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"To exult and sing out" Stevenson's Song and the Song of a Divergent Scotland: Ronald Frame's *The Lantern Bearers*

The Lantern Bearers de Ronald Frame : variations sur l'essai de Robert Louis Stevenson et sur le thème de l'Écosse contemporaine

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“To exult and sing out” Stevenson’s Song and the Song of a Divergent Scotland: Ronald Frame’s *The Lantern Bearers*

The Lantern Bearers is the title both of an essay by Robert Louis Stevenson (1888) and a novel penned more than a century later by Ronald Frame (1999), another Scottish writer. There are differences between the two texts in terms of length or literary genre but they bear striking resemblances in their common concerns with art and memory. Stevenson’s essay begins with an autobiographical account of young boys’ activities on the east coast of Scotland before turning into a meditation on literature, and a redefinition of “true realism”. Frame’s narrative, on the other hand, revolves around the confessions of a music expert, Neil Pritchard. While the book that is required of him at the beginning of the novel is a biography of Euan Bone (a celebrated Scottish composer), the story ultimately presented to the reader takes the form of Pritchard’s own autobiography and the revelation of how he betrayed Bone thirty-five years earlier and stole the manuscript of his musical adaptation of Stevenson’s text. The fact that both texts should share the same title, and that the plot should centre on the events leading to the theft of the manuscript and its being restored to the public several decades later, attest to the central importance accorded to Stevenson’s text in the novel.

Contemporary Scottish writers very often engage in a process of re-writing Scotland in an endeavour to liberate it from the Victorian legacy. This involves, most particularly, the rejection of the influence of Walter Scott’s Romanticism and of the sentimentalism of the Kailyard novelists in order to redefine a more authentic and accurate notion of Scottishness. The purpose of the present study will therefore be twofold. It will first analyse the nature of the interplay between Stevenson’s and Frame’s texts to determine whether Frame’s re-writing of “The Lantern Bearers” is to be read as a criticism of, or as a tribute to, Stevenson’s essay. It will then consider whether Frame’s decision to centre his novel around a canonized Scottish writer indicates a desire to voice his own opinions

about the ongoing debate concerning Scottishness. Indeed, both extra- and intra-diegetic elements suggest the relevance of this question to a study of the novel. In the first place it is important to note that this is the first full-length novel by Frame to be set in Scotland. Secondly, bearing in mind that the novel itself was published in 1999—the very year of the first general election of the new Scottish Parliament—one must note that Neil Pritchard has expressly been asked by his editor to produce a biography which is not only intended to glorify Bone, but also celebrate his newly devolved country.

From the very beginning of the novel, even before the narrative itself commences, we are made aware of the importance of Stevenson's influence through intertextual references in the paratext. After the title of the novel comes a quotation from Stevenson's *Songs of Travel* which is the epigraph to the novel and to its 31st chapter. Not only are we permitted to witness the composition of *The Lantern Bearers* itself during the course of the novel, but we are also informed that Bone had already set some of Stevenson's poems to music and written an accompaniment to a stage production of *Treasure Island*. Finally, quotations from Stevenson's *Songs of Travel* and "Requiem" are engraved on Bone's and Maitland's memorial stones, causing Stevenson to appear as both the alpha and the omega of Frame's novel.

Despite the references to some of Stevenson's other works, allusions to "The Lantern Bearers" are clearly the most potent. In both texts, middle-aged narrators—one of whom is a novelist and literary critique, and the other a music expert—reminisce about their childhood in a specific Scottish seascape before engaging on a reflection about the nature of art, thus synthesising in one single text personal, parochial and universal elements. Both are indelibly impressed with an experience in their youth which only lasted a few weeks,¹ both have a tendency—as Stevenson confesses—to "withhold" what "[their] memory dwells upon the most" (*Essays*, p. 143), cherishing for a while the pleasure of secrecy before finally revealing their deepest, most intimate source of delight to their readers, the treasure that has been hidden under a coat or underneath a floorboard.

At first sight, Frame's novel might seem to focus more on the powerful evocation of childhood than on the celebration of imagination. This certainly seems to be the main interest in the eyes of Bone, for when he first describes it to Pritchard, he alludes only to the Victorian boys' seaside

1. In Stevenson's case, the experience may have been repeated several times over the years, nevertheless he insists on the fact that this lantern bearing season which is what his "memory dwells upon the most" merely lasted "a week or so of our two months' holiday there" (*Essays*, p. 143).

escapades, their lanterns and the stories they heard. A few pages later, the symbolism of the lanterns is decrypted for us but we are given the impression that this is an explanation given to us by the older Pritchard—who has come to grasp the true meaning of the essay and of Bone's creative process—rather than one Bone would have given to the fourteen-year-old Pritchard when they were working together. Several passages from the essay are actually quoted in the novel and these quotations seem to confirm the impression that the autobiographical dimension of Stevenson's text is the most fundamental since all the passages set to music by Bone concern the boys' adventures. Only when Pritchard reads the essay for himself do we find a quotation from—and not just a description of—the passages in which Stevenson abandons the autobiographical mode, in order to focus on the importance of imagination in man's life and art. And Pritchard underlines the fact that "Bone hadn't made any mention of that section to [him]. None of it appeared on the typed sheet of intended lyrics" (p. 121). This might deceive us into believing that the parallels between the essay and the novel are only of a rather superficial nature, that Bone's choice of this text is merely due to his fascination for the young boys he sees running on the beach from his window; and that Frame's novel echoes the essay only through its elegiac tone and because its hero is a young boy from the city spending his summer holidays at the seaside.

But there is a deeper meaning to this intertextual reference. Stevenson uses the lanterns that the boys hide under their coats as a symbol of man's imagination and we find that Frame does in fact deal with this other aspect of the text, in an albeit **less conspicuous but certainly no less meaningful** manner. For readers who are not familiar with Stevenson's essay, a few analyses of this metaphorical dimension of the lanterns are even provided in the novel:

The purpose of Stevenson's essay is to celebrate the poetry hidden in everybody's soul. It's precisely this element of resourceful creativeness, the author argues, which sustains us in the dull round of matter-of-fact existence. So-called realistic novels and plays are incomplete and one-sided if they ignore this vital secondary life taking place inside our heads. (p. 44)

The later portions turn to the subject of literary forms. Stevenson chastises novelists for toning life down to the grey and monochrome and matter-of-fact, for supplying such lack-lustre so-called heroes. Have they forgotten the vivid colours life once had for them? (p. 120)

Further on in the novel, passages from Bone's diary are quoted, in which we can see—in a much more elliptic and almost cryptic fashion—that

Bone is actually sensitive to that aspect of the essay, even if he hasn't mentioned it to Pritchard:

The L-B's

"*Lost Innocence*"

Needing to grow up. Disillusionment. (Corruption, of course.)

But the door has closed.

Only, in imagination... (The key to unlock the door.) (p. 187)

The idea of lost innocence is important in both texts. If we interpret it as a reference to sexual awakening, the theme is more fully developed in the novel than it is in the essay, in spite of Stevenson's allusions to the boys' inappropriate and indecent conversations. However Stevenson's essay rather suggests that this notion of lost innocence alludes to most adults' forgetfulness of their former capacity to be filled with wonder—the claim that imagination is the key to unlocking the door is definitely the crux of both texts. Moreover, the metaphor of singing and the suggested link between song and the power of imagination and poetry is recurrent in Stevenson's text and—unsurprisingly, given the plot of the novel—in Frame's too. According to Stevenson, "All life that is not merely mechanical is spun out of two strands: seeking for that bird and hearing him" (*Essays*, p. 146) and in *The Lantern Bearers*, the most intense experience of Pritchard's whole life is encapsulated within the few weeks he has spent singing for Bone or rather, letting Bone "charm music out of [him]" (p. 90) while Bone's life-long obsession has been to find "The voice. The one & only voice", "The original & archetype" (p. 187).

Yet Frame does more than just provide us with an analysis of Stevenson's text, or echo it occasionally through quotations or similar metaphors. His novel itself is a perfect illustration of what Stevenson insists genuine art should be. For Stevenson, "the man's true life, for which he consents to live, lies altogether in the field of fancy" (*Essays*, p. 148) and "no man lives in the external truth among salts and acids, but in the warm, phantasmagoric chamber of his brain, with the painted windows and storied walls" (p. 149). Because of the confessional mode of the novel and the intensity of Pritchard's feelings—which seem just as vivid as if he were still a teenage boy rather than a mature man remembering events that took place several decades earlier—the inner vision predominates over the description of external facts. There are many passages in which Neil's experience is described with either supernatural² or surreal images to the extent that sometimes reality seems to vanish completely:

2. Especially in passages in which Neil describes his singing and the time he spends in Slezer's Wark, saying for instance that Bone's music had been "spirited out of [his] own mouth" (p. 74), that

There wasn't any difference between what I visualised and the world called real. I was running along streets, past doorways and walls that might have been in Glasgow or in Auchendrenann, I was running through my dreams. (pp. 204–5)

I could conjure the music back now, every phrase of it. [...] I slipped between the notes, slithered in and out between the words, inhabiting the music completely. (p. 207)

In such passages, in which the text either explicitly insists on the predominance of the narrator's poetic inner vision over reality, or illustrates the way he creates a surreal world of his own, we clearly find an echo of Stevenson's theories about the imaginative dimension of "true realism".

In order to be faithful to "true realism" one must remember the inner fire of imagination but also that "the true realism, always and everywhere, is that of the poets: to find out where joy resides, and give it a voice far beyond singing. For to miss the joy is to miss all. [...] To one who does not comprehend the secret of the lanterns, the scene [...] is meaningless" (*Essays*, p. 149). This notion that joy is the quintessential aspect of true realism might seem to contradict any assertion that *The Lantern Bearers* meets Stevenson's criteria. Indeed, though Pritchard has undoubtedly been happy during the few weeks he spent with Bone, tragedy strikes more than once in the novel: when the young boy is banished from Slezer's Wark after his voice has broken, when his stealing of the manuscript leads to the separation of Bone and Maitland and when his unjustified accusations of child abuse lead to Bone's arrest and consequent death. And this is without even mentioning Pritchard's cancer and all the minor tragedies affecting the secondary characters, such as the divorce of Pritchard's parents and his mother's bitterness or the fact that his stay at his aunt's should have been traumatic enough for her to learn "how to be more protective of herself" (p. 167). There, we might be tempted to see a divergence between the essay and the novel but Stevenson never denied the existence of unhappiness and tragedy. On the contrary, the greatness of the true poet resides precisely in his capacity to discover the hidden spark of joy. Indeed there is a sense of unexpected magic and joy in some passages of the novel, for instance, when Pritchard leaves

"an energy that might have been angelic or devilish, [compelled his] voice a little higher and into more intimate disclosure" (p. 76), and that his days in Slezer's Wark were "an enchanted life" (p. 90) because everything there was "touched with the strange" (p. 95). As for the breaking of his voice, it is described as if "[he] had been possessed by some malevolent spirit determined to put an end to [his] pleasure, [his] charmed existence" (p. 136). The idea of the uncanny and allusions to some sort of *Doppelgänger* are also frequent when Neil alludes to his betrayal of the composer.

Auchendrenann, broken-hearted and having just committed his first crime, the stealing of the manuscript:

I had found the town grey, and I left it grey. [...] And then there was a very curious transformation. The sun appeared between lowering clouds, and the town—which was on the point of disappearing from view—turned from grey to silver. Auchendrennan shone—it dazzled—even against the vivid greens and blues, against the dark stormy sky arched over England and the fact of that constant concluding horizon. (p. 167)

Somehow, this magical light prefigures the optimistic mood of the final pages.

In Stevenson's essay, the bull's-eye lanterns are described as cheap objects which "smelled noisomely" and "never burnt right, though they would always burn our fingers" (*Essays*, p. 143) but they are the source of the boys' most intense experience of happiness and ultimately symbolize the burning flame of imagination buried inside every man. In Frame's novel, it is the manuscript—or rather Pritchard's copy of the original manuscript—that becomes the boy's—and the man's—carefully preserved secret. Like the bull's-eye lantern, this copy is a cheap object whose value does not reside in its material aspect since it is only a ballpoint copy, written on a school-jotter; like the lanterns hidden underneath the coats of Stevenson's boys, it is first dissimulated from other people's gaze. As for the stench of Pritchard's betrayal, it may be purely metaphorical but it is nonetheless pungent and the image of burning one's fingers is no less appropriate considering the scarring dimension of Neil's initiation to art, life and sexuality during his short stay at Slezer's Wark. After being carefully hidden during the protagonist's—real or metaphorical—journey, both the bull's-eye lantern and Bone's masterpiece are revealed in their full glory. Through his confession and through restoring Bone's final masterpiece to the public, Pritchard achieves his own redemption³ and although his death has been forecast for the near future in the early pages of the book, in the final pages he claims "I live on still, always in hope" (p. 248) and "I shall endure a little in ["The Lantern Bearers"], for as long as Bone's fame lasts" (p. 248).

Pritchard is a manipulative narrator and the reader may choose to question the notion that he has atoned for his crimes. Yet, he has at least been able to fulfil Stevenson's demand that a work should not dwell on "the ugliness of the crime" without giving hint of any "loveliness in the

3. An idea that the narrator himself suggests even while he seems to question it: "Atonement, redemption, mercy ... they're just words, to the godless like me. But equally words are all I have, and my best hope to clearing my mind." (p. 245)

temptation" (*Essays*, p. 150). Not only is the reader able to grasp the loveliness of Pritchard's temptations but even Bone's own crime—which is revealed belatedly to the narrator and the reader, and which is one of the most taboo crimes—is described in a way that suggests both "the ugliness of the crime" and the "loveliness in the temptation". Bone indeed proved unable to distinguish between his devotion to art and to the ideal archetypal voice and the young boy who, for the first time, embodied this voice.⁴ Both Bone and Pritchard experience hallucinations and believe they are haunted by the ghosts of the lantern bearers—it is not only the characters but the novel itself which is haunted in many ways by the presence of Stevenson's text, to such an extent that the final lines of the book are a disguised quotation—or rather an echo—of a key passage from the essay, in which the preciousness of the lantern is highlighted:

not a ray escaping, whether to conduct your footsteps or to make your glory public: a mere pillar of darkness in the dark; and all the while, deep down in the privacy of your fool's heart, to know you had a bull's-eye at your belt, and to exult and sing over the knowledge. (p. 119)

I have emerged from my long darkness too. [...] There has been just enough time to date: time for me to give the music back, and to exult and sing out Bone's song. (p. 248)

The many direct and indirect tributes paid to Stevenson in *The Lantern Bearers* make it quite clear that the novel is not intended as a criticism of this vision of art or as a debunking of any Stevensonian myth. Rather, to pursue the musical metaphors that blur the line between music and writing in both texts, Frame's novel can be seen as a variation on Stevenson's theme.

The Lantern Bearers has been hailed as a turning point in Ronald Frame's career, for although some of his short stories had already been set in Scotland, most of his prior works were concerned with the English upper-class.⁵ In this context, and considering the importance of Scottishness among the criteria often used by critics to assess the artistic achievements of Scottish writers, asserting in such a conspicuous way Stevenson's influence

4. Here again we may find some sort of notion of atonement as well as poetic justice since Bone will resist the temptation to repeat his crime with Neil and since the latter will nevertheless accuse him of child abuse in a desperate attempt to prevent his parents' divorce by thus drawing attention to himself.

5. *The Lantern Bearers* was followed by *Permanent Violet* (2002)—a novel about an expatriate Scottish woman living on the French Riviera—and by *Time in Canberg* (2004)—a collection of short stories set in a small Scottish spa town—but the main protagonists of his latest novel, *Unwritten Secrets* (2010), are American and Austrian.

on his novel could hardly be considered as a neutral choice. Stevenson is undoubtedly acknowledged as one of the canonical authors of Scottish literature but he wrote many works which are not about Scotland and spent his writing years away from his native country. Even so, he was still quite adamant in asserting his deeply ingrained sense of being Scottish. By claiming a continuity between his work and Stevenson's, Frame chooses one kind of Scottish tradition over another, namely, in this case, over the more recent but currently dominating tradition of the urban working-class novel.

The notion of artistic canon is important in *The Lantern Bearers* since the position of Euan Bone in the musical canon of his days, as well as in the narrating time of the novel, is discussed several times. Each time it is asserted over and over again, by the narrator, by Maitland, by critics in newspapers, etc., until the climax is reached when we are informed that "In the newly devolved Scotland, Bone is turning into a cultural icon"⁶ (p. 244). Equally important, through the mention of the more hostile reactions of the older generations—including Neil's mother for instance—the novel raises the issue of the opposition between the established and the new. Bone's reputation rests mainly on his adaptation of Scottish literary works, most of the time works written in the Middle Ages or in the nineteenth century, which tends to prove that the combination of the established and the new can be fruitful. This theory seems confirmed by Frame's own truly inspired adaptation of a text written by an author who undoubtedly belongs to the established canon of Scottish literature. But in the same way as voices have, at some point, been raised to question Bone's right to be considered as a canonical composer, Ronald Frame's position in the Scottish literary canon seems to be problematic. On the one hand, *The Lantern Bearers* received the 2000 Saltire prize and Frame has been acclaimed as a major writer by both critics and fellow writers,⁷ and yet, as underlined in a recent article published in *The Scotsman* on April 17th, 2010, he is "often overlooked in the roll-call of contemporary Scottish novelists".

6. There is a somewhat ironical debunking of this assertion in the final words of this statement ("Bone is turning into a cultural icon, in the rushed search to find heroes") but his greatness is nevertheless immediately reasserted in the following sentence: "The attention is deserved" (p. 244).

7. See for instance *Scottish Literature*, in which he is described as a "major Scottish, British and international writer" (p. 962), Douglas Gifford's article in *The Scotsman*, Douglas Dunn's article in *The Scottish Novel since the Seventies*, or William Boyd's in *Le Nouvel Observateur* and Allan Massie's in *The Scotsman*. Incidentally, it may be worth noting that the position of Boyd and Massie in the Scottish literary canon is quite as problematic as Frame's for they do not fit the stereotype of the Scottish writer any more than he does.

According to Pritchard, the reason why his parents' generation tended to reject Bone's music was that his work was disturbingly new and therefore sounded "dissonant and uncompromisingly awkward" (p. 29). Such is not the case with Ronald Frame: although his work is innovative, it is clearly not "disturbingly new" and the only reason why it may be described as dissonant is owing to its not being in unison with the dominant image of contemporary Scottish literature. The above description of Bone's work and the hostile reactions it provokes would more appropriately describe the reactions that followed when James Kelman's *How Late it Was, How Late* was awarded the Booker prize in 1994 and one of the judges, Julia Neuberger, described it as "completely inaccessible for most people".⁸ Yet, ironically, Kelman's work, which was violently rejected as abnormal by the standards of the Establishment, has itself become the new literary norm; like Bone's work, Kelman's appears as "a politically correct choice"⁹ (p. 29). No one can deny the fact that there was something typically Scottish in the emergence of the working-class novel in the late 70s and in the 80s. The failure of the 1979 referendum and the widening social and ideological gap between London and Scotland in Thatcher's days made it absolutely necessary for Scottish literature to find its own voice and make itself heard, free from the shackles of any unifying "British" label. The outraged and hostile reactions that Kelman's or Gray's novels sometimes encountered show how vital it was that some writers should assert the authority of the demotic voice. And their work has a wider resonance than a merely national one as Keith Dixon has underlined in "Making Sense of Ourselves: Nation and Community in Modern Scottish Writing", reminding us that the images conjured up in their novels "are largely absent from 'serious literature' in the rest of Europe" (Dixon, 1993, p. 366). Literary criticism is often politically constructed and it is perfectly coherent that Keith Dixon should not share some critics' concern that "In the new Scotlands that are emerging from contemporary fiction, middle-class sensibilities are significantly marginalised" (Dixon, 1993, p. 366). And Allan Massie's choice is equally predictable when he adopts the opposite stance and joins the chorus of those who

8. About the debate surrounding the critical reception of Kelman's work, see for instance Richard Harris's article, in which the above quotation can be found, or Graeme MacDonald's article, in which he alludes to David Hall's attack against what he describes as Kelman's narrow focus (*The Glasgow Herald*, 1st September 1995).

9. The notion of "political correctness" informs most critical debates not only about the urban working-class novel but more generally about all the Scottish literary traditions. To quote Murray Pittock, "There is a strong case to be made that much of Scottish literary history and criticism has overstated the importance of writers whose class or nationalist politics fit comfortably into a national(ist) narrative of an evolving literature" (Pittock, 2009, pp. 27–8).

complain of the preponderance of “Clydesidism” in Scottish literature. Pitchford makes a valid point when she claims that “While [she does] not want to dismiss or denigrate the authenticity of any of these writers [i.e. the contemporary Scottish writers that can blend with mainstream English literature] or the richness (or Scottishness) of their novels, the strategy of forming a definition of Scottish literary culture around their work *in order to exclude* such contemporary, urban, linguistically Scots writings as Kelman’s fits nicely with the refusal of the English conservative establishment to acknowledge Scotland as a thoroughly modern society—that is, having been both industrialized and subsequently de-industrialized—distinct from England and capable of self-rule” (Pitchford, 2000, p. 716). I would use the same oratory precautions and insist on the fact that I do not want to dismiss or denigrate the authenticity of the Scottish urban novel or decide on the superior Scottishness of one literary strand¹⁰ over another. However, I am convinced that the predominance of the urban working-class novel on the Scottish literary scene is not merely a reflection of a social and political ideology but also the result of commercial strategies¹¹ which resulted in Welsh’s *Trainspotting*—and its glamorous cinematic adaptation—becoming the “literary hallmark for authentic Scottishness, rendering inaudible the language and eclipsing the experience of other underprivileged groups”.¹²

The history of Scottish literature abounds in examples of struggles between “major” and “minor” writers, between the established and the new, but the texts which were once viewed as a positive assertion of this identity were often later judged as stultifying *clichés* that must be discarded to find the genuine national identity hidden underneath. Thus Walter Scott’s novels directed the attention of the whole of Europe and of the United States toward Scotland, giving it a cultural position that was

10. The debate about the influence of “Clydesidism” has been going on for almost thirty years now since Cairns Craig was voicing concerns about the predominance of industrial West-Central Scotland in Scottish literature as early as 1983 in “Visitors from the stars: Scottish film culture”. And yet Craig is by no means a detractor of Kelman’s work, whose major influence he often underlines in his critical work. Numerous pro- and anti- “Clydesidism” articles have been written since and although I have mentioned some of them in this paper the extent of this critical literature is such that it cannot be dealt with here. Moreover, as stated above, my point is not to establish a hierarchical classification of the various strands of contemporary Scottish literature—its more modest aim being simply to discuss Ronald Frame’s contribution to our vision of Scotland through *The Lanter Bearers*.

11. See for instance Andrew Crumey’s “The Public Image: Scottish Literature in the Media” and Kirstin Innes’s “Mark Renton’s Bairs: Identity and Language in the Post-*Trainspotting* Novel” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*. See also William Boyd’s article on Ronald Frame in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in which he blames *Trainspotting*’s success for the underrating of Frame’s novels.

12. Kirstin Innes, *op. cit.*, p. 303. Although Ronald Frame, as a writer, cannot be seen as a member of an “underprivileged group”, his novel deals rather perceptively with the struggles of homosexuals and women, disempowered groups which *Trainspotting* and its imitators tend to silence.

perceived as both central and authoritative. And yet the writers of the Scottish renaissance felt entrapped in the *clichés* that had resulted from the influence of Scott and his contemporaries, whom they held responsible for the bogus tartanry from which Scottish culture needed to liberate itself. Similarly, the urban working-class novels of the past decades were—and often still are—pioneering works that paved the way for fundamental reappraisals of the notion of Scottishness. Yet there is a danger that the essence of these works should be caricatured and, consequently, should lead to a narrowing of the definition of Scottish literature and cultural identity.

If Ronald Frame is “often overlooked in the roll-call of contemporary Scottish novelists” it is because of biographical elements such as his Oxford degree or his residing in the suburbs of Glasgow—rather than its working-class districts—but also because “references to modern urban Scotland in his fiction are as rare as a discarded syringe on a croquet lawn”.¹³ *The Lantern Bearers* is a perfect example of what James Kelman rejects in literature:¹⁴ written mainly in standard English, it focuses on the upper class or rather on two lower middle-class men who have succeeded in climbing the social ladder, the rags-to-riches success story of Bone and Pritchard comforting the readership in the notion that social hierarchy and social aspiration are fundamental values; finally it offers the possibility of a teleological reading, an optimistic *dénouement* rather than the typical open-ended, plotless structure of Glaswegian novels which Craig describes as “the hell of a world of endless repetition, of endless endurance; the hell of a narrative without end, without purpose” (Craig, 1999, p. 131). Yet I would contend that one should resist the temptation to dismiss novels such as *The Lantern Bearers* from the field of Scottish studies. It deserves our attention, not because the authority of Kelman’s own works should be challenged nor on the grounds that contemporary middle-class Scottish literature is regarded by some as an endangered species or that

13. David Robinson, *The Scotsman*, 17 April 2010.

14. At a 1988 conference in Glasgow, Kelman criticized the predominance of the upper-class in literature: “Ninety per cent of the literature in Great Britain concerns people who never have to worry about money at all. We seem to be watching or reading about emotional crises among folk who live in a world of great fortune both in matters of money and luck” (quoted in Cairns Craig, “Resisting Arrest”, p. 99). Mary McGlynn underlines the fact that “The class-based society and the canon are to Kelman interchangeable in their romanticizing of class distinctions, making such differentiations seem natural, inevitable, and aesthetic” (McGlynn, “Middle-class Wankers”, p. 53). She also insists on the fact that “he avoids equating narrative progress with economic advancement, even shunning the notion of plot development” (*ibid.*, p. 57). For most prior working class writers, “middle-class consciousness and status remain norms and even goals, implying the desirability of a trajectory of progress in much the same way as plot resolution is desirable in conventional novels, radically different goals from Kelman’s choice to disintegrate narrative hierarchies as a means of critiquing social ones” (*ibid.*).

the Scottish Tourist Board might benefit from a somewhat less bleak picture of the country. There is a much stronger case to be made for *The Lantern Bearers*. I am convinced that it deserves a place in the Scottish contemporary canon, first and foremost for its artistic achievements but also because we should resist the marketing trends cultivating the notion that *Trainspotting* is the only appropriate touchstone of Scottishness, for the richness of Scottish culture lies in its heteroglossia: “Traditions are not the unitary voices of an organic whole but the dialectical engagement between opposing value systems which define each other precisely by their intertwined oppositions” (Craig, 1999, pp. 32–3).

The fact that Ronald Frame should not write about contemporary urban working-class Scotland does not imply that he is trapped in a nineteenth-century, Romantic, idealised vision of Scotland. The society he describes is one in which repression and exclusion are dominant features. Furthermore, class-consciousness does play an important part in the novel¹⁵—only the sufferings described are not those of the working-class but of the lower middle-class, with all its aspirations for a more comfortable life and its fear of being “déclassé”.¹⁶ And in this, the present is no more idealized than the past. What was unacceptable in the early 1960s has become acceptable and even fashionable in the late 1990s—when the publisher says Bone’s biography can be “provocative, if need be” (p. 11) the truth is that he actually hopes it will be provocative enough to attract the public’s attention. What once had to be hushed up—i.e. Bone’s homosexuality and his support of a nationalist cell responsible for several bomb attacks—should now be brought to the fore. Similarly, gay culture has been given a new status in the Glasgow of the 1990s, for when Pritchard walks along the street down to the Clyde—the very same street in which he had earlier followed Bone—he notes that “Everything has a gay intonation” (p. 247) and that you can be safe there at any time of the day or night. However, though homosexuals may feel less like outcasts, this does not mean that things were **always rosy for them in the 1990s. As a confirmation of this**, Pritchard alludes to male prostitution, to the misery and

15. There, in fact, in the sexual repression and in the anxious desire to assert one’s belonging to the middle-class—albeit the lower end of it—we may see a parallel between the Victorian period and the Scotland of the 1960s but we can definitely not claim that Frame falls prey to any nostalgic idealization of this dimension of the past as it is either gently mocked or seen as destructive.

16. Pritchard repeatedly insists on the fact that his family belongs to the lower middle-classes and he often highlights his aunt’s and his mother’s obsessive desire to preserve appearances and a certain form of gentility by putting on a posher accent to place orders (p. 20), reading *The Scotsman* because it has “a more discerning readership” (p. 29) or refusing to watch ITV “because it was déclassé” (p. 191).

stigma attached to it (p. 13), and regrets that “Now drugs came into sexual transactions, just as much in a backwater town as in a city” (p. 239). These are only fleeting allusions for Frame never dwells on the squalid, he merely suggests it and leaves it to his reader to imagine the bigger picture. On the individual scale, time has apparently brought happy evolutions since Pritchard seems to be able to preserve the happiness of his own relationship, and this partly because he has witnessed the difficulties encountered by Bone and Maitland. Even so, as far as Scottish society is concerned, the situation has simply changed rather than actually improved, since there are still grim aspects linked with homosexuality, and since the apparently more cheerful picture of the gay district is seen with a critical distance and described as “Cloneville” (p. 247).

This is not the only aspect of Scottish society that is presented in an ambiguous light; in fact there is something paradoxical about the place of Scotland itself in this novel. The context in which it was published and the recurring allusions to a political background strongly imbued with nationalism also contribute to the impression that the definition and the assertion of Scottish identity are central issues in the novel. Yet, it may be worth noting that, ironically, while the publisher wants Bone's biography to become a tribute to Scotland as well as to the man himself, the novel opens on his encounter with Pritchard in a London restaurant, and the biography—as well as Pritchard's autobiography—will be written from Italy. In a way, it can be argued that even though Pritchard is Scottish, there is some external dimension to his retrospective gaze on the Scotland of his youth, and an almost foreign vision of a contemporary Glasgow he is no longer familiar with. Even in his youth he sees himself as something of a stranger, first in Auchendrennan, then in Glasgow. Indeed, Galloway is described as “a new part of the world” (p. 19) and Auchendrennan as being “somehow privately turned upon itself” (p. 19), a place where he would always be nothing but an outsider (p. 166). As for Glasgow, it shall never be the same for him after his visit to Auchendrennan—by then, the reality of the city has vanished behind his own dream-like visions.

Scottishness appears as an identity constructed almost exclusively against the other, the latter obviously being English. Thus, Bone and Maitland, who are at one point described as “Anglo-Scotsmen” (p. 123) are said to have embraced the cause of Scottish nationalism mainly out of spite rather than out of love for their mother country: “The two men's nationalism probably owed less to affection for Scotland than to their continuing anger at being denied a life in England. [...] London was where they had wanted to be.” (p. 236) Similarly, Pritchard's mother becomes increasingly aggressive towards English people and more assertive of her own Scottishness after her divorce from her husband:

she used more Scottish words than I remembered her using before dad left. [...] It was as if she was erecting a wall of language around us. (p. 212)

She started to speak sneeringly of the English. In the past her criticisms had always been humorous ones. Now she mimicked their accents and scoffed at their colonialists' bad manners, their self-centredness [...] She dumped her disdain on to them by the shovel-load, which made Aunt Nessie's criticisms of the Sassenachs seem mild by comparison. (p. 213)

Violent as they may be, these criticisms are not completely unfounded since the narrator underlines his father's "Englishman's ignorance of [Scottish] geography" (p. 171) and sympathises with Bone and Maitland's resentment at being banished (p. 236). Still, both at the political and individual levels, the characters' proud assertion of their Scottishness is—at least partially—debunked by the nature of their true motives. And the same critical distance may be felt when Pritchard ironically alludes to the newly devolved Scotland's "rushed search to find heroes" (p. 244).

Frame's position is fundamentally ambivalent—the elements outlined above make it difficult to see *The Lantern Bearers* as a plea in favour of Scottish nationalism yet it is equally impossible to consider Scottishness simply as yet another ridiculous notion. Indeed, it is ingrained in the characters deeply enough to betray itself in involuntary—sometimes even unconscious—idiosyncrasies or signs of a profound attachment to the motherland. Notwithstanding their nationalist sympathies, Maitland and Bone are not always the staunchest supporters of Scotland in their everyday lives—they long to be back in London and love travelling to Italy and Corsica. Yet, in spite of this craving for other lands, in spite of Bone's continental way of dressing, in spite of their criticism of Presbyterian smugness and Maitland's joke about Scottish idiosyncrasies—such as their tendency to speak hypothetically, which he calls "the Scots' disease" (p. 86)—, in spite of it all, they are undeniably attached to Scotland. And even while living in London, Bone was already working on Scottish topics.¹⁷

17. Several allusions are made to Scottish writers in Frame's novel which suggest that Bone demonstrated an unfailing interest in the literature of his native country. Indeed, whenever his compositions include lyrics, these are always based on Scottish literature or cultural history, ranging from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century: poems written by the Middle Scots "flyters"; a life of Robert Carver, the Scottish Renaissance composer; a stage work based on Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*; an opera adapted from Nancy Brysson Morrisson's *The Gowk Storm*. Even though they play a minor part in the novel compared with the influence of "The Lantern Bearers", the description of these two novels also suggests parallels between them and Frame's novel. *The Gowk Storm* is said to be "about the repressions in a Victorian Scottish manse" (p. 29) and even though Slezer's Wark could not be described as a Victorian manse—if only because it was actually built in the seventeenth century—it is definitely the most impressive house in the village with its four storeys, round turret and *corbie-stanes* and it plays an important part in the novel as the place where

Accents are an important clue to one's identity, as Pritchard's mother is well aware since she is keen to hear the voices of her husband's female co-workers "so that from their accent she could place where they came from, geographically and socially" (p. 122). As the narrator underlines, this is only part of these women's identities, but it is an important one nevertheless. And despite her usual self-control,¹⁸ Aunt Nessie sometimes slips back into a more vernacular accent and vocabulary, thus revealing a more intimate and perhaps more authentic aspect of herself:

"Och, it's aye doing that, son."

My aunt's accent wavered in sympathy with the drunken gate. (p. 23)

The central importance of voice in the novel implies that comments on people's accents are intended to be seen as meaningful, an idea which is corroborated by the attitude of Pritchard's mother and by his own keen awareness of his aunt's wavering accent. There, we have a further telling sign of Bone's Scottishness for his accent is that of a Glaswegian, a point which the narrator underlines several times throughout the novel. The way in which the characters choose to assert their Scottishness may not always be as genuine as they claim but the more authentic dimension of it usually expresses itself through their unconscious actions or attitudes. Scottishness is actually hard to pin down for the very simple reason that people have been exposed to various influences through the course of their lives, as the description of Slezer's Wark implies: "The interior mapped a private world: bits of London, but also bits of Scotland, bits of Italy." (p. 228) The characters' identities are no less heterogeneous.

As for Frame's style, it exhibits the same diversity of both Scottish and non-Scottish influences. In *Scottish Literature*, the authors highlight the influence of writers such as Proust or Henry James, and what he describes as Frame's "recognisably Scottish qualities", i.e. "hints of the supernatural

some of the greatest dramas will be set, and as a fascinating paradise lost for the narrator. Repression is also a central feature in *The Lantern Bearers*, and this is echoed in Morrisson's novel when the older sisters of the narrator fall in love with men who are not considered as acceptable matches either by their parents or by the society in which they live. We see a similar case, though for different reasons, when it comes to the relationship between Bone and Maitland. As for *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, it is described as a novel "where good and evil struggle for possession of a man's soul" (p. 29) and although Hogg's novel is actually more complex, this summary definition of it quite fits the moral struggles of Frame's narrator. In fact, like the justified sinner, Neil will sometimes have the feeling that his actions are not the result of his own will, so the idea of a *Doppelgänger* is somewhat present in Frame's novel even though it is less so than in Hogg's. After all, Neil is definitely a sinner confessing his wrongdoings but because he is an atheist, in his case justification does not imply a notion of predestination but rather his attempt to justify his actions in his own eyes and in those of his readers.

18. "In her own domain Agnes Smeaton was back in control of her accent. Polite, and passably genteel." (p. 25)

and deliberate play with ambiguities of morality” and “his eye for the subtleties of difference in English and Scottish class behaviour” (Schoene, 2007, p. 963). In *The Lantern Bearers* we can also discern the influence of the famous “Caledonian antisyzygy” coined by G. Gregory Smith. This phrase describes the combination of “the power of producing, by a cumulation of touches, a quick and perfect image to the reader” and a “maudlin affection for the commonplace” with “the airier pleasure to be found in the confusion of the senses” (McCulloch Palmer, 2004, p. 6)—a blending of contrary elements which is of paramount importance to both Stevenson and Frame. However, Douglas Dunn underlines the fact that we also find in Frame’s work a “departure from such Scottish inhibitions as resistance to pleasure, suspicion of the graceful and the elegant, and, above all, a distrust of the fictitious” (Wallace et Stevenson, 2004, p. 169). According to Dunn, Frame demonstrates “a divergent mischief, an insistence on the imagination’s freedom from the nationality” (*ibid.*). In fact, Frame’s Scottishness is simply as complex, ambiguous and elusive as the Scottishness of his characters in *The Lantern Bearers*.

Literary criticism has often felt the need to classify literary works, not only according to genres but also to notions of national or regional identities. This tendency is useful in certain respects but its limits have often been debated by contemporary theorists. As Homi K. Bhabha has shown in “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences”, any modern nation is hybrid by nature, so that any “claims to inherent originality or purity of cultures are untenable” and “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2005, p. 208) In fact this returns us to Stevenson who, although he had articulated it in a very different manner, had already underlined the heterogeneous and irreducible nature of Scotland in texts such as “The Foreigner at Home” or “The Scot Abroad”. In the latter essay, he claims that although a man belongs to a variety of countries, “the old land is still the true love, the others are but pleasant infidelities”—he then describes Scotland as “undefinable; it has no unity except upon the map” (Stevenson, 2004, p. 14). And if Scotland itself has no unity, why should we expect its literature to be univocal?

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