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Not Winnin' Anymore: *Boys from the Blackstuff* and the Literature of Recession

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Abstract

This article addresses representations of working-class life in Britain during the 1980s; specifically, experiences of recession, unemployment, and difficulty in the workplace. The primary text considered is the television drama series *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982), written by Alan Bleasdale; more briefly this is linked to James Kelman's novel *The Busconductor Hines* (1984), and to the post-industrial landscape of the poetry of Sean O'Brien. In the wake of the socialist criticism of Raymond Williams, the article explores how the "Industrial Novel" of the 1840s may be succeeded, in the Thatcher years, by the literature of recession and deindustrialization.

Keywords: *Boys from the Blackstuff*, Alan Bleasdale, James Kelman, Raymond Williams, Thatcherism

Unimportant Sunsets

The English poet Sean O'Brien (b.1952) grew up in Hull and later moved to Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The North of England is a significant setting for much of his poetry. His first collection of poems, *The Indoor Park*, was published in 1983. In the memorable poem "The Park by the Railway," the narrative voice asks:

Where should we meet but in this shabby park
Where the railings are missing and the branches black?
Industrial pastoral, our circuit
Of grass under ash, long-standing water
And unimportant sunsets flaring up
Above the half-dismantled fair. Our place
Of in-betweens, abandoned viaducts
And modern flowers, dock and willowherb,
Lost mongrels, birdsong scratching at the soot
Of the last century. Where should we be
But here, my industrial girl? Where else
But in this city beyond conservation?

(O'Brien 3)

The poem announces O'Brien's devotion to a landscape of disused railway lines and overgrown pitheads. It gives us an "industrial pastoral" of the deindustrializing age, as the iconography of the industrial world is mingled with a nature that reclaims it. In this vista of abandoned viaducts, ash and soot, the natural world itself is post-

industrial. Birdsong sounds in the wake of pollution; “modern flowers” are weeds proper to bombsites and derelict zones. With a characteristic breadth of historical vision, O’Brien in this poem conjures a romance of this transitional landscape.

This fragment of verse offers us a way in to the terrain of this essay, which concerns the depiction of working-class experience in British writing in the 1980s. Primarily, we shall look at the celebrated television drama *Boys from the Blackstuff*, scripted by Alan Bleasdale and first screened in autumn 1982. The five-part series quickly became famous as a response to poverty, recession, and unemployment, and became one of the iconic instances of literary dissidence in the 1980s. As such, it was also viewed as a cultural response to Thatcherism.

Thatcherism is a term that covers much territory. It may be defined as a political movement; a body of ideas; or a process of economic and social change. However it is defined, it was powered by, represented or spearheaded by, Margaret Thatcher, the first woman Prime Minister of the UK, who held that office from 1979 to 1990. Her administrations pursued a range of policies, some of them – such as the exploitation of military adventure overseas – not immediately pertinent to the present inquiry. More evidently pertinent was the running down of traditional industries, primary and secondary, from coal and steel to shipbuilding and car production, often described as the loss of UK’s manufacturing base; attacks on trade union rights and aggressive confrontation with trade unions, most extensively in the miners’ strike of 1984-5. Thatcherism commenced with economic recession. Jobs were lost, unemployment soared. The government wanted to encourage different kinds of businesses, notably financial services and leisure industries. The North of England, as well as Scotland and Wales, were disproportionately affected, leading to the perception of a North-South divide.

Raymond Williams (1921-1988) was the most eminent socialist cultural thinker in post-war Britain. He gave much attention to the connections between literary history and social history, in a manner on terms with, but also somewhat independent of, the Marxist tradition. Writing about the mid-nineteenth century, Williams influentially identified the Industrial Novel as a subgenre in its own right, a place where social conditions, indeed the condition of England, were discussed. “There are the facts of the new society,” Williams wrote, “and there is this structure of feeling” (99). If what Williams was able to perceive in retrospect was the emergence and clustering of the industrial novel, then perhaps some more recent texts can be partly identified as a literature of deindustrialization, or of profound change in the character of industry in Britain. The landscape of Sean O’Brien’s poem is a bleak but a lyrical vision of that.

We can also find a historical perspective not from the nineteenth century but from the other end, by registering that Thatcherism was not an isolated, temporary phenomenon but an avatar of a whole new era of global neo-liberal consensus – as traced, for instance, by the Marxist historian Perry Anderson in *New Left Review*.

In 2000, Anderson could assess the world order of the previous decade as “the virtually uncontested consolidation, and universal diffusion, of neo-liberalism.” In this context,

European social-democracy, having taken power across the [European] Union, has responded to continent-wide slow growth and high unemployment by across-the-board moves towards an American model – accelerating deregulation and privatization not only of industries but also social services, often well beyond the limits of previous conservative regimes. Britain had a head-start in deregulation, but Germany and Italy are now bidding to catch up, and France lags more in words than deeds. (Anderson section 3)

In short, American socio-economic models had become increasingly influential even in a Europe typically thought to differ from them, and Thatcher's Britain had been in the vanguard.

More locally, this pattern was traced also by the critic Dominic Head, who in the mid-2000s offered a level-headed assessment of the long-term effects of Thatcherism – or whatever broader force it represents – on class identity in Britain:

In contemporary Britain, poverty is no longer the province of wage-laborers, whose toil is defended by an effective union, and ameliorated by factory clubs and socials. Changes that have taken place since the rise of Thatcherism – the curbing of union powers, the imposition of strict productivity regimes, and the disappearance of traditional working-class communities – have meant that there is no longer a collective working-class experience with which to identify (as there still was in the 1960s and 1970s). (229-30)

Head does not mean that inequality and poverty do not persist in Britain; on the contrary, he insists that inequality has worsened since 1979. He is pointing to the fact that the structures of such inequality, and the identities and cultures associated with them, have changed in this period. The working-class identities associated with manufacturing industry, he indicates, have been displaced on one hand by the growth of a salaried middle class, whose aspirations and cultural norms have become dominant in British society; and on the other by an underclass, consisting of non-unionized, menial cleaners, service workers and casual laborers. This is the emerging social dispensation of neo-liberalism. *Boys from the Blackstuff* clearly belongs to an earlier point in this process: a moment when shockwaves of high unemployment were hitting areas of Britain during the first Thatcher recession; and in which the resurgent Conservative Party, captured by the New Right, was determined to deal devastating blows to the labor movement which still hoped to stop it in its tracks.

A Realist Intention

It was at this specific juncture that *Boys from the Blackstuff* became an iconic television broadcast and an emblematic text of its moment. The program followed Alan Bleasdale's earlier, longer film, *The Blackstuff* (1978), in which the main characters

were introduced: a group of tarmac layers and builders from Liverpool who travel to undertake a job in Middlesbrough, and wind up losing their life savings as well as their jobs. This pilot set the conditions for the five-part series that followed, which commences with all five main characters queueing to claim benefits in the DHSS office. The opening scene of the series bids to be representative and emblematic, with each character representing themselves in the most typical way. Chrissie Todd is lugubriously humorous, and even his name – Christopher Robin – suggests gentleness. He comes here for the company and the attractive surroundings, he wryly insists later, and next time the dole snoopers come round, he will bake a cake. Yosser Hughes barely contains his aggression, threatening to knock the clerk into the disability department despite the iron grille separating them. The elderly George Malone is eagerly willing to work though he has turned up in the pajamas befitting his invalid state. And the scene culminates in Dixie Dean's laconic assertion to the clerk that "no one on the dole counts, friend" (Bleasdale 10). The drama series here can be seen seeking to establish representative voices for a socially specific situation.

Formally speaking, *Boys from the Blackstuff* was essentially a piece of television realism, with a fairly conventional use of mise-en-scène, camerawork and editing, spiced and heightened with handheld camera, location shooting and point-of-view shots. Nothing demonstrates the conventional character of realism more readily than the unreality of yesterday's realism, and *Boys from the Blackstuff* itself now looks less gritty, more stagey than it did. Yet within the state of genre conventions in its own moment, the program would have been considered uncompromisingly realistic for a realistic television drama series.

That said, how should we situate *Boys from the Blackstuff*, and its supposed realism, historically? For one thing it represents the legacy of a particular age of television drama. Among the exemplars in this story are the editions of the BBC's *Wednesday Play* that ran from 1964 to 1970, most famously and influentially Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* in 1966. Loach and his collaborators, including Jim Allen and Tony Garnett, were also responsible for subsequent celebrated television drama, notably *The Big Flame*, a 1969 drama set in the Liverpool docks, and *Days of Hope*, a 1975 mini-series about working-class history culminating in the 1926 general strike. Alan Bleasdale's pilot film *The Blackstuff* was part of a tradition of the quality television film, related to these earlier instances though less obviously political in intent. The series was thus partly a continuation, or a late-flowering fruit, of a particular conjuncture: the admission of writers, actors and directors from the political left to the channels of public service broadcasting, in the 1960s and 1970s. A public-service ethos, and the greater freedom for maneuver then available in the BBC, gave these figures a degree of license to make committed and egalitarian drama.

The idea of realism is a recurrent one in representations of working-class life. But it merits closer consideration. In the 1970s, the avant-garde journal *Screen* promoted an aesthetic of political modernism, in which realism could be presented as a limited

form. For theorists like Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath, realism appeared a naïve mode in its claims to capture or render the world, even reactionary in its implication of a stable and unchangeably material environment. In a partial replay of the polemics of Bertolt Brecht against Georg Lukàcs – themselves republished by New Left Books in the 1977 collection *Aesthetics and Politics* – realism was associated with the cultivation of a passive audience response; avant-garde techniques and alienation effects with a more productive and energizing reaction.

Into this debate, Raymond Williams made an intervention in a talk given in 1976, later republished as “A Defence of Realism.” In boldly defending the realist dramatic project, Williams also provided some historical criteria which help us to situate *Boys from the Blackstuff*. He noted the importance of a contemporary setting, and a deliberate contemporaneity is part of Bleasdale’s intent in the series: it is insistently concerned with how conditions are right now, sometimes in contrast with how things were until the day before yesterday. The print edition of Bleasdale’s scripts announces on the back cover that “*Boys from the Blackstuff* catches the time. It is a television classic for the 1980s.” The program could be juxtaposed, historically, with the Falklands conflict earlier in 1982, which had done more than any other event to improve support for the first Thatcher government, despite the continuation of the conditions depicted in Bleasdale’s series. From the Roman poet Juvenal we have inherited the phrase “bread and circuses,” signifying the distractions that a government gives to the populace to keep them occupied. Against the bread and circuses of a royal wedding and foreign war, *Boys from the Blackstuff* pitted stale bread and building sites.

Still more relevant here is Williams’ observation that realism involved “a conscious movement towards social extension,” following

the need to extend the actions of tragedy from persons of rank, to whom by convention and precept tragedy had hitherto largely been confined, to – as it was put – “your equals, our equals.” This movement of social extension – “let not your equals move your pity less” – is a key factor in what we can now identify as a realist intention. (228)

Williams proposed more specifically that television had lately taken on this role. It is still visibly part of the meaning of *Boys from the Blackstuff* that it seeks to extend dramatic space to include figures who are not included in, or do not get a proper hearing in, other accounts of society. This is quite explicit in the text of the program – from Dixie’s opening comment that you are nobody if you are on the dole, through Yosser’s maniacal obsession with being noticed.

Indeed the extension of, not so much sympathy, as human recognition, was part of Alan Bleasdale’s stated intention as far back as November 1978, in a letter to English Regions drama proposing a series to follow up the original one-off TV play:

I think it very important right now to write about the Dole as seen from the point of view of those who are on it, and to side with them against the people

and papers who would like us to believe, despite the million and a half out of work and mass redundancies at every opportunity, that the majority of the unemployed are malingerers and rogues. (Millington 121)

That letter was written six months before Margaret Thatcher's first general election victory. As Bob Millington has pointed out, there was a kind of grim fortune in the delay between this proposal and the production and broadcast (122). The program would come to seem far more topical in autumn 1982, when unemployment had passed not one and a half million but three million – a figure widely considered to be politically unsustainable. In that sense the contemporaneity of the program is a happy or unhappy accident.

Tamper and Grit

It is true that some of the program's impact derives from its mimetic power, and this leads to effects worth observing in detail: particularly in the portrayal of the physicality of poverty. We observe sheer material limits being reached when Angie, Chrissie's wife, complains that last night there were three slices of stale bread, and in their absence the children have nothing for breakfast. Or when she wonders whether the young children are going to be "wearing hand-me-downs at eighteen and twenty":

What are we bringing them up for – and what is the point of livin' our lives when ... when ye' get up in the mornin' and it's all downhill from then on ... two ounces of spam and a quarter of brawn and any stale ... look!

She grabs a shoe from the side of the bed, turns it so that the sole faces Chrissie, then realizes that it's the wrong one. She hurls it away, and gets the other one. Chrissie laughs. She shows him the shoe. There is a hole in the shoe, temporarily filled with cardboard.

ANGIE. Look –

CHRISSIE. Yeah, well. Walk on one leg, you'll be alright. (143)

That same sense of the body itself as the first place of suffering or frustration is also visible in the world of work, and would-be work, itself, where Yosser utters some of Bleasdale's most famous lines as he follows a groundsman marking the touchline for a football pitch:

Gizza job, go on, gizzit ... gizza go, go on. I could do that. You only have to walk straight. I can walk straight, go on, gizza job, go on, gizza go. (152)

You only have to walk straight: the work which is unreachable manna to Yosser is a matter of the simplest physical activity, requires the simplest bodily qualification, yet remains tantalizingly unavailable. He says the same to the rent collector's minder, seizing the arm in which he bears a briefcase – "I could do that. I can carry things.

I've had practice" (161) – and even repeats the motif to the men who repossess his house near the end of his episode.

The series repeatedly stages the sheer intransigence of the material world in conditions of extreme poverty. It is not merely social relations that are hard, but their effect on the body and one's relation to the physical environment. Karl Marx wrote in the 1844 Paris Manuscripts of the alchemical powers of money, which could overcome distances or convert personal limitations into advantages:

The stronger the power of my money, the stronger am I. The properties of money are my, the possessor's, properties and essential powers. ... If I desire a meal or want to take the mail coach because I am not strong enough to make the journey on foot, money can procure me both the meal and the mail coach, i.e., it transfers my wishes from the realm of imagination, it translates them from their existence as thought, imagination and desires into their *sensuous, real* existence, from imagination into life, and from imagined being into real being. In this mediating role money is the *truly creative* power. (Marx 377-8)

Boys from the Blackstuff is a reminder of the grim opposite of this: the impotence of impoverishment, in which the material world cannot be bent one's own way but appears as a series of local obstacles and wearying barriers. In that sense, the criticism of realism as enshrining the unalterable solidity of the world misses the mark here: the intransigence of the world is part of the political point, the condition that is being exposed – to an audience for whom the world may be, for Marx's reasons, more malleable.

All this gains special pathos from the fact that the central male characters have all been manual laborers, men whose living came from working upon and transforming matter. Chrissie's speech to Angie at the climax of episode 3 voices this very explicitly, perhaps all too explicitly. "I had a job, Angie," he reminds her:

It wasn't a bad job, and I was good at it. I laid the roads, girl. *I laid the roads*. Motorways, laybys, country lanes. ... I could tamper and grit like nobody you ever saw. Nobody put the black stuff down quite like me. (141)

This celebration of skilled labor is more sentimental than most of Bleasdale's writing in this series. But perhaps its hollowness can be viewed as symptomatic: this is the kind of talk that has replaced the action Chrissie describes. In the same scene, following Chrissie's suggestion that she walk on one leg, Angie accuses him of making a joke of everything:

It's not funny, it's not friggin' funny. I've had enough of that – if you don't laugh, you'll cry – I've heard it for years – this stupid soddin' city's full of it – well, why don't you cry – why don't you scream – why don't you fight back, you bastard. (143)

In fact, Chrissie's humor is lugubrious and sarcastic rather than merely brittle or evasive; and when she repeatedly demands that he "fight back" (136, 143), it is hard to know what she actually wants him to do. His shotgun slaughter of the animals he keeps in the back garden, notionally as a sudden harvest of food for the cupboard, is the unhinged result of her demands.

Yet Angie's accusation carries some power, because it is generalized to *this stupid soddin' city*. She accuses a whole town of taking refuge from oppression in humor, sublimating pain into laughter. She alerts us to the way in which talk can replace action, eloquence displace energy – just as it does in Chrissie's statement about working on the roads, even if this is sentimental rather than comic. As a result, the literature of impoverishment is not necessarily impoverished, at the level of language. On the contrary, Scouse humor here, and the often crackling repartee scripted by Bleasdale, provides an echo of what is a familiar paradox in Irish writing, such as the theater of Synge and O'Casey: a plenitude of linguistic wealth that compensates for material poverty. As Terry Eagleton has written of those dramatists, "verbal profusion" is "a utopian compensation for the barrenness of their reality"; "the more men and women are victimized by history, the more a self-consciously poetic speech freewheels impotently around the action" (313).

The one character in *Boys from the Blackstuff* who unites eloquence and action is Snowy, the revolutionary who features in the first episode. He is given not only to diatribes about police brutality and the potential rise of an English fascism – statements which the other characters mock, as though they must be relativized into their proper dialogic place – but also to perorations about the pride of work, the value of traditional craft and skill in building. He would plaster for nothing if his political principles allowed, he says:

Y'know, doin' something' y' good at – there's nothin' like it. Standin' there in the mornin' facin' four empty walls – an' then goin' home at night with the plaster all dry and smooth – an' the bit y've just done all wet an' shinin' ... That's why I don't mind workin' on me own, if the truth be told, 'cos if there's one thing I can't stand, it's workin' with someone who hasn't got no pride ... An' funny enough, they're the kind that never want to come out on strike. (34)

He takes the melancholy Chrissie to see a wall of tiles laid in the late nineteenth century. Snowy insists that "We're all capable of work like that. Craftsmanship doesn't die out in people, Chrissie. We can all do good jobs, but we're not allowed to" (36) – explaining that some bosses do not want to take him on because the high quality of his work makes him slower. We finally see Snowy etching his own name into the corner of a wall he has plastered, on the model of an old master. Snowy is thus probably the one character in the series who manages to engage with the world in a fulfilling way, working on raw material in what he, let alone anyone else, would point to as an example of unalienated labor. But this character, having been given

his say and allowed to set an example, immediately perishes while fleeing the officers of the Fraud Department.

Words to that Effect

This motif of materiality can be seen as an aspect of the theme of realism. Yet Raymond Williams' insistence was also the Brechtian one that realism itself is a diverse, mutable practice. And in fact *Boys from the Blackstuff* deserves to be seen in this way. For it is looser than a slice of dour naturalism; its tones include black comedy and absurdity. This last is most notable in the fraud investigation offices themselves, where in episode three we watch a series of bizarre exchanges between various officers and their administrator. As the main characters present themselves at the office for retribution, she is apt to decide their fates on a whim, suddenly overriding her colleagues, while she assigns another officer, Moss, to various tasks which she knows frustrate him. The effect of these is not documentary realism but satire; or perhaps something odder still, a dislocated world of misdirected energies, random decisions and perverse bureaucracy.

Something equally disturbing is presented in the fourth episode, "Yosser's Story." Yosser is seen to undergo a kind of mental deterioration after the pilot film, *The Blackstuff*, in which it is his money-making scheme that goes wrong. When he arrives on the building site in episode one, it is as a harbinger of trouble. The other men groan at the sight of him swooping down the slope, followed, as ever, by his obedient young children. "Gizza job," he tells the contractor, Malloy, and starts work on a wall which is so slapdash that the builder tells him, "Son, the last time you laid bricks was when you had a Lego set" (43). Malloy is head-butted for his trouble – for Yosser is not only disturbed but dangerous. He is the only one of the men who carries a real threat of violence: he perhaps fulfils Angie's request to Chrissie to "fight back." But fighting in this way cannot ultimately win the day. Yosser's episode traces a downward spiral from an already low point. He has already lost his job; he now loses his wife, and then loses his children to social services while being brutally beaten by police. He descends to the level of a vagrant, and in a tragicomic moment of non-recognition he literally cannot be arrested despite his best efforts at smashing a shop window. Yosser finally attempts to kill himself in a lake, and is ambiguously denied this solace when rescued by police.

Yosser's story is less urban realism pure and simple, rather another strange hybrid of this basic mode with other tones. It is significant for instance that the episode opens with a dream sequence, in which Yosser sees himself and his children drowning in the same lake in which he ultimately makes his suicide bid; other characters, including his destitute contemporaries, float by in punts – dressed, the script tells us, for the Henley Regatta. The episode thus starts in the realm of the surreal, though this is diegetically explained as we see Yosser waking in sweat and panic. But in a sense Yosser brings his own air of unreality to proceedings as a whole, whenever he appears in the series. Other characters have been affected by unemployment –

Chrissie driven to shoot his animals, George Malone rising from his sick bed to arrive at the dole queue in pajamas – but Yosser has been the most deeply warped on the inside. We see this in his technique of bricklaying in the first episode, but we also hear it, increasingly, in his speech. His discourse is driven to repetition – sometimes of the deadpan refrain “Gizza job, I could do that,” which became the series’ call-sign; still more often a paranoiac reiteration of his own name – “I’m Yosser Hughes” – as though this too is about to be taken away from him. By the end of episode four, he himself has removed it. Sitting in heavy rain in Williamson Square opposite the Liver Building, he again encounters the Glaswegian wino he conversed with earlier. “Don’t I know you from somewhere?” asks the vagrant. Yosser has punctuated the entire episode with the phrase “I’m Yosser Hughes”: now he only mumbles “I’m ... I’m ... I’m wet” (183).

Along with this manic assertion of identity, Yosser also brings a strange brand of wordplay: a fantastic and unpredictable humor in the old sense of that noun. In episode three he is called into the fraud office, and lets it rip:

YOSSER. *And* – on Malloy’s site that particular day, the day in question, in fact, no money parted company to or from anyone. Who was there. When I was there. No money came my way. Not to my knowledge. Not when I was there. And I should know. Being there. And being me. (*He laughs, and stops dead.*) Malloy on no occasion never said to me, “Here y’are, touch for that.” (*Makes a movement with his hand indicating money being passed.*)

ASSISTANT. That’s a double negative.

YOSSER. Yeah well there’s two of you isn’t there? And, as a matter of fact, I was there on a trial basis, but left after one wobbly wall and a short exchange of words, or words to that effect. (112-3)

Some of Yosser’s speech here is a pastiche of bureaucracy, or of the constable with his notebook – “on Malloy’s site that particular day, the day in question, in fact” – though it is also marked by oddities, like money “parting company” rather than, more idiomatically, “changing hands.” His speech becomes staccato as he jerkily gropes after qualifications and relevant additions – “Who was there. When I was there. No money came my way. Not to my knowledge. Not when I was there.” And he also plays on words, with a nervous comedy: “a short exchange of words, or words to that effect,” and the terrific illogic, almost worthy of Flann O’Brien, of a double negative to serve two listeners. But we do not read this as the detached wit of a man in control of the discursive situation; rather as the involuntary incoherence of a man whose wits are leaving him, and who is discovering accidental comedy in the ruins of his reason.

Certain Items Transpire

Yosser Hughes plainly dramatizes the connection between social breakdown and personal breakdown. It is here that the series most closely resembles the fiction

of another of the greatest chroniclers of the British working class in the Thatcher era: the Glaswegian novelist James Kelman. His novel *The Busconductor Hines* (1984) outdoes even *Boys from the Blackstuff* in its fixation on material limit, the small comforts and enduring discomforts of relative poverty. Scene after scene describes the maneuvers of Robert Hines, his wife, and their young child around their tiny flat. The novel does not directly concern deindustrialization, in that its characters do not work in the primary or manufacturing industries being run down by the Conservative government; they drive and conduct buses for the Glasgow Corporation. This novel's world is not quite one defined by unemployment, as is Bleasdale's Liverpool, but rather by the difficulty of work, its undesirability and frustrations. Hines' constant risk of losing his job, for poor attendance, tardiness or insubordination, is matched only by his constant desire to be shot of it. He and his wife Sandra discuss whether it would be better for him to be on the "broo" or dole than to keep trying to make the best of this soul-destroying occupation.

Towards the end of the novel Hines becomes the center of a minor industrial dispute over a point of procedure – he refuses to attend a disciplinary hearing in his own time, rather than in working hours – and a strike is called to defend the principle of his stand. Here, briefly, the novel swings closest to the political claims of Snowy Malone in the first episode of *Boys from the Blackstuff*: that it is possible, and more necessary than ever in this historical climate, for working people to stand together and face down employers; that, as Snowy puts it, "if y' give in y' dead" (37). Yet at the climactic moment Hines does, it seems, give in: he abruptly declares to employers and union representatives that we should "call it quits," announcing "I'm away home; that's me resigned" (Kelman 211). There is something about Hines which does not seem to belong to the collectivity of the union, or even the bus garage or canteen. He is a thoroughly working-class character, and sees the world in terms of deprivation and hardship; but he is also a loner, with some of the perversity and inner anger of Alan Sillitoe's Arthur Seaton, or of the existentialists to whom Kelman was soon compared. In a sense, Kelman refuses to give an audience to the working-class protagonist that it might want or expect. He is humorous, gritty, resilient; but he is also stubborn, opaque, thoughtful. And like Yosser, his hardship is not just external, but imprinted on the inside, in the consciousness to which the narrative gives us access. In the course of this novel a good deal of time is spent hearing these circling thoughts, which have nowhere to go and no issue. Here is one instance:

His goal was twofold: to obtain a PSV licence, to acquire a sum of money – a sum of money which while of unknown extension was nevertheless taken for granted as settled in some unshadowy region as for example consider the striving to a goal where the goal lies in between the lines while the lines themselves are the striving and can produce the goal seemingly in themselves but not really in themselves for the goal lies in between and though some daft cunts have no knowledge of this they assume its existence in accordance

with the existence of the lines. Now this is fucking nonsense of course because there doesn't have to be any in between at all, there can be nothing whatsoever. ...

Now: let us take it slowly, slowly and calmly. One might start off by too late it is too late, too fucking late, it is too fucking late for the shite, for this imbecilic carry on; it is too late. The problem is that it is too late. 5 years is not 10 minutes. This is the problem. Hines really does know it now, at long last, he is in full realization of it, as he has been before right enough it has to be admitted at this stage of the game that eh he has known it before. He used to know it. He gets jolts. Jolts come along. Hines gets jolted. Certain items transpire. (Kelman 97-8)

Swearing is sometimes euphemistically referred to as “industrial language.” Writing fiction for a small publishing house, Kelman had more license to use heavy industrial language than did Bleasdale. Otherwise, we notice here the strange mixed voice characteristic of Kelman’s protagonists. There is a peculiar formality – “He conducted himself in a manner such that, his method of being, it accorded to certain factors. Certain factors appear to have governed his movements.” Yet there is also a halting syntactic uncertainty: short sentence, unfinished sentences, thoughts that stop. In both respects, in fact, the passage is reminiscent of Yosser’s speech quoted above. Alternatively, some sentences get much too long: “as for example consider the striving to a goal where the goal lies in between the lines while the lines themselves are the striving and can produce the goal seemingly in themselves but not really in themselves for the goal lies in between,” and so on.

In writing like this, Kelman indicates that a working man living a hand to mouth existence in a tenement flat is not necessarily a simple being. He grants this figure a complexity of consciousness and language, and this is a polemical gesture against a literary tradition that Kelman believes has excluded working people or made them figures of fun. To that extent, we are again in the realm of Raymond Williams’ historic project of realism: the extension of attention, the insistence on the detail and value of lives further down the class structure.

But in Kelman’s hands this is a mixed blessing, a pyrrhic victory. In being granted inner complexity, his protagonist does not gain a capacity for serene contemplation, or a vivid sense of life’s richness, as if it was Virginia Woolf without the neurosis. He gains confusion, mental struggle; the internal complexity is not so much rich as tortuous, labyrinthine. To be revealed as fully human is not that much of a blessing, if the conditions in which one lives make it painful to occupy that humanity. In this sense Kelman’s figure, like Yosser, perhaps represents a limit to the principle announced by Williams. The franchise of representation has been extended, but the franchise of social equality has not. The project of realism may be to give dignity to characters like this – but perhaps society as a whole makes such dignity unavailable, whatever the intentions of the form.

To watch Yosser Hughes' and Rob Hines' meandering, frustrated monologues is to see a representation of working-class life that is not a worthy naturalism, but closer to the arbitrary, repetitive, self-molesting discourses we encounter in Samuel Beckett. (That *Boys from the Blackstuff* features characters called Malloy and Malone, however, is probably an accident of geography rather than a literary allusion.) It is also to see a connection between social ills and psychic illness. It is significant that these men are not simply presented as hardy fellows, nor as nobly defeated proletarians, but as people whose inner lives have been damaged by their outer existence. Both Bleasdale and Kelman can plausibly be seen to posit blighted mental health as a result of contemporary socio-economic conditions; uniting private and public, inner and outer lives.

These Days

In one sense *Boys from the Blackstuff's* image of despair and breakdown has lost its immediacy: it has become a television legend, a late nugget in the golden age of BBC drama. In a different sense it is as striking now as it was then, precisely because Thatcherism is now so profoundly part of what shapes our historical horizon. It is not only that Thatcherism would be hard to undo, in any practical sense, but that it is now difficult to imagine the historical trajectory of contemporary Britain without it – to think counterfactually and entertain alternatives to the neo-liberal project with which the British state navigated that epoch of deindustrialization and structural change.

Among the most poignant scenes in Bleasdale's series is a moment not so much of personal trauma, but of broad historical analysis – when the Marxist Snowy passionately explains to his fellows:

SNOWY. ... I mean, it was easy to be a socialist when I was growin' up in the sixties, an' even f'most of the seventies. Everyone was a friggin' socialist then. It was fashionable. But it's not now ... Everythin's gone sour, everyone's lockin' the door, turnin' the other cheek, lookin' after number one. *But now's the time when we should all be together.* Now's the time when we *need* to be together, 'cos ... 'cos well we're not winnin' anymore. *Don't you see that?* (He pauses.) Like, that's all I'm sayin'.

CHRISSIE. (*Gently.*) Of course we see it.

JIMMY. And the last thing we need is t'be told about it, f'Christ's sake.

CHRISSIE. 'Cos deep down, most of us know it. But y'don't look that far, not these days. Not when y' scared Snowy. (29)

This exchange allows the radical his space, in a brief but serious historical analysis. The replies from the other characters are neither a ringing endorsement of his politics, nor a rejection of them: they accept the analysis – and it is moving to see their grudging, reflexive political solidarity with Snowy, despite the mockery of him – but by that very token identify themselves as victims who are unable to act on it.

Part of the success of *Boys from the Blackstuff* is this readiness to be melancholy; the absence of cheap uplift. And it shares this with Kelman, for whose fraying men there are never easy answers or really any answers at all; and with Sean O'Brien, with whom we started, for whom a deindustrializing landscape might carry romance, but would not promise any victory or necessary bright tomorrow. The texts considered in this essay are not impoverished in a literary sense, but they offer no unreal political riches either; no fool's gold, just the black and blue stuff of a history which may not yet have done its worst.

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