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Kelman, Suspicion and the Fantasy of Homeland Security
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At the risk of blowing my own cover, James Kelman doesn't really belong in the company of spies, murder and intrigue in this issue of *The Bottle Imp*. In fact, he defines his work against the phony excitements of genre fiction:

I think the most ordinary person's life is fairly dramatic; all you've got to do is follow some people around and look at their existence for 24 hours, and it will be horror. ... There's no need to be saying or thinking "When's the murder or bank robbery going to happen?"¹

"In reality", we are soberly reminded, "these events are abnormal". The gripping adventures of Kelman's characters are about getting by, not getting the bad guy, and there is no prospect of a tidy finale that sees the truth revealed and the guilty punished. When the cops show up in the final pages of a Kelman novel, they resolve nothing and only heighten the sense of dread.

And yet, viewed from a certain angle, Kelman's fiction has a noirish tint: cynical anti-heroes groping their way through a disenchanted world, the treachery of all "normal" appearances and expectations, the lonely intensity of men who live in their heads, struggling (and usually failing) to puzzle things out. The fretful routines of the hardboiled detective are close to the standard mental weather of the Kelman hero, but with one key difference. Kelman's fictions brim with mystery and tension, *but as vivid realities in their own right*, detached from the narrative mechanics of the abnormal event and its investigation.²

To go any further exploring this facet of Kelman's writing, we need to draw a strong

distinction between fictions of *suspense* and *suspicion*. "The form of pleasure evoked by thrillers", writes Jerry Palmer, is "by common consent, suspense ... reading a story in order "to find out what happens". As Colin MacCabe argues, "every narration is always a suspense story", in the sense that it is in the resolution of narrative – the ending – that the sense, the identity, the closure, of the narrative can be experienced".³

Suspense is a narrative effect – perhaps the essential narrative effect – and it relies on a determinate story for its realisation: a pattern of disclosures and misdirections which foster anticipation of the "reveal". (It is just this sense of artificial expectancy Kelman rejects, favouring the unplotted contingency of moment-to-moment consciousness.)

Suspicion is a different matter, being a lived *experience* separable from its narrative resolution. That I suspect you of some malign purpose is an emotional fact in its own right, and "real" to me irrespective of your true intentions. Future knowledge may confirm or erase my suspicion, but the inclination to find out is distinct from the vivid force of what I already think I know. And the impulse to test my hunch against confirmed realities may be weaker than the suspicion itself; it may even be absent. The most powerful and dramatic suspicions are indifferent to "proof", generating an entire world premised on their self-confirmation.

For all his commitment to realism, Kelman is a writer of suspicion in this vein. Take this vignette from his 2004 novel *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*. The main character is eyeballing another passenger on the subway:

I noticed the guy reading the newspaper, he looked like Franco's politics would have been okay by him. A right creepy-looking cunt, these horror right-wing fascist fuckers ye sometimes see creeping out from behind middens. He had the type of face ye wantit to christ I dont know, I wouldnay have trusted him as far as I could throw him, ye just imagined things about him, secret police, anti-freedom squads, dangerous bastards, evil, on a lucrative retainer by the pentagon greysuits. They get by on fear; vicious, malicious, ruthless fucking terrors, torturers man the lowest of the low, and their fucking arrogance! Incredible!⁴

Clearly the arrogant presumption here belongs to the character, whose rush to judgment sprints ahead of any plodding concern for the

facts. What he *feels* he sees quickly hardens into its own imaginative solidity, each fanciful embellishment rendering the last more plausible. We quickly lose sight of any sleuthable reality, the external world relegated to raw material for the hero's "ayn fantastic inner dramatics" (p. 276).

This side of Kelman's work shares in the strand of modernist writing David Trotter calls "paranoid narrative". Such fictions are animated by the hero's brittle sense of singularity – of being specially attentive, specially persecuted – and belief in "an invisible but comprehensive design" lying beneath surface reality. Known for outward lethargy and frantic internal activity, the spy-like aspect of the paranoid subject is manifested in "compulsive thinking", the obsessional "investigation of even the most self-evidently trivial occurrences" for hidden slights, plots or meanings. Such inquiries are held to yield deep insight into universal laws and forces, affirming the specialness of the sensitivity which detected their unassuming traces in ordinary life.⁵

Most readers familiar with Kelman's writing will recognise aspects of this pattern, and the abundance in his fiction of compulsive hyper-analysis and wayward philosophical rumination. It is a key strand of what his writing shares with Beckett, Kafka and Dostoevsky, though it has a stronger and more programmatic ideological impulse. In Kelman, the tendency to get carried away by mental hijinks is anchored by fixed political convictions, unchanging ethical verities which seem woven into the very fabric of the fictive universe. As one of his characters cheerfully declares, the core belief and founding suspicion of Kelman's writing is that "the powers-that-be are fuckpigs".⁶

You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free has great fun with swingeing judgments of this kind, and jettisons the Kelman protagonist's usual self-doubt. The novel toys with the fantastical potential of untrammelled suspicion, explored partly via the clichés of detective fiction. The central character, Jeremiah Brown, is a Scottish émigré who has lived in "Uhmerka" for twelve years, whose company we share the night before his flight home to "bonné Skallin". (His idiosyncratic language is a matter of great interest, though there isn't space to do it justice here.⁷) The evening is spent in copious reminiscence of his adventures and heartache in the USA, including a period working as a minor functionary in the "homeland security" apparatus. Landing such a responsible job might imply a degree of successful

assimilation, but the closer "Jerry" moves to the inside of the American system the more an outsider he feels. Though paid to exercise the official suspicion of the American state, Jerry's life as a security operative is guided by his own wild conjectures, which take flight the very moment he accepts the job:

The boss smiled and gied a jerk of the skull to signify the end of this part of the interview.

Skull is the wrang word; he had the head of a brangus bull only much softer and the flesh was all droopy. As well as that he had one of these very thick necks and very red faces. I knew it was a prejudice but I was always suspicious of very red faces and very thick necks; size 24-inch collar for his fucking shirts. It seemed to signify "one who exploits the other" and at the same time gorges himself on meatpies, grits and catfish chowder or any other tasty foodsicle that happens to be available, including that of god-fearing passers-by minding their ayn business, eheu vir, pardonais moi m'sieur, je ne comprend, el guerro por favor, these red-neck cunts steal their french fries and chips, lettuce leaves with barbeque sauce or these wee red vegetable things – horseradishes – fucking anything, gie me it they cry, I'll fucking eat it. (p. 171)

Much of Jerry's time on patrol is spent in extravagant speculation of this kind, which yields a style of surreal comedy unique in Kelman's oeuvre. When he's not working, Jerry spends his time trying to become a scribbler of dime-store trash:

It was gauny be a novel about a scabrous private eye. My hero – or anti-hero – was a youthful but disillusioned cool due of Skarrisich extraction who is at hame in all scenarios and well able to handle firearms, throwing knives, sophisticated women, corrupt practices, femme fatales and sultry beauties; unarmed combat, corporate consigner, wiseguy cops and shady financiers, corrupt politicians, racist immigration politics; in short, miscellaneous hoodlums and a host of luscious lassies. It would be a readable yarn but a fucking ripsnorter of a movie, guaranteed. (p. 42)

Clearly we are in the presence of "scabrous" pastiche here, but the stale familiarity of these themes, phrases and situations also serves as a comforting zone of recognition for Kelman's most profoundly dislocated character. His alter ego may be "at home in all scenarios" but Jerry most definitely is not. His American experience is skewed by his official status as an "alien" required to hold and display a Class III "Red

Card" warning the public of his unsound views (libertarian socialist) and lack of religious faith. Obligated to produce his Red Card in ordinary social situations such as pubs, Jerry can never truly belong or blend in. Having just ordered a drink, he imagines the barman sizing him up: "I caught him examining me, gauging what I was, who I was, why the hell I had come to his bar. I resisted winking when he knew I had caught him in the act" (p. 9). As the silent interrogation develops, it gains an outlandish momentum:

I knew he was placing bets with himself: 8 to 5 this guy with the funny voice is a conman, evens he is on the run, 4s an unfrocked priest. But I warnt no christian never mind no catholic christian. And if he read my mind I would get accused of blasphemy and he would fill me full of holes and be awarded the congressional medal for services to the almighty while I would be buried at the crossroads, a lonesome coyote growling. (p. 9)

What begins as Jerry feeling scrutinised and "othered" flips into another colourfully trite attack on red-state Americana, as though the subject of the barman's searching gaze returns it with a blast of projected narrowness. The isolation ensured by his Red Card seems to give Jerry license to inhabit a world of his own unchallenged prejudice, a quarantined republic of one with no aliens or dissent.

In his study of the British spy thriller, Michael Denning notes that "the novel of espionage is the tale of the boundary between nations and cultures, and the spy acts as a defender or subverter of the nation in the face of the other, the alien".⁸ Jerry explodes this paradigm from within, a proudly "non-integratit unassimilatit member of the alienigenae" (p. 151) who subverts and scrambles every stable identity available to him (political, national, linguistic), while employed to police the boundaries of a homeland which refuses to accept him. His restlessly fluid lingo marks out his placeless condition, but also his linguistic freedom and mobility, crossing demotic Scottish (or "Skarrisch") language with cartoonish American slang borrowed from pulp westerns, Warner Brothers and the hustler yarns of Damon Runyon. We form the impression that Jerry would prefer to live in the romantic, over-coloured America of these fictions rather than the heavily policed and bureaucratised society in which he finds himself escorting down-and-outs to "Patriot Holding Centres". (The warped image of post-9/11 America present

in the novel owes something to Kafka's own woozy picture in *Amerika*, clearly referenced on the cover of *Careful*, which has the Statue of Liberty wielding a sword of justice instead of the torch of liberty.)

And yet the strong realist dimension of Kelman's project is not fully in abeyance. Nearly all the novel's comic riffing on "Uhmerka" has an acid sincerity, aiming to expose an underlying truth. When Jerry has his mind on commercial success, he caters to the bigotry and machismo of his imagined audience:

My private-eye hero carried a pistol. He traveled on buses and subways and was aye engaged in menacing life-threatening scenarios that arose unexpectedly. Other males would sit there pretending to mind their ayn business; no so much cowards as unheroic individuals. But the private-eye feller, he would calmly yawn and take out his pistol, gie it a brief wiggle, and save the lives of sundry auld ladies and infirm gents who wuz being robbed, tortured, vilified and generally castigated by teams of cauld-blooded druggies of unknown extraction – barbarian furnirs, swarthy barbarian furnirs, savage swarthy barbarian furnirs, ones with beards, ones who had forfeited the right to breathe in this man's army. (p. 164)

As the xenophobia of this description snowballs into hyperbole, we realise we are once again in the midst of Jerry's "ironic savagery" (p. 180), constructing a crass stereotype of Hollywood stereotype – though these images also evoke "real" schlock fodder such as *Delta Force*, *Rambo* and *Dirty Harry*. When in earnest, Jerry imagines writing stories to negate these racist and militarist fantasies, righteous fictions expressing and affirming the views stigmatised by his "Red Card":

My hero was nay the usual apolitical right-wing hollywood prick, his sympathies went to the underdog, he was anti-cops and anti-robbers, anti-authoritarian, he was also a good anarchist; anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-racist, pro-justice, pro-truth, pro-asylum seeker, pro-immigration, pro-equality – christ I could go on forever. And the place to do it was the book. (p. 67)

There is, here, a gently self-mocking resonance of Kelman's own literary politics, which take aim at the typologies richly evident in much genre fiction ("within the process of art more and more human beings start being "discovered" as particulars, witnessed as individuals ... and in the far-off future there won't be any

racism, no sexism, no prejudice, no imperialism, no colonisation ...".⁹) But spinning virtuous yarns does little to combat the oppressions and "horror" of everyday experience, and Jerry struggles to enact his principles in any plausible alternative reality, instead taking refuge in satirical fantasy.

David Trotter observes that "the years between 1900 and 1914 saw the establishment, not at all coincidentally, of the British spy novel and the British secret service. Both invested heavily in fantasy. Indeed, they invested in the *same* fantasy, of an omnipotent German adversary. They invested in paranoia" (p. 142). A century later, Kelman takes aim at the lurid imaginings made commonplace in the global war on terror, and the centrality of social and ethnic distrust in everyday American life. The ideological function of early British spy fiction, says Trotter, was "to imagine a suspiciousness triggered early enough in the game to avert catastrophe", detecting and preventing the enemy plot (p. 143). In Kelman's novel, patriotic suspicion has become its own complacent ambience, the banality of permanently heightened alert. In place of the charismatic special agent, dramatic interest is invested in the everyday tedium of ordinary security workers trying to make it to the end of the shift. Jerry and his colleagues inhabit a world of vigilance so all-pervasive and institutionalized as to erode its triggering potential, scrambling the very intelligibility of action. Drafting his potboiler, Jerry struggles with the most basic mechanics of making things happen: the "hero guy ... was aye gauny be in situations where he had to take to his heels and I couldna get it to come out in a natural way, it aye sounded stupid: "he went flying down the stairs three steps at a time", "flying down the steps three rows at a time". All that kind of keech" (p. 48). With state imperatives focused on the correct *response* to suspicion – dutifully saying something after you see something – free action is subordinated to the hyperactive detection of abnormality, otherness, the unnatural. Instead of motivating action, the self-confirmations of suspicion generate a closed reality of stasis and isolation, where a priori distrust can never encounter a "reality" which is not the product of its own determinations, prejudice affirming itself.

In place of the "abnormal event" which disturbs the expected order, the dramatic focus of Kelman's most surreal novel is, in fact, conformity: the self-affirmations of suspicion and the exclusion of otherness. In this heightened

version of post 9/11 America, *not* to share in xenophobic paranoia is highly suspicious, and "furnirs" must take particular care to "act normal" amidst constant scrutiny. With nowhere else to belong, Jerry's inner citadel of suspicion serves as a mental "homeland" he can police on his own terms. It is only in the "ironic savagery" of his fantasy life, a world beyond the gaze of heroic spies and ordinary barmen alike, that we encounter a space of freedom worth defending.

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Notes

- 1 Kirsty McNeill, "Interview with James Kelman", *Chapman*, 57 (1989), pp. 1–9 (p. 9).
- 2 The one clear exception is Kelman's novel *Mo said she was quirky* (2013), in which a possible sighting of the protagonist's long-lost brother is a key preoccupation (though not quite a "search" plot).
- 3 Jerry Palmer, "Thrillers" in *Popular Fiction and Social Change*, ed. by Christopher Pawling (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 76–98 (p. 76).
- 4 James Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004), p. 105.
- 5 David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 145.
- 6 James Kelman, "Some thoughts that morning" in *The Good Times* (London: Vintage, 1998), pp. 180–87 (p. 183).
- 7 For more on the novel's blur of languages and vernacular effects, see Scott Hames, "Kelman's Art-Speech" in *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, ed. Scott Hames (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 86–98.
- 8 Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 13–14.
- 9 James Kelman, *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural & Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), p. 14.



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