed to be himself, nor be allowed to stay. He feels he cannot go home for the risk of being branded a failure, but he cannot express his true beliefs in America as they do not fit with what is deemed acceptable to the authorities. As Kövesi points out, the more Jeremiah has his identity defined, the more he seems to lose his own sense of self. He is told who he is, but more significantly who he is not. This concentration on the life of a disenfranchised individual runs through Kelman's fiction and Jeremiah could be the cousin over the sea to other Kelman protagonists: Robert Hines (*The Busconductor Hines*, 1984), Tammas (*A Chancer*, 1985), Patrick Doyle (*A Disaffection*, 1989) or Sammy Samuels (*How Late it Was, How Late*, 1994).

The characterisation is strong enough to suggest that the circumstances these men find themselves in are secondary to the conflict of the self that each of them suffers. Kelman is showing that his narrators are everymen, but at the same time distinctly individual. As Roderick Watson says of Kelman's protagonists, they are: 'Lonely men essentially sealed off (even from their lovers), given to physical action, but held rigid by the male ethos and a sense of socio-political futility in an existential realm of pain and courage, and masochistic or homo-erotic martyrdom'.<sup>29</sup> This is one of the traits of Kelman's fiction; he deals with those whom others choose to ignore. Jeremiah Brown fits this description perfectly, as can be seen by this reaction to a security guard who is patrolling with his Rottweiler: 'Don't threaten me with yer stupid fucking dog man I'll batter its fucking heid in and have it with chips'.<sup>30</sup> Later Jeremiah regrets this loss of temper, and tries to examine what caused it: 'There had been nay need to go losing my temper and picking on the big guy, him and his canine comrade. All they done was come out for a walk and look what happened! harassed by an alien in their ayn domestic hinterland'.<sup>31</sup> Such self-examination and flagellation exemplifies Kelman's 'heroes'. They often act in haste, almost without thought, then repent throughout the rest of the novel, adding layer on to layer of self-loathing. Whereas Iain Banks' characters have the education, social position, good health and will to actively engage in political argument, Kelman's are dealing with surviving; barely, as in the case of Jeremiah Brown, simply getting from point A to B, and often failing to do so. This difference can be said to be at the heart of their approach to writing. Banks deals with politics directly as his characters have the ability, or perhaps seek to realise the possibility, to make a change, whereas Kelman is representing those to whom such power has been denied. He sees the political starting in having this power, and his characters reflect the struggle of those who are disenfranchised.

In his essay "*And the judges said ...*" Kelman explains what his writing sets out to challenge and overcome, namely the idea that art is only for the few, a notion that is tied to economics:

There is a notion that art is sacrosanct and it is a dubious notion; there is also the notion that the practice of art is sacrosanct which is just nonsense. The only context in which it has meaning is political, it implies hierarchy, it assumes freedom for some and economic slavery for others; for some there is the luxury of time, not

having to worry about how to get by in the world, you can be a free spirit, it is your right as an artist, you are set loose from the everyday trials and tribulations of an ordinary person because first and foremost you are not an ordinary person, with all the diverse responsibilities which that might entail, you are an Artist.<sup>32</sup>

Such an elitist view is anathema to Kelman, and this sets out the political ideas that drive Kelman's fiction. The characters that appear in his fiction are fighting a similar battle to be recognised as individuals as he believes he has to fight to be recognised as a writer. They are 'ordinary' people whose responsibilities are controlled by matters economic and political. Kelman sees the act of writing itself as necessarily political if it is to be relevant, whereas for Banks it is a means to express his political and moral world view. This difference applies to the characters who inhabit their writing as well. Banks' characters are free to make choices, or at least appear to have a greater level of freedom, and are aware of those that they make, and accept the consequences of them. Their lives are affected by the actions of others, but they take control of their lives by the time the novels end. Kelman's characters either try to avoid making any choices, or believe they are prevented from doing so. As Roderick Watson notes:

I am worried by the fixity of Kelman's characters, and while I admire their capacity to survive, or even to embrace their condition, they seem to me to be trapped... The perception that there is nothing to be done is acceptable and undeniable, I think, in absolute metaphysical terms, but it is disturbing (as Kelman means it to be) in a genre which presents itself as realism...Kelman's vision is deeply existential and even, finally, metaphysical.<sup>33</sup>

When critics talk of 'existential writers' they often mean writers who portray existential angst in their fiction, their protagonists finding themselves in situations where free choice appears either impossible or undesirable. James Kelman's characters live such lives, at least during the time that the reader spends with them. They are often in the state which Sartre calls bad faith. In his introduction to Sartre's *What is Literature?* David Caute clarifies this idea:

Man wishes to be the sole subject of the universe, to absorb the world into himself, and never to be an object. But for other men he is inevitably an object. According to Sartre, we react to this anguish either honestly, by acting on the basis of our freedom, or in bad faith, by escape and evasion.<sup>34</sup>

Another term for such anguish would be suffering, an important idea for Kelman, Banks and Sartre. James Kelman's narrators are always seeking to escape or evade, but they suffer, whereas Banks' characters are aware that there are 'others' suffering and want to change the world to ease this. As Sartre states in part two of *Being and Nothingness*:

The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as for-itself. Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state.<sup>35</sup>

Faced with this bleak view of reality it is understandable that escape or evasion would be a preferable state.

In *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies* Cairns Craig further outlines the existential dilemmas facing Kelman's protagonists:

The crises which Kelman's protagonists face – and they are all in one way or another on the edge of mental breakdown – are not resolvable by action and event; they are conditions of suffering which are permanent, reflecting the stasis, both political and social, of the worlds which they inhabit. There is no way out: the condition continues. It cannot be arrested and there is no respite from it. All of Kelman's protagonists are condemned to go on, restlessly and relentlessly bearing their unbearable alienation, precisely because the ultimate falsehood would be to cease to be aware of suffering.<sup>36</sup>

This is certainly borne out in the life of Jeremiah Brown. Literally suffering alienation he is only too aware of his condition, at times having to remind himself of the basics of living: 'ye breathe out, ye breathe in'<sup>37</sup> but he accepts it as an inevitability that suffering will only stop when his life ends, something he considers as he begins to freeze near the end of the novel:

Maybe mmy end had come. Maybe ttonight was gauny be ththe night, mmmaybe that auld gguy with the long bbblack cloak and ssscythe was a gonna come lukkin fir me. The more one thought about it the more convinced one became. If it wasnay me then it was somebody damn close. The lord save us all. The guy with the scythe is out looking for us, ice dripping from his stragglng yellowing beard.<sup>38</sup>

This shows that Jeremiah believes that not only is his life to be nasty, brutish and short, but that this is a universal condition, with nothing but the prospect of eventual death to

look forward to. 'Life is suffering, followed by death' could be a neat, if bleak, summary of Jeremiah's expectations, and that applies to many, although not all, of Kelman's men.

But if Kelman's men suffer, then Iain Banks' men, although they are aware that there is suffering, and feel anxiety, or even guilt, about this, at least have life experiences that give the reader the impression or appearance of being enjoyable. Admittedly, this is often a superficial enjoyment, but it is there none the less. Banks' characters regularly enjoy sex, drugs, and rock n' roll, sometimes indulging in all three of these simultaneously. Kelman's characters are excluded from enjoying the excesses that society can offer. They sometimes drink or gamble to excess, but there is rarely any sense of joy. Banks' characters often live lives of excess, but it does not define them and you rarely get the feeling that they are in thrall to such a lifestyle, or that these are the root of their problems. It is interesting that although these two authors create very different characters the result of these different lives are often the same, with a sense of despair and emptiness at the heart of both writers' heroes.

The character of Ken Nott in *Dead Air* is, at first glance, as far as can be imagined from Jeremiah Brown. He is a successful radio DJ living, and playing, in swinging London. When we first meet Nott he is with a 'Madonna-esque' rock star: 'Breakfast had been some orange juice and a couple of lines of coke each'.<sup>39</sup> We find he drives both a Porsche and a Lexus, has sex with various partners, and is looking for the next conquest at an age where society usually dictates that he should know better.<sup>40</sup> But through this hedonistic, selfish character Banks comments on issues as wide and diverse as the power of the press and the hypocrisy of those who consume it: 'I wouldn't buy a piece of shit like *The Sun* or the *Mail* or the *Express* in the first place...I'd have been less, not more likely to do so if there had been a photo of Princess Di on the cover. So I hadn't helped kill her'.<sup>41</sup> Institutionalised racism, the morality of the sex industry and the problems of the middle-east are all Banks' subjects in this novel. The following 'rant' from Ken Nott is typical of what occurs throughout the novel:

God, look, can we just agree on this? That the Holocaust wasn't evil and horrific and the single most obscene concentrated act of human barbarism ever recorded because it happened to the Jews, it was all because it happened to *anybody*, to *any* group, to *any* people. Because it did happen to the Jews, and there had been nowhere for them to escape to, I thought, Yes, of course they did deserve a

homeland. It was the least that could be done. The world felt that. Partly guilt, but at least it was there. But it wasn't a moral blank cheque. For fuck's sake, if any people should have known what it was to be demonised, victimised and oppressed and suffer under an arrogant, militaristic occupying regime, *and* possess the wit to see what was happening to them and what they were doing to others, *they* should have.<sup>42</sup>

This is another example of Banks' fiction making his own political stance clear, and to convince the reader that it is worth considering. It is passionate, reasoned, educated and clearly argued. Yet the man whom Banks uses to convey these words appears morally bankrupt and self-destructive.

Banks seems to believe that by portraying his characters as flawed he can convince the reader that it is their unhappiness with the world, as much as with themselves, that leads to their disaffection with life. Ken Nott is a man whose life is driven by hate; it appears to define him. The things that he hates are not, however, random. They are all considered, and the reader knows that, if asked, Nott could justify every one. In just a small extract of a list of his 'dis-likes' we find:

The Tories? New Labour? American Republicans? The CIA? The IMF? The WTO? Rupert Murdoch? Conrad Black? The Barclay Brothers? What-d'you call-him Berlusconi ? George Dubya Bush? Ariel Sharon? Saddam Hussein? Thingy Farrakhan? Osama Bin Laden? The entire Saudi royal family? Muslim fundamentalists? The Christian Right? Zionist settlers? The UVF? Continuity IRA? Exxon? Enron? Microsoft? Tobacco companies? Private Finance Initiatives? The War Against Drugs? The Cult of the Shareholder?<sup>43</sup>

From this list we get a sense not only of Nott's politics, but of Banks', and perhaps we can assume other aspects of how Banks views himself through his characters. They are often flawed, regularly flippant and immature, but in the end serious, political and righteously angry. Banks is aware of the personal nature of much of his writing. In an interview with *The Guardian* he owns up to accusations of self-indulgence: “*Dead Air* is full of rants; it's a rant-based book,” he concedes. “Yes, it's self-indulgence. I plead guilty; *mea culpa*”.<sup>44</sup> However, it should be noted that self-indulgence does not necessarily mean unsuccessful writing, and it is the anger and frustration that drives much of Banks' fiction. His characters express this anger in the process of changing from the people to whom we are introduced at the beginning of the novels, to those we leave at the

end. Banks' characters go through journeys of discovery in his novels, leaving them 'better' people when the story is ended, or at least having a 'better' understanding of their own self. There is a sense of redemption in Banks' writing that is missing from that of James Kelman. *Dead Air* is a novel that is, as is shown from the earlier quotation, set on the day of 9/11. But, as with *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*, the focus is on a man whose life is not the way he would have imagined. As with Jeremiah Brown, there is suffering, but there are differences of class, money, status and social standing. These are aspects of both Kelman and Banks that will be investigated in chapters two and three, but first I want to look at the similarities of approach. There is anger, frustration and despair with the way of the world, and this is ultimately expressed from the point of view of the individual.

In *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* Alban McGill is a character who is seeking redemption, and who, like Ken Nott, is angry both at the world and at himself. Independently wealthy through the success of his family's board game, pointedly called *Empire!* Alban has dropped out of the family business and is introduced to the reader in a Perth housing estate earning enough money to buy cheap beer and drugs. In contrast to Ken Nott, Alban McGill has decided *not* to tune in, but to drop out, but like Nott it is his decision. What moves Alban from his situation is the proposed takeover of the Wopuld family business by the *American Company Spraint Corp*. The climax of the novel builds as his family all descend on the family home of Garbadale in an attempt to work out whether to sell to the Americans, or keep things in the family. Alban's self-imposed role as 'outsider' detaches him and the reader from these events. Addressing his friend Verushka: "I feel like a UN Observer or something," he tells her. "I'm going to watch them tear themselves apart, for money. Or stay shackled together in some sense dubious spirit of solidarity".<sup>45</sup> Banks is less than subtle in drawing parallels with the world political situation. The members of *Spraint Corp* fit the image of American Neo-Conservatives: god-fearing, money-loving and ruthless. This allows Banks to take fairly obvious swipes at some of his usual targets such as organised religion: "I'm an atheist, Mr Feaguig," he said, turning to the other man. "I was trying to explain to Tony here that, from where I stand, Judaism, Christianity and Islam don't even look like separate religions, just different cults within this one, big, mad, misogynist religion founded by a

schizophrenic who heard voices telling him to kill his son'.<sup>46</sup> Banks may be accused of simplifying or even trivialising religion in such a passage, but it is a clear expression of his beliefs. In conversation with Jill Owens, Banks expresses the contempt with which he views organised religion:

There's something absolutely frivolous about religion, no matter how ghastly it may appear, no matter how strict and stern its countenance. I call something frivolous if it distracts from the nuts and bolts of real life, of how we try to live our lives as model creatures. I find something unforgivable about the way religion clouds what should be fairly clear water and does everything to make that as difficult to navigate and negotiate as possible. To that extent, probably all of my books try to put something of that across. But again, you do have to be careful not to preach.<sup>47</sup>

*The Steep Approach to Garbadale* may break no new ground in Banks' oeuvre, but it is worthwhile discussing as it brings together many recognisable Banksian traits. The structure of using a dysfunctional family with a secret as the dramatic backdrop is one which he first used in his debut *The Wasp Factory* (1984) and it has served him well through *The Crow Road* (1992), *Complicity* (1993), *Whit* (1995) and *A Song of Stone* (1997). As well as family secrets there is betrayal, confusing love-lives, self-discovery and the excuse for Banks to rage against whatever is firing his ire at the time of writing. Some of these complaints will endure, such as his views on religion, and some are more specific. In this novel the particular irritant is the second Iraq War, and Banks' view of the US as the new Imperial power. The novel can be summed up as a typical example of Banks' writing:

This is not intended to be just a diatribe against the US in general and Spraint Corp in particular, though I do feel I have to explain a little of why I feel the way I do about the choice that we're being presented with here today... The USA is a great country full of great people. It's just their propensity as a whole for electing idiots and then conducting foreign policy of the utmost depravity that I object to. You could argue that Bush junior has never been fairly elected at all, but, in the end, at the last election, faced with the choice between the guy with the Purple Heart (John Kerry) and the guy with the yellow belly, the half of the US electorate that could be bothered to vote appears to have pumped for the latter.<sup>48</sup>

What *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* also highlights is that for all the anger and exasperation that Banks expresses in his writing his novels leave the reader with hope;

that people can change if they choose to and that such change could facilitate wider change. It is a perfect example of existential theories put into practice. Individuals make choices in an attempt to make them better people in moral and metaphysical senses, and with the hope that this will affect further individuals to do likewise.

Another difference between Banks and Kelman is that the latter's readers are left believing that his characters have little chance of change. Compare the end of *Dead Air* with that of *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*. Banks' novel ends: 'We spent some time shopping and wandering around Glasgow during that first day, before we went back to my parents' place for dinner, and – in a sudden shower, dodging traffic – we ran across Renfield Street, holding hands'.<sup>49</sup> At the end of his novel Kelman leaves only the promise that life, as experienced by Jeremiah Brown, will continue: 'But being an outlaw is a serious affair. If anybody with a medical interest ever did a survey of these poor unfortunates it would reveal that the vast majority die of pulmonary diseases brought about by nervous disorders. Take Billy the Kid. Yes sir'.<sup>50</sup> Banks' optimism for the future is a vivid contrast to Kelman's pessimism, even if Banks ironises cliché and Kelman ironises irony.

It is worthwhile once again to examine what Sartre means when he describes the 'engaged writer', and reappraise what that means for writer and reader in relation to Banks and Kelman. Of the two writers Banks appears the most obviously engaged as he uses his words as direct action. His style, at least in terms of communicating his moral and political beliefs, is relatively straightforward with little work to be done by the reader in terms of understanding. It would be difficult to imagine a reader greatly misunderstanding Banks' world view. However, it would be a mistake to think that Kelman is any less engaged, he just demands more work from his reader, and it is the relationship between writer and reader that I want to examine to conclude this chapter. It may be imagined that this relationship is an unbalanced one, where the writers are certain of their meaning but the reader can only interpret meaning and may be mistaken as to what the writer intends. However, the change in both reader and writer occurs in this relationship necessarily, therefore the writer's meaning is irrelevant until the reader is involved, and the act of reading is as creative as that of writing. Sartre examines this relationship in his essay 'Why Write?': 'Since the creation can find its fulfilment only in

reading, since the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun, since it is only through the consciousness of the reader that he can regard himself as essential to his work, all literary work is an appeal'.<sup>51</sup> If we accept the role of the reader is a creative one then what does this in turn say about the readership for whom the writer writes? I would argue that James Kelman asks more, or perhaps expects more, of his readership than Iain Banks does in terms of the 'work' he asks them to do.

The relationship between writer and reader is one built on more than trust, as it involves reflective recognition. That is to say, as was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, both writer and reader become aware of each other and that they are equally free. The relationship, at least as Sartre sees it, is clarified by Gary Cox: 'In liberating the reader through his successful efforts to create challenging and provocative works of art, the writer is in turn liberated by the reader and fully realizes his own freedom'.<sup>53</sup> It is not a case of a writer being engaged or un-engaged, or committed or non-committed, but a question of degree. All writers are engaged at some level, even if they are unaware of this, they all comment, to some degree, on the world in their time. Sartre is challenging writers to become fully 'engaged', to accept the responsibility that comes with being a writer to challenge and change the world: 'Literature should not be a sedative but an irritant, a catalyst provoking men to change the world in which they live and in doing so change themselves'.<sup>54</sup> In the following chapters I will examine how James Kelman and Iain Banks attempt to fulfil this mission by liberating their readers and themselves, and changing wider society.

Notes

1. Jean Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, pp 7-66, page 23.
2. Ibid. page 20.
3. Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), pp 1-10, page 7.
4. Jean Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* pp 7-66, page 11.
5. Ibid. pp 19-20.
6. David Caute, Introduction to Jean Paul Sartre's *What is Literature*, page viii.
7. Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction* pp 1-10, page 7.
8. Edith Kern, *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett* pp vii-xi, page vii.
9. Ibid. page vii.
10. Jean Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, pp 38-66, page 60.
11. Ibid. page 63.
12. Ibid. page 63.
13. Ibid. page 30.
14. Iain Banks, *The Steep Approach to Gabbardale* (London: Little Brown and Company, 2007), page 376.
15. Iain Banks, *Dead Air*, (London: Little Brown and Company, 2002), page 378.
16. Iain Banks interview with Stuart Jeffries for *The Guardian G2*, Friday 25/05/08.
17. Iain Banks, *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, page 351.
18. Iain Banks, *Dead Air*, page 378.
19. Jean Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, pp 23-24.
20. Iain Banks article for the *G2 supplement to The Guardian*, 27/2/07 page 2.
21. Iain Banks interview with *The Herald*, 07/06/10 page 11.
22. Ibid. page 11.
23. James Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), page 1.
24. Ibid. page 5.
25. Ibid. page 107.
26. Ibid. page 144.
27. Ibid. page 149.
28. Simon Kövesi, *James Kelman: Contemporary British Novelists*, pp 167-185, page 180.
29. Roderick Watson 'Maps of Desire', *Scotland in the Twentieth Century*, eds. T.M. Devine and R.J. Finlay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp 285-396, page 302.
30. James Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*, page 412.
31. Ibid. page 412.
32. James Kelman, *And the Judges Said*, pp 37-56, page 41.
33. Roderick Watson 'Maps of Desire', ed T.M. Devine and R.J. Finlay *Scotland in the Twentieth Century*, pp 285-396, page 303.
34. David Caute, Introduction to Jean Paul Sartre's *What is Literature*, page ix.
35. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, [1943] 1998), page 90.
36. Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, page 106.
37. James Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*, page 119.
38. Ibid. page 426.
39. Iain Banks *Dead Air*, page 4.
40. Iain Banks characters often share his tastes, be it cars, music, whisky etc.
41. Iain Banks *Dead Air*, page 147.
42. Ibid. pp 218-219.

43. Ibid. pp 186-187.
44. Interview in *The Guardian G2* section 08/09/09, pp 10-11, page 10.
45. Iain Banks, *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, page 251.
46. Ibid. page 317.
47. Interview with Jill Owens for Powells.com  
<http://www.powells.com/authors/iainbanks.html> [last accessed 3 December, 2010].
48. Iain Banks, *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, page 351.
49. Iain Banks *Dead Air*, page 408.
50. James Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*, page 437.
51. Jean Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism*, page 46.
52. Ibid. page 51.
53. Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction*, pp1-10, page 7.
54. David Caute, Introduction to Jean Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?*, page xi.

## Chapter 2: The Political Writer

“Every time you use language it’s a political act”. James Kelman<sup>1</sup>

In chapter one I examined how James Kelman and Iain Banks engaged with a specific socio-political situation, that of the post 9/11 world, in their fiction. In this chapter I look at what makes them political writers in the wider sense. To do this it is important to have a look at some of the political background that has shaped both writers, and how their response to the political marries to Jean Paul Sartre’s beliefs of what the engaged writer should be concerned with.

Sartre, in his essay ‘Situation of the Writer in 1947’, states his belief not only what the writer must comment upon in their own age, but applies this theory to his age, specifically 1947 when post war Europe was defined by revolutionary ideals, the beginning of the Cold War, and global and local uncertainty. This is a situation which Sartre addresses directly, but in doing so he also outlines the role he sees the writer fulfilling necessarily:

If perception itself is action, if, for us, to show the world is to disclose it in the perspectives of a possible change, then, in this age of fatalism, we must reveal to the reader his power, in each concrete case, of doing and undoing, in short, of acting. The present situation, revolutionary by virtue of the fact that it is unbearable, remains in a state of stagnation because men have disposed themselves of their own destiny; Europe is abdicating before the future conflict and seeks less to prevent it than to range itself in advance in the camp of the conquerors.<sup>2</sup>

It is a call to arms for the writer to reveal to the reader the power of the individual to challenge and change specific political situations and reflect the times and places in which they write.

Kelman and Banks are of a generation of Scottish artists who have reacted to a particularly volatile time in Scottish politics. Kelman had been published as early as 1973 when *Puckerbrush Press* printed his collection of short stories *An Old Pub Near the Angel*, but his first novel, *The Busconductor Hines*, was not published until 1984. Iain Banks’ debut novel *The Wasp Factory* was published in the same year, placing both writers firmly in the period that can be summarised as ‘between the votes’; that is the two

most recent referendums on Scottish devolution, the first of which was in March 1979, and the second in September 1997. This period was defined politically in the United Kingdom by a succession of Conservative governments. Under Margaret Thatcher's leadership the Conservatives won the General Election on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1979. In the introduction to *Contemporary Scottish Fictions: Film, Television and the Novel* (2004), Duncan Petrie talks about the political situation of this period, what he refers to as Scotland's 'double whammy':

The first blow took the form of the referendum debacle of 1<sup>st</sup> of March, 1979, in which a narrow majority in favour of establishing a devolved Scottish assembly was rendered invalid by a ruling that required 40 per cent of the registered electorate to vote in favour of devolution. While some critics have regarded the result as a collective failure of nerve on the part of the Scottish electorate, others have noted the manner in which this negation of the democratic will, however marginal the result, became transmuted into a straightforward rejection of devolution. This was followed a mere two months later by the triumph of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party in the general election, a result emphatically *not* endorsed in Scotland where the Tories polled less than one-third of the popular vote.<sup>3</sup>

Thatcher led her party to two further election victories in 1983 and 1987 before being replaced by John Major. Under his leadership the Conservatives then won a further election in 1992 before the defeat by Tony Blair's Labour Party on 2 May 1997. This period of Conservative rule was one where Scotland as a nation had lost significant political power, with residents of Scotland voting for the Labour Party and the Scottish Nationalist Party in far larger numbers than were voting Tory. In late twentieth-century Scotland the years of Conservative rule created a generation that felt politically disenfranchised. Scotland in the 1980s and the early 1990s was a country that was governed by a party that had so little representation in the country as to make it negligible. Usually political trends cannot be painted in such broad brush strokes, but the figures bear this out:

The decline in Conservative support across a wide spectrum of social groups suggests that the party had become alienated from Scottish society as a whole, not just from some segments within it. In other words, it suggests that there was a national dimension to Conservative unpopularity in Scotland...In fact the crucial difference between Scotland and England concerns the skilled working class, a group which was particularly enthusiastic about Margaret Thatcher's policies in the 1980s. Conservative support in this group in the rest of Britain was around 40 per

cent between 1979 and 1992 and still over 20 per cent in 1997. In Scotland, by contrast, it was usually under 20 per cent and plummeted to under 10 per cent in 1997.<sup>4</sup>

If the above statistics relate to the skilled working class of Scotland, it is easy to imagine the impotence felt by the unskilled working class, who, thanks to massive unemployment, were a larger group than at any previous time in the late-twentieth century. In *The New Statesman* magazine Allan Little gives a personal account of this period in Scotland which crystallizes the political situation: 'Margaret Thatcher swept away the post-war consensus. She transformed the economic topography. The company that lights my home isn't even British. In rolling back the frontiers of the state, the Thatcher revolution had an unintended consequence: it also rolled back the frontiers of British sentiment in Scotland'.<sup>5</sup> Little goes on to explain that this was more than a statistical difference between Scotland and England, there was an ideological split that had a huge impact on how Scots viewed the United Kingdom. In the following passage he gives some reasons why this was the case:

Scotland never had an indigenous Thatcherite revolution. For a decade, England voted enthusiastically for the change that she offered; Scotland resisted it. Until the mid-seventies there was little difference between the ways people voted north and south of the border. After that, voting behaviour started to diverge until, by the nineties, the divergence was extreme. This was highly corrosive for the Union. Its place in the popular imagination shifted. It was no longer a beneficial partnership, but an instrument of English control, a means by which England imposed on Scotland changes that had been rejected at the ballot box.<sup>6</sup>

This perception of English control led to a widespread disillusionment with the political process in Scotland. This had an important if unsurprising effect on general social and political awareness, but also on artistic sensibilities, something Cairns Craig explains: 'Many anticipated that Scotland, economically marginalized, politically divided, would become a cultural desert. In fact, however, the political energy that had been blocked by the Referendum went into cultural creativity, and the 1980s and 1990s saw an efflorescence of Scottish culture which many described as a "renaissance"'.<sup>7</sup> This 'cultural renaissance' was largely defined by an apparent political apathy. As time moved on many in Scotland appeared to lose a collective political will as the chance to make any difference to United Kingdom politics seemed to move further into the distance, and the

work of writers and artists reflected this. Ideas and dreams of political and social change were decimated. Many Scottish novelists chose to portray a Scotland where such ideals of national independence were seen as unreal or irrelevant.

Writers such as Alan Warner, Duncan Maclean and Irvine Welsh, all of whom were first published in the 1990s, wrote novels whose protagonists did not even try to push for political change. Their idea for a better life was escape; either through drugs and alcohol or physical escape from Scotland. At first examination this would seem to put them closer in terms of subject and aesthetic, if not politics, to James Kelman rather than Iain Banks. Banks' characters do use drugs and drink, but recreationally, not to primarily avoid dealing with everyday reality. The relationship that many of Kelman's characters have with alcohol is more dependant. They frequently use it to blot out the world, and it becomes another part of their problems rather than any escape or solution. In *How Late it was, How Late*, the reader is introduced to narrator Sammy Samuels in the opening paragraph:

Ye awake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts; but ye want to remember and face up to things, just something keeps ye from doing it, why can ye no do it; the words filling yer head: then the other words; there's something wrong; there's something far far wrong; ye're no a good man, ye're just no a good man. Edging back into awareness, of where ye are: here, slumped in this corner, with these thoughts filling ye. And oh christ his back was sore; stiff, and the head pounding. He shivered and hunched up his shoulders, shut his eyes, rubbed into the corners with his fingertips; seeing all kind of spots and lights. Where in the name of fuck...<sup>8</sup>

Kelman uses various techniques to convey Sammy's disorientation and psychological turmoil. The move from second person to third person narrative not only expresses the confusion of Sammy's thoughts, but reports on his physical as well as his psychological condition. There is also a mix of Scots and English language. The 'Ye' appears to signify Sammy's immediate thoughts as he tries to make some sense of his situation. The 'He' is secondary, reportage on his physical state as if described by another. The third-person narrative addresses those sensations that are matter-of-fact rather than open to Sammy's conjecture. As the novel progresses the narrative style continues to switch between second-person and third-person narrative, and even these blur at times into first, second and third-person reference:

The thing is ye see about Sammy's situation, the way he thought about things. Who knows, it wasna something you could get yer head around. Hard to explain. Then these things as well that draw ye in then push ye away I mean fuck sake great, alright ye think alright, it's good man, it's okay, I mean who's gony fucking moan about it, there's nay moan on, it's just being practical, realistic, ye've just to be realistic, ye approach things in a down-to-earth manner. I mean Sammy was never a moaner.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the first name 'Sammy' would appear to be third person, but the use of 'ye' before it, and considering it is still Sammy's internal monologue (or even a dialogue with himself), means it can also be read as a second person narrative, or even in first person, as the repeated use of 'I' suggests. Cairns Craig deals with Kelman's use of language in *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999):

The standard written forms of language and the representation of oral pronunciation are so mixed in Kelman's language that there is no distinction between the narrative voice and the character's speech or thoughts: no hierarchy of language is established which orders the value to be put on the characters' language in relation to any other mode of speech or writing within the text.<sup>10</sup>

There is a misconception that the political aspect of Kelman's language is simply down to his use of dialect, but the question is much more complex. In his essay 'The Novels of James Kelman', Laurence Nicoll explains why Kelman writes as he does: 'Kelman cannot opt for a conventional third-person narrative, with an author/narrator who views his characters from above, for this would convert the author into a divine orderer, a "God"'.<sup>11</sup> What Kelman is trying to achieve is to remove any idea of the assumed authority of the author over the individual, what Nicoll refers to as an 'existential aesthetic'.<sup>12</sup> As Kelman himself says in his introduction to *An East End Anthology* (1988): 'In our society we aren't used to thinking of literature as a form of art that might concern the day to day existence of ordinary women and men, whether these women and men are the subjects of the poetry and stories, or the actual writers themselves'.<sup>13</sup> Kelman is not only trying to give these ordinary women and men representation, but shows that such representations can be more than third-person narrative reportage, and he believes that conventional literary techniques have to be subverted:

The establishment demands art from its own perspective but these forms of committed art have always been as suffocating to me as the impositions laid down by the British State, although I should point out that I am a socialist myself. I

wanted none of any of it. In prose fiction I saw the distinction between dialogue and narrative as a summation of the political system; it was simply another method of exclusion, of marginalising and disenfranchising different peoples, cultures and communities.<sup>14</sup>

The opening 'Ye' of *How Late it Was, How Late*, while identifying Sammy, also implicates the reader. It can be seen as a direct appeal to the reader to put himself or herself in Sammy's place and to consider the life that unfolds not from a detached perspective, as the reader may expect, but to become involved in this situation. Kelman is not trying to evoke sympathy for Sammy: that would be patronising to both reader and character. Rather, he strives to create the opportunity for empathy, and then to distance the reader from Sammy. The reader has to see Sammy as an individual, not simply a stereotype, but also to remain at a critical distance as that will provoke the strongest reaction.

Iain Banks is thought to be more straightforward in his use of literary techniques, but it would be a mistake to dismiss him in this way. In his novel *Complicity* (1993) Banks also begins with the second person: 'You hear the car after an hour and a half. During that time you've been here in the darkness, sitting on the small telephone seat near the front door, waiting. You only moved once, after half an hour, when you went back through the kitchen to check on the maid'.<sup>15</sup> This is part of an opening where Banks introduces the serial killer whose identity will remain a secret for most of the novel. His use of the second person in the serial killer sections not only lends the violence an immediacy but is an interesting contrast with the first person narrative of the main protagonist Cameron Colley, who is both 'detective' in his role as investigative journalist, and a suspect in the police investigation of the murders. *Complicity* is a political novel in a very different way to *How Late it Was, How Late*, and I will examine that further shortly, but it is interesting to note how Banks' use of different narrative viewpoints also asks the reader to consider the perspective of the individual. Is the distance obtained by the use of second-person narrative necessary for an individual to commit such horrific acts? The use of the narrative 'you' means that the individual narrator is seeing himself as others would see him, and he views his actions as those of another. In chapter one I looked briefly at Jean Paul Sartre's theory of bad faith. This is the belief that the

individual may react to anguish by self-deception, escape or evasion. The use of second-person narrative voice gives the impression of an individual who has distanced himself from his actions. Is this essential to removing a sense of blame? If this is the case then it is clear from the beginning that Cameron Colley, with his reference to 'I', is not the killer, and suggests a psychological difference between someone who may fantasise about committing such acts, and someone who really acts. The one who only fantasises has an intact moral sense that such actions are wrong and they remain fantasies, the one who makes these fantasies reality has to convince himself that his or her actions are warranted. They have to act in bad faith to be able to justify their actions

There is a major difference between the voices of the narrators in Kelman's novels and those in Banks', and this difference concerns the question of class. This is something I will look at further in later chapters, but it is worth noting here for the position in which it places Banks in particular in the context of modern Scottish literature. Banks' characters are almost always middle class, something which sets him apart from almost all of his Scottish contemporaries. This is not a question of language, but of position in society. It could be argued that Banks stands apart from other writers because he chooses to write about people who have had apparently happy and comfortable upbringings, even if the author often goes on to puncture this idyll. To the outside world it may seem that they should be content, and it is only through the skill of Banks' writing that he manages not only to convey the underlying sadness of his protagonists, but to make the reader care about them. Banks finds himself in the middle in more ways than one, in terms of Scottish literature. Kelman may have inspired future Scottish writers to write honestly about the working class, but it was Banks' horrific writing, as first seen in *The Wasp Factory*, that was an influence on many of the deliberately disturbing scenes that became a hallmark of much modern Scottish writing. Two explicit examples are Duncan MacLean's *Bunker Man* (1996) and Irvine Welsh's *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995) (although scenes of graphic violence may be found in almost anything by Welsh). I would argue that many modern and contemporary Scottish novelists exhibit a combination of influences from Kelman and Banks. The result is a sizable amount of fiction which describes the damaged masculinity that is central to Kelman's fiction with the horrific and lurid descriptions that Banks excels at. Like Kelman, Banks' novels

regularly feature damaged males, although they are usually men who have the wealth and education to change their situation.

In Banks' *The Wasp Factory* the reader is introduced to Frank L. Cauldhame who believes he has been physically damaged by the family dog, literally losing his manhood as a child. But this is nothing as compared to the imagined psychological damage that occurs when Frank discovers he is really Frances, his father's daughter, not his son. Such a twisted scenario was to become typical of this writer's work. But his books are much more than horror stories or tales of the unexpected. Banks often looks to events that occur in childhood and examines how they affect the adult in later life. This prompts questions of 'nature versus nurture' and how the expectations of societies, and families, can become burdens as Banks' protagonists try to deal with them. In *Complicity* there are the flashbacks to the apparently ideal childhood of Cameron Colley, Andy Gould and Andy's sister Claire. That idyllic life is smashed when they encounter a stranger who attacks then rapes Andy until Cameron, who has initially run away, returns and kills the man:

He has one hand over Andy's face, clamped tight, his head is turned away from me, red hair fallen down over one ear. I put the branch two-handed over my right shoulder as I ran up to them, jump over a small bush and then as I land at their side bring the branch swinging down. It whacks into the man's head with a dull, hollow sound, jerking his head to one side; he grunts and starts to go limp. I stand over him.<sup>16</sup>

A simple reading of this event could be that it causes Andy to commit the murders he does. It is the moment at which childhood dies. The Old Testament judgement of 'an eye for an eye' is vividly revisited throughout the novel. But as with all Banks' novels things are never as simple as they may first appear. The boys had been sexually experimenting when they had been discovered by the stranger, with the older Andy encouraging Cameron to masturbate him. Banks manages to effectively depict a series of events that would undoubtedly twist a child's ideas of sex, death and power, and it is made more lastingly potent for these occurring in a short space of time. What begins with adolescent sexual discovery ends just minutes later with a dead body. As with Frank's revelation in *The Wasp Factory*, it is difficult to imagine the psychological effect that this would have on the boys. Cameron seems to have buried these memories, although his indulgence in sadomasochistic sex suggests he has not buried them very deeply. However it is Andy

who becomes the serial killer, one whose punishments fit his victims' 'crimes'. Again Banks asks the reader to become involved, to question motive and the idea of justice. Is this psychotic behaviour a result of his shattered childhood? Is it the result of the scenes of horror he has witnessed in his time in the army, a veteran of the Falklands and the first Gulf War? Banks is challenging established beliefs of right and wrong in relation to the individual and wider society.

Sammy Samuels, at the beginning of *How Late it Was, How Late*, wakes up blind, confused and alone, a situation that sets the tone for the novel. Kelman's novel is a very different critique of the political situation of the 1980s. Whereas in *Complicity* Andy Gould has decided on a direct form of action to fulfil his idea of justice, Sammy has no option but to simply try and survive. Kelman makes Sammy's situation clear, and the struggle Samuels faces: 'fuck it. He was gony fling himself in. Life, know what I mean. So what man so what, it didnay fucking matter, it was all fuckin crap'.<sup>17</sup> Sammy's struggles are punctuated with little successes: 'So okay. He was a blind bastard. Right then. That stage ye just go, Fuck it, cause what else is there? nothing, there's fuck all. Sammy had reached that stage. A while ago. It just hadnay dawned on him. No till now. He smiled. Fucking Weird. There ye go but!'.<sup>18</sup> As Sammy is always aware of his situation, so is the reader, who is forced to confront not only Sammy's plight, but also the social circumstances that allow it. Cairns Craig outlines the existential dilemma that Kelman's characters face, and the reason for this technique:

Kelman's working-class realism is tactical rather than essential, for what is essential is that the working-class characters, and especially the marginalised working-class characters who are his protagonists, are the sites not of a social – a class – conflict, but of an existential awareness from which most human beings are being insulated by their society. The alienation of the working class becomes the context not for the exploration of social issues and possible political improvement, but for the exploration of humanity's existential condition.<sup>19</sup>

With regard to Banks and Kelman, we are being confronted with two types of horror, the psychological horror of the everyday that Kelman confronts the reader with, and the exaggerated extreme 'shocking' writing that Banks often deals in, although neither are merely 'sensational'. A writer who combined these two aspects would produce novels similar to those of Irvine Welsh, Duncan Maclean or Louise Welsh;

writers who deal with damaged males, and who are not afraid to shock the reader through graphic scenes of sex and/or violence. In an interview with Steven Redhead Irvine Welsh explained: 'I used to get "oh he hates James Kelman and all this stuff" and it's not that kind of thing at all. You're writing against, you're reacting against what went before to some extent'.<sup>20</sup> It is understandable why Welsh would want to distance himself from Kelman. He wants to be seen as part of a new literary movement and as such wants to distance himself from what has gone before, as though those who claim he is influenced by Kelman are somehow lessening Welsh's own work. However, I believe he is being disingenuous to a degree as Kelman's influence in his use of language is obvious. In the same collection of interviews Duncan Maclean is more forthright in admitting Kelman's importance in his work:

In the same way that (Lewis Grassie) Gibbon was talking about a place I knew, Kelman was writing about a time I knew: I recognised the people, the language, the predicaments, the politics, the culture, the world. Of course, Kelman's a great writer in all sorts of ways. But for me, and no doubt a lot of other writers who have been published in the last ten years or so, he was more than that. Kelman was the first contemporary writer I was aware of who made fiction seem like a necessary thing, like a vital thing, like something I should get involved with.<sup>21</sup>

There is no such written evidence of Iain Banks' influence on these writers, either as inspiration or as someone to kick against, but perhaps this is not surprising. Banks is seen as a middle-class writer, and both Irvine Welsh and Duncan Maclean normally avoid writing about the middle classes in their novels, except when such characters are held up for ridicule or scorn. I contend Banks has been a significant influence both in Irvine Welsh's work and certainly in the visceral Maclean novel, *Bunker Man*. But it is Louise Welsh, whose style could be described as 'urban gothic' who comes closest to combining the aesthetic of Kelman and Banks. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2005 she simply states: 'When I started writing I really wanted to be James Kelman, and it took me a long time to realise that I wasn't'.<sup>22</sup> But with her 2002 novel *The Cutting Room* and her 2006 novel *The Bullet Trick*, Louise Welsh has written fiction that is considerably closer in style and content to Banks rather than Kelman. In the same way as *Complicity* could be described as a murder/mystery or genre novel, so can Louise Welsh's novels, but like Banks' work they reach beyond the limitations of genre. The most obvious comparison is

in the way both writers are happy to be as graphic as they feel necessary when it comes to scenes of sex and/or violence.

In Louise Welsh's debut *The Cutting Room*, the central character Rilke's promiscuity is the defining aspect of his sexual persona rather than his homosexuality. To help involve the reader in the seedier side of life that he is comfortable with, his sexual encounters are graphically detailed. This is not simply for reasons of sensationalism or eroticism. Welsh is asking the reader to consider why certain homosexual activity is carried out in the shadows, and closely examines attitudes to and from Rilke, forcing readers to question their own prejudices regardless of their own sexuality. There are also questions about the nature of sex, its link to death, and the line between sexual fantasy and reality. As Rilke approaches climax with a one-night stand his thoughts turn to dark images: 'I imagined myself in a movie I'd seen ... raping this boy ... taking him against his will...'.<sup>23</sup> Such scenes set the mood of the novel, but also ask questions about sexual politics and challenge what individuals desire and what society deems acceptable or normal. In *Complicity* there is a similarly graphic scene which poses these questions. Amongst the passages of torture and death there is a scene where Cameron is attacked and bound by a female assailant, who 'tortures' him while he is aroused. It is only at the end of the scene that the reader is assured that this was consensual:

'I lie cradled in her arms, panting, spent, exhausted, the agony in my muscles and bones and sockets gradually easing and the tears on my face drying and she says softly'

'How was that?' and I whisper,

'Fucking brilliant'.<sup>24</sup>

Some will see such scenes as purely gratuitous but they are as important in asking questions about shared social values as the more apparently straightforward political questions. This is something which Cairns Craig confronts in his *Reader's Guide* to the novel:

The wrecked landscapes that litter Banks's novels are the outcome of an ideology of power and oppression within which masculinity has been defined. For Banks, sexual transgression can be simply another form of the will to power, of the individual's assertion of himself – or herself – on the world, or it can be the opening up of alternative forms of sexual identity that will help us escape the

wreckage of the past. The difficulty is in knowing which is which, and the intertwining of sexual liberation, sexual repression and violence is a major theme of *Complicity*.<sup>25</sup>

If we are to ask questions about morality and politics then we must also consider sexuality with equal seriousness. Banks realises that even though these aspects of our metaphysical make-up are individual they must also be shared if they are to make any meaningful sense. It is this constant dialogue between individuals that is typified by the writer/reader relationship, and also allows Sartre's existential and literary theories to work in practice.

With *Complicity* Banks combines his flair for horrific exaggeration with political anger. This allows Banks free rein to indulge his macabre edge, while also commenting on the aspects of political life that he abhors. As Alan MacGillivray writes:

The plot, which revolves around a series of sadistic murders and attacks on prominent members of the establishment, that is, the ruling elite of politics, law and business, seems to be a vehicle for Iain Banks' feelings of hatred and disgust for the selfish and materialistic right-wing trends he observed in British public life through the Eighties and Nineties.<sup>26</sup>

These include not only the arms dealer who has his limbs amputated, a judge who is lenient when sentencing rapists who is himself raped, a pornographer who is poisoned with HIV, but also the death of the doctor who Andy blames for misdiagnosing his sister Claire, and who he holds responsible for her death. The violence in the novel is not only political, but personal, and even sexual. In conversation with his friend Andy Gould, Cameron hears Andy's motivation for his killing spree: 'We all have moral responsibility, whether we like it or not, but people in power – in the military, in politics, in professions, whatever – have an imperative to care, or at least to exhibit an officially acceptable analogue of care; duty, I suppose. It was people I knew had abused that responsibility that I attacked; that's what I was taking as my authority'.<sup>27</sup> This confession is followed by an ideological rant characteristic of Banks:

You know the evidence: the world already produces... *we* already produce enough food to feed every starving child on earth, but still a third of them go to bed hungry. And it *is* our fault; that starvation's caused by debtor countries having to abandon their indigenous foods to grow cash crops to keep the World Bank or the IMF or

Barclays happy, or to service debts run up by murdering thugs who slaughtered their way into power and slaughtered their way through it, usually with the connivance and help of one part of the developed world or another... We *could* have something perfectly decent right now – not Utopia, but a fairly equitable world state where there was no malnutrition and no terminal diarrhoea and nobody died of silly wee diseases like measles – if we all really wanted it, if we weren't so greedy, so racist, so bigoted, so basically self centred. Fucking Hell, even that self centeredness is farcically *stupid*; we know smoking kills people but we still let the drug barons of BAT and Philip Morris and Imperial Tobacco kill their millions and make their billions; smart, educated people like us know smoking kills but we still smoke *ourselves!*<sup>28</sup>

This is another example of Banks' own voice appearing in his novels. If this passage were to be read in isolation from the rest of the text it might be taken as a polemic delivered by an educated liberal with a passion for educating others as to how world economics work, and with the aim of convincing them that it is an unjust system. But it should be remembered that this, like other similar passages, is being delivered by a serial killer who has tortured, in the most imaginative ways, his victims, before killing them. It seems curious that Banks would have the character of Andy appear to be the voice of reason. This suggests that Banks is trying to encourage the reader to ask whether Andy's actions are also reasonable. It is the character of Cameron who is made to appear weak, and Banks seems to identify himself with Cameron Colley, someone who holds all the views expressed but who would never resort to violence to achieve actual change. Cristie L. March links Andy and Cameron:

Cameron also recognises the powerful emotions expressed by Andy through his murders. When he leads the police to the body of a male rapist who attacked the two of them and children...he learns that the rapist has survived the fall and crawled to an adjacent air shaft before dying. Although he regrets the pain caused, 'part of me rejoices, that is glad he paid the way he did, that for once the world worked the way it's supposed to, punishing the wrongdoer.'<sup>29</sup>

Andy Gould can be viewed as the Mr Hyde character to both Cameron's and Banks' Dr Jekyll, someone who will dare to do the things that they may have fantasised doing. Of all of Banks' literary protagonists it is Andy who takes things to extremes, justifies his actions, and shows no remorse as to what he has done. In interview with the online magazine *Spike* Banks talks about the violence in this novel, but his response could be read as a critique on all his work:

In principle, anything's OK, as long as I've got an excuse to put it in – which is a more honest way of saying, “Is it artistically justified?” You shouldn't self-censor yourself just because you have a gut reaction that an idea is too horrible. If there's a reason for it, it has to be done. There's a moral point to that ghastliness, pain and anguish. Which is why I would absolutely defend *Complicity's* extreme violence, because it was supposed to be a metaphor for what the Tories have done to this country.<sup>30</sup>

All of Banks' novels ask similar questions about the nature of the political and ethical, but it is in *Complicity* that he asks them with the most force. Banks has the courage of his convictions. Andy Gould escapes, but only after giving Cameron the option of turning him in. Cameron chooses not to do so, and perhaps Banks could not bear to see his ideological avenger Andy either behind bars or killed, but it may also be that he wants to blur the reader's concept of justice. If extreme times call for extreme measures then the character and actions of Andy Gould not only show how strongly Banks felt about the times, but also what he felt may be the means necessary to bring change. But these are measures that Cameron, and by extension Banks, is not willing to take.

The novel makes clear that, at the specific time he wrote *Complicity*, Banks had decided that there was little chance of change. *Complicity* was written in the middle of the period in Scotland as set out at the beginning of this chapter, at a time when it looked as if the Conservative Party would control the British Parliament for as long as they wished. The novel ends with Cameron taking substantial amounts of cocaine, and, with deliberate irony considering Andy's verbal attack on tobacco companies, lighting up a cigarette: ‘What the fuck. Screw the world, bugger reality. Saint Hunter would understand; Uncle Warren wrote a song about it. You light a cigarette, shake your head as you look out over the grey-enthroned city, and laugh’.<sup>31</sup> In the absence of hope, or with the inability to affect change, there is little else to do other than laugh or cry. The situation that Cameron Colley finds himself in at the end of *Complicity* clearly shows how angered Banks was, not only about Scotland's political and social situation, but wider global concerns. The frustration and despondency in passages such as the following leave the reader in no doubt as to Banks' state of mind:

Oh I know there's goodness in the world, too, Cameron, and compassion and a few fair laws; but they exist against a background of global barbarism, they float on an

ocean of bloody horror that can tear apart any petty social construction of ours in an instant. That's the bottom line, that's the real frame work we all operate within, even though most of us can't or won't recognize it, and so perpetuate it.<sup>32</sup>

The bottom line for Banks is that there are lengths he will not go to, and therefore he cannot fully condone others who do so. Even in his fiction there has to be a voice of reason, a character who not only shares Banks' political but his moral sensibilities as well.

In many aspects *Complicity* is a novel of fantasy, but Banks still shows responsibility. He may claim that the violence in the novel is justified, but he still needs to have the voice of reason, his voice expressed through the character of Cameron, and it is Cameron who is the main character, not the avenging Andy Gould. Unlike Andy, Banks will not reduce himself to the level of those whom he opposes, but you also get the sense that even he is not sure if that is the 'brave' course of action, or the cowardly course. And it is this confusion, or feeling of helplessness which is the real driving force behind the novel, and much of Banks' writing. As the title suggests, everyone is complicit in allowing this state of affairs to occur, including Banks himself. As Andy Gould says to Cameron: 'We're all guilty, Cameron; some more than others, some a *lot* more than others, but don't tell me we aren't all guilty'.<sup>33</sup> This sense of guilt is important to much of Banks' fiction, and is perhaps the greatest difference between not only Banks and Kelman, but Banks and other Scottish writers. It is middle-class guilt writ large. Most of Banks' characters have a level of success and wealth but are unhappy with the world and their place in it. The arc of the story, as in evidence in *The Crow Road*, *The Bridge* (1986), *Dead Air* and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, has the protagonist unhappy and unsure of how their lives have progressed. In reaction to this they either drop out or try to avoid responsibility before lessons are learned and they finish the novel wiser and happier. What makes *Complicity* different from Banks' other novels is that Cameron finishes the novel as disillusioned as when we first meet him. Wiser perhaps, but not happier.

Although *How Late it Was, How Late* follows the style of all of Kelman's novels in not having an unambiguous ending, it would appear that both Sammy Samuels and

Cameron Colley come to a similar conclusion. 'Bugger reality' could be a clarion call for both men. But what is unexpected is that it is Kelman's novel that offers hope at the end. As Sammy hails his taxi, and disappears 'out of sight'<sup>34</sup> to both his son and the reader, there is the paradox that there is hope for Sammy as he seeks to start anew, but also the fear that nothing will change. Cameron's actions are direct interpretations of social and political reality. Sammy's only hope is to leave his immediate world behind, and go somewhere, anywhere, else:

He waited on the pavement once they had said cheerio. Then he tapped his way back to the pub doorway and stood inside. A hackney cab; unmistakable. When the sound died away he fixed the shades on his nose and stepped out onto the pavement. It wasn't long until the next yin. He tapped forward waving his stick in the air. It was for hire, he heard it pulling in then the squeaky brakes. The driver had opened the door. Sammy slung in the bag and stepped inside, then the door slammed shut and that was him. Out of sight.<sup>35</sup>

Both Kelman and Banks deal in politics, culture and morality. What Banks confronts in *Complicity* is the morality of violence. When, if ever, is it justified? The violence dealt with is not only political, but personal, and sexual. There is violence in *How Late it Was, How Late*, but Kelman is more concerned with the representation of those who have been underrepresented in art and literature. This is a situation that he sees as deeply engrained in Scottish society.

It is perhaps unsurprising that since Scotland's political landscape has changed in the twenty-first century, both novelists have latterly turned to settings and concerns further afield. What is certain is that the period of Scotland's history between the votes of devolution in 1979 and 1997 cast a long and particularly dark shadow over all aspects of Scotland's culture, and that James Kelman and Iain Banks were to the fore in terms of challenging and reflecting the result of these years, politically and socially, and at the same time influencing the next generation of Scottish writers.

Jean Paul Sartre believed that writers write for their age, and this is something which applies to both Kelman and Banks in their age particularly with reference to politics. In 'Situation of the Writer in 1947' he states:

A literature of praxis is coming into being in the age of the unfindable public. That's the situation. Let each one handle it in his own way. His own way, that is,

his own style, his own technique, his own subjects. If the writer is imbued, as I am, with the urgency of these problems, one can be sure that he will offer solutions to them in the creative unity of his work, that is, in the indistinctness of a movement of free creation.<sup>36</sup>

The writer must offer solutions to the ‘urgency of these problems’ and it is the fulfilment of this mission that implicitly places Kelman and Banks in the tradition of political writer that Sartre set out. They not only report on the political situation in Scotland in their age, they implicitly offer suggestions for change. The writing is more than reportage.

In *Complicity* Cameron Colley says to Detective Inspector McDunn, with reference to the series of murders: ‘I don’t think it’s political, [...] I think it’s moral’.<sup>37</sup> This comment applies as much to Banks and Kelman as to any of their characters. While politics, language and class are key questions which are often commented upon by critics, particularly with reference to Kelman (although less so in criticism of Banks), the question of existential morality has been less frequently discussed. The reason for this could be that it is seen as an aspect of the individual, whereas critics have been more interested in political and social questions rather than the personal.

Whereas this chapter has focused on the political ‘engagedness’ of Kelman and Banks, the next chapter will therefore look at the moral writer and examine whether the political and moral can be distinguished, and if so, how James Kelman and Iain Banks express their moral beliefs as opposed to specific political beliefs.

Notes

1. James Kelman, speaking at the Edinburgh Book Festival as reported by Lesley McDowell in *The Herald* newspaper, 15 August 2008.
2. Jean Paul Sartre, 'Situation of the Writer in 1947', *What is Literature?* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, [1948] 2001), pp 128-229, page 224.
3. Duncan Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions: Film Television and the Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), page 2.
4. A. Brown, D. McCrone and L. Patterson, *Politics and Society and Scotland* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), page 156.
5. Allan Little 'Scotland; Time to Say Goodbye?' *The New Statesman*, 26/3/07, pp 30-32.
6. Ibid.
7. Cairns Craig, *Iain Banks's Complicity: A Reader's Guide*, pp 7-41, page 29.
8. James Kelman, *How Late it was, How Late*, page 1.
9. Ibid. page 112.
10. Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, pp 75-117, page 101.
11. Laurence Nicoll, 'The Novels of James Kelman', *The Contemporary British Novel*, eds. James Acheson, and Ross, Sarah C.E. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp 59-69, page 63.
12. Ibid. page 63.
13. James Kelman, (ed.) *An East End Anthology*. (Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 1988), page 1.
14. James Kelman, *And the Judges Said...* pp 37-55, page 40.
15. Iain Banks, *Complicity* (London: Abacus, 1994), page 1.
16. Iain Banks, *Complicity*, page 238.
17. James Kelman, *How Late it Was, How Late* (London: Vintage, [1994] 1998), page 263.
18. Ibid. page 324.
19. Cairns Craig, 'Resisting Arrest: James Kelman', eds. Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson *The Scottish Novel since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp 99-114, page 105.
20. Irvine Welsh in interview with Steve Redhead, *Repetitive Beat Generation* (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc, Canongate Books, 2000), pp 135-150, page 139.
21. Duncan Maclean in interview with Steve Redhead; Ibid, pp 101-109, page 104.
22. Louise Welsh in interview with *The Guardian* newspaper 5/08/2005.
23. Louise Welsh, *The Cutting Room* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2001), page 153.
24. Iain Banks, *Complicity*, page 95.
25. Cairns Craig, *Iain Banks's Complicity: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), pp 7-18, page 18.
26. Alan MacGillivray, *Iain Banks; The Wasp Factory, The Crow Road, Whit* (Edinburgh: ASLS, 2001), page 6.
27. Iain Banks, *Complicity*, pp 297-300, page 297.
28. Ibid. page 300.
29. Cristie L. March, *Rewriting Scotland: Welsh, McLean, Banks, Galloway and Kennedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) pp 81-107, page 97.
30. *Getting Used to Being God*; An interview with Chris Mitchell for *Spike Magazine Online*, [www.spikemagazine.com/0996bank.php](http://www.spikemagazine.com/0996bank.php) [last accessed 3 December 2010].
31. Iain Banks, *Complicity*, page 313.
32. Ibid. page 302.
33. Ibid. page 302.
34. James Kelman, *How Late it Was, How Late*, page 374.
35. Ibid. page 374.

36. Jean Paul Sartre, 'Situation of the Writer in 1947', *What is Literature?* pp 128-229, page 224.
37. Iain Banks, *Complicity*, page 264.

### Chapter 3: The Moral Writer

Modern literary theory has frequently overlooked the moral to concentrate on the political. In his 2004 book *After Theory* Terry Eagleton provides commentary on the situation: 'For a long time, cultural theorists avoided the question of morality as something of an embarrassment. It seemed preachy, unhistorical, priggish and heavy handed. For the harder-nosed kind of theorist, it was also sloppy and unscientific. It was too often just a fancy name for oppressing other people. [...] The ethical was for suburbanites, while the political was cool'.<sup>1</sup> It is important to put aside the theoretical snobbery to which Eagleton alludes and look at the ethical while also examining the political. Indeed, to do this is a necessity as it is in the exchange of ethical ideas that the political is formed. For Sartre the ethical was the driving force behind a writer's reason to act. As Gary Cox explains, Sartre believed that: 'An existentially ethical world would be one where a history driven by human freedom has realized an end to the exploitation and oppression that results when one freedom does not respect and affirm another'.<sup>2</sup> Writing is the artistic method best suited for expressing an individual's moral ideology in the hope of influencing a wider readership and realising this end. Sartre believed that an ethical society is one where individuals recognise each others freedom, and this recognition is exemplified in the writer/reader relationship. In this chapter I look further at how the writer uses his craft to convince the reader that their moral values and ideals are ones that the reader should consider, be convinced by, and share.

Having said that the ethical and the political are deeply intertwined, nevertheless, there is an important distinction to be made between political value and moral value. The first is communal in that it is inclusive to a greater or lesser degree while an individual's morals are thought to be just that. Although we can legitimately talk of 'shared moral values' they can always be referred back to the individual and his or her specific moral sense. Arguably political ideals are nothing more than an expression of shared moral values. Therefore, one could argue that 'the political' arises from 'the moral'. However, shared political values may find civic expression in state legislation, and the moral values of the individual may well be at odds with the state legislation. Indeed, Kelman and Banks both often deliver their visions of morality as criticism of the state, whether Scottish, British, 'Western', or 'Global'.

The terms political and moral have become loaded beyond simple dictionary definitions. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, Jean Paul Sartre believed that the individual is responsible for his or her actions, which arise from his or her moral sense, and this, when applied to other individuals, is how the individual becomes political as well as universal.

What James Kelman and Iain Banks achieve in their writing is to combine the political and the ethical, recognising that as all art is political, it must also be ethical and vice versa. Although in many ways their writing expresses similar world and ethical views, as shown in previous chapters, they examine the move from the individual to the universal and from the aesthetic to the moral using different literary techniques. If, as Eagleton suggests, questions of morality were often seen by theorists as 'uncool', both these writers reject such a view. Although they have distinctly different aesthetics, both writers engage with similar political ideology and it is by examining the aesthetic and the political that their distinctive moral values can be ascertained. Both Kelman and Banks offer many of their protagonists the promise of a better life if they will only put faith in themselves to act 'correctly'. That is not acting in an 'objectively' correct way, as you may expect, particularly from Banks, but to act in the way that they feel is best for those individuals and that will give value to their actions.

As previously mentioned, both writers are atheists, but how they comment on religion in their writing gives the reader a solid example of their aesthetic differences. In novels such as *A Disaffection* and *Kieron Smith, boy* (2009), James Kelman exposes what he sees as the hypocrisy of religion by how it affects his characters lives. When compared to how Banks criticises religion in his novels *Whit* (1997) and *The Crow Road* (1993), where his characters tend to voice their thoughts on religion directly, it can be argued that Kelman deals with the subject in a manner that is less direct than Banks. Some may believe that this difference is another example of the class differences between the average Kelman character and those that usually appear in the work of Banks. The fact that Banks' characters do tend to be middle-class and educated would suggest that they would have the critical tools to express their opinions, whereas those who inhabit Kelman's working class world might not. Such an assumption may appeal due to its simplicity but would be a mistake, and would overlook the respective aesthetic style of

both writers. The conclusion reached in chapter one was that whereas Banks directly informs his readers as to what he sees as politically problematic, using his fiction as a platform to explicitly express his views, Kelman's writing is more involved and subtle. Kelman uses the plight of his protagonists and their reaction to get his message across. The writing itself, both the style and content, is central to this message and will be further discussed in chapter five. Kelman's frequent use of interior monologue in his fiction gives the reader an insight into why his protagonists act as they do, or what stops them from acting as the reader may have expected. From Robert Hines in *The Busconductor Hines* (1984) to Kieron Smith in *Kieron Smith, boy* Kelman's narrators give the reader an insight into their thoughts, and from both thoughts and deeds the character's moral values can be deduced. But there is a subtlety in the writing that can be overlooked. Kelman makes every word count. The way a word is spelt, how the prose looks on the page, the way a character forms thoughts, the way the language used will sound, these are all taken into account in Kelman's writing. The aesthetics of the writing are politically vital.

An example of this can be found in the names he gives his protagonists. These provide the reader with clues as to Kelman's views on religion, particularly with regard to life in Glasgow. Kelman is as aware as anyone familiar with the city that Glasgow is divided by religion, in the most simplistic terms, with Catholic on one side and Protestant on the other. A writer who takes his craft as seriously as Kelman does will not name his characters without thought, so it is prudent to ask why he gives Patrick Doyle in *A Disaffection* the name he does. This would be considered a Catholic name, yet it is clear that Doyle is from a Protestant family: 'P for Patrick Doyle, a good protestant atheist, a good Glaswegian protestant of the nonbelieving class, not only a virtual atheist but a literal one, a total and literal one since a wee boy of some twelve summers'.<sup>3</sup> This particular confusion is alluded to later in the novel when Patrick is asked if he knows the Simpson family: 'Aye well ye don't want to! Especially with a name like Paddy! Bluenoses. Bitter as fuck'.<sup>4</sup> Kelman asks the reader to realise how morally and intellectually bankrupt he views such judgements, and to realise the inevitability of what happens when a society is divided, whether along lines of language, class, education or religion.

Similarly in *Kieron Smith, boy* the titular Kieron is aware from a young age that he has been given what is considered a Catholic name, and this point is made in an even more specific way: 'Oh Kieron is a Pape's name. They said that. Oh ye do not get Proddies called Kieron. So if it is Irish, you must be Irish. Oh you are a Pape'.<sup>5</sup> The result of these words coming from the mouth of a child gives them a strength they may otherwise not have possessed. One of the recurrent themes in this novel is the importance that Kieron places on his religious identity, and the inference that this is something that is learned behaviour from the adults in his world. Kelman is making the point that although he considers these concerns childish they do not originate from childhood. This is reaffirmed as Kieron watches a Protestant 'Orange walk' in Glasgow:

Then came the old men marching then the band and more men then women and boys and lasses and with the orange and blue and white. Hullo Hullo, for the Billy Boys and other ones and the boys were shouting tooralooo f\*\*k the Pope tooralooo for the Protestant Boys and that was us.<sup>6</sup>

Such a scene is viewed through the boy's eyes and the reader gets the sense of colour and excitement and will understand that such a carnival would appeal to the youngster. But this child's view also gives the reader a strong sense of the ridiculousness of the adult behaviour.

Similar behaviour can be found inside the Smith household. When his father is watching boxing on television we see his actions and reactions, which are fuelled by his own bigotry, through the eyes of Kieron:

My dad did not like darkies and if they came on the telly or if they were tough and in a boxing match he just watched them, no saying nothing because if they were good fighters, if they were winning the fight and the white one was getting beat.<sup>7</sup>

There is no condemnation involved in Kieron's observations, any judgement is left to the reader:

Oh and if one was a Pape and giving the Sign. My da hated that. Really really he did. He kept the newspaper on his lap so then he lifted it up and kidded on he was reading it. So if he did not see the white one making the Sign. He acted like that. So if he did not know the white one was good. But no if he saw he was a Pape, if we saw he saw, so then he could not. If the Pape won then my da just looked at his

newspaper, Oh I think God answered his prayers, he prayed to God to win the fight and God just done it for him, oh is he not just good, that is Papes for ye.<sup>8</sup>

The language again reflects and highlights the childish behaviour of the adult. It is as if Kieron and his father are of similar age and he is trying to fool not only the rest of the family but himself as well. It should be noted that while Kelman uses capital letters when referring to 'God', 'Papes' and even when referring to the 'Sign', he uses lower case when referring to Kieron's da. This reflects the awe that the boy holds for religion and is in direct opposition to how he respects his father. Both of these feelings develop throughout the novel. While the younger Kieron is aware that there is a difference between Catholics and Protestants he does not see that this will affect his life: 'I had a pal and he was RC, Michael Lang, he took me into the Chapel'.<sup>9</sup> As he grows older he becomes more indoctrinated into a 'them and us' mind-set. When being told that Carolyn Smart, a Catholic girl to whom he is attracted, will never marry him, he quickly decides the reason for this is down to religion:

Because I was a Proddy. It was nothing about nothing except I was a Proddy. It was not to do with her being older but she was a Catholic. So if the Priests would not let her. Else her maw and da if they did not like Protestants. Some did not talk to ye. So if that was her family. Oh do not marry him, do not let her marry him. That happened if ye married a RC, they got against ye.<sup>10</sup>

Kelman is aware of the assumptions made in the West Coast of Scotland and the prejudices that endure. Names, places lived, the schools attended and even an individual's looks can cause assumptions to be made about a person's religion and class. Kelman challenges such one-dimensional thinking, and this can also be seen in *How Late it Was, How Late* where the narrator is Sammy Samuels. Samuels would be regarded as a Jewish name and Kelman makes deliberate play of this. In a city where you could be asked if you are a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew the naming of this character is crucial, and gives no easy answer as to Sammy's sympathies when he is picked up by the police and questioned. Again Kelman is asking the reader to examine their own moral values and challenges them to rethink their 'truths'.

Kelman does not directly attack any religion. Rather, through the lives of his characters, and through exposing the ways in which language operates, he lets the reader

see the divisive effect that religion can have in everyday life. In *A Disaffection* the situation of an atheist living in a city which is divided and dominated by religion is one that is to the fore, and forms part of Patrick Doyle's existential crisis. His anti-religious stance emphasises his position as an outsider. The novel is the most obvious example of Kelman describing the life of a man who, to others, has a life of promise, but who is personally deeply unsatisfied. Patrick's unemployed brother Gavin epitomises this view when he discovers that Patrick is thinking about leaving teaching: 'He's a bloody teacher and he earns a bomb, a single man, he can do anyfuckingthing he likes'.<sup>11</sup> Gavin strikes at the heart of Patrick's 'disaffection' with another accusation that is aimed at Patrick's chosen profession, and, by implication, at Patrick: 'All your teachers and all your fucking students and pupils and all your fucking headmasters and your cronies from the fucking staffroom. Fucking middle-class bunch of wankers ya cunt!'<sup>12</sup> This categorisation cuts Patrick deeply when he reflects upon it: 'Gavin was actually very out of order in what he said I mean you don't call your fucking younger brother a middle-class wanker I mean fuck sake. A middle class wanker!'<sup>13</sup> The feeling given is that it is the accusation of being middle-class that stings the most. Class snobbery is not simply a one way relationship, and it carries with it the accusation of betrayal, not only of your class, but of your family and, by extension, yourself. His brother's accusations and his reaction to them intensify the feeling that Patrick is a man apart, whose own family cannot relate to him anymore, and that he is painfully aware of this. The language that Kelman employs for the two brothers also strengthens a sense of difference. When Patrick expresses the thought that 'Gavin was actually very out of order', the politeness of the language is pointed, but sits uneasily in the mind of Patrick, as it may do with a child who is aware of the 'correct' thing to say, but finds it unnatural to do so.

Kelman returns to this idea in *Kieron Smith, boy*, and again uses language even more sensitively. Throughout the book Kieron's narration takes the form of forced 'correct' language, one that is noticeably childish, but is attempting to fulfil the different expectations of an education system, and of a collection of friends and family, which often seem at odds with each other. Kieron's voice is childish, but gives the reader an insight into Kieron's family aspirations and ideas of what is considered right and wrong, particularly with reference to the spoken word. This comes from Kieron's mother who

chastises her son when he does not speak in what she believes is the correct manner: 'My maw gave me rows about if I said heid and not head. But no to ma da if he did'.<sup>14</sup> Even at such a young age Kieron is receiving conflicting messages about wrong and right. His father speaks one way, but when Kieron tries to emulate him, a natural thing for a child to do, he is rebuked for speaking incorrectly. This division can only cause Kieron to view his parents as having different standards, and he will side with one or the other, or perhaps neither. This division does not only occur between Kieron's mother and father: 'Granda said weans, but my maw did not like it. Oh it is children, they are not weans they are children. And if it is words the same, oh she did not like it, aye and cannay dae. Aye but I cannay dae that. My granda said that. Aye but I cannay dae. It is not aye and cannay dae it is yes and cannot do'.<sup>15</sup> Kieron is being told that those closest to him, with the exception of his mother and teachers, are speaking a language that is not correct, that they are mistaken, either deliberately or because they know no better.

Such ideas are reinforced at school. Kieron's teacher makes sure that the children know what is expected of them: 'Ye had to speak right all the time, Oh it is not cannay it is cannot, you must not say didnay it is did not. If it is the classroom it is not the gutter. It is the Queen's English, only you must speak the Queen's English'.<sup>16</sup> By naming this 'correct' language as belonging to 'the Queen' the teacher is not only appealing to a higher power to prove its worth, but is firmly putting the children's families in their place. Kelman has often spoken out against the educational system in Scotland, something I will examine in detail later in this chapter, but it is prudent to note here his thoughts regarding how children are taught English in schools. In the essay 'Elitism and English Literature, Speaking as a Writer', Kelman comments: 'It is one of the most sophisticated features of the elitism in this country that prior to leaving school the majority of kids know not only what society thinks of them but what it thinks of their parents'.<sup>17</sup> In both *A Disaffection* and *Kieron Smith, boy* Kelman uses the dialogue of his characters to suggest that a language that is forced, or forced upon, people can and will only have the effect of dividing families and societies rather than uniting them. It is not only unnatural but inherently divisive. It is worth noting that while Kelman's examples have specific reference to Scots speech, particularly Glasgow speech, his point is not so much about Scots and English spoken idioms as signs of national difference; rather it is

about the differences between speech among working class people and the speech of middle class people, or, more pointedly, of working class aspirants to middle-class status.

Both Kieron Smith's and Patrick Doyle's immediate families are divided by education and language. For Kieron in particular an obvious split occurs: 'My maw was a snob. We all knew it. My da too. If she gave him a look he did not like it. She was snobbish and posh'.<sup>18</sup> The disapproval that Kieron's mother openly shows towards her husband is not missed by Kieron, but it should also be noted that Kieron's family in turn judges his mother equally harshly. She wants her children to do 'better' than she has done, trying to get them into 'better' schools, and to speak 'correctly', yet she is branded a 'snob' by those closest to her. The pressure she feels comes from a society which equates 'better' with class, an idea that she passes on to her son: 'People that talked like me were just keelies and did not go to good schools. That was what my maw said'.<sup>19</sup> This idea that a person's worth can be judged by how they speak is central to *Kieron Smith, boy* but is present to a greater or lesser degree in all of Kelman's fiction, and language and its functions are brought into question. In his essay, 'Homecoming', Alan Riach quotes poet Peter McCarey, who sets out his ideas on the role(s) of language:

Knowing who you are and where you are from is not only a matter of being able to say things to your friends without being understood by foreigners, useful though that can be at times. There are two main functions to speech: communication and identification. One function conveys messages and the other shows where the messages come from. One makes bridges and the other draws borders, often between two people who are trying to talk to each other. Both are vital.<sup>20</sup>

Language is about belonging and understanding. Of course to belong to one group means that there are others to which you do not. The reason that Patrick's brother's accusation of Patrick becoming 'middle class' had such an impact is that he is defecting from his own people to another group. Similarly, Kieron Smith's knowledge from an early age of the derogatory slang used on both sides of the sectarian divide in Glasgow immediately signals to him who he belongs with, and where. Kelman's examination of the political power of language is grounded in this idea. It is centred on the idea of identity and position in society and his belief that borders are constructed far more often than bridges are built. In the reality of Kelman's Glasgow, language, more often than not, becomes divisive.

Such divisions are further shown by Patrick Doyle's estrangement from his family and his former life, which is in evidence when he visits his parents. He does so through a sense of duty rather than any real desire to see them, finding it a struggle to communicate:

What was there to talk about? Nothing. Fuck all. Pointless worrying about it either. Fathers and sons and brothers. A load of tollie. Plus education and class warfare, revolution and disease and starvation and torture and murder and rape. There is nothing to crack up about.<sup>21</sup>

This is more than a generation gap. There is an ideological divide between Patrick and his family. During a discussion with his mother and father about the treatment of schoolchildren he accuses his mother of being prejudiced against the current generation:

I'm no prejudiced at all, you just stick up for them.  
I don't, I just tell the bloody truth, as I see it.  
I'm no saying ye don't, but let's face it as well Pat, ye do like to be different.  
Naw I don't. Your maw's right, said Mr Doyle.  
The same with bringing back the belt, you've got to be different there too.<sup>22</sup>

But the reason for this estrangement lies not with only with Patrick, it has developed on both sides. Patrick's family sense the division as well as he does, and Kelman doesn't excuse the reactionary views of Patrick's family, and, by extension, other members of the working class. When his brother, Gavin, is relaying the details of a car accident, Patrick finds he has to confront him:

What you said there, a wee minute ago, about a paki knocking that wee boy down I mean I don't understand that at all what bloody difference it makes if it was a paki or it wasn't a paki. Even using that word, paki, I mean it isn't a word it's just a bloody derogatory racist bloody term. If ye mean a guy that was from fucking Pakistan ye should say so.<sup>23</sup>

The novel is not about Patrick growing apart independently. There is a sense of pride from his family that their son, and brother, has been educated which causes the reader to realise that the family willed him to 'better himself' through the system of education, but there are negative emotions as well. Kelman sees this family conflict as a natural result of a class system that the educational status quo maintains. Patrick's problem is that he recognises this, but perpetuates it by being part of the system rather than fighting against it.

Is it possible that Patrick Doyle is a vision of the man that James Kelman could have been if he hadn't chosen to write? There is a real sense with Patrick of someone who is uncomfortable in his own skin, a feeling that life is not the way it should or could have been. This is at the heart of his disaffection. Like Tammas in Kelman's 1985 novel *A Chancer* Patrick feels separate from those around him: family, friends and colleagues alike. The difference between Tammas and Patrick is that Tammas *wants* to be separate from 'others', he has no desire to belong, and indeed dreams of escape. Patrick wants to be a part of something, even if he is confused as to what. He appears to feel closest to the children that he teaches and it appears that they are fond of him until they discover he is to leave, an act which they look upon as a betrayal. He sees hope in his pupils, perhaps in recognition of a time when he belonged, and it is poignant that it is to them that he opens up about his true feelings: 'I'm saying to you that there is a bit of a crisis in my life. I'm sick of being alone and being a teacher in a society that I say I detest all the time, to the extent that the term 'detest' isn't really important because it's a form of obscenity'.<sup>24</sup> However even this relationship is one which is unbalanced as Patrick attempts to mould them into what he feels they should be. Discussions involving Camus and Tolstoy, and introducing his pupils to the writing of the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek,<sup>25</sup> reflect an earnest desire to educate his pupils, but also to subvert the system that he is supposed to represent. His condition is exasperated and exemplified by this state of affairs. When one of his pupils asks him: 'Do you think that we shouldn't be here?'<sup>26</sup> his answer is no answer at all: 'Aye and naw. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't'.<sup>27</sup>

Patrick's education, secure employment and single status allow him a sense of freedom to choose that the rest of his family do not appear to have. If we can accept Sartre's tenet that all men are free, we should also admit that it at least appears as if some are freer than others. Commitments and constraints such as raising a family, poverty and the shackles of the class system mean that Patrick's family do not have the luxury to choose their life as Patrick at least appears to have. Such apparent constraints are central to all of Kelman's fiction, and explain why his protagonists, who are non-conformist, are seen as problematic by the rest of the characters in his fiction, particularly those who are in positions of power. Patrick is not confronted with the hurdles that face other Kelman narrators, and the fact that he cannot exercise his free will is pointed. His father has to

stay in an unsatisfactory job to support his wife, and did so as a younger man to support his children and, ironically, to allow Patrick to attend University. His brother is worried about paying the electricity bill and providing for his young family. Patrick has the apparent freedom to remain a teacher or to do something else, and this choice, and his inability to act, is at the heart of this novel and Patrick's crisis. It could be seen as a question of courage. Does he remain unfulfilled but secure in terms of employment and finance, or does he take a chance and choose to follow a path which offers no assurances, but does offer the opportunity of a life he desires, that of the artist. Until he accepts a choice one way or the other his condition will endure. He encourages his pupils to try and change their lives: 'Why don't you go and blow up the DHSS office?'<sup>28</sup> but he seems unable to practice what he preaches when it comes to his own life. In a moment of clarity he realises that the conflict in his life, with his family, colleagues, the educational system and within himself, cannot be solved unless *he* changes:

The very idea that such conflicts can be resolved! This is a straight bourgeois intellectual wank. These liberal fucking excesses taken to the very limits of fucking hypocritical tollie.

Now we know the truth. There is only one way to go home: home to one's own house and draw the curtains and set yourself down and out with the pipes.<sup>29</sup>

The pipes that Patrick refers to, and his romantic attachment to them, represent the most enigmatic aspect of Patrick's life. He finds them abandoned at the beginning of the novel: 'They were longish and reminded him of english saxophones from a bygone era, the kind that reach the floor and are normally performed on by seated musicians'.<sup>30</sup> He bonds with these curious objects immediately: 'The pipes were strange kind of objects in the response Patrick had to them. It was immediate to begin with. As soon as he saw them it was, christ!'<sup>31</sup> To have such a visceral response to these enigmatic items is unusual, and Kelman imbues them with a greater importance than the reader may realise at first. They are obviously not exceptional, at least in the eyes of other people. When Patrick's fellow teachers see them they make no exclamations of awe or envy: 'Quite a nice pair of pipes'.<sup>32</sup> But it is Patrick's response to them that makes them significant, and Kelman is making the point that it is the individual that gives value to a life and all aspects of it.

Patrick imbues the pipes with his hopes and dreams, taking them home and increasingly seeing them, along with a longed for relationship with his colleague Alison, as the only things that offer him hope of a better life. Alison and the pipes have value for Patrick only because he chooses to give them value, and his 'disaffection' is because he cannot place such value on other aspects of his life, or have the courage to change his life to give it the value he desires. The pipes represent the possibility of Patrick taking control of his life and doing something for himself, not for his pupils, his parents or his employers, but his inability to act negates this. He yearns for a different life but seems incapable of actually implementing change. In discussion with his sister-in-law Nicola he admits to her that his life is not his own: 'Uch, Nicola I'm just bloody sick of working for the government, I'm sick of doing my bit to suppress the weans'.<sup>33</sup> The desire to have a different existence is clear, but there is no indication by the end of the novel that anything will change, or that Patrick is capable of change.

The novel ends with Patrick contemplating suicide, a course of action that is often contemplated by Kelman's protagonists: 'That temptation. What is that temptation. That temptation is aye the same and it is suicide, it is actually suicide'.<sup>34</sup> Kelman's novels usually hold out a level of hope, but for Patrick there seems only self-loathing and desperation. As Patrick considers suicide unidentified voices shout abuse at him, but the personal nature of the voices' attack leads the reader to believe that this is Patrick's internal monologue judging him: 'They're just shouting they hate ye we fucking hate ye, that's what they're shouting. It was dark and it was wet but not cold; if it had not been so dark you would have seen the sky. Ah fuck off, fuck off'.<sup>35</sup> This ending is unexpectedly violent and it does appear that Kelman is harder on Patrick Doyle than he is on his other central characters. Robert Hines in *The Busconductor Hines*, Tammas in *A Chancer*, Sammy Samuels in *How Late it Was, How Late* and Jeremiah Brown in *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* are all struggling against the system, and although all have their faults we are never in doubt that Kelman wants the reader on their side. But there seems to be an underlying sense of loathing for Patrick Doyle, as if his life disgusts Kelman and he finds his lack of action pathetic, an act of cowardice. In an interview with Kirsty McNeill, when asked about similarities between himself and Patrick, Kelman refuted the suggestion: 'Doyle is like a lot of people who come through university

without any experience of working class jobs. They think and the educational process teaches them to think – that they can change the system from within'.<sup>36</sup> Kelman is deliberately painting Patrick as naïve, and is suggesting that his disaffection arrives with the realisation that it is futile to believe that you can change the system while being part of it. It is important to note that Kelman wishes to distance himself from Patrick, and his comments to McNeill support the feeling from the novel that he has no respect for his protagonist. It is worth surmising that the highly charged nature of the writing comes from the belief that, without the courage to become the artist he is, Patrick's life is what the writer could have faced. Kelman has given his life value in a way that Patrick has not been able to manage.

In *A Disaffection* Kelman is asking his readers to consider not only how they live their life, but ironically how they instruct others to live theirs. As in *Kieron Smith, boy* Kelman is drawing attention to the importance of teaching children to think for themselves while conceding that one patronising system of education is likely to be replaced by another. He is not only concerned with education as the state provides it, but education in a wider sense. He is clear, however, about where he believes educational indoctrination begins: 'The classroom is where we discover what is "good" literature. Very soon "good" literature and "literature" become one and the same thing. Literature becomes the thing we are allowed to see in the classroom. The other stuff is the stuff we are not allowed to see'.<sup>37</sup> Kelman is suggesting in *A Disaffection* that it is in the classroom that the root of Patrick's crisis is to be found. As a teacher he reflects on the role he plays in maintaining the elitist system that Kelman discusses. In conversation with fellow teacher Alison he confesses his doubts:

I think about their parents, Alison. The way they just stand back and let their weans' heids get totally swollen with all that rightwing keech we've got to stuff into them so's we can sit back with the big wagepackets. It's us that keep the things from falling apart. It's us. Who else! We're responsible for it, the present polity.<sup>38</sup>

Patrick does try to subvert the system by informing his pupils that they are being oppressed by the system: 'Now class, the lot of ye, repeat after me: Our parents, who are the poor, are suffering from an acute poverty of the mind'.<sup>39</sup> The closest that Kelman gets in any of his fiction to grandstanding in a manner similar to that of Banks comes in the

sections when Patrick is trying to influence his pupils: 'Repeat after me: We are being fenced in by the teachers [...] at the behest of a dictatorship government [...] in explicit simulation of our fucking parents the silly bastards'.<sup>40</sup> Such sentiments reflect Kelman's views on the education system, but we are also given an insight into Patrick's situation, as well as the disdain with which Kelman views Patrick. The class room is the only place where he feels at ease, able to make jokes, and able confidently to promote his views and affect the ideas of others.

As with much of Kelman's fiction, *A Disaffection* presents an individual's inner monologue, discovering the thoughts that drive their actions. Kelman's writing epitomises Sartre's idea that we act from free will, but also expresses the individual's struggle to accept this freedom. Where Patrick Doyle differs from other Kelman protagonists is that the battle he faces is not with obvious outside forces as much as those from within. Kelman portrays an individual trying to do the 'right' thing and failing. It could be said that *A Disaffection* is Kelman's 'bad faith' novel, portraying a man who is 'denying himself'. In what appears to be a direct reference to Sartre's ideas Patrick asks the same question when he finds himself shivering in the cold: 'in an incredible, exaggerated fashion so that you had to ask is it genuine? is it the mark of a false consciousness? an indication of what's the fucking French for bad faith!'<sup>41</sup> By this stage Patrick is questioning the motivation for his every action. Kelman makes the reader aware that while others may judge an individual by their actions there is a constant struggle within the individual to try and discover just what those actions should be. Patrick Doyle is in conflict with himself to the extent that he becomes divided in two, one part working-class son and brother and one part middle-class teacher.

The allusion to bad faith also highlights another difference between Patrick and other Kelman characters who often wear their knowledge lightly. Patrick is obsessed with artists and philosophers from the past whom he seems to hold up as role models for himself. While considering his own mental state he compares himself to a German philosopher whose work influenced, amongst others, Sartre: 'Hegel was never near to insanity. He never was. Or so we are given to understand. [...] He caroused with women and drink and no doubt that is why Schopenhauer hated him. Kierkegaard didn't fucking like him either'.<sup>42</sup> Patrick is asking himself if an apparently immoral life, as typified by

Hegel's alleged 'carousing' with women and drink, can also be an intellectual life. The feelings towards Hegel that Patrick attributes to Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard suggest that his fellow philosophers thought it could not. This also highlights the fact that Patrick refuses to give value to his own moral life, trying to find such value by examining the lives of others. The idea that the intellectual life and the moral life are one and the same is not a new one, and Kelman believes that a person's life and their ideas, whether expressed philosophically or artistically, are part of the same 'whole' individual. In a talk to Glasgow School of Art students Kelman explains this point of view:

Was Paul Gauguin racist? Was he sexist? What about Van Gogh, was he racist? Did he hate atheists? What about Picasso, was he sexist? Did he hate homosexuals? Was Gertrude Stein elitist? Did she hate men? These sorts of questions are also the province of art criticism. They cannot help being part of it. When we are examining the racial or sexual or elitist stereotypes in a writer or painter's work, we are examining technique.<sup>43</sup>

Some may see such claims as controversial, not least artists themselves, but Kelman's claims reflect Sartre's ideas about art and existence, a belief that the free action of writing is the same as that of drinking or speaking. This also returns to the idea that an artist's metaphysics alongside their art. Put simply, the art and the artist are inseparable and to understand one the critic must examine both.

In an address to students in Dallas, Texas, Kelman spoke of how he was inspired not only by the art of the French impressionists, but by their lives:

I found the lives of these artists interesting. In fact I found their lives extremely exciting. They were standing up for what they believed in, many of them had nothing, they went without food, they had a tremendous commitment to what they were doing. And the authorities didn't like it. That was the rule of thumb for me, if the authorities didn't like it then it might be interesting. From then on I became interested in the lives of the artists.<sup>44</sup>

This interest is reflected in Patrick Doyle's many references to the life of these artists and philosophers rather than their ideas. But there is a subtle difference between what Kelman describes and Patrick Doyle's interest. The suggestion in *A Disaffection* is that Doyle is looking for role models to fit his life, rather than ones whose example he will follow. Such thoughts are telling about the personal dilemmas that consume his waking thoughts

and it is significant that they cross his mind as he considers his relationship with his parents, particularly that with his father. The gap between his father's life and that to which Patrick aspires are made clear. This is another conflict that Patrick faces, that of love versus respect:

He loves his da, he really does. It's just that fucking hopeless reactionariness. How do you pierce it? It's a fucking tortoiseshell. You would need a Moby Dick harpoon. Father! Daddy! Dad! How are you doing? How is your drying hand? Okay? Good, that's good. And have you wiped your gaffer's arse recently? Last week? Fine. Aye. Consistency is a desirable category. Here you are.<sup>45</sup>

This lack of communication between the generations could be regarded as symbolic, but it would be wrong to overstate this. This is about personal relationships and how the breakdown of these can effect change on a wider level and provides the reader with another example of the individual reflecting wider problems in society.

Like Kieron Smith's early views of his father, Patrick's more developed relationship with his cannot be described as a positive one, although it is more difficult in Patrick's case to see what his father has done, and is continuing to do, wrong. Examining these two sets of relationships together causes the reader to ask particular questions about where and when an individual forms his moral values, and consider questions of nature versus nurture. Does the individual follow what they are taught, or rebel against it? Kelman is asking similar questions as those that Sartre asks in respect of morality and free will.

As well as Hegel, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, Patrick muses on the life and times of Hölderlin, Goya and Beethoven amongst others. These philosophical and artistic allusions appear central to Patrick's crisis of identity. He does not know how to be 'himself' so is looking for role models, aspirational figures whose life and work only serve to highlight the apparent waste of talent that Patrick perceives his life to be. It appears that Patrick's education is a curse, that the knowledge that he has acquired only heightens his disaffection with and isolation from the rest of the world. But Kelman is not suggesting that happiness is to be found in blissful ignorance. Patrick finds himself apart from family and colleagues as he is the exception, not the rule. His fight is against becoming something he is not, from being subsumed by the system. Kelman gives the

reader no direct answers or solutions. The easiest route in life is to accept the status quo, but that is not the right thing to do. Again there is a blurring between the moral and political, one that points once more to the existential. The life that Kelman is suggesting is not an easy one, nor should it be. *A Disaffection* is a warning to his readers, and, by extension, to all, to take control of their lives. Other Kelman novels highlight the way in which the state keeps the individual in his place. In this case Kelman is suggesting that even if the individual has the freedom to act, it is not easy to embrace such freedom, and, when the individual has been used to having to submit to the state's oppressive system, when they find they have the choice to act freely, they display bad faith by refusing to make that choice. Sartre proclaimed in *Being and Nothingness*: 'I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free'.<sup>46</sup> This concept of condemnation is at the centre of Sartre's philosophy, and at the heart of *A Disaffection*. The reason that this novel stands apart from the rest of Kelman's body of work is that the critique is of the individual rather than the society that has shaped him. It is the moral duty of the individual to decide what is 'right', and then use their life to make it so.

This sense of moral obligation as set out in his writing is one which Kelman shares with Iain Banks. Although their fiction differs in how it is written, there is still the shared underlying message that individuals should try and affect change where they see it is needed. Like Kelman, Banks' fiction contains the admission that this life is not an easy one, and it is the difficulty in living such a life that is at the heart of the crisis that afflicts both writers' characters. As previously mentioned, Banks is not usually thought of as an existential writer, but his characters are comparable to those of Kelman, more so than they may appear at first. In a review of *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* Douglas Gifford considers 'the recurrent existential loneliness of so many of his (Banks's) protagonists'.<sup>47</sup> 'Recurrent existential loneliness' is at the heart of both novelists' work, and this reflects not only that their protagonists stand alone, but that they recognise aspects of life that are, in their judgement, immoral, and strive to have the moral strength to try and change matters. Gifford goes on to ponder the relationship between character and author: 'one wonders whether Banks works from the same paradoxical position of so many of his characters, who sense the underlying meaningless nature of experience, yet

still restlessly seek meaning'.<sup>48</sup> Considering the style and content of Banks' writing such an assumption seems a correct one.

Banks' aesthetic is more direct than Kelman's in the way he conveys his message and he is aware that his style of writing could be described as less than subtle: 'I'm quite a frustrated political writer. I don't have the gift to properly embed politics in the book. Characters come along and spout what is obviously my rant. It's an eternal frustration'.<sup>49</sup> The difference between the two can be seen most clearly in the way that they deal with matters concerning religion. I stated in the introduction to this thesis that existentialists included religious believers and non-believers, but the second group markedly outweigh the first. Sartre believed that existentialism and atheism are intrinsically linked. In *Existentialism and Humanism* he states: 'Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position'.<sup>50</sup>

This seems unequivocal, however later he appears less strident, and it would be a mistake to think that atheism, despite Sartre's statement above, is required for existential ethics. If we again return to the definitions of existentialism which appear at the beginning of this thesis; the primary concerns are freedom, responsibility and value. The existence or otherwise of God is not necessarily a concern. Atheism may allow Sartre a secondary argument for his existentialism, but it is not dependant on it. Individuals are free whether God exists or not. This is something Sartre goes on to explain:

Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe that God does exist, but we need to think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic, it is a doctrine of action.<sup>51</sup>

This seems to lean towards an agnostic world view, although Sartre would deny this vehemently. He believes that in this ideological battle you must pick a side, a belief that he shares with Banks and Kelman. The way the two writers criticise religion is markedly different. As discussed above with regard to *Kieron Smith, boy* and *A Disaffection* Kelman makes comment on religion by showing how it affects the lives of his

protagonists, not in any overly dramatic way, but by being a constant divisive force that is ever present.

Banks directly communicates with his readers, with the result that it can feel as if the writer is trying to persuade the reader through the strength of the characters' convictions. The characters might seem to function, rather crudely sometimes, as mouthpieces for the writer. At best, though, it is rather that the characters take part in the investigation or argument that the particular novel is engaged in. For example, in *Whit* (1995) Banks devotes a whole novel to what he sees as the hypocrisy that is intrinsic in organised religion, but his atheistic anger can be found throughout his novels. A prime example of this can be found in the following passage from *The Crow Road* (1993) where the central character Prentice McHoan has fallen out with his father, and former hero, Kenneth, to the extent that they are no longer on speaking terms. Again, as with Kieron Smith, Patrick Doyle and their respective fathers, there is more than just a generation gap appearing between the two. As the novel progresses the reader is made aware that a disagreement over religion is at the heart of the quarrel. In his *Scotnotes* critical study on Banks, Alan MacGillivray sets out their relationship:

In a reversal of the more common father-son conflict in Scottish novels, where the sensitive liberal-minded son falls foul of his father's stern religious beliefs, Prentice feels that Kenneth's tolerant atheism and sceptical attitudes do not satisfy his need to believe in something, to find some meaning behind the tragedies of life.<sup>52</sup>

Prentice's attitude to his father's (non-)beliefs could be viewed as a natural teenage rebellion which is seen as part of growing up. However Prentice's need to believe in a God who moves in mysterious ways is more than just an attempt to make sense of life's horrors. Banks uses Prentice's progress to comment on life, death, family and faith. He also uses it to talk about personal responsibility and how religion can be used as an excuse by an individual to avoid facing their own responsibilities. In answer to Prentice's assertion that there has to be a greater power or life has no meaning, his father replies with a rational anger that again echoes Banks' own:

Why?' Kenneth said, trying not to sound angry. 'Just because we feel that way? One wee daft species, on one wee daft planet circling one wee daft star in one wee daft galaxy; us? Barely capable of crawling into space yet; *capable* of feeding everybody but...nyaa, can't be bothered? Just because we think there must be

something more and a few crazy desert cults infect the world with their cruel ideas; *that's* what makes the soul a certainty and heaven a must?' Kenneth sat back, shaking his head. 'Prentice, I'm sorry, but I expected better of you. I thought you were smart. Shit; Darren dies and you miss Rory, so you think, "Bugger me; must be a geezer with the long flowing white beard after all." [...] 'What about your Aunt Kay?' Kenneth said. 'Your mum's friend; she *did* believe; must be a God; prayed every night, went to church, practically claimed she had a vision once, and then she gets married, her husband dies of cancer within a year and the baby just stops breathing in its cot one night. So she *stops* believing. Told me she couldn't believe in a God that would do that! What sort of faith is *that*? What sort of blinkered outlook on the world is it? Didn't she *believe* anybody ever died "tragically" before? Didn't she ever read her precious fucking Bible with its catalogue of atrocities? Didn't she believe the Holocaust had happened, the death camps ever existed? Or did none of that matter because it had all happened to somebody else?'<sup>53</sup>

Banks gives these views even more credence by comparing and contrasting them to the extreme and ridiculed Uncle Hamish, otherwise known by the family as 'The Tree'. Hamish is portrayed as a man who has firm, if unconventional, Christian beliefs, and is ridiculed for this. His unique brand of Christianity is dependant on his moods and whims, and, according to Prentice, is a mixture of the simplistic ('At the moment he seems to be veering towards the idea that if you did more good than bad during your life you go straight to Heaven')<sup>54</sup> and the worryingly bizarre (the rest sounds like something dreamt up by a vindictive bureaucrat on acid while closely inspecting something Hieronymus Bosch painted on one of his bleak but imaginative days.)<sup>55</sup> He is the family figure of fun, a situation which extends to his own wife and children, and this results in his worshipping alone. This portrayal is used not only to show Kenneth in a positive light when compared to his brother, but also when compared to his son. When Prentice shows interest in his uncle's 'church' it is patently more about upsetting his father than any respect for Hamish.

The fact that Kenneth McHoan is also a writer further enforces the idea that he represents Banks in this novel. As a young father he uses his stories to promote natural history and discredit the idea of God comparing him to: '...Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy'<sup>56</sup> Neither writer, McHoan or Banks, make an attempt to give a fair and balanced view. Their point of view, as far as religion is concerned, is clear. Banks turns biblical mythology on its head by having the father die to save the soul of the son. Kenneth dies in typical Banksian fashion, electrocuted on the church steeple while

denouncing religion: “‘Hamish; all the gods are false. Faith itself is idolatry’”.<sup>57</sup> Hamish, of course, sees his brother’s death as divine retribution, but ironically this reaction serves to push Prentice away from faith in God and towards his father’s beliefs. This is a point that Cristie L. March discusses in *Rewriting Scotland*:

the novel has consistently presented Hamish as a ridiculous figure [...] By offering the possibility of Kenneth having been punished for his atheism, and revealing that Hamish accepts such a reading of the event, Banks dissuades the reader, and Prentice, from thinking the same.<sup>58</sup>

*The Crow Road* can be described as a quest, where the protagonist Prentice is trying to discover ‘the truth’ on varying levels. On one level the novel takes on the form of a murder-mystery as Prentice tries to uncover family secrets and discover what happened to his missing Uncle Rory. But there is also a deeper search undertaken, one for universal truth. Prentice is trying to make sense not only of his life, but of life in general. Prentice has encountered a lot of tragedy in his young life. The deaths of his Aunt Fiona and his close friend Darren Watt, and the disappearance of Uncle Rory, have caused Prentice to consider life and death, and he is attracted to the idea of God existing as he wants to believe that there is a deeper meaning to life than his father’s atheism offers. He needs to believe that death is not the end: ‘There *has* to be something more than that!’<sup>59</sup> Prentice is deliberately painted as young and naive, and another aspect of his quest is that he matures throughout the novel. The death of his father is the pivotal moment in his quest as it appears to put all of the other deaths he has encountered in his life into perspective, and his later musings on the subject of death could have come straight from the mouth of this father, or indeed Banks:

We continue in our children, and in our works and in the memories of others; we continue in our ash and dust. To want more was not just childish, but cowardly, and somehow constipatory too. Death was change; it led to new chances, new vacancies, new niches and opportunities; it was not all loss. The belief that we somehow moved onto something else – whether still recognisably ourselves, or quite thoroughly changed – might be a tribute to our evolutionary tenacity and our animal thirst for life, but not to our wisdom. That saw a value beyond itself; in intelligence, knowledge and wit as concepts – wherever and by whoever expressed – not just in its own personal manifestations of those qualities, and so we could contemplate its own annihilation with equanimity, and suffer it with grace; it was only a sort of sad selfishness that demanded the continuation of the individual spirit in the vanity and frivolity of a heaven.<sup>60</sup>

Prentice loses his need to 'believe': '*All the gods are false*, I thought to myself, and smiled without pleasure'.<sup>61</sup> He struggles throughout the novel not to find God, but to lose Him in what can be described as an existential journey. In this way Banks is changing Prentice as he wants to effect wider change in the reader, fulfilling Sartre's definition. Just as Patrick Doyle looks to historical artists and philosophers to guide him as to what has value, so Prentice looks to God, or at least to religion, to give value to his life. When Prentice proclaims 'all the gods are false' he is not elated by this thought, and neither Banks nor, for that matter Sartre, would claim that such a conviction is a reason to rejoice as the burden of existence and responsibility falls solely on the self. As Sartre explains with reference to his own atheism: 'We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free'.<sup>62</sup> Sartre claimed that the starting point for existentialism can be found in the belief as expressed by Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's *The Karamazov Brothers*<sup>63</sup> that if God is dead everything is permitted. Sartre goes on to say: 'Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself'.<sup>64</sup> If Prentice 'kills' God then he must embrace the 'terrible' freedom and accompanying anguish to which Sartre refers.

It is typical of Banks that he reverses the reader's expectations. The son rebels against the father by challenging his atheism, and then spends the novel suffering an existential crisis which is only solved by refuting any idea of faith and returning to his family. Prentice is a prodigal son who makes his peace not with God, but with his late father and his (non) beliefs: 'Well the old man had been right and I had been wrong, and I just hoped that he'd known somehow that I would come to my senses eventually'.<sup>65</sup> The final comparison to be drawn between Kenneth McHoan and Banks is that, just as the former's message eventually persuades Prentice, so Banks hopes that the arguments that are set out in the novel will convince the reader not only that God does not exist, but more importantly, that religion is not required for the individual to lead a moral life, and to think otherwise is childish and unsophisticated. In a 2007 interview with *The Independent* Banks talks about such a life: "I never had a guilt-making religious

background,” [...] “I’m lucky to have escaped all that Calvinist nonsense. I think you can live a perfectly normal life as an atheist and a humanist””.<sup>66</sup>

It is worth directly comparing Kelman’s *A Disaffection* and Banks’ *The Crow Road* at this point. Both novels are concerned with an individual’s actions, or rather the lack of action and the consequences of both. Like Patrick Doyle, Prentice McHoan’s life, at least to begin with, is defined by an inability to choose. Also, like Patrick, his lack of decision-making makes Prentice a difficult character to warm to. From the time he is introduced, at his grandmother’s funeral, until the later part of the novel where matters are resolved, Prentice can be described as feckless. He is portrayed as a nauseating adolescent. An example of this is his infatuation with his cousin Verity Walker. His inability to ask her out leads to his losing her to his elder brother Lewis, whom he sees as being his nemesis. But Lewis is guilty of nothing more than being more successful, popular and charming than Prentice. Like Kelman with Patrick Doyle, it is a brave move by Banks to have such an apparently weak and confused character as the protagonist, although he has never been afraid of doing this, beginning with the insect-torturing Frank Cauldham in *The Wasp Factory*. What is so frustrating about Prentice is that there seems no real reason that he is like this. Brought up in a stable family unit, with wealth and the possibility of a good education, he seems determined to estrange himself from friends and family. Prentice’s life progresses through the intervention, and the patience, of others, and, as is also in evidence in Kelman’s fiction, it is the women who offer salvation for the men.

In *A Disaffection* Patrick sees salvation in a possible relationship with fellow teacher Alison, although typically, as she is married and gives him little encouragement, he is putting faith in a relationship that is unlikely to succeed. The best advice he receives comes from his sister-in-law Nicola: ‘Pat, you’ve just to get things worked out for yourself. And stop acting like a wee boy!’<sup>67</sup> When she goes on to criticise him further, what she says could be applied in equal measure to Prentice McHoan: ‘The way you’re going on just now. Maybe all men are the same but. I get so sick of it, your moods, having to watch all the time not knowing when’s the right moment to ask something. Even listening to you just now ... all you’re doing, complaining – if ye listen to yourself – complaining, that’s all your doing’.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, it is the women in his life who shape Prentice's story. The defining relationship in *The Crow Road* may be the one between father and son, but it is the women who shape his life in a positive manner. His petulance at losing Verity to Lewis is matched by his mother's forgiveness at his subsequent behaviour. It is his missing Uncle Rory's girlfriend 'Aunt' Janice who sets him on the road to uncovering the mystery surrounding Rory's disappearance, a puzzle that obsesses him and also allows him an excuse when his life spirals downwards. Most importantly there is Ashley Watt, his childhood friend, who picks him up at his lowest point when he is charged with shoplifting and has failed his University exams. His realisation at the novel's conclusion that his father's atheistic and humanist world view was right coincides with the realisation that he loves Ashley Watt, a love that is reciprocated. It appears as if Banks is again liberally employing irony as Prentice is punished for believing, and is only rewarded when he loses his faith, or at least his need for faith. As there is no God to 'test' Prentice, the reader can only conclude that it is Banks who is testing him; the omnipotent writer presenting various tasks for the boy to overcome before he is rewarded with enlightenment and love. As a deity Banks is more ancient Greek than Christian, playing with his characters' lives in a knowing and wicked manner, and teaching both the characters, and the reader, a moral along the way. The Odyssey that Prentice has to undertake only goes to highlight this.

But there is more to Banks' fiction than rants, rallying cries and the refutation of religion. He asks the reader to question how the individual should live despite the surroundings in which they find themselves. Like Kelman's characters Banks' are portrayed as outsiders. It is again made clear that the 'easy' road in life is to adhere to and respect the status quo. Banks has dealt, from *The Wasp Factory* onward, with righteous anger and non-religious fervour and he asks his readers questions about man's existence. Questions of nature versus nurture, of what it means to live a 'good life', and to what extent man is free are all tackled in Banks' novels. All of the protagonists in Banks' novels seem lost until situations force them to act. They are unhappy in their lives and need exceptional circumstances to find meaning. Sartre stated that by choosing for yourself you choose for all, and Banks reiterates this idea in his writing. In *The Crow Road*, *Complicity*, *The Business* (1999) and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* the

individual is fighting to change not only their own situation, but that of those around them. Although not always to the fore in his novels, the bigger questions of politics, religion and morality are always present. Banks reveals, in his writing, what he sees as important, and wants change by making others aware. He understands that to opt out of interacting with questions of politics, if not necessarily with party politics, leads to a loss of influence in shaping society and this leads to a loss of self.

Banks can be described as a novelist of extremes. His novels are often angry and violent and can be explicit in terms of sex, drugs and the grotesque. *A Song of Stone* (1998) can be considered his most extreme. Set in an unnamed country which has been devastated by war the novel takes Banks' cynical view of what human nature is capable of and explores the possibilities further than previously. All the familiar aspects of Banks' fiction are included. Themes such as family, nature versus nurture, free will, corruption, power and lies are to the fore, but Banks presents them in such a way as to challenge his most loyal readers. The novel is arguably, alongside *The Bridge* (1992), the most poetic and intriguing of his mainstream fiction. It is certainly less obvious as to where the writer's sympathies lie as there are no characters that can be called heroic, and the lack of the archetypal Banksian rant means that there are no clues for the reader as to how he feels, and more importantly, how they are meant to feel. As a result the reader has to decipher the novel for himself or herself and is left to reflect on how he or she really feels about all the questions posed, rather than finding themselves agreeing with or opposing a stated view. *A Song of Stone* is more forensic, more distanced in style, than Banks' other novels. There is an effective uncertainty about where our sympathies should lie. The result is a novel which insists upon the existential status of the individual reader, rather than a novel which addresses readers collectively. It is the work of a writer who is disillusioned with the world, his disgust palpable, and the novel is a reflection of this, but it is also someone who is taking risks with his writing, trying to influence his readers in a different way. Using hindsight to examine the novels that preceded *A Song of Stone* an argument can be made that his fiction had been leading up to this point.

The three novels that precede *A Song of Stone*: *The Crow Road*, *Complicity* and *Whit*, had revealed a writer with an increasingly weary world view. The sense of hope at the end of *The Crow Road*, which sees Prentice with the promise of a better life with

lover Ashley Watt, is undercut by being set against the beginning of the first Gulf War. Through *Complicity* and *Whit* Banks' view of human nature has darkened, and the lies and deceptions have become more reprehensible with little hope that things will get better. There are attacks on religion, politics, capitalism, business, but also examinations of personal relationships in the form of families, lovers, friends and communities, none of which are spared his sceptical and critical eye. Banks' debut, *The Wasp Factory*, is based on a family lie, but readers of that novel may have viewed this as a plot device which allows the shocking ending. What is made clear when we consider all of Banks' mainstream novels to this point is that the writer's negative view of humanity was not only focused on larger 'political' targets, but applied as much to individuals and the closest of relations. Dishonour and deceit are constants in the novels.

*A Song of Stone* appears to be the ultimate expression of this misanthropic view. The novel may be set in a war-torn land, but it is really about family, relationships and morality. We are introduced to Abel, the narrator, and his sister, and lover, Morgan, as they flee the castle they call home. The idea that these two are lovers is dealt with in a sensual and non-judgemental way: 'You drained me, sequentially; our pleasure became pain and I discovered that you suffered in silence, and screamed – quiet, hoarse, bitten off – for satisfaction only. We fell asleep in each other's arms, and on our family's'.<sup>69</sup> Their relationship sets the tone for the novel. It asks the reader to consider right and wrong, and it should be remembered that this relationship has not been consummated against the backdrop of war, but began years before, and perhaps such apparent decadence is at the heart of the current hostilities. Revolution usually occurs when the working classes are starving and the ruling classes no longer care. The lifestyles of Abel and Morgan have echoes of the last days of Rome, or the last Tsars of Russia, and they seem to act without fear of recrimination or judgement. Life has become a game to them, and they seek extremes. Abel says:

One should only spar with those near equal to oneself, otherwise the contest tells us nothing beyond the embarrassingly obvious, and they unwittingly confirm this who in their propensity for picking on those ruled-out from replying directly expose themselves as most likely defenceless against those who could.<sup>70</sup>

He is not only placing himself above others, but excusing his actions as a natural state of affairs. He goes on to surmise: 'We are all our own legal system, where we feel the need and see the opportunity; apprehending, judging, dispensing and, where we can, enforcing whatever by our personal philosophy we deem legitimate'.<sup>71</sup> This gets to the heart of the novel, and is the closest we get to the voice of Banks as he reduces responsibility for our actions to the individual. This existential view of echoes not only Kelman, but Sartre.

Banks seems to be an atheist who bemoans the lack of God or at least faith. There is a sense that he wants to believe. This is shown most obviously in *The Crow Road*, with Prentice McHoan, and in *Whit*, with the titular character Isis Whit. Both of these characters want to believe, and their loss of faith equals a loss of innocence. Banks is suggesting that belief in a God is desirable as it simplifies life, but it is a childish delusion and should be considered as such. Banks' atheism is uneasy, and a spiritual power that lends order and meaning to existence is the absent friend from his novels. It is humanity that Banks often portrays as contemptible in his fiction, and for him religion is a man-made construct, but there appears to be no spirituality in his secular world. *A Song of Stone* is set in a land where not only is there no God, but society is also broken. There are no laws except those that the strongest impose. This novel is where the questions of nature versus nurture which Banks first posed in *The Wasp Factory* reach a conclusion. What is right and what is wrong when the only thing to bind you is your own idea of morality? Incest, sadomasochism, murder and torture are detailed in *A Song of Stone* with little comment from the characters. There are emotions but they often seem out of kilter to the events that cause them. When Morgan is taken from Abel by the violent and fascistic Lieutenant his reaction reveals the ennui that is central to his existence:

I feel a kind of jealousy, I think. How novel, considering what we've shared, one could even say disseminated. I might even think to savour this unfamiliar bouquet, at least to swill it around before I spit it out, but it has always seemed an ignoble emotion, a confession of moral weakness.<sup>72</sup>

As the world portrayed in this novel is in a state of war we should not judge the actions of the characters by the social norms of a stable democracy. But this is easier said than done. The reader is asked to try and put aside their own ideas, which have been formed by family, religious or social standards, and ask themselves the difficult questions of what

they would do if there were little to no repercussions. It is the focus on the reader that makes this Banks' most complex novel as, instead of instructing the readers as to what they should think, he insists that they should judge for themselves.

*A Song of Stone* appears to have been cathartic for Banks, as the novels that followed, *The Business*, *Dead Air* and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* do not contain the same bleak view of humanity at their heart, and all three end with the promise of hope. Of course it should also be noted that the year *A Song of Stone* was published was also the year that Conservative Party rule ended in the United Kingdom, and the New Labour era began. We know from his novels and interviews how political Banks is, and it is most likely no coincidence that this change in the mood of his novels matched the political climate. In *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, where Banks rages against the second Iraq war, and the Labour politicians who allowed it to happen, there is still an optimistic ending. Perhaps more than the New Labour victory in Britain it is a post-devolution feeling that has permeated Banks' most recent work. Certainly he has become disillusioned with British politics. In the interview with Liz Hoggard he discusses fellow Fifer's Gordon Brown's future as Prime Minister: 'He thinks Brown will make a better PM than Blair. "His hands are relatively clean when it comes to the Iraq war. But he's still very much a monetarist and a privatiser, so I couldn't bring myself to vote for him"'.<sup>73</sup> Banks goes on to express that he is political in terms of issues rather than any blind loyalty to a particular party, an important distinction to make: 'Banks usually votes SNP, but he's heard a rumour that the party will guarantee the Catholic adoption agencies get a get-out from the Sexual Orientation Regulations Act. "So I'll probably waste my vote on some extreme leftwing candidate as usual"'.<sup>74</sup> These quotes show not only Banks' 'moral' rather than political outlook, they also go to show how Scotland's political landscape has changed. Since Conservative Party rule ended, Scotland was granted a devolved form of government and *A Song of Stone* was published. To be able to discuss the comparative merits or otherwise of two Labour Prime Ministers, and of choosing to vote meaningfully for either the SNP or a leftwing party would have seemed unimaginable in 1997-98 as Scotland was still reeling from 20 years of political impotence.

Jean Paul Sartre states that what connects the individual writer to society is the concept of morality, both individual and collective. As David Caute explains in his introduction to Sartre's *What is Literature?*:

By the time Sartre wrote *What is Literature?*, he was laying increasing stress on the becoming, on the active side of freedom. The notion was now invested with a social content: to be complete, one man's freedom depended on the freedom of others, on the creation of a society from which exploitation and oppression had been eradicated. This brought Sartre into the sphere of morality and social humanism. He now urged writers to use their ontological freedom at the service of social freedom, while at the same time insisting that the one cannot be fully realised without the other.<sup>75</sup>

This central idea of Sartre's that 'one man's freedom' depends on the freedom of other individuals is important when considering the link between his existential philosophy and literature. Writers and readers must recognise the freedom of each other for a moral or ethical value to exist. Gary Cox explains Sartre's view on ethics and the importance of 'Others': 'Sartre sees ethics as an Other-related phenomenon, as a feature of being-for-others. He argues that no action is unethical until another person judges it to be so. An ethical state of affairs is one in which people respect and affirm each other's freedom.'<sup>76</sup> If the reader and writer recognise each other as has been set out above, then this mutual recognition brings with it an ethical dimension that cannot be denied. For there has to be an ethical dimension to any writer's work, and the reader's recognition of this gives not only the ethical stance value, but the work itself. The individual, when they recognise their own freedom, becomes authentic, but it is when individuals recognise the freedom of others that morality becomes a reality.

In the case of James Kelman and Iain Banks, their distinctly individual moral sensibilities fire their political values, and both are expressed in their writing. It is this artistic expression of individual value systems that makes Sartre's ideas of existentialism appropriate for looking at literature and morality. If we can accept Sartre's claims that man is free to choose, and by choosing give value to that which is chosen, then such value can only be seen as a moral value. Therefore, an individual's set of moral values is such that the individual believes these values should be universal and it is in this belief that the move from the individual to the universal can be found, from the very real

subjective to an apparent objective. The individual has a desire and a belief that his or her value systems are the correct ones, and to validate this he needs others to share these values. The values of the individual self are not only necessarily the best for themselves, but for all. The relationship between writer and reader through the medium of narrative fiction is the artistic expression of this relationship.

Notes

1. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp 140-173, page 140.
2. Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), pp 11-50, page 45.
3. James Kelman, *A Disaffection* (London: Vintage, [1989] 1999), page 210.
4. Ibid. page 282.
5. James Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), page 43.
6. Ibid. page 26.
7. Ibid. page 146.
8. Ibid. page 146.
9. Ibid. page 32.
10. Ibid. page 408.
11. James Kelman, *A Disaffection*, page 260.
12. Ibid. page 281.
13. Ibid. page 285.
14. James Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy*, page 8.
15. Ibid. page 88.
16. Ibid. page 207.
17. James Kelman, *And the Judges said...*, pp 57-74, page 72.
18. James Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy*, page 301.
19. Ibid. page 301.
20. Peter McCarey, quoted in Alan Riach, 'Homecoming: An Introduction', in *Homecoming: New Poems 2001-2009*, page 15.
21. James Kelman, *A Disaffection*, page 118.
22. Ibid. page 112.
23. Ibid. page 307.
24. Ibid. page 248.
25. Ibid. page 245.
26. Ibid. page 26.
27. Ibid. page 26.
28. Ibid. page 186.
29. Ibid. page 306.
30. Ibid. page 1.
31. Ibid. page 1.
32. Ibid. page 2.
33. Ibid. page 317.
34. Ibid. page 337.
35. Ibid. page 337.
36. Kirsty McNeil, 'Interview with James Kelman', *Chapman 57* 1989, 1-9, page 1.
37. James Kelman, *And the Judges said...*, pp 57-74, page 69.
38. James Kelman, *A Disaffection*, page 149.
39. Ibid. page 24.
40. Ibid. page 25.
41. Ibid. page 174.
42. Ibid. page 118.
43. James Kelman, *Some Recent Attack: Essays, Cultural and Political*, (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), pp 5-15, page 10.
44. James Kelman, *And the Judges said...*, pp 415-446, page 439-40.
45. James Kelman, *A Disaffection*, page 119.
46. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp 431-556, page 439.

47. Douglas Gifford, 'Bridge Builder', *Scottish Review of Books Vol 3, No 2*, 2007 pp 14-15, page 15.
48. Ibid. page 15.
49. 'Changing society, Imagining the Future': Interview by Patrick Ward with Iain Banks, *Socialist Review Online*, February 1989, <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=10267> [last accessed 18/06/09].
50. Jean Paul Sartre *Existentialism and Humanism*, pp 23-56, page 56.
51. Ibid. page 56.
52. Alan MacGillivray, *Iain Banks' The Wasp Factory, The Crow Road, Whit*, page 41.
53. Iain Banks, *The Crow Road* (London: Abacus, 1993), page 145.
54. Ibid. page 176.
55. Ibid. page 176.
56. Ibid. page 32.
57. Ibid. page 314.
58. Cristie L. March, *Rewriting Scotland*, pp 81-107, page 89.
59. Ibid. page 145.
60. Ibid. page 484.
61. Ibid. page 479.
62. Jean Paul Sartre *Existentialism and Humanism*, pp23-56, page 34.
63. In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre appears to quote Dostoevsky directly as having written: "If God does not exist, everything would be permitted." The sentence as quoted never actually appears in the novel to which it is most often attributed, *The Karamazov Brothers*, but it does reflect and summarise the thoughts of Ivan Karamazov who asks non-believer Rakitin: 'So where does that leave man then [...] with no God and no future life? I suppose now that everything is permitted, one can do whatever one likes?' Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, Ignat Avsey (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp 705-823, page 739.
64. Jean Paul Sartre *Existentialism and Humanism*, pp 23-56, page 33.
65. Iain Banks *The Crow Road*, page 485.
66. Liz Hoggard, 'Iain Banks: The Novel Factory' Interview with Iain Banks, *The Independent*, 18/2/2007.
67. James Kelman, *A Disaffection*, page 319.
68. Ibid. page 319.
69. Iain Banks *A Song of Stone* (London: Abacus, 1998), page 49.
70. Ibid. page 77.
71. Ibid. page 77.
72. Ibid. page 81.
73. Liz Hoggard, 'Iain Banks: The Novel Factory' Interview with Iain Banks, *The Independent*, 18/2/2007.
74. Ibid.
75. David Caute's Introduction to Jean Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?*, page x.
76. Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction*, pp 11-50, page 45.

#### **Chapter 4: The Writer and the Representation of Women and Men**

As discussed in the previous chapter, James Kelman and Iain Banks are often classified and over-simplified as being a working-class writer and a middle-class writer respectively. One of the reasons for this can be found in the representations of the characters that inhabit their fiction; most obviously the male, but also the female. It could be said that class defines social roles. Yet every character is an individual and novelists often deliberately subvert expectations of their characters' 'pre-ordained' roles. If the men in the novels of Banks and Kelman normally work with predictable social determinants, it is worth enquiring into the novelists' representation of women. It could be said that class defines social roles. In this chapter I look at this further and try to discover how both writers deal with gender and what comments they make through these representations. Their approaches to writing may be distinctly different, but their commentaries on the sexes are actually more alike than they first appear. This applies to how they write female characters perhaps even more than the male and I will return to this later in the chapter, but both writers have a lot to say about the complex question of modern Scottish masculinity and the accompanying mythology. In doing so, their political, ethical and aesthetical become more sharply delineated, allowing us a better view of their relationship with Sartre's ideas on literature.

In an article written for *GQ* magazine the Scottish novelist Ewan Morrison asked the question, 'Is Scottish Masculinity in Crisis?' Morrison argues that post-devolution Scotland has not had a positive effect on the Scottish male. He believes that such a state of affairs will only change when Scotland rejects the current form of devolved parliament, something he views as a political pacifier from Westminster, and takes control of its own destiny by pushing for independence. No matter what you think about the politics it is apparent that Morrison believes masculinity is linked with the political state:

If the true citizen is a mature man taking responsibility for his life on the stage of history, then post-devolution Scottish man is a pimply, whinging adolescent...The new Scottish man cannot have powers devolved to him: he has yet to evolve. As a fervent feminist once explained to me: 'we don't want you to give us power. We want to take it for ourselves.' Only through the journey into the negative does the

positive emerge, as every revolutionary knows. It is time for the Scottish male to transcend the negative and find self-empowerment.<sup>1</sup>

These are interesting questions to consider. Can masculinity, and indeed femininity, be linked to a nation's political and social systems, and if so, then how do gender portrayals in art reflect this? In this chapter I intend to examine Kelman's and Banks' gender depictions. How does the way they present their characters in relation to their gender comment upon Scottish society?

At first inspection it appears that Banks views the relationship between the sexes as one of equality. The middle-class world that Banks' characters inhabit allows for this, with a greater chance for both men and women to have had a good education and be in well-paid employment than is to be found in the working class world in which many of Kelman's characters live. Kelman's world is more traditionally divided along gender lines, and Kelman concentrates on the masculine. His is predominately a man's world with the female more identifiably the 'other'. Crucially, however, both writers are unavoidably writing from the male view no matter what the sex of the characters. It is often more revealing to look closely at how writers portray the opposite sex. Kelman's and Banks' female characters help to give a more complete picture of their fiction and their particular metaphysics. In more than one sense, for Kelman and Banks, women are 'the Other'.<sup>2</sup> This makes their depictions of women especially revealing.

As I have discussed previously, James Kelman, through both his fiction and his own discussions of art, is seen as someone who represents the working classes, but Kelman is aware of the problem that the artist faces when trying to represent any group of people. As he says in his essay, 'Artists and Values':

What actually is the proletariat? Or for that matter the bourgeoisie? How do you recognise a class of folk? Or a race of people? You recognise them by general characteristics. When we perceive a member of a class we are not perceiving an individual human being, we are perceiving an idea, and abstract entity, a generality; it is a way of looking that by and large is the very opposite of art.<sup>3</sup>

This is a dichotomy that all writers are confronted with. They write individual characters but they also want a readership to recognise, or at least sympathise, with their characters. To achieve this there has to be some use of 'general characteristics'. This will include

aspects such as language, political persuasion and social class. There is a balancing act to be performed by the writer. The question then arises as to how to perform such an act when representing women in fiction. The male writer, even when dealing with a class or race that is not his own, is more likely to have an inherent understanding of the male view, and this is not purely a result of their gender. It can also be attributed to the patriarchal hierarchy of Western society which promotes a masculine reading.

From his first published novel, Banks addresses questions of natural, social and familial constructions of gender identity. Sexuality is defined in relationships and it is the loss of defined sexuality in the novel's protagonist that sets him/her apart as an extremely isolated individual. *The Wasp Factory* plays with the readers' expectations and notions of gender, posing questions about what shapes gender identity. The narrator is Frank Cauldhame, ostensibly a sixteen year-old boy, through whose eyes we learn about his strange upbringing by his eccentric father. Central to the novel is a traumatic childhood event, a dramatic ploy which appears in many of Banks' novels. In Frank's case it was the loss of his genitalia as a child. The accepted story is that the ageing family bulldog, Old Saul, attacked him, biting him in the groin and removing his genitals, which are then kept on display in a glass jar by his father. The castration occurs at exactly the same time that his mother is giving birth to his younger brother Paul.

Such a peculiar set of dramatic events are not unusual in Banks' fiction, but it is the conclusion of the novel that causes the reader to re-think all that they have just read. The jar containing Frank's pickled penis and testes, a constant reminder of his emasculation, is accidentally smashed by his father: 'He held it out for me to see, but I was looking into his face. He closed his hand, then opened it again, like a magician. He was holding a pink ball. Not a testicle; a pink ball, like a lump of plasticine, or wax'.<sup>4</sup> This is revealed to the reader at the same time as it is to Frank, and the result is the questioning of what has gone before. Frank's obsessions and thoughts had been those of a teenage boy, if a rather disturbed one with a peculiar upbringing. Indeed when compared to his father and elder brother Eric, he often appears as the voice of reason. The discovery that he is a young woman asks the reader to consider questions about what constitutes gender: 'I'm not Francis Leslie Cauldhame. I'm Frances Lesley Cauldhame. That's what it boils down

to'.<sup>5</sup> What is in a name, and what does this mean in terms of identity, gender or otherwise?

The depth of the deception becomes clear to the reader as it dawns on Frank/Frances:

When Old Saul savaged me, my father saw it as an ideal opportunity for a little experiment, and a way of lessening – perhaps removing entirely – the influence of the female around him as I grew up. So he started dosing me with male hormones, and has been ever since. That's why he's always made the meals, that's why what I've always thought was the stump of a penis is really an enlarged clitoris. Hence the beard, no periods and all the rest.<sup>6</sup>

Such a level of detail is to convince the reader that such a deception is possible, but there are other reasons and questions, the first of which is why? Is it for reasons of revenge on the female sex, or a 'Frankenstein'-like experiment to try and create a life that is 'unnatural'? As Alan MacGillivray points out:

He [Frank's Father] is playing God in much the same way that Frankenstein was accused of doing. In the transformation of Frank into a violent, sadistic killer of animals and murderer of his own close kin, we can see the same kind of degeneration of a being from a psychologically healthy condition into a state of bitterness and futile impotence. Frank is not aware of the causes of his condition, as Frankenstein's monster is, but the effects on him are the same.<sup>7</sup>

*The Wasp Factory* is also following James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). The theme of split or dual personality is one with a rich and important tradition in Scottish literature but it is the cross-gender aspect of *The Wasp Factory* that is the element that keeps it apart from those earlier works.

Another difference is that Frank/Frances is unaware of his/her father's experiment. This is not a psychological or supernatural story but one which finds its horror in the very real world of science, and there is no ambiguity about this. Like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Jekyll and Hyde*, *The Wasp Factory* serves as a warning about the dangers of abusing science and opposing nature. If we view Frank's/Frances' upbringing as a twisted sociological experiment carried out by his/her father then we have to ask, 'What is the balance between nature and nurture?' Ignoring how realistic the

situation may be, and Banks goes to some lengths to convince us that such a deception is possible, the questions raised are important ones when we consider representations of gender, raising the novel above a mere 'horror' story, and preparing readers for the seriousness and complexity that is to be found in all of Iain Banks' work. Many of these questions are proposed by Frank/Frances:

Part of me still wants to believe it's just his latest lie, but really I know it's the truth. I'm a woman. Scarred thighs, outer labia a bit chewed up, and I'll never be attractive, but according to Dad a normal female, capable of intercourse and giving birth (I shiver at the thought of either).<sup>8</sup>

The overt interest in violence and destruction that Frank displays throughout the book can be seen as Banks' comment on society's construct of what it means to be masculine, a symbol of the destruction that 'man' can cause. As Berthold Schoene-Harwood states: 'Incapable of ever mustering an erection, he (Frank) becomes a mere impersonator of masculinity, the irreparably emasculated shadow of heroic man'.<sup>9</sup> But we can speculate that Frances may have acted in the same or at least a similar manner if she had been raised as a girl by her father. If the only difference in her life was that she was aware of her sex then how different would *The Wasp Factory* have been? Are there inherent behavioural patterns in men and women which can be altered in their upbringing? Banks is asking us to consider what makes us act as we do, as men and women.

In *The Wasp Factory*, Banks removes Frank's/Frances' sexuality, or at least disguises it, and by doing so asks the reader to question the importance or otherwise of gender when the individual considers personal identity and how the burden of freedom may or may not be a gendered one. As Frank/Frances comes to terms with the realisation that he is a she, he/she reaches a conclusion: 'But I *am* still me; I *am* the same person, with the same memories and the same deeds done, the same (small) achievements, the same (appalling) crimes to *my* name'.<sup>10</sup> Despite the revelation of her sex, Frances is sure of who she is, and the reader is made aware that the search for identity and meaning that Frank was searching for throughout the novel will be continued by Frances. On the final page of *The Wasp Factory*, Frances says: 'Our destination is the same in the end, but our journey – part chosen, part determined – is different for us all, and changes as we live and

grow. I thought one door had snicked behind me years ago; in fact I was still crawling about the place. *Now* the door closes, and my journey begins'.<sup>11</sup>

Although there is a sense of hope for Frances, a sense that she can move on, the reader cannot forget her earlier actions such as the blowing up of rabbits, the construction of the monstrous insect torture chamber that gives *The Wasp Factory* its title, and the murders of her cousins Blyth and Esmerelda, and younger brother Paul. Read on one level this could be a commentary on a particular type of Scottish masculinity, a masculinity that shapes Frank's ideas of what it means to be a man, ideas which can be interpreted as dangerous and destructive. As Schoene-Harwood comments: 'Banks renders the eventual collapse of Frank's masculinity, as well as that of the patriarchal order in its entirety, not as ruinous defeat but as some kind of liberating rebirth or regeneration'.<sup>12</sup> Banks appears to be agreeing with Ewan Morrison that 'it is time for the Scottish male to transcend the negative and find self-empowerment'.<sup>13</sup>

*The Wasp Factory* is prescient in many ways in terms of Banks' fiction, and perhaps no more so than in the way he portrays women. In his novels there is an implicit liberal feminist agenda at work. Banks seems to endorse the basic tenet that there should be equality between the sexes. Just as Frank's/Frances' actual gender appears to have had little influence on his/her actions, so the sex of the majority of Banks' characters has no major bearing on the way they act. The women drink, take drugs and have as much sex as the men (often more) and it is not difficult to imagine swapping the sex of many of his characters without any noticeable change in their behaviour in terms of plot development. It could be argued that the same paternalistic society that he parodies in *The Wasp Factory* is the cause of sexual inequality and that the real need for change is in a society that is intrinsically set up for the female to fail. This is crucial in the novels *Canal Dreams* (1989) and *The Business*. Both these novels have women as their main protagonists, and it appears that they have to be 'masculine' to survive in situations that are 'man-made'.

In *Canal Dreams* Hisako Onoda is a cellist who finds herself caught in the middle of a political coup in Panama. Hisako is originally portrayed as conventionally

'feminine', attempting to seduce the captain of the ship she is travelling on, with the situation played from her viewpoint:

Was she being too obvious, running her fingers along the levers? This was silly, really. There was a very attractive young woman officer on this ship, much better looking than her. But what was wrong with flirting? She wasn't even flirting, anyway. Probably he hadn't even noticed; she was being over-sensitive.<sup>14</sup>

Scenes such as this, of which there are a number in Banks' novels, seem to be more about male fantasy rather than an attempt to portray a female state of mind, but it is unfair to overtly criticise Banks for such writing. All his protagonists have doubts and fears of which the reader is made aware, and it would be inconsistent for the female characters to be any different, and, as with *The Wasp Factory*, he is playing with expectations that are soon to be challenged. As the plot unfolds in *Canal Dreams* Hisako is called to turn herself into a heroic figure who handles knives and guns with aplomb, eventually defeating the Panamanian rebels and destroying the boat which they control. This would be an unlikely chain of events no matter what the sex of the 'hero', so the question arises: why should Banks decide to make his main character female? It is possible that Banks is taking the idea of sexual equality to an exaggerated extreme. If the drama is an adventure fantasy then the sex of the main character matters little. The reader of *The Wasp Factory* is asked to reconsider the actions of the pre-revelation Frances Cauldhame. Were these actions a result of her belief that she was a boy, and had been treated as a boy, so she acted as was expected of a boy? Or were her actions little to do with her sex? Similarly, the reader of *Canal Dreams* is called upon to question not only if a woman could act as Hisako does, but if anyone could, and if the answer is no to both questions then it matters little whether the protagonist is indeed male or female.

In chapter one of Banks novel *The Business* the reader is introduced to Kathryn (Kate) Telman as she is about to take a return trip to Coatbridge, a town to the east of Glasgow, where she was born and raised. As noted, it is a feature of many of Banks' novels that an incident in childhood changes their lives, but in *The Business* the incident appears, at first, to be one which changes Kate's life for the better. The eight year-old Kate is discovered playing on the streets of her home town by the business woman Elizabeth Telman, and Banks makes it clear that Kate is from a poverty-stricken

background. There is a discussion between the two that is marked by the difference in language used, with the older woman speaking English while young Kate speaks in Scots, depicted phonetically by Banks: ‘Ahm no Inglish, ahm Scoatish’.<sup>15</sup> Kate is adopted by Elizabeth, and works her way up the corporate ladder to become a senior executive for the global capitalist organisation known as ‘The Business’.

What is unclear in this novel is why Banks has decided to have a female protagonist. The stereotype of the hard-headed business woman is one which is a fairly recent construction, and one which would have been considered exceptional until the second half of the twentieth century. What Banks appears to be commenting on in *The Business* is that to succeed in this male-dominated world a woman has to be prepared to act as her male contemporaries act. The novels, perhaps especially when female protagonists are employed, offer a critique of masculinity. As in *The Wasp Factory* and *Canal Dreams*, Banks appears to be commenting on gender, and the idea that it is irrelevant to how an individual acts. He again returns to questions of ‘nature versus nurture’, implying that it is the latter that will eventually supersede the former, but won’t destroy it completely. We have seen in previous chapters how Banks rails against many specific aspects of what can be roughly described as ‘global capitalism’, and this is never more pronounced than in *The Business*. Much of the novel is concerned with the detail of how big business, in the eyes of Banks, works:

We’re quite happy to deal with corrupt regimes and people, so long as figures are all above board at our end. In many cultures a degree of what is termed corruption in the West has long been a respectable and accepted part of the way business is done, and we are ready, willing and able to accommodate this. (In the West, of course, it is just as common. It’s just not respectable. Or publicised).<sup>16</sup>

As Kate’s belief in the mantra of *The Business* begins to fade her ‘human’ nature comes to the fore, and Banks’ voice can also be heard: ‘What is it that really matters to all of us? We’re all the same species, the same assemblage of cells, with the same unarguable needs for food, water and shelter. The trouble is that after that it gets more complicated’.<sup>17</sup> This appears to confirm the belief that it is environment that shapes the individual, causing them to believe they *have* to act the way that they do. When considering women in *The Wasp Factory*, the unenlightened Frank decides: ‘There must be a few strong women,

women with more man in their character than most'.<sup>18</sup> It appears in Banks' fiction that when the female has to compete with the male they discover the 'man in their character', but Banks sees this as a necessity rather than any desirable quality, and despairs that this is the case. He holds up the feminine as a source of hope. This is a theme that I will return to when discussing James Kelman below.

There is another Banks novel that at first appears to have a different portrayal of women, his 1995 novel *Whit*. In this novel we are introduced to Isis Whit, the character who gives the novel its name, and, unusually for a Banks character, a true innocent. Isis is the granddaughter of the founder of 'The Luskentyrian Sect of the Select of God', and is one of the select of the religion. Her character is portrayed as having an idyllic childhood, brought up in the safe surroundings that the Sect offered. Such a scenario is not expected in an Iain Banks' novel, where childhoods are more usually Frank Cauldhame than Isis Whit. However, Banks plays with the reader by splitting the female identity into two distinct characters. Isis is an innocent as she has been constrained and protected by a male dominated society, rarely venturing out of her religion's homestead. By contrast, her cousin Morag has become a woman who escaped such confines to discover what the outside world held, a world referred to by the Luskentyrians as 'The World of the Unsaved'. The main plot of the novel is Isis's search for Morag who disappeared from the Luskentyrian's church after she renounced her faith. Morag has run away to London, and become a musician, but the Luskentyrians want her back for their 'Festival of Love'. Isis's journey is one of discovery that leads her to realise the hypocrisy of her family and its beliefs. This novel is another attack on a distinctly patriarchal society and on religion in particular. Although it is the women who are worshipped it is the men who hold the power. As Alan MacGillivray comments:

The real sustained opposition within the novel is between male and female qualities and characteristics [...] Throughout the novel, there is an explicit difference between the male and female characters. Gender difference carries with it a clear moral and psychological distinction, so the significant male characters illustrate one set of qualities, and female characters illustrate another opposing set. No living characters in the novel cross this divide.<sup>19</sup>

In *Whit*, more than any of his other novels, Banks demonstrates an explicit difference between the male and female. There are none of the 'cross-gender' representations that

often appear elsewhere. At every point of her quest Isis discovers that the males she encounters will at best be a distraction, at worst will actively seek to cause her harm. In fact, it is the male characters in *Whit* that are the most interesting as they have little to redeem them. This applies especially to Isis's grandfather Salvador and her brother Allan. As in *The Wasp Factory*, *The Crow Road*, *Whit* and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* Banks is using the dynamic of a dysfunctional family to make comment on wider society, but in *Whit* the family divisions are more emphatically along male/female lines instead of being along generational lines.

Isis's relationships with both her brother and grandfather are confused and change dramatically as she discovers more about herself and her family. Her brother Allan is jealous of her special status, allowed her because she is born in a leap year, on February 29, and plots against her. But it is the betrayal by her grandfather Salvador, a man whom she idolises, that is central to the novel. Isis discovers the depths of his hypocrisy in a scene where he forces himself on her sexually, after persuading her to disrobe in the name of his religion:

'We must commune together!' He pushed his mouth towards mine.

'What?' I yelped, bringing my arms up to his shoulders to try and push him away. 'But Grandfather!'

'I know!' he cried hoarsely as he turned his head this way and that, trying to bring our lips together. 'I know it seems wrong, but I hear Their voice!'

'But it's forbidden!' I said, straining at his shoulders, still trying to push him back. He was forcing me over and down now, onto the bed beneath. 'We are two generations apart!'

'It was forbidden; it isn't anymore. That was a mistake'.<sup>20</sup>

This disturbing scene mirrors those in Banks' other novels in that what appears to be a loving, if quirky, family is shown to have a dark secret and to be built on hypocrisy and lies. The ability to change the 'rules' of religion, rules which are 'man-made', is at the heart of Banks' accusations against it. This time it is not only a family unit, but the whole Luskentyrian community that has been lied to. *Whit* can be read as simply another Banks' attack on religion, but it is more than that. It reinforces a bleak view of family, that there will be lies, betrayal and hypocrisy even in the most apparently stable units. In *Whit*

Banks makes clear whom he thinks is to blame. Banks seems to make a blunt moral distinction in this novel. The men are evil and the women are good. This seems crude, but Banks is too clever a writer not to have made the distinction for a reason, and we should examine the characters with regard to his other novels. If Kate Telman and Hisako Onoda have to act as men in order to survive in *Canal Dreams* and *The Business* respectively, then conversely when the female characters stay true to their sex, that is by not accepting the subservient roles that the men allow them, as Isis, Morag, her maternal grandmother Yolanda, her aunt Zhobelia and Isis's friend and travelling companion Sophi do in *Whit*, then not only do they support one another, they expose the hypocrisy of the male characters. When Isis takes over control from her grandfather of the Sect at the end of the novel, with the promise to control every aspect of its running, the reader must question what is to follow. Isis is in control and promises herself that she will only deal in one thing: 'Truth, I thought. *Truth*; there is no higher power. It is the ultimate name we give our Maker'.<sup>21</sup> Will Isis reform the Luskentyrians and lead them into an ideal life, or will she come to act as her grandfather and brother have, promoting self-interest over the common good? Considering Banks' obvious disdain for hierarchical organisations and religion in general it is unlikely that he holds out much hope for the Luskentyrians' future. There is little doubt that he believes Lord Acton's dictum that 'power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'.

This fascination with, and repulsion for, the corrupting nature of power perhaps explains Banks' most strikingly cross-gendered female character, 'the lieutenant' in *Song of Stone*. Abel and Morgan's castle is captured by a group of soldiers who are led by their female lieutenant. The first time we are introduced to her the impression she makes on Abel is clear:

Her plain face is dark, nearly swarthy, her eyes grey under black brows. Her attire is composed of many different types of uniforms; her stained, scuffed boots come from one army, her torn fatigues from another, her grimy, holed jacket from yet one more, and her crumpled cap – sporting wings as part of its insignia – appears to have originated in an air-force, but her gun (long and dark sickle-shaped magazines neatly taped back-to-back and upside down) is spotlessly clean and gleaming. She smiles at you and tips her cap briefly, then turns to me. The long gun rests easily on her hip, barrel threatening the sky. 'And you, sir?' she asks. Her voice possesses a roughness I find perversely pleasant, even as my skin crawls at a buried menace in

her words, a promissory threat. Did she suspect, did she foresee something even then?<sup>22</sup>

This erotic and sensual account hints at the violence of the past, and that yet to come. The character of the lieutenant is as far away from Isis Whit as it is possible to get, although there is the suspicion that she is another stereotypical male fantasy figure, and in that sense can be placed beside Isis: the dominatrix to sit alongside the virginal innocent. The 'romantic' triangle that is at the heart of *A Song of Stone* confronts the reader with a world that has become desensitised and as such only the most extreme behaviour seems to cause reaction. The rules of what may be called 'civilized society' have broken down. The lieutenant's men are known only by their nicknames: 'Airlock, Deathwish, Victim, Karma, Tootight, Kneecap, Verbal, Ghost, [...] Lovegod, Fender, Dropzone, Grunt, Broadleaf, Poppy, One-track, Doppie, Psycho'.<sup>23</sup> This has the effect of depersonalizing the soldiers, as if they are role-playing and these are their pseudonyms. It is only when one of them dies that emotion surfaces in the lieutenant: "I remembered Half-caste's name, his old name, civilian name, when I kissed him." [...] 'It was ...Well, it doesn't matter now.' 'Then you killed him'.<sup>24</sup> The idea of domination is never far away. The thought that this has become a land where rules, moral or otherwise, are decided by the most powerful individual rather than any set of 'laws' is reinforced when the lieutenant asks Abel: 'Do you believe in God?' 'No'.<sup>25</sup> This once again echoes Sartre's belief, as stated in the last chapter, that: 'Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist'.<sup>26</sup> The laws that govern man, and woman, in this godless and war-torn country, are decided by the person with most authority. In Abel's world this becomes the lieutenant.

Such a world is the background to the novel and to the relationships between the three main characters. One of the themes in *A Song of Stone* is that of domination. Abel's relationship with Morgan seems to be one where he is in charge. Indeed, Morgan is an almost mute object of desire, willing to be taken by her insistent brother. Morgan, although she only appears at the edges of the novel, is as fascinating a female depiction as the lieutenant. Throughout the novel she is the object of his love, but it is the lieutenant who becomes the object of his desire, and this relationship is one where he has no control. He begins to refer to her as 'our lieutenant', showing that he believes he and his sister are as one, that he has subsumed her and that he speaks, and thinks, for both of

them. When he discovers his sister and the lieutenant in a post-coital embrace Abel is not outraged or jealous, but envious: 'How I ache to join you both, to slide silently in and join your warmth, to be accepted by her as well as you'.<sup>27</sup> Abel appears to believe that not only all is fair in love and war, but that it is love, or at least pleasure, that makes living in this time of war bearable. Abel states his idea of love early on in the novel:

Love is common; nothing's more so, even hate (even now), and – like their mothers – everyone thinks theirs must be the very best. Oh, the fascination with love; ah, the startled clarity, the revelatory force of love, the pulsing certainty that is all, that it is perfect, that it makes us, that it completes us ... that it will last forever.<sup>28</sup>

This passage is one of the tenderest in Banks' writing and one of the few times he deals with the idea of love. The fact that this is to be found in his darkest, bleakest novel shows how Banks' optimism battles with his pessimism. *A Song of Stone*, more than any other of his novels, shows how Iain Banks views the relationship between the sexes. In a patriarchal society the strongest person in the society, even if it is a woman, is in control, and it will remain that way until someone stronger arrives, male or female.

At the beginning of chapter three of *The Wasp Factory* Frank says: 'My greatest enemies are Women and the Sea. These things I hate. Women because they are weak and stupid and live in the shadow of men and are nothing compared to them'.<sup>29</sup> This quote is worth noting when comparing Iain Banks and James Kelman and their representations of women and men. In Banks' case this is because his representations of women and men are, at first examination, similar. For Kelman, there appear to be defined social roles for men and women, roles which are more complex than they may first appear.

In Kelman's fiction it is the men who are often presented as being 'weak and stupid' and the women who offer the only chance of redemption or the promise of a better life. Kelman's fictional world is almost exclusively male. Where Banks' women are often at the centre of the action, Kelman's are usually kept in the wings, influencing events but not directly partaking in them. In *A Chancer* we are introduced to Tammas, who is described on the novel's back cover thus: 'He's a loner and a gambler. He can't hold down a job. He flits from the dog track to the casino to the races to his sister's and back again'.<sup>30</sup> Simon Kövesi reduces Tammas to two actions: 'he habitually gambles, and he habitually leaves'.<sup>31</sup> It appears that all of Kelman's male characters have developed

bad 'habits' of some form, be it gambling, drinking or 'leaving'. In this way Tammas is linked to Robert Hines, Sammy Samuels, Patrick Doyle and Jeremiah Brown. Tammas's gambling could be described as addictive, but it is the 'leaving' that is the most telling of his habits. It appears that when situations get awkward, or even when they threaten to do so, Tammas avoids them by removing himself from the scene. It could be said that Tammas is exerting his 'free will'. This would be more convincing if Tammas was not in thrall to gambling. How free can a man be when he is compelled to act in a certain way? But he chooses to gamble. As Kövesi points out: 'Gambling is an activity, not a passivity, and it is in that action that freedom pertains'.<sup>32</sup> Free will is not always about choosing for the best, it is choosing for oneself no matter what the results will be, and this is a conscious choice on Tammas' behalf, what objectively seems for the best. Tammas, on some level, will believe a win will set him 'free'. He is aware of the possible outcomes of his gambling, and also of the effect that it has on his relationships. Tammas remains separate from everyone else in *A Chancer*. He is in many ways an outsider who epitomises an existential hero. Tammas seems to suffer no guilt about his actions, and seems not to suffer as others in *A Chancer* do. All of the other characters have someone else on whom they rely or depend.

Iain Banks' male characters differ from James Kelman's in more than class, education or circumstance. His fiction relies on his characters' reacting to the situations they find themselves in, rather than their inaction to the situation. Even in *The Bridge*, where the main character of Alexander Lennox spends much of the novel in a coma, his subconscious is trying to actively return him to consciousness. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Banks' characters are moved to try and affect change. This is possible as Banks allows them a certain position in society that means that their voice can be heard. They often have jobs such as radio presenter, journalist, rock musician, classical musician, head of business and even godhead to a religious cult. These are all people that will be heard when they decide to speak. They have tasted success, indeed often this is at the centre of their problems, and this allows them a voice. Kelman's male characters also have a voice, but it is one that has little chance of being heard, or perhaps more pertinently, understood. It is this inability to be heard that causes the isolation and frustration of his protagonists. This is not about language alone, but about how the

individual is ostracised when he refuses to, or simply cannot, fit in. Whether it is Jeremiah Brown trying to claim his green card in *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*, Sammy Samuels' attempting to negotiate his way through a world that cares little for his plight in *How Late it Was, How Late*, or Tammas trying to discover where he belongs in *A Chancer*, they are all outsiders who have no wish to belong, at least not to the communities where they currently find themselves. Like Banks' characters there is a sense that if you do not conform to your society's ideals then you are condemned to a life of struggle.

Women in James Kelman's writing appear to offer comfort, hope and the promise of a better life. In an interview with Kirsty McNeill, Kelman answers her enquiry as to how he views the women in his fiction:

I find the relationships between men and women in the novels quite solid. They're structural in the sense that everything develops from them. I don't even think it's depressing or pessimistic that the male or female world should be like that. I do tend to think that's the way they are – but sometimes I think that's where the strength lies.<sup>33</sup>

Kelman's sexual relationships have fixed roles, and individuals fit into these roles when they enter into such associations. It is not the women who are stereotypical but the constructs of male/female unions against which Kelman argues, and one of the reasons for this is that when two people enter into such a partnership there are socially expected roles to which individuals believe they should conform. Kelman actually seems to use the women in his stories as literary devices, offering his main characters hope in their 'horrific' lives. Jeremiah Brown lives in the hope that his broken relationship is salvageable, giving him a conscious reason to stay in his miserable life as an alien in America. Similarly, Sammy Samuels stays in Glasgow until the hope of his girlfriend Helen returning to him has disappeared. Once that hope is gone he makes the decision to leave for the South.

In *A Chancer* Tammas has three significant relationships with women, with the promise of a fourth. He lives with his sister Margaret, has finished with his long-term girlfriend Betty, and starts a relationship with Vi, who, along with her young daughter Kirsty, offer the possibility of family for Tammas. In his book on Kelman, H. Gustav

Klaus makes the following observation: 'Striking up with the resourceful independent Vi brings out Tammas's most engaging characteristics. For the first time he is stirred out of his boredom. Suddenly we notice how vulnerable he is – a trait submerged under the rough and tumble camaraderie of his environment'.<sup>34</sup> The promise of a life with Vi and Kirsty offers Tammas a choice that his life otherwise seems to lack. Indeed Kelman appears to be saying that the only escape from Tammas's life of indifference and despair lies in the future of this relationship, and the realisation of this in turn makes Tammas vulnerable as he actually cares about what Vi thinks of him, something that has never occurred to him previously. When he discovers that Vi's friend Milly has labelled him 'a chancer'<sup>35</sup>, Tammas proves to be sensitive to this slight, more so than the reader, or indeed Vi, could have expected:

That's terrible. Naw kidding ye Vi...He shook his head again. She was still laughing. Naw, he said, hh, that's really terrible. I mean she doesn't even know me Christ, that's no fair. It's no. Vi was smiling. Naw but...It's just no fair.<sup>36</sup>

It can be argued that Tammas's apparent confidence, which is proven in this scene to be a front, occurs as he is a man in a world where the old certainties no longer exist. Tammas's generation would leave school without the promise of work to walk into. In his book *Writing Men*, Berthold Schoene-Harwood reflects on Scottish masculinity in particular:

Scottish masculinity occupies no fixed position of indisputable social hegemony but is caught up in continuous oscillation between the diametrically opposed sites of (post)colonial marginality on the one hand and patriarchal dominance on the other. This simultaneous inferiority and superiority make an uneasy blend, highlighting men's complicity with a system of oppression while, at the same time, necessitating their commitment to counterdiscursive resistance.<sup>37</sup>

This movement that Schoene-Harwood identifies is exemplified in many of Kelman's characters, but never more so than in Tammas. He lives in a man's world of the workplace (briefly), the pub, the casino and the card table. 1985, the year *A Chancer* was published, was a time of high unemployment, when blue collar industries such as mining, steel and shipbuilding were all in rapid decline and the working class stereotype of walking straight from the school gates into a job had disappeared. Schoene-Harwood talks of 'men's complicity with a system of oppression', echoing the ideas that Iain Banks

expresses in his novels. However, if the part of the system in which you are supposed to fit falls apart then emasculation occurs. The confusion that results from this situation is that men, who believe that their social role is to provide for 'their women', to protect them, become confused and feel socially impotent. The hope that women offer in James Kelman's novels is to be found in the idea that they hold the possibility of giving meaning to the lives of the male characters, meaning that they can no longer find elsewhere. With no job, no money and few prospects the male characters look to the female for meaning. But this will never satisfy them, and it is a reflection of this loss of self-worth that the majority of relationships that occur in Kelman's novels are either destroyed or doomed. The hope is a false one, but when it exists it is a powerful motivation for change. But this is not the full story. In one sense the hope that Kelman's men have for redemption through a relationship contributes to their inability to act. It is the hope that causes fear, and fear is at the heart of Kelman's novels.

This is never seen more clearly than in the relationship between Robert Hines and his wife Sandra in *The Busconductor Hines*. Our introduction to Sandra is as voyeur through the eyes of Robert as he watches her as she bathes. This opening scene immediately sets up their relationship, at least as Hines views it. Hines deals with the heavy lifting of the hot water and offers to rub her back, but this is not the erotic scene that it might have been. It is actually awkward and uncomfortable to read, and there is the feeling that these are two people who are not as comfortable with each other as they once were, or as they should be:

[...] she continued to undress, her back to him, as though she was watching television, but it was not on. Aside from her bra she took off all her clothes; she stepped into the bath, eventually sitting down with her knees raised almost to her chin. The water had risen to within an inch of the rim. Hines grinned. A moment later he said. Want me to do your back?

No.<sup>38</sup>

Sandra hides herself from her husband and rejects his advances. There is an embarrassment in evidence that we would not expect from someone who is married to, and has had a child with, the man in the room. What soon becomes clear is that Sandra's embarrassment is to do with her lack of perceived status, both as an individual and as a

family member, and this manifests itself physically. The situation that she finds herself in, bathing with such a lack of privacy (the room is so small that she has to close the curtains to be sure no one outside can see her), without running hot water, strongly hints at their living circumstances and, by extension, to their finances. It is not only Robert that she wants to reject, but the life that she now has with him. With very few words spoken the reader already has an understanding of the dynamics of the Hines family. As the book progresses this domestic tension is increased with unpaid bills and broken promises until Sandra reaches a breaking point: 'We can't carry on the way it is just now Rab, we can't'.<sup>39</sup> H. Gustav Klaus sets out the situation from Sandra's point of view:

For Sandra, however, a part time office-worker, brought up in comfortably middle-class Knightswood and looking back on a five-year marriage without marked social improvement, the accumulated strain proves too much. The upwardly mobile aspirations of her parents, carefully accentuated, have led her to expect more from life.<sup>40</sup>

The state that Sandra and Robert exist in remains more or less constant throughout the novel. There are separations and arguments, followed by reconciliations and the whole thing starts over again. Neither of them really moves forward. The last scene between the two in the novel is another one of functional domesticity that contains no warmth:

He went ben the front room to change clothes. Paul was asleep. Back in the kitchen he waited for the kettle of water to boil then made a pot of tea. A foreign film was beginning. Sandra had switched on the television for it. He passed her a cup of tea and sat down with his own.<sup>41</sup>

The driving force for the novel is contained in that opening scene. While there is also a sexual aspect to it, it is not as voyeuristic as it may seem. Robert is watching Sandra, and there is an underlying current of lust, but he is not confident or able to act on these feelings. It is through Hines' gaze that Kelman sets out the domestic situation, and the unspoken details that are at the heart of both characters' unease. This is effectively a questioning of gender roles. The fact that Sandra is viewed in this way reinforces sexual stereotypes. The idea that the male gaze objectifies women is demonstrated here. But that is not the only thing going on. As Carole Jones writes in *Disappearing Men: Gender Disorientation in Scottish Fiction 1979-1999*: 'Traditionally men as bearers of the gaze have used this power to dominate and objectify women'.<sup>42</sup> This idea can be traced back to

Simone De Beauvoir's study of woman *The Second Sex* which posited that the male subject's gaze objectifies women, taking possession of the image as they perceive it, creating a division between the Subject, who is male, and the Other, the female: 'For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other'.<sup>43</sup> De Beauvoir's ideas are particularly relevant as her theories of the relationship between the sexes arise from the same existentialist philosophy as that of Sartre. Kelman's female characters are necessarily viewed through the male gaze, and this does have the effect of producing a sense of voyeurism, and objectification, but rarely a will to dominate. There is an aspect of power in Robert and Sandra Hines' relationship, but their relationship is more complex than this. Kelman's fiction deals with the emasculation of the male rather than questions of the female, although these are not entirely separable. Robert Hines is acting out this dominating role when in fact he is in a diminished position. Robert is stuck with the idea of what it 'means to be a man' in his life, and there are further uncertainties because Sandra is from a middle-class background. The inference is that Sandra is the one who wishes to move up society's ladder. She is set to become the main breadwinner in the home as Robert finds that his job is under threat, as Sandra outlines: 'I was thinking if you went on the broo I could go full-time and you could find something else – anything; part-time, it wouldn't matter because we'd be able to save either way. It won't be for long. Once we had enough gathered we could leave, leave Glasgow I mean, just go away'.<sup>44</sup> Sandra is trying her best to make the most of their increasingly precarious situation, but it appears that her positivity has a detrimental effect on Robert. His simple reply to her plans speak volumes: 'Right enough'.<sup>45</sup>

Robert feels impotent at not being able to give Sandra what she wants, even if he sometimes does not entirely understand what that is, and this leads to his 'inaction'. Even the simplest of tasks are postponed, followed by promises of future change. When Sandra asks Robert to decorate, his answer indicates his state of mind. She tells him:

I think it'd be worth doing – even if we were only here another six months.  
Ah we'll be long gone by then.  
Will we?  
Course.

You never know though. Even just painting it. Anything to cover it up; it's awful. I'm surprised Paul doesn't get nightmares just from seeing it. Can you imagine having to lie there night after night!  
Hines nodded.<sup>46</sup>

The precarious nature of Hines' employment, and the knowledge that he has not been able to give Sandra the life she desires, has led to a life of deception and self-loathing. This returns to Sartre's theory of living in bad faith, i.e. the state an individual finds themselves in when they act in a way that is not true to their own selves. The apparent choice to move from their current home, either in the direction of Knightswood or Drumchapel, and, more poignantly, the inability to do either, is symbolic of Robert's life. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre expands on this theory with direct reference to the individual and the Other:

In the first place there is a relation of being. I am this being. I do not for an instant think of denying it; my shame is a confession. I shall be able later to use bad faith so as to hide it from myself, but bad faith is also a confession since it is an effort to flee the being of which I am.<sup>47</sup>

The idea of shame is central to Sartre's theories but can also be applied to Kelman's novels. Carole Jones, when talking about Kelman's men says: 'Male failure is further consolidated through a process of shaming, involving the recognition for these men that they are less than they thought they were'.<sup>48</sup> Kelman's males are distanced from the women they believe will make them complete because the women view them as having broken promises to them, and, when they reflect on these relationships, the men feel shame. They comment upon the females, and gaze upon them, but rarely actually interact with them. They can talk about women, just not to them. This again comments on the controlling and destructive nature of social structures that Kelman believes keep working class people in 'their place'. Just like his male characters, the female characters hope for a better life, and they believe that their men should help in the pursuit of this better life, when they do not, or more pertinently cannot, that is when they move away from the relationship. This may have the effect of reducing the women in Kelman's fiction to facilitators, the reason that his men feel the need for change, and this reduces their role to another stereotype. However as Kelman's fiction is predominantly about the masculine, perhaps he can be forgiven for 'gazing' on his female characters in a similar manner to

his male characters. The result is that his female characters are only two-dimensional when compared to their complex male counterparts.

In Kelman's interview that Michael Gardiner conducted in 2003 the following exchange took place on the subject of male and female perspectives in the novelist's fiction:

MG: As you've already said, you've written as, and about, many different kinds of males, from many perspectives. Have you ever thought of seriously adapting the voice of a woman?

JK: Well yeah, a couple of stories are from the women's perspectives; there's no reason at all, if I live for another fifty years I'll maybe extend my range.

MG: I was thinking, because the presentation of men-women relationships works well in stories like 'The Norwest Reaches', why not take it a step further and take up the female voice more?<sup>49</sup>

JK: I'd love to do that, I really would, you know. Also the thing about age groups, it would be great to write as certain age groups, or certain types of male, it'd be good to operate within different types of psyches, but part of this comes back to time. [...] But part of the problem of, you might say, the formal aspect of where my work has gone, is that transition from imparting the narrative of the inner psyche, the most natural place, and 99% of that time is in the male psyche, it is natural for me, because I am a male.<sup>50</sup>

Kelman successfully managed to write from the position of a different age group with *Kieron Smith, boy*, but as yet he has still to place a woman at the centre of one of his novels, and perhaps this is understandable. His fiction concentrates so intensely on the psychological state of his protagonists that he sees it as impossible, or near to it, to write from the point of view of a woman.

But it is not only relationships with the opposite sex that Kelman's protagonists have trouble creating or maintaining. Most of his main characters cannot manage sustained relationships with anyone. As Duncan Petrie notes: 'Kelman's protagonists remain isolated, rendering them incapable of forging and sustaining meaningful and nurturing relationships with other people as a bulwark against despair'.<sup>51</sup> But while his central characters are estranged from others in the novels, they desire that they wish to 'forge' relationships with women. Robert Hines, Tammias, Patrick Doyle, Sammy Samuels, Jeremiah Brown, and even young Kieron Smith see salvation as possible in women. This again raises the question of Kelman's characters being 'fixed' in their roles,

but perhaps not in the way that we would expect. The men are fixed by their inability to act and the women are fixed by the gaze of those men. This explains the desire for escape experienced by *all* Kelman's characters. The women, ultimately, want escape from these men, and the men, when they realise this, want escape from everything.

Kelman and Banks hold out hope for society by a greater inclusion and empowerment of the feminine, although their approaches are different. This is shown in their writing of both men and women. Their female characters, and the male characters' relationship to them, are beholden to social rules and expectations as set out by masculine society. However, whereas Banks' male characters strive to break these rules, or at least to subvert them, Kelman's are normally constrained and limited by them. Male and female roles are (mostly) clearly defined in terms of place and position which in itself causes division and mutual suspicion. For Robert Hines there is a division between his home life with Sandra and his working life at the Bus Station, and he plays different roles depending on his stage. For Kelman, the roles ascribed to men and women are another layer of control of the class system which tries to keep his characters in their place.

Both Kelman and Banks seem to promote the ideal of equality of the sexes, but believe that this can never happen in a patriarchal system. To say this is, perhaps, to suggest that despite their obvious masculinity and their emphasis on the experience of men, they are both, in this simplistic sense, feminist authors. Although their writing is aesthetically different, it is in their portrayals of the sexes that the real similarities in the beliefs that underpin their writing can be found. Both think that current Western capitalist societies are complicit in destroying individuals and communities, and change in the attitudes created by such economic designs can only occur when that form of economy is ended. Where the two writers differ is in their approaches to expressing this belief. Banks believes that in such a system everyone involved suffers, whereas Kelman is dealing primarily with male isolation. Kelman believes that change comes from the individual first, and that only through the individual can greater change be achieved in society. Banks believes that nothing can really change until the systems of government, finance and control are changed. These are different emphases, different priorities, but they are connected; they overlap. They indicate clearly the relation between (and interconnection

of) the individual and society, which is why these novelists, when considered together, offer a paradigm of Sartrean existentialism at work in modern Scottish fiction.

Notes

1. Ewan Morrison, 'Is Scottish Masculinity in Crisis?' article in *GQ Style* magazine, page 181.
2. This reference to 'the Other' relates to Simone De Beauvoir's specific use of the term which will be explained in further detail later in this chapter (note 43).
3. James Kelman, *Some Recent Attack: Essays, Cultural and Political*, pp 5-15, page 11.
4. Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (London: Macmillan London, 1984), page 236.
5. Ibid. page 240.
6. Ibid. page 240.
7. Alan MacGillivray, *The Wasp Factory, The Crow Road, Whit*, page 29.
8. Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, page 241.
9. Berthold Schoene-Harwood, *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp 103-116, page 109.
10. Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, page 242.
11. Ibid, page 244.
12. Berthold Schoene-Harwood, *Writing Men*, pp 103-116, page 110.
13. Ewan Morrison 'Is Scottish Masculinity in Crisis?' article *GQ Style* magazine, page 181.
14. Iain Banks, *Canal Dreams* (London: Macmillan London, 1989), page 58.
15. Iain Banks, *The Business* (London: Abacus, [1999] 2000), pp 22-30, page 23.
16. Ibid. page 94.
17. Ibid. page 387.
18. Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, page 50.
19. Alan MacGillivray, *The Wasp Factory, The Crow Road, Whit*, page 65.
20. Iain Banks, *Whit* (London: Abacus, 1997), page 276.
21. Ibid. page 455.
22. Iain Banks, *Song of Stone*, page 8.
23. Ibid. page 42.
24. Ibid. page 43.
25. Ibid. page 43.
26. Jean Paul Sartre *Existentialism and Humanism*, pp 23-56, page 34.
27. Iain Banks, *A Song of Stone*, page 218.
28. Ibid. page 38.
29. Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, page 50.
30. Quote from the cover of James Kelman's *A Chancer*.
31. Simon Kövesi, *James Kelman*, pp 65-87, page 65.
32. Ibid. page 77.
33. Interview with Kirsty McNeill in *Chapman* No.57, pp 1-9, page 5.
34. H Gustav Klaus, *James Kelman* (Tavistock, Devon, UK: Northcote House in association with the British Council, 2004), page 42.
35. James Kelman, *A Chancer* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1985), page 377.
36. Ibid. page 377.
37. Berthold Schoene-Harwood, *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man*, pp 103-116, page 106.
38. James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines* (Edinburgh: Polygon, [1984] 2007), page 2.
39. Ibid. page 125.
40. H. Gustav Klaus, *James Kelman*, page 34.
41. James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines*, page 278.
42. Carole Jones, *Disappearing Men: Gender Disorientation in Scottish Fiction 1979-1999* (Amsterdam – New York, Rodopi B.V., 2009), pp 32-61, page 53.

43. Simone De Beauvoir, Introduction to *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Pan Books, [1949] 1988), pp 13-29, page 16.
44. James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines*, page 210.
45. Ibid. page 210.
46. Ibid. page 78.
47. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp 221-302, page 261.
48. Carole Jones, *Disappearing Men: Gender Disorientation in Scottish Fiction 1979-1999*, pp 32-61, page 53.
49. Michael Gardiner, 'James Kelman: Interviewed by Michael Gardiner', *Scottish Studies Review* 5.1 pp 101-115, page 114.
50. Gardiner is refereeing to 'The Norwest Reaches', a short story from Kelman's 1988 short story collection *The Good Times*.
51. Duncan Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions: Film, Television and the Novel*, pp 39-63, page 46.

## Chapter 5: The Writer's Aesthetic

Apparently I am what is known as an Unreliable Narrator, though of course if you believe everything you're told you deserve whatever you get. (Iain Banks: *Transition* (2009))<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between reader and writer is one which both parties, to a greater or lesser degree, understand. In terms of the writer, they will be successful if they persuade the reader to alter their previously held points of view, or their values be they aesthetic or ethical, to move closer to that of the writer. The writer and the reader enter into this contract freely, and indeed there is an expectation, a desire on the part of the reader to be affected. This is the expectation that many writers seek to fulfil.

This active relationship is central to Jean Paul Sartre's views on literature and existentialism. As Gary Cox explains in his book *Sartre and Fiction*: 'What, in Sartre's view, sets literature apart from other, lesser, forms of writing, such as mere storytelling<sup>2</sup> for the purpose of entertainment, is the intention of the writer'.<sup>3</sup> The writer's aesthetic and intention are intrinsically linked, but the relationship between the two is hierarchical. The writer's intention is primary. Style, subject matter, language, setting, character, plot, time and place are, on the whole, necessary tools, but are servants to the writer's reason for writing. There is a tension between the intention and the aesthetic as there is the move from the subjective to the objective. The writer must take his singular view and present it in a manner that is not only understood by others, but appreciated by them:

we must bear in mind that the writer, like all other artists, aims at giving his reader a certain feeling that is customarily called aesthetic pleasure, and which I would very much rather call aesthetic joy, and that this feeling, when it appears, is a sign that the work is achieved.<sup>4</sup>

Sartre is making an unnecessary leap with regard to this last claim. His wish to talk of 'aesthetic joy' rather than use the term 'pleasure' is deliberately loaded with meaning as he wants to suggest that the joy that can be felt at reading a novel is equivalent to the joy he believes accompanies the realisation that the individual is 'free'. As he explains:

The recognition of freedom by itself is joy, but this structure of non-theitical consciousness implies another: since, in effect, reading is creation, my freedom does not only appear to itself as pure autonomy but as creative activity, that is, it is

not limited to giving itself its own law but perceives itself as being constitutive of the object.<sup>5</sup>

All individuals, if we accept Sartre's existentialism, have the capacity to realise that they are free, and experience the joy such a realisation brings. In essence they are reacting to a single truth. Sartre makes the claim that aesthetic joy is similarly essential:

It is on this level that the phenomenon (aesthetic joy) specifically is manifested, that is, a creation wherein the created object is given *as object* to its creator. It is the sole case in which the creator gets any enjoyment out of the object he creates. And the word enjoyment which is applied to the positional consciousness of the work read indicates sufficiently that we are in the presence of an essential structure of aesthetic joy.<sup>6</sup>

Sartre uses the non-specific term 'certain feeling' which appears to tacitly accept that the phenomenon of aesthetic joy cannot be objective. However, it is sufficient to say that if the writer provides aesthetic pleasure to even one reader then there is a level of success, but this pleasure or joy should facilitate the expression of the artist's intention. Aesthetic joy is not enough in itself and this is another example of the intrinsic link between the writer and reader.

A writer's aesthetic allows the individual writer to have a collective effect and therefore allows the writer's intention to be communicated persuasively. Sartre's aesthetic is clear. Art, and specifically literature, has little to do with any idea of beauty or art for itself, it is an undertaking that serves the purpose of promoting change and awareness in both writer and reader, an attitude and aesthetic which Banks and Kelman also share. All three write to illuminate, and often educate, their readers. They do not write directly about the world, but create a fiction so as to fire both their own, and their readers', imagination and it is in the imaginary that change can be envisaged. It is this definition of the writer's aesthetic that allows Sartre's theories of existentialism and literature to succeed in fulfilling their aims:

To succeed in writing literature – as Sartre always aspires to do, even, arguably, in his factual works – a writer must engage with contemporary issues. He must be committed to ask relevant questions and to challenge current norms in a way that raises the awareness of his readership and inspires them to action. Literature reveals and challenges aspects of the contemporary world.<sup>7</sup>

It is important here to look closely at what literature reveals and challenges. As said previously writing reveals how the individual writer views the world, and how he reacts to it. The challenge is two-fold: firstly to the reader to reappraise their own world view, and secondly to the writer who is challenged by the reader's reaction. The claim that literature necessarily deals with the contemporary world is contingently true as it is only the contemporary world that will directly be challenged and changed. That is not to say that the subject matter of literature should be limited to this world, only that the world commented upon necessarily is the one in which the writer writes, no matter when or where a novel is set:

A committed writer such as Sartre does not, for example, write about political corruption in Ancient Argos unless it is to comment on political corruption in his own time. Writing literature heightens the social, political, historical and philosophical awareness of the writer, while reading literature raises these same forms of awareness in the reader.<sup>8</sup>

Again we are reminded that the relationship between writer and reader is a dialogue, and one which benefits both. As this is the case, it is not only the writer's aesthetic we should consider, but also the aesthetic of the reader.

All art is a conscious expression of the artist's feelings, a process that involves an attempt by the artist to understand themselves and the world, and also inform and influence others to do likewise. In his treatise on aesthetics, *What is Art?* (1897), Tolstoy discusses the role of art, the artist and the audience:

Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced or is producing the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression.<sup>9</sup>

The reader is the writer's audience. Sartre's 1964 autobiography *Les Mots* is split into two distinct sections. Part one is called 'Reading' and part two 'Writing'. Sartre is keen to split his life into these two distinct stages, making the point that all writers are first readers, but not all readers become writers. The role of the writer then takes on greater significance as they understand the relationship between reader and writer from both sides, and that both writer and reader project meaning onto a text. It is a similar relationship to that of performer and spectator. Just as the performer is moved to perform

because they have at first been a spectator, so the writer is moved to write by things that they have read. The *literal* primacy of reading over writing is not intended here, as we have acknowledged that writing and reading are reciprocal acts. The point is that the imagination is at work in reading as it is in writing, and that in writing, the writer's imagination has been and is being informed by the whole history of the imagination's work in reading. This universal capacity to create is examined by Jacques Ranciere in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009): 'It is the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else'.<sup>10</sup> This capacity can remain latent, but the existence of the possibility to create allows the individual to be consciously aware that they are free, indeed that they must be free, as although they may be inspired by the same art, their reaction to it, the formation of their personal aesthetic, can only be individual. People who will never know one another, who remain 'anonymous' will react to the same artistic stimuli in a necessarily unique manner. Ranciere goes on:

It is in this power of associating and disassociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists – that is to say, the emancipation of each of us as a spectator. Being a spectator is not a passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we have seen and said, done and dreamed. There is no more a privileged form than there is a privileged starting point.<sup>11</sup>

Both spectator, or in this case reader, do not, at least wholly, wish to replicate what has inspired them, they want to express themselves as individuals, inspired by what they have experienced. This potential to create, which is in every individual, first comes from experiencing others. This means that this move from the individual to the universal is constant and inevitable. It also means that matters of taste, apparent aesthetic objective truths, can be both accepted and rejected with equal credence.

Complicated questions of inclusion and exclusion which arise can be explained by aesthetic values that are apparently shared or cause division. As with language, art can alienate as well as bring together. As set out at the beginning of this thesis, there are many reasons for comparing Iain Banks and James Kelman. What I have yet to examine is the reaction to their work in terms of comparative critical reception. Banks is a prolific and successful writer in both his mainstream fiction, and, as Iain M Banks, in his science fiction. Yet he has received little critical and academic consideration, certainly when

compared to James Kelman. Kelman, in turn, is regarded as critically important and there are many books and articles regarding his work to prove this. It appears that there is little if any link between critical appreciation and popular success. This is because the criteria for critical appreciation involve more than simple aesthetic valuation. In an interview with Sam Phipps for *The Herald* newspaper in 2006, Professor of English Literature at Aberdeen University, Janet Todd, seems to admit that there is a moral set of values at work in literary criticism as well as an artistic set. Phipps reports:

When it comes to contemporary Scottish writers, Todd rates Alasdair Gray very highly, though 'he can get overly political'. She also admires Ali Smith, Janice Galloway and others. Less so James Kelman. 'The trouble is, one ought to admire him,' she says, hinting at the pressures of academic orthodoxy.<sup>12</sup>

This is a telling quote. To claim a writer is 'overly political' suggests that the politics on display are not those of the reader. It is difficult to be certain without a clearer definition of what is meant by 'political', but Todd appears to be applying her political and moral values as well as her aesthetic ones in this statement. We should not expect her to do otherwise, but it would be interesting to compare the former to the latter. We can make a reasonable assumption from the above quote that Todd's politics are closer to those of Ali Smith and Janice Galloway rather than Kelman, and at least some of Gray's. But it is the second part of the quote that is the most telling. The admission that Todd is 'troubled' by the feeling that she 'ought' to admire Kelman suggests that she feels peer pressure as to what an individual's aesthetic values should be, that there is an apparent 'objective aesthetic value' which does not marry with her own. While at once stating the individual nature of her own tastes, she is suggesting that there are a greater number of peers with whom she disagrees. There is her subjective value which clashes with an apparent objective value that others share. This apparently (self-) contradictory statement is actually consistent as long as we accept that the apparent objective values are, in reality, shared individual values that differ from her own.

James Kelman recognises the important role that art plays in society: 'we have to be able to see art in the context of society as it exists, that it cannot be separated from society'.<sup>13</sup> But he also sees art as intrinsic to the individual, and sees no contradiction in this:

Let us take it as given that life without art is so unthinkable that it may as well be a contradiction in terms of what it is to be a human being. But when all is said and done, art is created by human beings, by people; and people live in societies of people. I'm not speaking as an art historian here but as a practicing artist, a writer of stories.<sup>14</sup>

It should be noted that Kelman is a writer who deliberately refers to himself as an artist: 'Literature is no different from other forms of art: when you want to create it and you have the tools and materials then you just get to work, you begin. The writing comes first, not the theory'.<sup>15</sup> It may seem from this quote that Kelman feels that writing is seen as an inferior art, and therefore he has to claim its parity. Rather, like Sartre he is making it clear that everyone has the capacity to create, and that any attempt to own or categorise literature by academics or critics is not only an attempt to justify their existence, but has the more important result of denying those who do not belong to a cultural elite an artistic voice. If this is the case then the relationship between writer and reader becomes a divisive one rather than the inclusive relationship that Sartre, and Kelman, believe it to be.

When addressing students in Dallas, Texas, Kelman concluded his talk with this statement which addresses the effect that art can have:

Freedom and truth, and integrity, and no hypocrisy. For some of you it might sound a strange way to think about music, stories, or the theatre, or poetry, painting, dance, the movies, other forms of art in that way. Most of you are used to thinking about art in a different way, as a form of entertainment, maybe high-class entertainment but only as entertainment all the same. But I don't see it that way. On its own I don't think 'entertainment' is powerful enough to describe what our relationship to it is, the way that we respond. When you think about it, how could it be? How could entertainment be enough to help you through these difficult times, to survive these horrible traumas? But that is what art does. Of course art can be entertainment, but it is so much more.<sup>16</sup>

When Kelman speaks of 'Freedom and truth, integrity and no hypocrisy' he is making a claim for what constitutes 'great' art. He knows, like Sartre, that by affecting the individual, art can affect society as a whole, and it is this possible change that makes art political: 'Good art is usually dissent; I want to be involved in creating good art'.<sup>17</sup> He is suggesting here that this relationship is a positive one, but he is also aware that it can be used in a negative way, that successful art can be used to suppress as well as enlighten.

Kelman himself has admitted: 'A good writer is not necessarily a good person'.<sup>18</sup> Kelman is stating that he believes there is a link between aesthetic value and moral value, even though the two are not analogous. His use of the word 'good' is vital. He is not using it in the same sense both times. His 'good artist' is technically good, able to successfully convey his meaning to his readers or audience. The second use of 'good' is in the moral sense, yet both appear similar in that they are purely subjective, even if they do not appear to be. Kelman seems to be suggesting that both the 'good artist' and the 'good person' will be recognisable to other people. This again suggests objectivity, but it is only the appearance of objectivity.

In an existential sense, since we cannot get past human subjectivity, we have to accept that one person's negative may reflect another's positive. Art can be seen as a battle ground of ideas and ideals. It is this that makes claims to 'high' and 'low' art contentious. When Gary Cox dismisses 'mere storytelling for entertainment'<sup>19</sup> as a lower form of art compared to the literary writer he is claiming the importance of one over the other. When Kelman makes reference to 'high class entertainment' or refers to 'the good artist', he also appears to be admitting that there is a hierarchical scale of art. He is referring to other people's criteria of what constitutes high art, the fallacy that places one form above another. Kelman's true feelings can be comprehended in this passage:

Writers are literary artists, they write stories, they tell tales. A storyteller is somebody who tells tales. It is important that they appreciate that stories cannot be true and they cannot be false: they are fictions; and you cannot get true fictions and you cannot get false fictions; they just exist; stories just exist. They are created by people; an artist is a person.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps it would be helpful to think of the 'successful artist' rather than any notion of a hierarchy of art. For, if the function of art is an exchange of ideas and ideals, then surely the method of transmitting these ideas can only be viewed in terms of how 'successful' the artist has been in conveying the ideas to their particular audience and not some abstract, objective, artistic merit. As Ranciere says: 'There is no more a privileged form than there is a privileged starting point'.<sup>21</sup> The desire that many critics have to rank and rate the art that they experience is understandable, and perhaps feeds a need for

individuals to believe that their values are shared by others, but it can create prejudice of the sort that Kelman claims exists in contemporary Britain and beyond.

Many writers simply will not care what critics have to say about their work, or at least will claim to. They will say that the knowledge they are being read is enough. Iain Banks, although willing to talk about his work, is wary of discussing it in anything other than the most superficial manner. Interviews with him are rare, and when they occur are often self-deprecating and any criticisms are responded to with humour rather than serious debate. Banks is the man who used the following review of *The Wasp Factory* to promote it:

As a piece of writing, *The Wasp Factory* soars to the level of mediocrity. Maybe the crassly explicit language, the obscenity of the plot, were thought to strike an agreeably avant-garde note. Perhaps it is all a joke, meant to fool literary London into respect for rubbish.<sup>22</sup>

This was not a unique critical stance, many of the reviews of his debut were equally as harsh, and it is typical of Banks' attitude to criticism that he used more negative reviews at the front of the novel than positive ones. His attitude appears to be that as long as people buy and read his novels the critics are irrelevant to his self-esteem, but they are useful contributors to a community of readers no matter the content of their reviews. Their outrage, scorn, snobbish disdain, may be quoted against them, not directly to oppose their points of view, but to allow their comments to redirect focus on to the novel itself. Kelman is unusual in that he attacks not only the critics, but the whole system that supports what he believes is an academic and economic apartheid, one that stops people from discovering their voice rather than helping them:

Good literature is nothing when it is not being dangerous in some way or another and those in positions of power will always be suspicious of anything that might affect their security. True literary art makes some folk uncomfortable. It can scare them. One method to cope with being scared is not to look, to turn away then kid on whatever it is does not exist.<sup>23</sup>

The literary establishment that Banks was accused of trying to fool is the same one that Kelman is pursuing. Whereas Banks is content to ignore the critics, Kelman wants to oppose them, or at least challenge them. This differing approach to the literary establishment is reflective of Banks' and Kelman's fiction and their aesthetic.

One of the differences between the two writers is the importance of voice. Kelman places as great an importance on *how* language is spoken, and written, as what is being said. This is the greatest difference in the two writers' aesthetics and perfectly shows how the writer's aesthetic and intentions are intrinsically linked. For Kelman his decision to focus on dialogue as much as narrative is vital to his reason for writing. He believes that the perceived system of literary production in the English-speaking world has to be challenged if social constructs are to be changed by art.

Again it is tempting to view Banks' aesthetic as artistically less sophisticated or intellectually demanding than Kelman's. As with Kelman, Banks writes in the style that serves his intention. Banks wants to express his thoughts and ideas as clearly as he can, and wants the reader to be in no doubt as to what these are. With his direct style of his writing, with its concentration on narrative, Banks is writing from within the system that Kelman is attacking, and it is debatable whose writing is more successful in the transmission of ideas. As discussed in chapter two Banks' targets are as political as Kelman's, but whereas Banks' writing is used to attack his targets, Kelman sees the method of writing itself as political. As Philip Tew notes in *The Contemporary British Novel*: 'His (Kelman's) work deliberately resists the dominant terms of the capitalist media and the culture industry, articulating a politicised critique of trends within literary modernism'.<sup>24</sup>

If Kelman is a controlled writer, considered and deliberate in his use of language, making every pause and beat count, then Banks can be considered a writer of extremes. His novels revel in the extremes of violence, sex, pleasure and pain. The admission that he includes personal 'rants' supports this idea as they are the expression of the anger that Banks feels at the time of writing, and the reactions of his characters can be viewed as how he wishes he could react to such anger. Banks has been described as a writer of fantasy, and this applies to all of his novels both sci-fi and mainstream. As discussed in previous chapters, Iain Banks uses his characters to fantasise about how he would like to react to the moral questions that they face. There is the feeling that while Banks, like Kelman, is using his writing to change reader's ideas, he is also involved in an almost therapeutic or cathartic act, a literary exorcism of his rage.

In his essay 'Mr Iain and Mr Iain (M)...(Banks)', Edmund O'Connor discusses how Banks' style of writing sets him apart from his contemporaries: 'Bank's writing challenges both 'Scottish writing' – and 'novel writing' itself'.<sup>25</sup> These are bold claims, but O'Connor goes on to explain further:

Proper novels favour interior dialogue over exterior action and contain complicated ideas you only 'get' after having 'absorbed' the book. They are *not* supposed to be written quickly, to feature physical action as mental as *The Crow Road's* exploding granny, and be great fun to read. And successful too. But Banks does all these: so his books aren't seen as 'real work'. They challenge too many preconceived ideas about what a novel 'should' be.<sup>26</sup>

O'Connor perhaps overstates Banks' 'difference' but the underlying theory is a valid one. Banks is not taken as seriously by critics and academics as many of his contemporaries, and much of this may be a result of his style. O'Connor's claim that Banks challenges the idea of 'what a novel should be' may be far-fetched, but the thinking behind such a claim is sound. Because Banks moves easily between genres he is hard to categorise. *The Wasp Factory* can be described as gothic horror, *Canal Dreams* is a political thriller, *Espedair Street* (1987) takes the form of a rock memoir, *The Crow Road* and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* are family sagas. This is without taking into account his other life as Iain M. Banks, writer of science fiction. Most of his novels differ considerably in terms of plot and character. He cannot be accused of being formulaic, at least in terms of genre, but everything he writes is distinctly by Iain Banks. It appears that Banks is often seen as being apart from any particular literary movement. Banks' fiction is both diverse and distinctive and that diversity appears to become a problem when it comes to contextualising him in the sense of inclusion in a Scottish literary canon. His inclusion in critical collections which discuss modern and contemporary Scottish literature mostly give him only briefest of mentions, if they do at all.

A writer's aesthetic is constantly evolving. There is simplicity of style in both Banks' and Kelman's respective debut novels *The Wasp Factory* and *The Busconductor Hines*. This is not to say that they are in any way lesser novels than what was to follow, indeed it can be argued that *The Wasp Factory* in particular benefits from the focus and structure that comes from simplicity of plot that Banks rarely revisited in his subsequent work. However, when compared to their most recent novels, *Transition* (2009) from

Banks and *Kieron Smith, boy* from Kelman, there is a progression involved in terms of style and content.

In terms of style Kelman's fiction has moved from being fairly straightforward in terms of use of language and narrative, to use dialect, phonetic spelling, the text on the page and even the space on the page in his later novels. In his novel *The Busconductor Hines* Kelman uses third person narrative in Standard English with Glaswegian spoken Scots for the dialogue. The first conversation between Hines and his wife Sandra sets the linguistic and stylistic tone for the novel:

Want me to do your back?  
No.  
You sure?  
I want to relax a minute.  
Will I turn the fire up a bit?  
She shook her head.  
Naw, seeing you're still wearing the bra and that I thought you might be cold.  
I'm fine.<sup>27</sup>

Short sentences are spoken in conversation. Characters speak recognisably Standard English with the odd word of Scots dialect used, but not any that would make the novel problematic to any reader unfamiliar with Scots. All the male voices have this same speech pattern:

There's no question of your chapping the table, said Ramsay.  
I mean God sake if  
The tables chapped and it stays chapped, said Hines.  
Quite right pardner. Reilly spoke while walking to join him:  
Me and you'll play the winners of this here tourney.  
Ach away and drive your fucking buses, muttered a voice from the back of the room.  
Aye, said somebody else, bloody scandal – no wonder you can never get a bloody hold of one when you want it. All off their work drunk so they are. The like of them shouldn't have a job in the first place.<sup>28</sup>

Even though the language is fairly straightforward, there are the beginnings of Kelman's desire to experiment with language, to confront expectations and the determination not to conform. This was a style he had developed in most of his earlier short stories, and he continued in this vein through *The Chancer* and *A Disaffection*. His style became more complex for *How Late it Was, How Late*. Opening with a mix of narrative voices,

Kelman is challenging his readers and also allowing them to identify with the confusion felt by narrator, Sammy Samuels, as he wakes up blind, disorientated and shoeless. The first dialogue of this novel is spoken when Sammy asks a soldier for money:

Heh mate need a pound. I don't like asking. Sammy shrugged. Being honest, it's cause I was on the bevy last night; fuck knows what happened except I've done the dough. I had my wages too and they're gone, some bastard's fucking robbed me I think. Ye don't know who's walking the streets these days. Know what I'm talking about, now-adays, ye're no safe walking the streets.<sup>29</sup>

The use of Scots is more pronounced, and the focus is on Sammy. The fact that he is getting no response from the soldiers he is talking to, heightens the sense of his difference and isolation. The above passage is a flashback to before the beating that causes him to lose his sight, but there is little difference to how he is treated before this event and after. Sammy is struggling to be heard by those in power, something he shares with all of Kelman's protagonists. He relies on the kindness of acquaintances and strangers, but the authority figures of the army, police and medical staff see him as a problem rather than someone in need of help.

*Kieron Smith, boy* has Kelman marrying two central concerns of his fiction, language and individual freedom, or rather its restraints. This novel is a return to his roots, and sees him using all the style and skill that had been developed over his career. Here the dialogue is reminiscent of his earlier novels, while deploying the more stylized technique of his later work:

O for G\*d sake. O for G\*d sake.  
Sorry dad.  
Ye are screeching the d\*\*m chair.  
I did not mean it.  
Oh no ye did not mean it.<sup>30</sup>

Every decision, from the spelling of a word to the way it will look on the page, is made for a reason. What we see by comparing the passages above is a writer finding new ways to make his intention clear.

As stated in the introduction, it is a fundamental belief in Sartre's philosophy of existentialism and literature that it is not enough for the reader to have his ideas changed

by the writer. For the writer to be successful he must also affect the reader's aesthetic values as well as their moral values. This, for James Kelman, is a process of purification. The relationship between the writer and the reader benefits both, and all. Kelman sets out this belief in his essay *Artists and Value*, which is based on a talk he gave to students at Glasgow School of Art in 1989, where he says:

So within the process of art more and more human beings start being discovered as 'particulars', witnessed as individuals, specific folk, persons; and within the process of society more and more human beings start making such discoveries themselves, and in the far-off future there won't be any racism, no sexism, no prejudice, no imperialism, no colonisation, no economic exploitation, and so on and so forth, a process of elimination.<sup>31</sup>

This utopian ideal highlights the power that Kelman believes is to be found in the artistic process and what it can achieve. Whether we can fully accept this conclusion or not, the link between art, the individual and wider society is clear. Behind Kelman's claim is the belief that it is by engagement with the artistic process that the 'process of society' will change, at least for Kelman, for the better. There are artistic and moral values at work here and they are inseparable. Such ideas echo Sartre:

Each painting, each book, is a recovery of the totality of being. Each of them presents this totality to the freedom of the spectator. For this is quite the final goal of art: to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it had its source in human freedom. But, since what the author creates takes on objective reality only in the eyes of the spectator, this recovery is consecrated by the ceremony of the spectacle – and particularly of reading.<sup>32</sup>

In this passage Sartre is not only showing the causal link between art and morality, but also that between writer and reader. This passage shows specifically how both writer and reader are required for 'objective reality' to be brought into existence. This 'objective reality' is then a state which is necessary for social and cultural interaction and which projects forward, from the first movement of writing, publication and first reading, into a future, towards a future readership, in an unconfined context. This may run the risk of infinitely deferring achievement and risks utopianism. But it is the specific work of art, the insistence Sartre and Kelman both give to the individual work and act that keeps their beliefs safe from these accusations. Banks, Kelman and Sartre implicitly, and sometimes

explicitly, posit human freedom, as 'the final goal' for this process in the way which Sartre defines it.

This thesis has concentrated on the similarities between James Kelman and Iain Banks, but it is also important to closely consider how differently they are perceived, particularly in their reception by readers and critics, a distinction that is important to make. As has been discussed earlier in this chapter there is a perception that Kelman is a more academically worthy writer than Banks and this belief appears to come down in part to a question of literary difficulty. Aesthetically Banks is the more traditional in his style and approach to writing, although he is often playful within that tradition, whereas Kelman's way of writing is of intrinsic importance to the writing itself. The essential difference appears to be that Banks is easier to read, and requires less critical explication, than Kelman. Yet as this thesis sets out to demonstrate, this is not necessarily true. However, the desire to use language in a way that opposes tradition leaves Kelman in a quandary in terms of his aesthetic and how his work is received: despite his rejection of them, Kelman, as with Banks, needs his critics and appraisers.

The driving force behind Kelman's fiction is to give voice to those who have none, whether this be disenfranchised Glaswegians at home and abroad, or political prisoners as can be found in his 2001 novel *Translated Accounts*. His fiction is written in the way that he believes best expresses the voice and culture of the people he is representing on the page. He believes that English standard prose form is central to keeping marginalised cultures disenfranchised and has sought to break free from those conventions. However, most readers may not be aware of the political and aesthetic decisions that lie behind Kelman's fiction when they first encounter his work. His style, particularly in the later novels *How Late it Was, How Late*, *Translated Accounts*, *You Have to be Careful In the Land of the Free* and even *Kieron Smith, boy*, is not what many readers have come to expect from their fiction. Of course this is for the very reasons that Kelman outlines, namely the prominence of Standard English in prose, especially in the most widely read commercial fiction, but it still causes Kelman some fundamental problems in terms of reputation and perception.

The central irony when it comes to Kelman's fiction is that it is not read as widely as he would wish, particularly by those whom he claims to be writing for (in both senses of the word). This is clearly problematic. Willy Maley outlines the situation when he quotes writer Ian Rankin with reference to Rankin's father. Rankin gave his father some Kelman to read and his reaction is telling: "But he said he couldn't read it because it wasn't in English. Now my dad is from the same working-class linguistic community that Kelman writes about. If he couldn't read it, but half of Hampstead was lapping it up, that to me was a huge failure and I decided then not to write phonetically".<sup>33</sup> Rankin is voicing the widely held opinion that Kelman is a literary darling to the very establishment that his fiction opposes. However, the reaction of some members of that establishment to Kelman's winning the Booker Prize proves that this is far too simplistic an idea and that Kelman's position as a novelist is almost uniquely complex.

Kelman has often stated his desire not only to write about, but also for, the community that Rankin says his father, and Kelman, are from. In his essay 'The Importance of Glasgow in My Work' he says 'The stories I wanted to write about would derive from my own background, my own socio-cultural experience. I wanted to write as of my own people, I wanted to write and remain a member of my community.'<sup>34</sup> This wish to remain part of a community is central to his aesthetic, but, with another layer of irony, his protagonists are mostly separated from this community, or wish to be. Robert Hines, Patrick Doyle, Tammas, Sammy Samuels, Jeremiah Brown and even Kieron Smith are all defined by how they do not fit in, for whatever reasons. They stand alone, and often leave, or at least want to. In that sense Kelman's fiction contradicts his critical prose.

In terms of understanding the fiction of James Kelman his non-fiction is instructive. The collections of his essays *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political* and *And the judges said...* explain the ideology that drives Kelman to write not only what he does but how he does. Kelman, like Sartre, talks of 'commitment' in terms of writing and art. He believes, in an apparent discussion of 'low' and 'high' art, that art has a duty to deal with 'serious' subjects in a mature way. In the title essay in *And the judges said...* he explains what he sees as the role of the artist:

But being an artist is not a licence to remain an adolescent for the rest of your life. Some of the mythology surrounding art gives us to understand that a special case is made for those who create poetry, music, paintings, stories, drama, etc. – whatever the media – that artists are allowed to remain children. But I'm an adult human being and if I want to express an opinion then I'll express it. I'm not going to enjoy it if my opinion is downgraded simply because I'm a story-teller or artist. It's quite remarkable the different ways whereby the State requires its artists to suck dummies, even when we're walking with the aid of zimmers; like kids we are to be seen and not heard.<sup>35</sup>

This idea that writers and artists should be serious and vocal is a point that he has continued to make over the years. His recent proclamations about the worth of 'genre' writers, which is discussed in greater detail below, would seem to come from a belief that what such practitioners write about does not challenge the State, but helps uphold it.<sup>4</sup> It is this reputation for conflict that has led to many seeing him as a writer who is intransigent in his beliefs as to what constitutes literature. But Kelman is aware that there is a danger that the 'rules' of revolutionary, anti-capitalist, literature are as authoritarian as the system that they oppose:

These ideologies also debase and dehumanise individual existence, forcing people into the 'scheme of things', not allowing them the freedom to live as whole beings. Unlike fantasy and romance 'committed' artists here reveal their commitment in their work – their particular form of socialism or whatever – as a function of its representation or approximation to 'the real world', ie naturalism, or 'social realism' so called. Stories, painting, music, drama and so on are duty-bound to concern 'the harsh reality', i.e. the effect of, and the struggle against, the capitalist system.<sup>36</sup>

Kelman's belief that writing, indeed all art, is a serious business cannot be doubted, but he stresses the need for individuality amongst the artists, even if they are seen to be, or believe themselves to be, part of a wider movement. For Kelman the successful writer is one who not only deals with the political, social and moral, but does so in a way that is not dictated absolutely by any set principles, even when the accompanying ideology is close to what the individual believes. This returns to Sartre's idea that literature recognises the freedom of the individual as primary, but also recognises the existence and freedom of others. It brings together the aesthetic and the moral and the notion of artistic responsibility.

In the introduction to the chapter on Jean Paul Sartre in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* it is claimed: 'Authors need the reader's freedom for their work to exist authentically. Without it, they will cease to function as authors and their work will fall into obscurity, unread. [...] The goal of art, Sartre asserts, is "to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it has its sources in human freedom".<sup>37</sup> This is the central idea in Sartre's theories that link aesthetics and morality. But aesthetic worth and moral worth are not the same. In Chapter One of Elisabeth Schellekens *Aesthetics and Morality* she sets out this problem: 'To philosophize about questions in Aesthetics or Morality is first and foremost to reflect and scrutinize value. Aesthetic and moral value, perhaps more than any other kinds of value, answer to our sense of what we consider to be of genuine importance in life, the kind of persons we want to become, and what aims we deem truly meaningful'.<sup>38</sup> Sartre recognises that these values, while different, are intrinsically linked. In 'Why Write?' he examines this link with reference to the writer and the reader:

Thus, the writer's universe will only reveal itself in all its depth to the examination, the admiration, and the indignation of the reader; and the generous love is a promise to maintain, and the generous indignation of the reader; and the generous love is a promise to maintain, and the generous indignation is a promise to change, and the admiration a promise to imitate; although literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative. For, since the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men.<sup>39</sup>

This aesthetic and moral link is what Kelman is alluding to when he talks about the maturity of the artist. He feels that it is a moral duty for the artist to take their craft seriously. It is not enough to simply set out to entertain; the writer must use their work to promote those feelings in the reader that Sartre suggests are necessary. It is this undertaking that exemplifies Kelman's work, but both Kelman and Sartre have to accept that a successful aesthetic will appeal to the reader on more than a moral level.

Kelman had a literary epiphany when he realised that he could write in a language that many readers would not consider 'English', and this was in no considerable part due

to discovering the work of the Realist writers from America, and from Europe the 'Existentialists' where he found characters whom he recognised: 'I found folk whom I regard as ordinary; here they were existing in stories, not as clichés, not as stereotypes. I was also discovering foreign language literature through translation; Russians, the Germans, the French and others. I found literary models'.<sup>40</sup> This claim that he had to look outside his own country to discover such inspiration is interesting in many ways. For one thing it suggests that Kelman saw himself as groundbreaking in terms of Scottish literature, at the forefront of liberating Scots writers and the community in which they write. Kelman has always stressed the importance of writing about and for his own community, but he could not find the inspiration from within that community required to change his view of what a writer can be. His discovery of these 'literary novels' had a liberating effect on his own work: 'Now I could create stories based on things I knew about; snooker halls and betting shops and pubs and DHSS offices and waiting in the queue at the Council Housing office; I could write stories about my friends and relations and neighbours and family and whatever I wanted. The whole world became available'.<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to note that this very freedom that Kelman discovered, to write about the people and places that he had encountered in his life, has been used by Duncan Petrie to claim that he is not writing about a realistic working-class at all:

Kelman's fictions ironically seem to confirm Margaret Thatcher's notorious claim that 'there is no such thing as society' – albeit in a profoundly negative sense. Consequently, Kelman's vision of working-class reality is distinguished not by retreat into existential dilemmas or creative fantasies, but rather by the endless and banal repetition of everyday events and acts: the rolling of cigarettes, making coffee, betting on horses and dogs, drinking in front of the television.<sup>42</sup>

Petrie is being simplistic in this view, for while these everyday events do appear in Kelman's fiction, as he openly admits, there *are* existential dilemmas. If his writing avoids 'creative fantasies', then this is unsurprising as Kelman has stated that he finds such writing 'childish' and constricting. But this literary liberation again flags up an apparent contradiction in the work of Kelman. His inspirations meant he could place his work in a global literary tradition of writing about the working classes and the oppressed, but he found that he was restricted by what he saw as 'censorship and suppression',<sup>43</sup> that

arose from the constraints of the use of Standard English language in Scotland's literature.

This claim is where Kelman and Ian Rankin's father, and those like him, are likely to have parted ways. Kelman admits it took an immersion in literature and art, some from home, but mostly from abroad, to realise that it was a legitimate and valid artistic practice to write in phonetic Scots, to represent people by the word on the page rather than simply what it said, or the legitimacy or validity endorsed by the English language and Scotland's educational provision, but most of those from Kelman and Rankin senior's community will not have undertaken a similar journey and therefore will not recognise such legitimacy or validity. In this sense Kelman's fiction is as much about education as art. Kelman may write about 'my own background, my own socio-cultural experience', but it is arguable that he writes for those who share that background and experience, for an audience who were set in their expectations of what constitutes literature. Kelman must have realised that his fiction would alienate the readership he desires. The very fight he has undertaken was never going to be an entirely successful one as he was a revolutionary writer apparently without a revolution.

This alienation of his desired audience could be said to have reached a new level with *Translated Accounts* which saw him set a novel outside of Glasgow for the first time. This meant not only changing the setting of previous novels, but the people and their language. As Banks did with *Song of Stone*, Kelman had to construct his own dystopian society in an attempt to show readers what the terrible results of State-led repression could be. *Translated Accounts* – like any work of art – is a warning to readers to be vigilant against complacency. In the preface to the novel what is about to unfold is rather ambiguously described:

These 'translated accounts' are by three, four or more individuals domiciled in an occupied territory or land where a form of martial law appears in operation. Narrations of incidents and events are included; also reports, letter fragments, states-of-mind and abstracts of interviews, some confessional. While all are 'first hand' they have been transcribed and/or translated into English, not always by persons native to the tongue.<sup>44</sup>

The reader is made aware that what they are about to read will not be presented in a familiar structure. Kelman is deliberately vague in the preface forcing the reader to engage with only the barest of information, and what is given has to be deciphered. But there are more layers of confusion promised:

In a very few cases translations have been modified by someone of a more senior office. The work was carried out prior to posting into the computing systems. If editorial control has been exercised evidence suggests inefficiency rather than design, whether wilful or otherwise. This is indicated by the retention of account Number 5 in the form it emerged from computative meditation. A disciplined arrangement of the accounts has been undertaken. Some arrived with title already in place; others had none and were so assigned. Chronology is important but not to an overriding extent; variable ordering motions are integral to the process of meditation that occurs within computing systems and other factors were taken into consideration.<sup>45</sup>

The purpose of this preface is to prepare the reader for what is to come. Transcription and translation written in English by translators whose mother tongue is not English, the use of computing systems; these are all barriers to understanding the novel. The preface almost acts as a warning to readers that Kelman is going to push them hard. Just as he believes writers should be 'committed' so he demands commitment from his readers, challenging them to work through the layers that stand in the way of understanding. This challenge continues as the book progresses. *Translated Accounts* is a collection of fifty-four 'accounts' by 'three, four or more' unnamed foreign prisoners. As such there is repetition of voices, but as they are unnamed it is difficult to individualise one from another. Language is being used to help remove the self from these incumbents; it is 'processed' just as they have been. The reader is disorientated by trying to decipher just what is being expressed. There are varying degrees of difficulty in following the text. Chapter Two, "the early woman died", is relatively straightforward: 'The woman discovered early on the road, I know who she was. When she was living I visited her. I would talk and she would lie back on her pillows and listen and not listen. My talk was stories, they followed patterns and within the pattern was space for dreams, her dreams my dreams, as of weaving, the story-web, spiders'.<sup>46</sup> The translation, while obviously not perfect, is relatively easy to understand, and many of the *Translated Accounts* are written this way.



horrific to read, made even more so as the realisation of what is being described can dawn upon readers unexpectedly. In 'I speak of these men' a disturbing scene is depicted:

I do not know about these men. I saw the younger man. I said that I did. Having regard for me, yes, I said it, having regard for me, he had it. He also would look. Of course. I know that he would. It was not rape. I am saying it. Yes, I have heard. Those terms, definitions. Perhaps if it was not rape, no, I am saying it, it was not. These were men. Not women, girls, none would be there, they would not be taken to there, it was men, some older. Not boys, these would not be taken. Men. Men masturbated. Yes men masturbated of course men masturbated. They masturbated. What should I say. Each other. I do not know. They lose interest, depart, go away, they go away. Who would recognise individuals, not recognise individuals.<sup>49</sup>

This unrestrained, almost animal, behaviour is a sign that any civilisation that there once was in this unnamed land has broken down. The last sentence is significant. It is not only immediate situation that is causing this mob behaviour. Through the structure of these accounts, and of the book itself, no one recognises individuals in these tales. 'I speak of men' concludes: 'I shall speak. I have said it. I can say it again, I shall say it again. What am I to say?'<sup>50</sup> These apparently opposing statements sum up the hopeless situation that these prisoners have found themselves. Able to tell their story they are unable to fully express the horrors that they have encountered. Language fails them.

Underlying these linguistic stylistics we find Kelman further investigating the power of language to liberate or to constrict. *Translated Accounts* is his attempt to align himself to a politically motivated group of writers who have not only written about post-colonial cultures, but done so in a linguistic style that challenged standard forms of prose. Kelman mentions the importance of discovering these authors in Paisley library in the late 1970s: 'In this "Ethnic" section I found Ayi Kwei Armah, Amos Tutuola, Alex La Guma, Okot p'Bitek and others. Although using the English language these writers were NOT working to assimilate their own cultural experience within standard prose form which is possible only through ultimate surrender. Surrender was the last thing on their mind'.<sup>51</sup> From such a statement it is clear that such writing fits in with a tradition that Kelman ideally sees his own writing belonging to as well. As he said in this speech when accepting the Booker Prize for *How Late it Was, How Late* in 1994:

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 -- toward decolonization and self-determination: it is a tradition that assumes two things: 1) The validity of indigenous culture; and 2) The right to defend 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, in particular imposed assimilation. Unfortunately, when people assert their right to cultural or linguistic freedom they are accused of being ungracious, parochial, insular, xenophobic, racist etc. 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 power to dismiss that right, but the authority lies in the power and I demand the right to resist it.<sup>52</sup>

*Translated Accounts* is arguably the novel that most explicitly places Kelman in such a tradition. He sees the role of the writer as necessary to engender change: 'Any marginalised culture is a culture under attack. Accept the marginalisation and act on it. Spread the information; share the experience; disseminate the knowledge. If the struggle will succeed it will be from the bottom up'.<sup>53</sup> Michael Gardiner looks at the novel and what influenced and inspired Kelman to write it:

Told in snatches of mutilated 'found' prose, the stage of *Translated Accounts* is pointedly non-specific, shifting from descriptions evoking the Niger Delta to scenes resembling the Middle East; the territory of the novel is a highly politicised non-place. Refusing the linguistic authority of an ethnic 'here' its language, as Susanne Hagemann says, 'belongs to nobody' and so any naturalising force of a core language becomes impossible [...] The book is also, though, noticeably aligned with the literature of Nigeria, a neocolonial regime using English as a lingua franca, challenged by the 'counter-anthropological', nativist tradition of fiction following [Chinua] Achebe.<sup>54</sup>

His earlier novels had become increasingly stylistically complex and *Translated Accounts* sees this progression continue. The novel concludes with account 54 'it is true': 'I cannot say about a beginning, or beginnings, if there is to be the cause of all, I do not see this. There are events, I speak of them, if I am to speak then it is these, if I may speak'.<sup>55</sup> It is the right to speak, and to be heard, that Kelman is concerned with.

Kelman views on high and low art are interesting to consider in closer detail. In 'The Importance of Glasgow in My Work' he says: 'There is absolutely nothing I would want to say to someone like Jeffrey Archer or Harold Robbins or Stephen King or Frederick Forsythe. I don't regard what they do as being in any way similar to what

writers of the kind alluded to earlier are engaged in'.<sup>56</sup> He goes on to claim that: 'This has nothing to do with "high brow" literature versus "low brow" literature,'<sup>57</sup> but it is difficult to see it as anything else. Kelman's distinction is one which echoes Sartre's ideas on what constitutes successful literature. It is all about whether the writer is 'committed' or not. Kelman goes on to explain the distinction as he sees it: 'It's just that I've nothing to say to writers who aren't committed. There are no areas at any intellectual level I want to enter into with them. It makes no difference whether these writers are from Glasgow or Johannesburg'.<sup>58</sup> Again this Kelman places himself in a 'global' tradition of 'committed' writers rather than purely a national one.

Kelman goes on to apparently lessen this hard-line attitude towards other writers, and in doing so adds another criterion for what constitutes a successful writer in his eyes, that of 'seriousness':

Yet there remain a few I could find it possible to communicate with, in certain social settings, as long as it didn't happen too often: members of what I'll describe as the literary establishment. That's because they at least take the artform seriously, they approach it in an honest way. But when commitment, or what I mean by the term, looms into view – as it always does sooner or later – then the conversation grinds to a halt, or ends in social disarray. In that case I have much more to talk about with folk who aren't writers and artists but whose commitment leads them to live their lives in ways I approve.<sup>59</sup>

Unfortunately Kelman does not go on to explain just what he means by the term commitment in this instance, although it appears he is using it at first in a specific artistic sense when referring to other writers, in a similar way to Sartre. He then talks about preferring the company of 'folk who aren't writers and artists' who he describes as being 'committed', people who live their lives in a manner that Kelman approves of. Perhaps he means 'committed' in the same sense, and that life and art cannot be separated. Either way it is tempting to suggest that Kelman's aesthetic can be reduced to what he approves of.

But it is this commitment, and the craft involved in his writing, which makes Kelman an important writer. He is an author whose work may be read by (relatively) few, at least when compared to Iain Banks, but without his work the next generation of writers would not be as they are. Kelman may not have reached as many of his intended

readership as he would have desired, but his influence on those writers who followed should not be ignored, and they are reaching the wider readership in the later generation of Scots that Kelman could not with his own. It is this influence that makes Kelman the culturally significant writer that he is.

As Scott Hames says in his Introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, the writer is '[...] perhaps the major influence on the younger generation of writers (Irvine Welsh, Janice Galloway, Alan Warner, A.L. Kennedy, Duncan Mclean, Alan Bissett, for example) who have made recent Scottish writing so compelling - and easy to describe, complacently, as a "new renaissance" reflecting national confidence'.<sup>60</sup> Hames goes on to claim that: 'Kelman is allergic to "national confidence"; his success at home makes it all the more difficult to locate him there'.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this contradiction, the Scottish icon who is against any idea of nationalism, defines the man and his work.

Having looked at what James Kelman considers a serious and committed writer it is worthwhile considering how Iain Banks fits into this picture. The desire for serious and committed literature that Kelman eschews seems to have little room for fantasy, and yet Banks demonstrates that the two are not mutually exclusive.

*The Bridge* is the novel where Banks most successfully marries fantasy and realism. It is often compared to Alasdair Gray's *Lanark: A Books in Four Parts* in its structure and style, and the 'double-lives' of their respective protagonists; Alexander Lennox/John Orr and Duncan Thaw/Lanark. It is an over-simplification to say both novels are split in two, but they do follow two separate primary stories that are intrinsically linked. There are different narratives running through both novels, and they ask the reader to make the connections between the two. The 'fantasy' story of Lennox/Orr is 'contained' within the realist narrative of *The Bridge* but the reader deciphers that realist narrative through the fantasy, and the fantasy itself is compelling. The fantasy/realist split in *Lanark* seems to be more absolute: neither aspect 'contains' the other, but they are bound together in intimate reciprocal forms and characters. Our understanding needs both aspects, and the novel thereby demonstrates the necessary value of the work of the imagination.

Another comparison is that the two books are considered to be at least partly autobiographical. *The Bridge* of the title is obviously based on the Forth Road Bridge that

dominated the skyline of Banks' childhood days in Queensferry, and many of Alexander Lennox's interests, such as rock music, whisky and fast cars, are shared by Banks. Thom Nairn quotes Banks as saying: 'I don't think *The Bridge* would be the way it is at all if it wasn't for *Lanark*'.<sup>62</sup> This comparison takes on a greater relevance when we apply Kelman's definition of 'serious' and committed writing. It would seem to preclude fantasy as something that is 'immature', and writers should be 'duty-bound to concern 'the harsh reality, i.e. the effect of, and the struggle against, the capitalist system'. Kelman is a public supporter of the work of Alasdair Gray, yet, at least in terms of *Lanark* there seem to be some contradiction.

Actually, both *Lanark* and *The Bridge* have a third narrative level. In *Lanark* there are the interventions of 'the narrator', and in Banks' novel there are the 'Barbarian' sections, and these are also relevant when considered alongside the aesthetic of James Kelman, particularly with reference to the use of language. Banks normally sticks to Standard English in his novels, with the odd exception of a Scottish phrase here and there. The Barbarian talks in a thick Scots dialect: 'It iz this majishin that geez this thing, cald it a familiar soay did an it sits on ma showder and gose jibber fukin jibber oll bludy day it gose. I cany stand the dam think but am stuk with it I suppose an it wi me to, cumty think ov it'.<sup>63</sup> These sections are deliberately comical, and it is interesting to ask what purpose they serve. Is Banks making a critical commentary on how Scotland is viewed in popular culture, and in doing so is he suggesting that the use of such language in fiction is a hindrance to Scottish literature being taken seriously? But, like the novel, the barbarian only makes sense when considered alongside his 'other half'. His 'familyar', which sits on his shoulder, speaks in RP English, is clearly educated, and is something of an intellectual: '[...] the tower signifies retreat, the limitation of contact with the real world; philosophical introspection. In short, nothing to do with the literally infantile preoccupation with phallic symbolism I mentioned earlier. Indeed, except within the most morally constipated societies, when people dream about sex, they dream about sex'.<sup>64</sup> This relationship is a fairly straightforward commentary on Scotland's relationship with England, and how one-sided Banks sees that relationship, but these are telling sections. Banks is using these fantastical scenes to make political and social commentary. This is light-hearted in its execution but absolutely serious in the points it is making, and this

applies to most of Banks' fiction. Like Alasdair Gray, Banks' use of 'fantasy', as with his use of 'realism', is always serious at its core. This may also apply to some extent to his science fiction but an important distinction must be made. The science fiction is written explicitly for a genre readership. This readership is not exclusive and indeed overlaps with that of his mainstream novels. But it is different and the intention, address and function of the writing (while equally not mutually exclusive) is different. Fantasy is employed in the mainstream novels but never generically throughout them.

In terms of Alexander Lennox's psyche it appears the barbarian represents a suppressed 'masculinity', and these sections echo the more violent and extreme sections that often appear in Banks' fiction. They are indicative of the 'games' that Banks loves playing, and perhaps it is the wish to play games that separates Kelman and Banks in terms of their aesthetic approaches. Kelman refuses to play games as he sees them as 'immature', whereas Banks enjoys playing games, but uses these games to convey political and moral ideology that is every bit as serious as Kelman's. These two apparently opposing approaches are closer than either writer would perhaps believe, or would want to admit to.

*The Bridge* is Banks' greatest puzzle. As Alan MacGillivray discusses: 'It is Banks's third novel, *The Bridge*, which carries the textual game-playing to its greatest heights so far'.<sup>65</sup> There are jumps between worlds, diagrams, pages left almost blank, and quizzes for readers to solve: 'Banks's main game with the reader is to keep Lennox's name concealed and only revealed in two textual clues, requiring for their unravelling a knowledge of both modern Russian history and contemporary rock music. *Bridge* is the name of the game, but also the game of the name'.<sup>66</sup> Banks is asking for work from his readers as Kelman does from his. *The Bridge*, as with many of Banks' novels, follows in a Scottish literary tradition, as Cairns Craig explains:

Works such as James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) have come to be taken as representative expressions of a theme which is repeated in Gray's *Lanark*, whose central character lives two lives, one as the failed artist Duncan Thaw in the Glasgow of the 1950s and 1960s, and one as Lanark, a character trapped in a fantasy world which, through the forms of a fairy tale, repeats in concealed form Thaw's life in the real Glasgow. Modern concern with the double may derive not only from such traditions of Scottish writing but from the work of influential

Scottish psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, whose book *The Divided Self* (1957) analyzes schizophrenia in relation to a conception of the self as developed in the work of the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray.<sup>67</sup>

Perhaps there is a problem with perception that stops Banks from being considered in a historical 'Scottish' literary tradition. There is a sense of playfulness, of fun, in his writing that seems to suggest that the fiction itself is of lesser critical worth than Kelman.

Indeed, it is Banks' very diversity that apparently causes him problems when it comes to be taken seriously by literary critics. Edmund O'Connor sets out these, and other, hurdles that Banks faces to be taken seriously as a writer: 'Too Scottish for London, not Scottish enough for Scotland, too violent by half and too obsessed by SF (science fiction) for his own good – these are some things which stop Banks and his work from being taken seriously'.<sup>68</sup> These are relevant points, but it is not up Banks to change to become accepted, it is for critics to widen the scope of what is 'serious' fiction, or at least fiction that can be taken seriously. As I hope I have proved in this thesis Banks needs and benefits from critical consideration and literary comparison and contextualisation.

It is interesting, as a comparison, to note James Kelman's views on genre fiction as set out at the 2009 Edinburgh International Book Festival. In answer to being asked how political today's generation of Scottish writers are he makes clear what he thinks the Scottish literary establishment think of him and those who they considers his peers:

'For me,' he said, 'it's always been an indication of that Anglo-centric nature of what's at the heart of a writer like Tom Leonard for example, and how they praise the mediocre, how so much praise is given to writers of genre fiction in Scotland. [...] if the Nobel Prize came from Scotland they would give it to a writer of f\*\*\*ing detective fiction or else some kind of child writer or something that was not even news when Enid Blyton was writing *The Faraway Tree* because she was writing about some upper middle class magician or some f\*\*\*ing crap'.<sup>69</sup>

Such attacks are consistent with his earlier statement that he would have nothing to say to writers such as Archer, Robbins, King and Forsythe. Although his recent targets seem fairly obviously fellow Scottish writers J.K. Rowling and Ian Rankin his accusations could have easily included Iain Banks. So if we believe Edmund O'Connor, Banks will never be taken seriously critically, and if we believe Kelman, one of Scotland's most

celebrated and discussed writers, that Kelman is not taken seriously then it would appear that literary criticism in Scotland is in a perilous state. But Kelman is mistaken with these claims, and is actually highlighting the opposite point. He is confusing critical acclaim with financial success or at least backing, and the two are rarely synonymous. The writers he attacks may be promoted at his expense, but if it came to putting respective literary medals on the table then he would win every time. Such a debate is not a particularly useful one as it creates division between ‘literary’ and ‘genre’ fiction, which make claims to high and low art without consideration of the actual text and what it sets out to achieve. As Willy Maley points out with reference to the furore: ‘What’s clear amid the mudslinging is that the controversy threatens to deny the connections between Scottish writers in favour of artistic differences – between literary and genre fiction – that are also differences of readership loyalties and royalties’.<sup>70</sup>

But perhaps Kelman’s point has been widely misunderstood, or he has picked unworthy targets. In a recent online article for Christie Books, ‘From a Room in Glasgow’, Kelman returned to a popular theme about how literature is treated in Scotland: ‘Scottish children grow up in ignorance of our own culture and traditions. Our literature is a “specialist area” even in Scotland. Those who control the arts bureaucracy for the most part share that ignorance. Whether they are born in Scotland or not is irrelevant. They are fully assimilated to the English perspective and cannot evaluate art from a Scottish aesthetic’.<sup>71</sup> This statement seems to bring us back to the thorny question of ‘validity’, and asks how it is possible to have a unifying ‘Scottish aesthetic’, but it is possible that the point Kelman is making is about the selling of literature rather than any attack on individual writers. Admittedly if this is the case he makes it in the most confusing manner, but when considered alongside his previous thoughts on the promotion or otherwise of Scottish culture it makes more sense. In the same article he makes the following point: ‘One of the last century’s most important Scottish poets was Norman MacCaig. For his centenary it was advocated that the comedian Billy Connolly presented the programme. The establishment cannot distinguish between our artists and cannot recognise artistic merit. They do recognise that one Scottish man is more widely celebrated than another; the substance of celebration is not important’.<sup>72</sup> Taken alongside the Edinburgh comments it is possible that what Kelman is actually railing against is the

power of 'celebrity' culture, and that this has now infiltrated the literary world, and in terms of Scottish literature there are few bigger 'celebrities' than Rankin and Rowling. It is possible it is not about the writers, but about the way they are promoted, sold and received by the general reading public. What was perceived in the press as a rant driven by sour grapes was more likely to have been another call for 'political' literature to be given an equal footing, or even a higher footing, than it currently has, an appeal to his potential audience that there is a wider selection of fiction available than they may realise. Perhaps it was simply to remind people outside of literary circles that he is still relevant. Whatever the case, it appears that Kelman believes that he must wait for his audience to catch up with him, rather than his changing to find an audience, and this position is largely admirable, but ignores the reality of 'selling books', and his views make an interesting comparison to recent developments in the marketing of Iain Banks' fiction.

The simple decision, made in the 1980s, for Banks to split his fiction into Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks, was as much a commercial decision as it was an artistic one. His 2009 mainstream novel *Transition* saw the perhaps inevitable clash of the 'two Iains' as it has been sold as one of his mainstream books, but is a novel as fantastical as any of his science fiction. He has had similar crossovers of styles previously with 1985's *Walking with Glass* and *The Bridge*, but *Transition* blurred the realism and science fiction boundaries more than any previous novel. It is set ostensibly in our world: 'between the dismantling of the Wall and the fall of the Twin Towers, frozen in the shadow of suicide terrorism and global financial collapse...'.<sup>73</sup> But the setting is really where reality stops and fantasy takes over.

*Transition* is an important novel for Banks as it marks a shift in how he is being marketed, and perceived. In an interview with Ken Livingstone for the *New Statesman* magazine the confusion that has resulted is discussed:

KL: Although your new novel, *Transition*, isn't science fiction - it hasn't got your middle initial - it's something about shifting between time zones.

IB: It was published as science fiction in America. It's not proper time travel; it's using the many-world theory, the multiverse, that kind of thing.<sup>74</sup>

It is interesting in terms of the stated complaints of Kelman, and the claims of Edmund O'Connor, that *Transition* was sold in the USA as an Iain M. Banks' novel, and that Livingstone did not decide for himself whether it was science fiction or not, but simply went by the signifier that is the lack of 'M' on the cover. Banks' answer suggests that he is uncomfortable relinquishing his dual identity, looking to justify this decision in a manner that will seem overly technical even to the exacting standards of the science fiction fan. Perhaps Banks' science fiction sells better than his mainstream work in America and his publishers chose to sell him to that market under the more recognisable, or profitable, name. *Transition* was also released as an abridged podcast, which could be downloaded in twenty-four parts, and a talking book. Banks is demonstrating the constant struggle between artistic integrity and adherence to a personal aesthetic, and the need to adapt to sell books to be able to continue writing them. It is a Catch-22.

It is not surprising that a writer such as Banks would embrace the most up to date ways of selling his work, but it would be a mistake to think that this is driving his writing. *Transition* has a 'serious' message behind its use of 'many world theory'. In an interview with Anna Burnside Banks explains his motives:

I think what comes out of *Transition* is that torture should always be absolutely illegal. Murder is illegal; there is a commandment that says you shalt not kill, yet we still have army chaplains. There are lots of loopholes but you should only torture if you're so convinced you're doing the right thing that you are prepared to suffer the consequences and the consequences should be absolute.<sup>75</sup>

It is clear that Banks wants to get his fiction to be read and subsequently get his message across, and to that extent is complicit in selling art in the modern world.

It is not unimaginable that this is the sort of marketing strategy that would enrage James Kelman, but then the rebranding of his own novels and essay collections, as publishers Polygon did in 2008, means that as a published writer he too is complicit in this economy. As Isaac Davies says over the titles of the 1979 Woody Allen film *Manhattan* when he fears the opening to his novel is too preachy: 'I mean, you know, let's face it. We want to sell some books here'.<sup>76</sup> It may appear a trite point, but it is an important one to consider and one which cannot be separated from the 'art' of the writer. Committed writing, according to Kelman, may necessarily oppose the capitalist system,

but the realities of working as a writer today is that to survive you may just have to embrace that which you wish to destroy.

It could be argued that James Kelman's last novel *Kieron Smith, boy*, is a return to what his readership expect from him; fiction based in working-class Glasgow which is set pre-1990 Glasgow. In fact it is set in 1950s, but I use the former date with good reason. This was Glasgow's Year of Culture, a year which has widely been praised as being a success in terms of the rebranding of the city, promoting tourism and enhancing a sense of pride in the city. Kelman sees this view as one that has harmed his city and its culture:

This was a classic example of the exploitation of art and artists. The City of Culture Year remains a taboo subject for serious study. One is not supposed to mention it seriously at all, just recall it hazily but with affection, as that strange time our ayn wee city of Glasgow made it on to the international map. Anything is justified because of that. Look at the publicity the city got. It was only a few years ago yet already it's a legend, a mythical kind of thing, mythical in the sense that it is not open to analysis, not available for critical examination, not then and not now. If you attempt such a thing you get called a boring spoilsport.<sup>77</sup>

Once again Kelman makes the distinction between mature and immature responses: 'Once again we were children, usually spoiled brats. Those of us who refused to stand up and sing our party piece were sent to bed without a chocolate biscuit.'<sup>78</sup>, but it makes little sense to replace one apparent conformity with another, and what Kelman is offering is a different conformity.

Modern Scotland is a foreign country for James Kelman, he still places his fiction in a Glasgow which is one of sawdust floored pubs, steel-grilled bookmakers, tenement living, even though the first two are in decline in the parts of the city where his characters live, and the third are either knocked down or resold as private flats. The liberation that Kelman felt when he realised that he could write about such places and their people has become restricting. The post Garden Festival and City of Culture Glasgow does not intrude on the lives of his protagonists which seems strange given proclamations such as the above. You would think that it would be better to deal with the changes that occurred as a result head on rather than pretend they never happened. What this avoidance also means is that Kelman is accused of not dealing directly with post-devolution Scotland in his fiction. As Aaron Kelly describes:

Notably, Kelman's post-devolution fiction is set outwith Scotland: the fragmentary reports of *Translated Accounts* (2001) seep through the confines of an undesignated regime that is possibly Turkey or somewhere in Eastern Europe, while *You Have to Be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004) addresses the experience of the Scottish migrant Jeremiah Brown in the United States.<sup>79</sup>

These novels are about displacement and disorientation, and incorporate language that is not Scots but is not Standard English either. They reject the national for the international, suggesting that national identities count for little in a globalised capitalist world, indeed they are used as distractions to the social and cultural problems that arise from such a system of power. Kelly goes on to say: 'Kelman's recent fiction intensifies his stringent confrontation with power in all its forms, even as those forms seek simultaneously to overwhelm us and withdraw from our grasp and understanding completely'.<sup>80</sup> There is no doubt that there is something to be gained from viewing these novels in this reflective way, but I would suggest that Kelman does not feel comfortable writing about modern Scotland, at least in his fiction, and with *Kieron Smith, boy* he produced a novel that was a return to home, but was out of time. It won the Saltire and SAC prizes for best book of 2009. Ironically, yet triumphantly, it is a return to his earliest sources of experience, and it is 'said' by 'the judges' to be a major literary achievement.

With the notable exception of *Translated Accounts*, Kelman's protagonists are distinctly individual, and his views of what constitutes a committed writer are similarly so. For all Kelman's stated belief that he is 'representing' his culture, actually he is representing his individual view of the world, aesthetically and morally. This accusation of aesthetic relativism could be applied to most writers, but Kelman's claim for the 'validity' of his culture, as made in his Booker speech, is a social assertion, for if he claims that the culture he 'represents' is 'valid', then this is in response to the assertion or belief that it is somehow 'invalid'. Kelman's experience of Glasgow's Year of Culture is 'valid' and yet many people had very different experiences of that year that are just as valid. Kelman may argue that the 'culture' in question is one which is emphatically materialistic, commercial, middle-class and driven by the bottom line that is the profit margin and therefore repressive towards others. But the result is that his definition of Glaswegian working-class culture means that many working-class Glaswegians, many of

whom cross the cultural boundaries that Kelman recognises, are transgressive of such definitions. Kelman's reluctance to represent Glasgow post 1990 means that in terms of realism his version of the city is historical. If this means that it is as much of a fantasy as any of Banks' alternative universes, the evidence then is clear, that the work of the imagination, the exploration through fantasy or through history, of worlds that may have been, or may yet be, in language arising from local speech, as opposed to Standard English, is emphatically endorsed by both Kelman and Banks. This is an 'aesthetic' which appropriates both 'realism' and 'fantasy' in the writer's exploration of the individual and society, and this, too, is an extension of the Sartrean paradigm of the existential writer.

Notes

1. Iain Banks, *Transition* (London: Little Brown and Company, 2009), Prologue, page 1.
2. This term 'mere storytelling' is Cox's own, and it is one to discuss. My argument is that even 'mere storytellers' or entertainers are trying to inform and influence their audience or readership. This appears to be making claims to high and low art, claims which at the very least are contentious.
3. Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction*, pp 1-10, page 6.
4. Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, pp 27-49, page 43.
5. Ibid. page 43.
6. Ibid. page 43.
7. Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction*, pp 1-10, page 6.
8. Ibid. page 6.
9. Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), page 120.
10. Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), pp 1-23, page 17.
11. Ibid. page 17.
12. Interview with Janet Todd, 'The age of the page' for *The Herald*, 11/3/06.
13. James Kelman, *And the judges said...*, pp 37-55, page 52
14. Ibid. page 52.
15. Ibid. page 67.
16. James Kelman, *And the judges said...*, pp 37-55, page 43.
17. Interview with Kirsty McNeill, *Chapman* 57, pp 1-9, page 3.
18. James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political*, pp 5-15, page 7.
19. See note 2.
20. James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political* pp 5-15, page 7.
21. Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, pp 1-23, page 17.
22. Review of *The Wasp Factory* from *The Times* used by Iain Banks in the paperback edition, *The Wasp Factory*, page i.
23. James Kelman, *And the judges said...*, pp 57-74, page 68.
24. Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), page 112.
25. Edmund O'Connor 'Mr Iain and Mr Iain (M) ... (Banks)' essay in *Chapman* 108, ed. Joy Hendry (Edinburgh: Chapman Publishing, 2006), pp 119-125, page 121
26. Ibid. page 121.
27. James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines*, page 2.
28. Ibid. page 2.
29. James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late*, page 4.
30. James Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy*, page 8.
31. James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political* pp 5-15, page 14.
32. Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, pp 27-49, page 42.
33. Willy Maley, 'Rebus Without A Cause – But Who's Complaining', *Perspectives*, No 26 Summer 2010 page 20.
34. James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political*, pp 78-84, page 81.
35. James Kelman, *And the judges said...*, pp 37-55, page 43.
36. At the 2009 Edinburgh International Book Festival Kelman launched an attack on 'genre' fiction and the misplaced importance that he believes is placed on the writers of detective, fantasy and other 'genres' in Scotland.
37. Ibid. page 40.
38. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Peter Simon, pp 1333-1349, page 1334.

39. Elisabeth Schellekens, *Aesthetics and Morality* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), pp 13-28, page 13.
40. Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, pp 27-49, page 47.
41. Ibid. page 83.
42. Ibid. page 83.
43. Ibid. page 83.
44. James Kelman, *Translated Accounts* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), page ix.
45. Ibid. page ix.
46. Ibid. page 5.
47. Ibid page 39.
48. James Kelman, *And the judges said...*, pp 140-186, page 146.
49. James Kelman, *Translated Accounts*, page 137.
50. Ibid. page 146.
51. James Kelman, *And the judges said...*, pp 217-228, page 227.
52. James Kelman in his Booker Prize winning speech in October 1994.
53. James Kelman, *And the judges said...*, pp 217-228, page 227.
54. Michael Gardiner, 'Kelman and World English', ed. Scott Hames *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, Hames, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp 99-110, page 106.
55. James Kelman, *Translated Accounts*, page 322.
56. James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political*, pp 78-84, page 79.
57. Ibid. page 80.
58. Ibid. page 80.
59. Ibid. page 80.
60. Scott Hames, Introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, pp1-5, page 2.
61. Ibid. page 2.
62. Thom Nairn, 'Iain Banks and the Fiction Factory', *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, pp 127-135, page 129.
63. Iain Banks, *The Bridge* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1986), page 77.
64. Ibid. page 78.
65. Alan MacGillivray, 'The Worlds of Iain Banks', *The Association of Scottish Literary Studies Online*, 1996 [http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/scotlit/asls/Laverock-Iain\\_Banks.html](http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/scotlit/asls/Laverock-Iain_Banks.html) [last accessed 3 December 2010].
66. Ibid.
67. Edmund O'Connor, 'Mr Iain and Mr Iain (M)... (Banks)', *Chapman* 108, 2006, pp 119-125, page 121.
68. Ibid. page 125.
69. Alan Taylor, 'Chilled-out' Kelman raises the temperature', *Herald Scotland*, (27/08/2009) <http://www.heraldscotland.com/chilled-out-kelman-raises-the-temperature-1.838582> [last accessed 3 December 2010].
70. Willy Maley, 'Rebus Without A Cause – But Who's Complaining', *Perspectives*, No 26 Summer 2010, page 20.
71. James Kelman, 'From a Room in Glasgow', from a room in Glasgow', *Christie Books*, 11 November 2010 <http://www.christiebooks.com/ChristieBooksWP/?p=2375> [last accessed 12 December 2010].
72. Ibid.
73. Iain Banks, cover sleeve for hardback edition of *Transition*, 2009.
74. Ken Livingstone, 'The Book Interview: Iain Banks', *New Statesman*, 17 December, 2009 <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2009/09/livingstone-interview-culture> [last accessed 11 December, 2010].

75. Anna Burnside, 'Iain Banks: The Man Who Fell to Earth', *The Sunday Times*, 13 September, 2009  
[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article6832156.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article6832156.ece) [last accessed 5 December, 2009].
76. Woody Allen as Isaac Davis in the opening credits of the film *Manhattan*, (United Artists, 1979).
77. James Kelman, *And the judges said...*, pp 37-55, page 45.
78. Ibid. page 45.
79. Aaron Kelly, 'James Kelman and the Deterritorialisation of Power', ed. Berthold Schoene-Harwood *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp 175-183, page 179.
80. Ibid. page 183.

## Chapter Six: The Contemporary Scottish Novelist

In the introduction to this thesis I explained that many of the existentialists had that label thrust upon them. Critics, particularly those who believed they were close politically and ideologically to Sartre such as Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, were keen to categorise both Sartre's philosophy and also his politics. They saw *What is Literature?* as not only an existential text, but as a Marxist one, reading the text as asking writers to become 'committed' politically, to use their prose to promote change and directly challenge readers to act, to create what would be in effect political manifestos, rather than works of fiction representing an individual writer's ideas and ideals. However, my thesis has argued implicitly that this is to misunderstand the text and the philosophy. While it cannot be argued that Sartre was unsympathetic to Marxist theory he did not see it as incompatible with individual freedom and, importantly, believed that a writer could not be free if they are in thrall to the ideology of others to the extent that it overwhelms their literary identity and practice. It was Sartre's determined stance to remain the individual 'free' thinker that he espoused in his work that provoked the greatest criticism and proved to be the strongest argument for his philosophy. He was so influential in twentieth-century philosophy that all relevant parties wanted to claim him for their cause, but it was his refusal to accept any one position led to criticism from all sides:

Sartre's pro-existentialist critics argued that he should abandon his newfound Marxism as incompatible with his existentialism, while his pro-Marxist critics argued that he should abandon his existentialism as incompatible with his newfound Marxism. Few thinkers besides Sartre seemed to think that the two theories were, or could be made to be, compatible.<sup>1</sup>

This desire of 'others' to claim Sartre suggests a fundamental, and perhaps deliberate, misunderstanding of his work and is typified by the confused reception of 'What is Writing?'. In his critical appreciation of Sartre, Bernard-Henri Lévy suggests that the confusion lies in a mistaken understanding of the term 'commit'. When the writer commits the word to the page he is acting in way that will necessarily cause change, it matters little what the subject is. The commitment is to change the world through their literature, not through the subject written about. It is the writing, and in writing, the aesthetic, that is where the commitment lies, not the subject under consideration, an interpretation of 'commitment' which mirrors that of James Kelman. The very act of

committing your thoughts to paper is an individual act of free thought that the writer wishes to share. It is not that writers 'should be' committed, they cannot but be committed. What Sartre is advocating is that writers should be aware of the power of the undertaking of writing. 'Committed, for Sartre, means first and foremost: conscious of the power of words'.<sup>2</sup> It could be said that all writers, to a greater or lesser degree, enter into and assume a context of either or both aesthetic persuasion and commercial exchange. What makes Banks and Kelman of particular relevance however, as discussed at the end of chapter 5, is the way in which they break across aesthetic and commercial priorities.

This thesis has referred to the engaged writer, the political writer, the moral writer, writer and the representation of woman and men, and the writer's aesthetic. The overarching discussion is an attempt to address the questions posed by Sartre in *What is Literature?*, namely: 'What is Writing?', 'Why Write?' and 'For Whom does one Write?' by placing them in a contemporary Scottish context. By looking at the work of James Kelman and Iain Banks I have concentrated on two writers who have distinct similarities and differences in their responses to these questions. I want now to go further by addressing these questions with reference to other Scottish writers at work today, and to consider Banks and Kelman in the company of their contemporaries.

In answer to his third question, Sartre believes that one writes for as wide an audience as possible at the time of writing. Writers do not write for the future, and they do not write only for themselves, they write for their here and now. This is why the fourth chapter of *What is Literature?* is entitled 'Situation of the Writer in 1947', the year Sartre wrote the text. In the appendix Sartre reiterates this idea:

A book has its absolute truth within the age. It is lived like an outbreak, like a famine. With much less intensity, to be sure, and by fewer people, but in the same way. It is an emanation of intersubjectivity, a living bond of rage, hatred or love among those who produce it and those who receive it. If it succeeds in commanding attention, thousands of people reject it and deny it: as everybody knows, to read a book is to rewrite it.<sup>3</sup>

But this does not mean that a text is only of use in its own time. There are always lessons to learn and ideas and themes to discuss: 'Later on, when the age is done, it will enter into

the relative, it will become a message. But the judgments of posterity will not invalidate those that were passed on in its lifetime'.<sup>4</sup> While the primary importance of art is to be found in the present, 'art cannot be reduced to a dialogue with the dead and with men not yet born; that would both be too difficult and too easy'.<sup>5</sup> Art is still of importance to those who will follow, and we can learn from what has been.

To conclude this thesis I want to consider a number of other contemporary Scottish writers and briefly examine whether and how the model of this thesis can be fully applied to their work. These writers engage with contemporary issues, but do so in aesthetically, and morally, individual ways. Too often differences in respective writers' aesthetics are used to create division rather than make connections. To widen the argument for the validity and usefulness of Sartre's theories we might look at a sample of apparently diverse writers who have engaged with Scotland, the social, political, moral and artistic aspects of the country – from, say, 1990-2010. This is to examine the extent that Sartre's claims can be upheld more generally than the specific analysis of the thesis has allowed as well as placing Banks and Kelman among their contemporaries.

In 1993 Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* changed Scotland's cultural landscape. By portraying the lives of a section of Edinburgh's underclass Welsh not only made Scottish society aware of its existence, but allowed greater understanding of particular social problems and the reasons behind them. Like Kelman, Welsh chose to write in a Scots linguistic idiom, but this working-class Edinburgh speech was one which was new to the Scottish novel. As discussed in chapter two, the representation of all sections of society in literature is important as it gives a voice to those who may previously have considered their life experience as unimportant or worthless. As Cristie L. March notes about Welsh's language: 'He creates narrative forms that both challenge non-Scottish readers and speak familiarly to those who recognise the lives his fiction characterises'.<sup>6</sup> March is only half right. Welsh's narrative forms challenged all readers as even those who may have recognised the lives of the main protagonists would never have seen their language written in such a way. The influence of James Kelman may have been important, but Welsh is doing something different.

These are the opening lines of *Trainspotting*:

The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried to keep ma attention oan the Jean-Claude Van Damme video.<sup>7</sup>

From the beginning, the reader is made aware that this is a voice that was distinctly new to Scottish literature. Whereas Kelman's Scots is mainly a mix of Standard English and West Coast Scots, Welsh would make greater use of phonetic spelling to express the language, shifting registers between internal monologue and external description, moving between representations of audible speech or the spoken idiom in the representation of thought, to the artifice of written language. Perhaps it can be said that Kelman needed to write first to allow Welsh and others to follow, but *Trainspotting* seemed a self-conscious development from what had been written before and presented Scotland with a new idiom in written Scots.

Welsh also gave voice to a widespread antipathy regarding the political situation as many saw it in Scotland in the early 1990s. Like Banks he has characters who give voice to his feelings while also reflecting wider concerns. An example of his personal statement is to be found in this infamous passage:

Fuckin failures in a country ay failures. It's nae good blamin it oan the english for colonising us. Ah don't hate the English. They're just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can't even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. No. We're ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation. Ah don't hate the English. They just git oan wi the shite thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots.<sup>8</sup>

This rant is voiced by Mark Renton in the novel, the character with whom readers are clearly intended to identify most closely, and whose world view is given most sympathy and credence by the narrative of the book as a whole. This political view when married with the language in which it is expressed speaks to a readership who may have felt under-represented previously, and, as Kelman has stated, such a connection is important to society's sense of self. The individual writer again speaks to, and for, a wider society.

Like most of Kelman's central protagonists Renton believes that his only chance of freedom is escape from his current life. The most famous section of *Trainspotting*, mainly

because of a longer, adapted for screen, version that is used at the beginning of Danny Boyle's film of the novel, is the following:

Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yerself in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye've produced. Choose life. Well ah choose no tae choose life.<sup>9</sup>

By listing these apparently free choices which are anything but, Welsh is making comment on the central existential belief that man is free to choose and cannot do otherwise. He is suggesting that many of us are living in what Sartre would call 'bad faith', believing that many individuals are expressing free will when in fact they are inactive, allowing others to inform their choices, that they are 'rotting away' while, simply existing, instead of exercising free will.

Welsh acknowledges existential concerns implicitly in a passage where Renton is on trial, although in this case it is the philosopher Kierkegaard rather than Sartre that is cited:

- So you read Kierkegaard. Tell us about him, Mr Renton, the patronising cunt sais.
- I'm interested in his concepts of subjectivity and truth, and particularly his ideas concerning choice; the notion that genuine choice is made out of doubt and uncertainty, and without recourse to the experience or advice of others. It could be argued, with justification, that it's a primarily a bourgeois existential philosophy and would therefore seek to undermine collective societal wisdom. However, it's also a liberating philosophy, because when such societal wisdom is negated, the basis for social control over the individual becomes weakened and ... but I'm rabbiting a bit here.<sup>10</sup>

This places Renton as being an outsider to the rest of the, male, characters in *Trainspotting* in that he has at least some level of education, but it also once again highlights the prominence of the individual apart that is a central strand in Scottish literature, and, as with the characters found in the novels of Kelman and Banks, answers a central question of this thesis; namely why an existential examination of Scottish literature reaps interesting critical rewards.

The end of *Trainspotting* finds him putting himself in a position where leaving is not only desirable, but necessary: 'He had done what he wanted to do. He could now never go back to Leith, to Edinburgh, even to Scotland, ever again. There, he could not be anything other than he was. Now, free from them all, for good, he could be what he wanted to be. He'd stand and fall alone'.<sup>11</sup> The Scotland of Banks, Kelman and Welsh is one which is often defined by the fear that those who live their find themselves ruled by. Just to take their respective debut novels as an example, Frank/Frances Cauldhame, Robert Hines and Mark Renton's lives are all ruled by fear of one kind or another. Cairns Craig examines Renton's leaving and what it represents:

Renton has escaped the mutual embrace of the fearful and the fearless only by ensuring its continued existence in the place to which he can never return. In that socially mutilating personal freedom, Welsh constructs a narrative which is not simply a response to the problems of the 'chemical generation' but is the recapitulation of the confrontations of the fearful that have been a defining characteristic of the modern Scottish imagination.<sup>12</sup>

In a Sartrean sense Renton is caused anguish by the recognition of his individual freedom, a freedom that cannot be shared or recognised in 'Others':

To be sure, I could not describe a freedom which would be common to both the Other and myself; I could not therefore contemplate an essence of freedom. On the contrary, it is freedom which is the foundation of all essences since man reveals intra-mundane essences by surpassing the world toward his own possibilities.<sup>13</sup>

Renton feels that he must escape his world before he can realise his own possibilities.

Welsh can be thought of as a Scottish writer who is the child of Kelman and Banks, in the sense that he combines the linguistic sensibilities of the former with the graphic horror and sensationalism of the latter. He is also the writer who approaches marrying the critical kudos of Kelman with the cultural popularity of Banks, and provided a model for what was to follow. In a modern Scottish canon Welsh, and *Trainspotting* in particular, is a prime example of a writer and a novel which merits inclusion. This novel comments on class, the nation, morality, politics and language and was successful both in Scotland and around the world. Willy Maley expresses what it is

about Welsh's debut novel that makes it cross perceived boundaries that divide high and populist art:

Welsh's influences, or effluences, range across contemporary film, music and television rather than resting on the canon. He excels at that potent blend of excremental and existential, 'keech' and Kierkegaard, that is all the rage in new Scottish writing, a social surrealism that takes its cue from cinema and dance as much as literature.<sup>14</sup>

The connections are clear. Notions of aesthetic worth could not be separated from the novel's social impact and commercial success, enhanced or exaggerated by film, theatrical and audio-book versions. It is little wonder few other novels have been examined in such detail as *Trainspotting* in the last thirty years of Scottish literary production.

As stated in chapter one, Sartre's theories of literature are based on the relationship between writer and reader. The writer's actions cause reaction in readers. They try to influence readers' subsequent actions. The writers disclose the world as they see it, or how they see it should or could be, and they hope, even implicitly, by the action of writing, to convince others of their moral stance. Taken at its most literal, this can be described as journalistic, but that does not mean what is happening is not artistic. Just as the best journalism will be literate so literature may use the idea of reportage to convince a readership of the strength of an argument. An explicit example of this is to be found in Ali Smith's 2007 novel, *Girl Meets Boy*. The novel is concerned with gender roles and expectations and looks to challenge the reader directly. One of the narrators, Anthea, and her partner Robin, have been arrested after spraying graffiti around Inverness city centre. Anthea's sister Midge discovers more of their handiwork:

Behind me and above me on the wall the words are bright, red, huge. They're in the same writing as was on the Pure sign before they replaced it. They've been framed in a beautiful, baroque-looking, trompe l'oeil picture-frame in gold. They say:

ACROSS THE WORLD, TWO MILLION GIRLS, KILLED BEFORE BIRTH OR AT BIRTH BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T BOYS. THAT'S ON THE RECORD. ADD TO THAT THE OFF-RECORD ESTIMATE OF FIFTY-EIGHT MILLION MORE GIRLS, KILLED BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T BOYS. THAT'S SIXTY MILLION GIRLS. Underneath this, in a hand-writing I recognise, even though it's bigger than usual: THIS MUST CHANGE. Iphis and Ianthe the message girls 2007.<sup>15</sup>

Ali Smith is attempting to challenge her readers to question their own moral values as a result of her writing. But as all her readers will have individual values the challenge to the readership will vary. There will be readers who know these statistics<sup>16</sup> and their world view will be confirmed. There will be readers who will be aware of the issues raised, even if they are not aware of these exact statistics and may have their points of view confirmed or even strengthened. There will be readers who find that their world has been challenged and they may look further into the statistics that Smith has confronted them with. Finally, there will be readers who read this and either choose not to believe the facts as detailed, or are content to believe them but consider that they reflect a world that they are comfortable with. No reader will be unchanged by the act of reading.

Even in the short Ali Smith extract above, which is dominated by the capital letters of the spray-painted slogan, there is a subtle craft at work to persuade the reader of the strength of Smith's message. *Girl Meets Boy* is ostensibly about two love stories and family ties, themes that most people can identify with, and she uses this recognition to promote the ideology she wants to promote to others; using her literary style to create debate on matters such as sexuality, the morality of advertising, women's rights, political correctness, gender equality and the dysfunctional relationship between the Third World and the First. Literature provides an artistic and relational context for might appear simplistic grandstanding or sloganeering. The spray-painted words are 'bright, huge, red'.<sup>17</sup> Smith paints them for the reader, and frames them as well in 'a beautiful, baroque-looking, trompe l'oeil picture frame in gold'.<sup>18</sup> However, the reader is not only to be persuaded by the spray-painted words themselves, but is being subtly persuaded by the words with which Smith describes them. Smith not only presents the world as it is (for her), but as it could and should be.

Later in the novel Midge reaches Anthea's latest answer machine message:

*Hi. This is Anthea. Don't leave me a message on this phone because I'm actually trying not to use my mobile any longer since the production of mobiles involves slave labour on a huge scale and also since mobiles get in the way of us living fully and properly in the present moment and connecting properly, on a real level, with people and are just another way to sell us short. Come and see me instead and we'll talk properly. Thanks.*<sup>19</sup>

This is another clever device to present a certain political point of view, but it wouldn't work without Midge's internal response: '(For God's sake.)',<sup>20</sup> which undercuts Anthea's preachy and righteous attitude with humour, but also by presenting the reader with a counterpoint. Without Midge's cynicism the novel would fail as there needs to be conflict for debate to take place. This is literature as Sartre believes it should be, As David Caute explains, Sartre thought that: 'Literature should not be a sedative but an irritant, a catalyst provoking men to change the world in which they live and in doing so to change themselves.'<sup>21</sup> Like Banks and Kelman, Smith shows the 'commitment' that Sartre is expecting from 'the writer', a marriage of the moral and the aesthetic, where the latter is used to evoke questions concerning the former, and it is in this complex, coherent totality of deliberately arranged language and aesthetic projection that the writer's art is enacted.

In Janice Galloway's 1991 novel *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* the central themes are those of gender politics, but also mental illness and the way that the individual deals with it, how society views it and how the latter affects the former. Galloway wants the reader to be aware of illness and to consider their own prejudices. Like Irvine Welsh she is representing people in Scottish society who have been underrepresented in literature, and like Smith she is asking questions of gender roles and stereotypes in society, particularly in the media.

If Welsh's and Kelman's fiction is intended to give a literary voice to those who previously had none, then *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* is about the lack of voice, an individual's personal and social isolation. It is ostensibly a novel about mental health, but is also about gender roles and expectations in Scotland at the end of the twentieth century. The central character of Joy Stone has just lost her married lover, a fellow teacher from the local school, in a drowning accident while they were on holiday. The book contains short dream-like passages which piece together that dreadful event. Like Kelman and Banks, Galloway uses the physicality of the text to help tell the story, as Matt McGuire explains:

In representing the reality of late-twentieth century female experience the text is highly experimental in regards to the novel as a literary form. Joy's narrative is interwoven with regular set pieces. These seek to parody various representations of

female identity within popular culture. The often contradictory and pernicious messages provided by fashion magazines, with their problem pages, horoscopes and recipes, form a particular target within Galloway's fiction. The layout of the text is also highly unusual. Several scenes appear as dramatic scripts with the characters becoming actors in their own lives, merely reading out their lines. We are asked to what extent female identity is a performative exercise? In what way does contemporary culture coerce women to appear and act in certain socially acceptable ways?<sup>22</sup>

Galloway uses all her aesthetic craft to present her moral and social arguments. Joy Stone's life is portrayed as falling apart and the character herself, and those around her, blame no-one but herself. Crime and punishment are central themes in the novel, but only as dictated by society, and guilt and self-loathing are the result. Everything Joy is and everything she does is defined by social expectations. Galloway believes this systematically sexist society is one of the reasons that, until very recently, Scottish women writers were scarce:

Scottish women have their own particular complications with writing and definition, complications which derive from the general problems of being a colonised nation. Then, that wee extra touch. Their sex. There is coping with the guilt of taking time off the concerns of national politics to get concerned with the sexual sort: that creeping fear it's somehow self-indulgent to be more concerned for one's womanness instead of one's Scottishness, one's working class heritage or whatever.<sup>23</sup>

The novel is about coping, particularly with these layers of guilt, as the title suggests, but is also about individual identity and the loss of it:

Cold spots dripped on my upturned hands but I didn't feel it was me crying. I could feel no connection between these splashes and me. I connected only with the words. They swelled and filled the whole room. I was eaten and swallowed inside those words, eaten and invisible. When it was over I knew I was smiling.<sup>24</sup>

Galloway manages to convey a life where Joy is emotionally separate from her physical life and where every little task becomes unimaginable, overwhelming and virtually impossible, a state which Sartre would cite as an example of 'bad faith'. The loss of Joy's individuality and the refusal to accept that she is free and responsible for her actions leads to this state of non-being. Her situation is ostensibly parallel to that of Antoine Roquentin, the narrator of Sartre's 1938 novel *Nausea*, who finds that situations, and

even inanimate objects, conspire to prevent him from acting 'freely'. Antoine's despairing self-investigation is remarkably similar to that of Joy's:

My thought is *me*: this is why I can't stop. I exist by what I think ... and I can't prevent myself from thinking. At this very moment – this is terrible – if I exist, *it is because* I hate existing. It is I, *it is I* who pull myself from the nothingness to which I aspire: hatred and disgust for existence are just so many ways of *making me* exist, of thrusting me into existence. Thoughts are born behind me like a feeling of giddiness, I can feel them being born behind my head...<sup>25</sup>

Both Antoine and Joy are paralysed by self-hatred and angst and their struggle is to accept their individual 'freedom'. *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* is a particularly bold novel as the sense given to the reader is that Galloway shows no sentimental sympathy for Joy. Joy is described objectively, even when her own point-of-view is inhabited by the author. It is an unsettling, challenging, technique. The detail and the effort of Joy's life are beautifully rendered in Galloway's unsentimental and often disconcerting writing. Joy Stone's life has become a struggle and the struggle is one that she has to deal with on her own.

Although the secondary characters in the novel are important, this is Joy's story. Her relationships with her sister, mother, young lover and boss see her trying to fulfil their, and society's, expectations. Some of the different roles that are expected of women in the West of Scotland are clearly set out. Joy is expected to be a daughter, a sister, a mother (figure), a lover and a whore. She tries to fulfil these roles, to be what is expected of her. Galloway portrays Joy as someone who feels she is being justifiably punished for having once put herself first. Mental illness is empathetically and graphically depicted, her anorexia, excessive drinking and unfulfilling sexual encounters are all aspects of her punishment. At one moment she clarifies how she feels: 'The More Something Hurts, The More it can Teach Me'.<sup>26</sup> The use of capitals adds to the importance of the sentence, but also apes the headlines of the magazines that she reads as another source of instruction as to how women are meant to act. As with Ali Smith's writing, the mix of literature and the journalistic adds to the strength of the message, but it takes a subtle moment of recognition, of brief clarity, to signal hope for Joy's future. This occurs when she says 'No' to her bookie boss Tony<sup>27</sup>. It is the first time she says 'No' to anyone in the

novel, and it is the moment that she begins to regain control of her life. It is the beginning of the end of the novel.

Like James Kelman and Irvine Welsh, Janice Galloway is writing to and for a section of society that has little representation in mainstream culture. *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* provides a voice for many of the people who have either suffered from mental illness, or have known others who have, and who will recognise passages from the novel. Such recognition, the realisation that no-one is alone in suffering mental health problems, is hugely important. The terrifying depiction of Joy failing to cope on her own should make the reader realise that support and understanding are the least that people should expect when such illness strikes. Arguably, it is this aspect of the novel above all others which makes it one of the most important Scottish novels of the last 30 years. It is not only a satisfying aesthetic literary novel, it is also a directly demanding moral, social and political exposition.

There is a recurring theme in Scottish literature of the damaged individual. Something that links Banks, Kelman, Welsh, Galloway and even Smith is that there are aspects in most of their protagonists' lives which cause them anguish, to a greater or lesser degree. This is something that Gavin Wallace notes: 'In English novels, the deranged, desperate, the neurotic and the variously addicted might provide the odd deviant diversion to emphasise the reassuring normality of everyone else. In Scottish novels, they are narrators and protagonists, rarely, if ever, fully in control of their existences, and morbidly aware of the fact.'<sup>28</sup> This makes Sartre's theories of existentialism and literature seem particularly pertinent as the struggle which is at the heart of Sartre's existentialism is the struggle to overcome living in bad faith, and to accept and embrace individual human freedom. Scottish literary narrators and protagonists as described above are all struggling to change, or escape, their lives as they are, to recognise themselves as individuals who take control of their own lives. Even if they fail, the story is in the struggle and the same can be said of Sartre's philosophy.

## Notes

1. Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction*, pp 11-50, page 47.
2. Bernard Henri Levy, *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, page 61.
3. Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, appendix pp 243-251 page 247.
4. Ibid. page 248.
5. Ibid. page 243.
6. Christie L. March, *Rewriting Scotland*, pp 11-38, page 12.
7. Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Vintage, 2003), page 3.
8. Ibid. page 78.
9. Ibid. page 187.
10. Ibid. page 167.
11. Ibid. page 344.
12. Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, pp 37-74, page 56.
13. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp 433-556, page 438.
14. Willy Maley, 'Subversion and Squirrility in Irvine Welsh's shorter fiction', eds. Dermot Cavanagh and Tim Kirk *Subversion and Scurrility: Popular Discourse in Europe from 1500 to the Present*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), page 192.
15. Ali Smith, *Boy Meets Girl* page 132.
16. Statistics taken from [www.womankind.org.uk](http://www.womankind.org.uk). [last accessed 3 December 2010].
17. Ali Smith, *Boy Meets Girl* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2007), page 132.
18. Ibid. page 132.
19. Ibid. page 111.
20. Ibid. page 111.
21. David Caute, Introduction to *What is Writing?*, page xi.
22. Matt McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp 62-91, page 84.
23. Janice Galloway, *Meantime Looking Forward to the Millennium* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), page 5.
24. Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (London: Minerva, 1991), page 105
25. Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (London: Penguin Books, [1938] 2000), page 145.
26. Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* page 177.
27. Ibid. pp 208-209.
28. Gavin Wallace, 'The Novel of Damaged Identity', *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, pp 217-231, 218.

## Conclusion

Scottish Literature is a revealing context to examine the role of Sartre's 'engaged' writer in society as it is a literature that has only relatively recently received the extended serious consideration it deserves. In his introduction to Hugh MacDiarmid's *Selected Poems* (1992), Alan Riach considers Scottish Literature and the idea of canonicity:

The literature of Scotland has not, until relatively recent times, been accorded canonical status. For good reason. Its study requires a greater degree of contextualisation, a more extensive consideration of matters non-literary (and where literary, often comparative) than the honoured and traditional study of canonical texts.<sup>1</sup>

It is not that Scotland did not previously have the writers or texts to merit the creation of a Scottish canon, but that they had not been sufficiently contextualised by literary and non-literary criticism to be considered canonical in a Scottish context. Writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns and Robert Louis Stevenson are widely known, but are not usually given their full Scottish literary context, particularly with reference to their Scottish contemporaries and in the context of literary production across the spectrum, from high art production to popular works. Scottish literature needed to create its own tradition of critical appreciation to raise its profile in the international literary world. This was a political argument as well as an academic one, and the subsequent success of the study of Scottish literature can be seen as a way forward for other areas of literary study, and not necessarily those determined by questions of nation. There is a wish to deal in set texts which is related to the desire to critically categorise as detailed in the last chapter, to make writers 'belong'. Often, labels such as 'Urban Realism,' 'Kailyard,' 'Romantic', 'Feminist' and so on are created by critics – and for commercial reasons. Subsequently, writers are placed into these categories. There are exceptions, such as when a writer deliberately adopts a pre-determined position. However, as we include we also exclude, and often it is the contemporary, populist and unusual that faces the greatest fight to be taken seriously. As the study of Scottish literature progresses it is important that it be open to as many and diverse writers and artists as possible, to listen to the new voices, whether contemporary or otherwise, but also keep contextualising and criticising the old and established.

It is here that Sartre's ideas of the primary and secondary roles of literature become practically useful. As set out in the previous chapter, in 'Situation of the Writer in 1947', Sartre believes a work is at its most important 'within its age'. It is by contextualising the work in its own time that we can understand it best, but it is also vital to reevaluate what has gone before continually. Writers, and even forms, such as the novel, which were once regarded as populist have been re-evaluated in the context of Scottish literary criticism. As Alan Riach concludes in *Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography: The Masks of a Modern Nation* (2005) with reference to the concept of the canon: 'Elitist disdain of ephemeral, populist, mass-produced work, or philistine disregard of high art and difficult work are equally inappropriate here. The point is, they are connected'.<sup>2</sup> This connection is one which must be examined and challenged by Scottish literary critics in the context of a Scottish 'canon', one which remains open, active and inclusive.

The terms 'high' and 'low' art give a value to art that is perilously close to saying 'good' and 'bad' art. These terms are examined by John Carey in *What Good are the Arts?* (2005):

The metaphor of height is itself curious. It may originate in bodily shame – 'high' art being that which surmounts the 'low' physical appetites and addresses the 'spirit'. It may also carry connotations of social class – 'high' art is that which appeals to the minority whose social class rank places them above the struggle for mere survival. Paradoxically, 'high' art is also generally assumed to be 'deep'. However, those who use these terms do not invest them with any real meaning. Advocates of high art take it for granted that the experiences it gives them are intrinsically of more value than low art gives others, although such a claim is not just unverifiable but meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

What Carey concludes is that there are no absolute values in art, although there may appear to be for the reasons he states, and it is difficult to refute his idea that those who make distinctions of 'high' and 'low' art are doing so to promote ideas of superiority in themselves. In an existential sense we have to accept that one person's negative criticism of a work of art may reflect another's positive appraisal of the same work, be it an obscure poem or popular graphic novel. As Walter Benjamin attests: 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it

was transmitted from one owner to another'.<sup>4</sup> If art is accepted as an aesthetic expression of ideas and ideals then we must accept that ultimately all values involved will, to a great extent, be subjective, whether moral or aesthetic. In his essay *What Is Art?* Leo Tolstoy summarises these beliefs:

In aesthetic literature you will incessantly meet with opinions on the merit and importance of art, founded not on any certain laws by which this or that is held to be good or bad, but merely on the consideration whether this tallies with the art canon we have drawn up.<sup>5</sup>

As stated in the introduction, the successful literary critic, at least according to Sartre, deals with the writer's metaphysics as well as their aesthetics, and once again as Tolstoy states, this blurs the boundaries between moral and artistic worth. This idea of an 'art canon' can be construed as a plea for a purely aesthetic distinction in art, although a slightly different one than that between 'high' and 'low' art. The key word Tolstoy uses is 'opinions', which we all have, but somehow feel the need for others to share them, hence the desire for a canon. But canonicity need not be the controversial topic that it is often held to be if we accept that any group will have their own 'canon' to which they refer; a collection of shared preferences that give the appearance of objective value. Argument and debate about what constitutes the canon can only be healthy. The arguments over what constitutes a literary canon should be as constant and exhaustive as the literature and society it purports to represent. This is not an idea without its critics. In Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994) he sets out the importance of maintaining a literary canon in the face of what he saw as cultural anarchy: 'Cultural criticism is another dismal social science, but literary criticism, as an art, always was, and always will be an elitist phenomenon'.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to explain the need for this elitist approach:

The Western Canon, despite the limitless idealism of those who would open it up, exists precisely in order to impose limits, to set a standard of measurement that is anything but political or moral. I am aware that there is now a kind of covert alliance between popular culture and what calls itself 'cultural criticism' and in the name of that alliance cognition itself may doubtless yet acquire the stigma of the incorrect.<sup>7</sup>

Bloom may be concerned with maintaining an aesthetic standard which is untouched by concerns of political, moral or social readings, a stand which cannot be maintained as he

promotes his 'canon' of predominately 'dead white males' over 'ethnocentric and gender considerations'<sup>8</sup>, but he is right to state that the existence of a literary canon need not ignore the importance of the modern and contemporary: 'All that we can do now is maintain some continuity with the aesthetic, and not yield to the lie that what we oppose is adventure and new interpretations'.<sup>9</sup> However, it would seem that the sense of adventure, and these new interpretations, would only occur in the parameters set out in Bloom's book.

Bloom's attitude to literature is opposed to Sartre's. Bloom sees the primary importance of literature as being in the past, what he calls 'the art of memory'<sup>10</sup>, and only sees worth in the aesthetic, and a particular one at that: 'the aesthetic is, in my view, an individual rather than a societal concern'.<sup>11</sup> However, an apparent shared aesthetic is something that his call for a Western Canon tacitly accepts, even if it is only to be shared by literary critics. It appears that the political, the philosophical, the moral and the social are not just secondary considerations for Bloom, but are to be, if not avoided in literary criticism, at least relegated to secondary considerations. If we consider Bloom's view then we have to question, if a literary canon is to exist, how we make it relevant in the society to which it belongs. As Sartre made compatible the apparently incompatible theories of existentialism and Marxism, so his theories of literature can do the same for the desire for a literary canon and the belief that critics should be primarily concerned with the contemporary. This is achieved by taking the personal aesthetic that Bloom, and Sartre, sees as of primary importance, and, as this thesis promotes, applying it in a societal sense. Despite Bloom's protestations to the contrary, any canon must be viewed and criticised in this context if that canon, and those who criticise it, are to remain significant socially.

The idea of the Scottish literary canon itself is a prompt to continue asking questions about political, moral, social, and artistic value. Only by asking such questions constantly can any 'canon' be relevant in an international literary context. It must remain open to the new while revaluing the past. Genre fiction, such as horror, detective, romantic fiction or the western is a literary phenomenon that should be considered with the same scrutiny as more apparently 'higher' literary style and forms. Literary, aesthetic and commercial imperatives are not, and never have been, unconnected. This is not to say

that every writer or novel is of equal importance or lasting worth. As stated in Chapter Five, for Sartre the writer's intention is primary to their success or otherwise. When Sartre says: 'Thus, there are only good and bad novels'<sup>12</sup> he is referring to that intention rather than making any superficial aesthetic judgement. He goes on to explain further:

The bad novel aims to please by flattering, whereas the good one is an exigence and an act of faith. But above all, the unique point of view from which the author can present the world to those freedoms whose concurrence he wishes to bring about is that of a world to be impregnated always with more freedom.<sup>13</sup>

Questions of what constitutes a 'successful' novel will depend on the level of 'engagement' with the political, moral and cultural aspects of society. As Bernard-Henri Lévy states, it is not the subject under consideration that is of primary importance, but the writer's level of engagement with it. It could be thought of as a question of seriousness. Just how important does a writer consider his writing to be? Kelman and, more notably, Banks often use humour in their writing but it would be a mistake to think that they are ever less than serious about the whole. Again, it is important to stress that this is not necessarily a question of aesthetic difference or difficulty, but of engagement with the matter in hand. The obscure poem and the popular graphic novel are obviously different forms of writing, but how serious their writers are, how 'committed', cannot be defined by the medium they have chosen. They must both be examined with equal rigour before we can make fair statement on their artistic worth. Kelman and Banks, as we have seen, are very different in their approach to writing in terms of style, language, and setting yet the reader is under no illusion that both men are very serious in the points that they are trying to convey, and that they hope their fiction will change – or confirm – their readers' ideas and ideals as they consider the respective arguments. One of the reasons for choosing Scottish literature to examine the theories of Sartre is because there are these complicated questions of language, place, nation, self-definition and marginalisation. We can talk of Scottish women writers, Scottish Gaelic writers, Scottish urban writers or even Scottish Gaelic urban women writers, yet still realise that perceived objective sensibilities will only be collected subjective individual ones.

By looking at contemporary Scottish fiction and those who create it my intention has been to examine the move from the individual to the universal and the writer's role in

this move. I have been looking at how James Kelman and Iain Banks in particular, have represented and affected the ideas and values of people. The areas covered – politics, language, class, gender, religion and nation – have all been viewed through the stated belief that by changing people’s aesthetic and moral values through art, the artist affects a wider, political/social/cultural change. As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, in terms of changing aesthetic and moral values, the aim of the artist is to effect the latter through the former. The reader is changed by both. The reader is made to view the world differently by the writer, who has chosen his words, his actions, not only as the best for the writer, but as the best for all. But this is not a one-way process. The artist is affected by others to create, and this action of creation demands response, which creates change anew.

Sartre’s theories of literature and existentialism have largely been thought outdated after the rise of structuralism and post-structuralism in literary criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, but in the last decade they have been reassessed:

The gradual turn toward the political in literary studies during recent decades has put Sartre’s work in a different light. The ethical and political dimensions of his existential thought and activism; his dramatic, interactive accounts of writing and reading; and his portrait of the reader as a complex human being with specific interests and values serve as models for those writers and theorists critically engaged not just with the institution of literary studies but with the world at large.<sup>14</sup>

Critic Linda Patrik believes that existentialism ‘forged a connection between philosophy and literature that has not since been duplicated’.<sup>15</sup> Both philosophy and literature are concerned with understanding the world around us, and existentialism has proven to be the philosophical movement that most explicitly acknowledges this. Jean Paul Sartre’s ideas of existentialism and literature gave further credence to these ideas by setting out the relationship between writer, reader and the wider society that both inhabit. In a post-devolution Scotland these ideas allow as many different voices to be heard and included in Scottish literary criticism as there are literary, engaged, writers who are dealing with Scottish concerns or context. Who this includes can be deduced by critics by applying Sartre’s definition of what being an engaged writer entails. There are no longer easy categories or answers to be had, and nor should there be. The literary critic should have to

work to contextualise those they are examining, and in an increasingly multi-cultural Scottish society which is spread throughout the globe, this will result in richer and more diverse Scottish literature.

Many contemporary Scottish writers have encouraged and criticised the recent changes in Scotland, be they political, social or cultural, through an examination of the individual. In the twenty-first century, Scotland's literature and art continue to be a vital way of understanding the country, and its people, and cultural criticism needs to make sure Scotland is engaged by the whole range of cultural production to retain the vitality of its own function. Such an undertaking is at the heart of Sartre's belief that literature is the most fitting way that the individual can recognise and change their society and, if in distinctly different ways, it is what Kelman and Banks both demand

Notes

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2. Alan Riach, *Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography: The Masks of a Modern Nation* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp 223-244, page 231.
3. Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, page 406.
4. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), page 248.
5. John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), page 32.
6. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Riverhead Books, [1994] 1995), pp 15-39, page 16.
7. Ibid. page 33.
8. Ibid. page 39.
9. Ibid. page 18.
10. Ibid. page 17.
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12. Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, pp 27-49, page 47.
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14. 'Jean Paul Sartre', ed. Peter Simon *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, pp 1333-1349, page 1335.
15. Linda Patrik, *Existential Literature: An Introduction*, (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 2000), page xi.

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