

Class, Community and 'Structures of Feeling' in Working-class Writing from the 1980s

John Kirk Manchester Metropolitan University

'Structure of feeling' represents one of the most provocative and productive theoretical insights in the whole of Raymond Williams's writing.¹ As a tool for cultural or literary analysis it presents the critic with problems and possibilities. The very concept itself appears a contradiction in terms, confusing the theoretical terrain rather than clarifying its borders or boundaries. Thus the terms 'structure' and 'feeling' seem incompatible bed-mates, at least in relation to social or cultural theory. Compounding this is the sense that the notion itself can mean more than one thing: the fact that Williams defined its usefulness for analysis in different ways, altering its emphasis, its strategic thrust. Nevertheless it is the central theoretical concern of this essay, where I will apply the insights derived from the concept to the work of three writers whose texts focus on working-class life and experience in the 1980s. I will argue that this writing explores a 'structure of feeling' which corresponds to and powerfully defines both the individual concerns of these writers and crucial aspects of the broader social, political and cultural context of the time.

A useful source for arriving at an understanding of the concept of 'structure of feeling' is Williams's own remarks and clarifications published in *Politics and Letters*.² Arguably, one of the most fruitful ways of approaching the theoretical implications of the term is to regard 'structure of feeling' as a kind of riposte to, or critique of, key aspects of post-structuralism. Peter Middleton has argued that the concept is grounded in a notion of experience and 'presence' that runs contrary to the anti-humanism of much post-structuralist thought.³ One tenet of post-structuralism is that experience cannot emerge pristine and uncontaminated by ideology. Williams accepts this, but

still insists that we need not see all experience as ideological, or accept that the subject is merely an ideological illusion. He holds on to the difficult term 'experience', at the same time rejecting the subject of bourgeois humanism, the sovereign individual with the capacity to act in the world unconstrained by structures and ideology.⁴ Thus, Middleton suggests: 'The *concept* of experience he would ... accept as in part an ideological illusion, but what he wants to retrieve is a recognition of the life processes, the praxis, that precedes analysis.'⁵ Ideology, for Williams, *does* contaminate experience; but there still occurs the life-process, involving an effort after meaning, in the telling of stories and the making of culture. Literature and writing produce a 'structure of feeling', which is open to critical analysis, and is privileged as a site where a specific sensibility, or *habitus*, can be encountered. Elaborating on this in *Marxism and Literature*, Williams states that he is 'talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships; not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelated continuity'.⁶

'Feeling' exists within a framework, or structure, articulated as social *and* personal, the result of intersubjective social relations and processes. Arguably there is something resolutely dialogic bound up with the concept of 'structure of feeling'; we get the sense that art and/or literature represents something more than the author's individual expression, or 'vision', as it necessarily engages with wider historical structures or events. Narrative then is a socially symbolic act. In this context, feeling suggests process and unfinished-ness – articulation finds uneasy expression through certain images and ideas which for Williams hover at the very 'edge of semantic availability'.⁷ This tension may constitute the text as a source of an often privileged insight on history.

Williams's own approach in terms of 'structure of feeling' is to identify an experience common to a group of writers in a particular period, writers with no ostensible connection between them, who can yet be seen as expressing in their work common themes or patterns. His own major example is the English novelists of the 1840s. He identifies the emergence of a new generation of novelists, adapting the realist form inherited from Scott to develop what have come to be known as the 'industrial novels', contributions to a wider 'Condition of England' debate. Williams sees these writers adopting or adapting specific conventions to express a 'structure of feeling' focused on the exploration of community, as a response to the force of change which they perceive. Thus 'class relations, including class conflict, [become] the conscious material of fiction', even if this dynamic is addressed 'precisely so it can be reconciled or evaded'.⁸ Touched on here is the emphasis on intersubjectivity which I have ascribed to Williams's concept – the dialogism expressed when language and experience are recognised and articulated as a site of class antagonism and struggle.

'Structure of feeling', analysable in the literary text, can help to understand writing's entanglement with historical change. Texts provide evidence about the vital and lived experiences or attitudes of a group or of a society in a particular historical period, defining a particular quality of social experience. Interaction occurs between the official consciousness of a period, duly codified and formalised (in the sense of a dominant ideology), and what Williams calls 'practical consciousness' – and this relationship remains a site of potential fracture and contradiction. Any opposition to the period's official consciousness is experienced as a 'kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material'.⁹ The term 'feeling' is appropriated to make a distinction from ideology as 'world view' ('the ideology of the working class'), because Williams is keen to identify meanings and values that are actually lived and felt, 'and the relation between these and formal or systematic beliefs'. This connection is variable and can range from assent to opposition, so that 'there are cases where the structure of feeling which is tangible in a particular set of works is undoubtedly an articulation of an area of experience which lies beyond them ...'. This is 'especially evident at those specific and historically definable moments when new work produces a sudden shock of *recognition*. What must be happening on those occasions is that an experience which is really very wide suddenly finds a semantic figure which articulates it.'¹⁰ Williams's clarification is of primary significance, and articulates 'structure of feeling' to a question of conventions. Referring back to Williams's own example of the nineteenth century, and his discussion of the industrial novels, he detects there a recurring convention of absolute importance: sympathy for the poor, in tension with a view of working-class collective political action as 'mob rule', an open threat to an essentially stable and democratic order. He relates this to the rise of working-class politics and to the class's newly emergent *visibility*, and the potential threat this posed to bourgeois hegemony. At the same time as these writers were encoding such anxieties in their work, they were responding also to a more general, and epochal, societal shift we know as the Industrial Revolution; grasping desperately for an understanding of new social relations in a 'knowable community' increasingly more difficult to define. Thus another category (along with that of conventions) becomes relevant to Williams's formulation of a 'structure of feeling': that of community itself.

In Williams's work generally, community is a keyword. The relationship between self and other is formed within community: here the subject acquires knowledge of herself/himself in a wider, and often determining, social context. 'Structure of feeling' is the term which suggests the continuing interaction between the individual and the social, standing as 'sociohistorical description and development ... integral to [Williams's] understanding of community'; stressing at the same time the 'process of communication by which interaction becomes possible'.¹¹ The concept embodies a structure of past, present and future which leads the text's characters (and, crucially, the audience/

readers, too) 'towards a new way of seeing and/or feeling, resulting in the familiar appearing strange or the strange becoming familiar'.¹² At the same time, more than one single, common 'structure of feeling' will be evident; this difference Williams places within a framework of the dominant, emergent and residual. The conflicting levels of consciousness are the moment of articulation that I will examine below, exploring tensions which are based overwhelmingly on an acute perception of change, felt as loss, crisis or discovery.

I have chosen to focus on some working-class writing from the 1980s in tracing evidence of a 'structure of feeling' which interacts with the dominant 'structure of feeling', or sensibility, of the period. That dominant sensibility was of course the codified – if ultimately contradictory – discourse and experience called Thatcherism. I have defined the work of the three writers discussed as working-class writing on the basis that the central focus and concern of their production is to do with representing and defining contemporary working-class life at a time of rapid historical change. Two of these writers established themselves during the decade under discussion: Alan Bleasdale, with the television drama *Boys from the Blackstuff*, and James Kelman with a range of novels and short-stories which, despite one novel winning the Booker (or maybe because of this), have received scant attention compared with other forms of literary production in this period. Finally, I examine the work of Tony Harrison, well known on the literary scene, if not as prominent in discussions of poetry as (less good) contemporaries. All three writers come from the working class, all three are roughly of the same generation, born around the time of the Second World War. This is a point of some significance and one key reason why their separable, yet collective, project to delineate a particular 'structure of feeling' related to working-class experience in the 1980s – the expression of a gradual awareness, barely articulable, of radical change and disruption – stand as important interventions in the cultural and political milieu of the time, both reflecting and shaping our own responses to the historical moment.

First televised on BBC 2 in October/November 1982, the impact of *Boys from the Blackstuff* was such that it was given an unusually quick repeat transmission in January 1983. It achieved popularity on a national scale with a total of thirty million viewers watching its BBC 1 second showing, and it generated widespread debate within the media, the political establishment and the public at large. Its intervention in the social and cultural scene of Britain at this time received added thrust in the light of the social, political and economic developments resulting from the election in 1979 of a right-wing Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher. Within the space of three years, the monetarist economic policies pursued by the Thatcher government had secured a return of mass unemployment as the industrial base of what was already an ailing economy was stripped away.

The central theme of *Boys from the Blackstuff* is unemployment, and its effects on a number of working-class families and individuals in Liverpool,

with a particular emphasis on the male experience of joblessness. Its representations of (un)working class men (Bleasdale focuses overwhelmingly upon the male experience of unemployment) seems to be constructed in such a way as to counter the official discourse of ‘dole scroungers’. This reflects Bleasdale’s own belief that

it is important 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.¹³

Bleasdale shows working-class Liverpool, its people, and how they cope during recession and capitalist economic reconstruction. The stories work within a dynamic that draws together the work-place (or the lack of it), the domestic or familial, and the personal with the political.

The effectiveness and impact of *Blackstuff*, ‘the T.V. drama event of the eighties’,¹⁴ was in its readiness to deal with the lived experiences of a large number of people faced or dealing with the prospect of unemployment. For one critic, it became in effect the *Means Test Man* of the 1980s.¹⁵ Urban representations in *Boys From the Blackstuff* are predominantly bleak. Community breakdown – a powerful ‘structure of feeling’ here – is reflected through images of urban decline, be they shots of neglected and rubbish-strewn wasteground, the uniform drabness of run-down post-war housing estates or the derelict docks now devoid of the activity that had previously animated them. The series uses locations easily recognisable to local people: the docks and the Tate and Lyle factory are two examples. Filming in and around housing estates contributes further to this process of identification, or orientation; a deliberate strategy to blur the distinction between fact and fiction, so although *Blackstuff* is labelled ‘drama’, the mode of representation suggests real life – a key component in the genre of social realism. Through Bleasdale’s mapping of the city we witness the destruction of the vernacular landscape or social space, processes set in train by industrial collapse. Public spaces become spaces of alienation, which then take on personal and ontological forms in figures like Yosser, or Chrissie’s wandering from site to site in search of work, or in George’s ‘last ride’ through the dead docks where he spent his early working life and learnt his politics.

Bleasdale’s writing exhibits a high consciousness of formal strategies or conventions. I have already suggested that the effectiveness of *Blackstuff* lay in its readiness to deal with the lived experiences of a large number of people faced or coping with unemployment. Representations of unemployment, the sense of human life stifled and repressed by outside forces, link Bleasdale’s work with some of the concerns of earlier socialist and working-class writers. The realist representations of working people in *Blackstuff* found wide

popularity through what might be termed the 'pleasure of identification'; the mobilisation of a 'structure of feeling' increasingly pressured in a climate of ideologically motivated individualism. What is then depicted is the crisis of a 'knowable community'. But *Blackstuff* moves beyond the dominant conventions of realism at important moments, applying strategies which disrupt naturalist representation in a process resembling Brecht's 'alienation effect', a decentring of the action where the narrative moves from the quotidian experiences of the dole or family life to, for instance, the slapstick behaviour of the dole sniffers, or Yosser's unpredictable head-butting, or the nightmare comic grotesque of the final episode. In this way, contradiction (even absurdity) is foregrounded, evinced in Chrissie's frustrated, and thwarted, attempts to live a normal life (get a decent job). Chrissie then represents 'nothing but an exhibit of the contradictions which make up our society.'¹⁶ This is from Benjamin's discussion of the theatre of Brecht, in which he argues that epic theatre 'is not so much the development of actions as the representations of conditions ... the truly important thing is to discover the conditions of life ... The discovery (alienation) of conditions takes place through the interruption of happenings'.¹⁷ This 'interruption' Brecht referred to famously as the 'alienation effect', which constructs a necessary distance between 'viewer' and 'viewed', effecting a radical discontinuity, and preventing any simplistic identification with the characters, thus decentring the action. The resulting fruitful dialectic of familiarisation and defamiliarisation characterises *Boys from the Blackstuff*.

This relates to the sense, broached in the earlier discussion of Williams, of the familiar becoming strange, the strange made familiar. These forms encourage, rather than passive consumption, 'complex seeing' which does not paralyse the audience's critical faculties, but emphasises the changeable and discontinuous nature of reality and subjectivity. It is possible to regard Bleasdale's mode of presentation as a process which both confuses and sharpens the act of identification and understanding, calling for some degree of political reflection, placing the viewer in the position of questioning what is happening on the screen and through the characters. *Blackstuff*, formally at least, strives for this 'complex seeing'; yet the five episodes expressed overall an acute political pessimism, a 'structure of feeling' symptomatic of the particular historic conjuncture in which the series was produced. This emphasis is symbolized in the powerful 'semantic figure' of the elderly political activist and trade unionist George Malone, who was so pivotal in the series.

Each of the five episodes focuses on the individual experiences of the 'Boys' and their search for work. These stories, however, overlap in crucial ways to suggest a collective experience, representing the characters as men fallen on hard times, finding it almost impossible to cope with their new conditions of existence. A strong sense of dispossession pervades the stories; their lives, and the communities in which they live, start to disintegrate.

Snowy, militant son of George Malone, voices the hard-Left anti-government stance, trying to rally the Boys:

All I'm saying is, if y' don't fight, if y' know, if ... like I mean, it was easy to be a socialist when I was growing 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. Everything'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?*

Despite Snowy's commitment, the discourse is hesitant, unsure, under pressure. And Bleasdale renders Snowy a symptomatically marginal figure in the series as a whole, hardly a representative voice. That Bleasdale should feel the need to kill off this character so early on (in the first episode) says a great deal about Bleasdale's view of class struggle and class politics in Britain at this time. Later in the series, when George Malone, quoting Dickens, tells the others that 'We are the most important part of the nation. We are the ones who do the work', we cannot help feeling the irony behind the remark, as the dole queues seem to lengthen with each passing week. The overall emphasis on the individual and psychological effects of unemployment heightens a feeling of pessimism, even hopelessness; and from the relatively light humour of the first episode, the comedy grows progressively darker until in the latter scenes it verges on the comic grotesque (though this carries its own ideological implications). I want to move on to the final episode, because it is here that the 'structure of feeling' receives full articulation.

The final part of *Boys from the Blackstuff* ends the series on a highly ambiguous note. It is an episode of high melodrama infused with what have been described as elements of the 'comic grotesque'.¹⁸ This last story is 'about' George Malone, as in some ways is the whole series. Traces of George, and what he is meant to represent in relation to traditional working-class culture and politics, are present in various degrees virtually from the outset. He is the figure of working-class mutuality and solidarity; the discursive and historical embodiment of working class resistance to exploitation and oppression to whom the others might turn in times past. The figure of George becomes representative of a wider, and largely unstated, problematic in the series as it negotiates at a sub-textual level with the current status of class struggle itself.¹⁹ George's death, more than anything else, signals a downturn in this struggle, at least as it has manifested itself in its labourist guise, or tradition. This has led one critic to argue that

All that is left is 'the world going mad' ... 'an absurd black farce' that corresponds to the cynical humour 'the Boys' use as their strength and their only defence against the material oppression visualised in the landscape of urban decay.²⁰

In this particular historical juncture it might be argued that it would be disingenuous for Bleasdale to suggest anything else. Rapid de-industrialisation, mass unemployment and working-class demoralisation form the context in which *Blackstuff* was written. Though it is possible to see *Blackstuff* opening up a space for protest, a cultural intervention into contemporary politics, critics have also made the point that its overlying 'structure of feeling' is one of despondency, which suggests no way forward, but instead only a debilitating passivity, a sense of acceptance.

The final episode – 'George's Last Ride' – has a profound generational perspective. Blacklisted in '58 for militant activities, recalled fondly by the doctor son of a docker father who had, as a child, witnessed him speaking passionately at a shop-stewards' meeting of 'one for all, and all for one', the ailing George Malone is shown arguing with his sons about politics in a new era:

JOHN: It's different now, dad. These days y'go on strike –

RITCHIE: Whatever the reasons –

JOHN: ... before y'can get out of the gates, management are havin' sing songs an' wearing party hats.

RITCHIE: (*Indicating*) With 'Goodbye Boys' written on the front.

JOHN: Come back next week to get your cards.

GEORGE: But what are the men thinking about? Y' not goin' to tell me that they're safeguardin' their future – 'cos they've got none whatever way it goes – so they may as well do what's right an' honest.

The two sons are shop-stewards, union activists, trying to represent their men in a hostile political climate. New trade union laws and rising unemployment make it increasingly difficult for the tactics George's generation might have successfully employed to carry weight in the present. Exasperated, they try to explain, but neither George nor their mother will have any of it:

MRS MALONE: I won't have that kind of defeatist talk at my table. Go and eat jelly with the bairns go on. And on your way to work in the morning, buy the *Daily Mail*.

She goes on to invoke the thirties and past working-class struggles against a system that brought hunger and poverty; a time of greater solidarity which, John argues, no longer exists:

JOHN: It means the thirties mam, and soup kitchens and hunger marches. You with your father marchin' from the North East, and my dad with his. It means people standing together and fighting. And it means another time and age.

Though it is suggested that the conditions of the 1980s (high unemployment,

the roll-back of the welfare state) are beginning to resemble those of the inter-war Depression years, those earlier responses are deemed inadequate. Past and present collide here, in an exchange resonant with working-class history and politics. What is partly spoken is the view that the mass worker of modernity represents an increasingly marginal figure, and George stands as a monument to a lost identity. Despite Mrs Malone's argument that the past should inform the present – fuel contemporary struggles, providing insights on a potential future – her sons are fatalistic, feeling side-lined by the bosses and let down by the men who 'don't seem to care or understand about anythin' that hasn't got tits or comes out of a barrel.'

As George symbolises an era that has passed, the images that surround him evoke a different time of flat caps, old fashioned furniture, coal fires. His 'last ride' through Liverpool, a sick man being pushed along by Chrissie in a wheelchair, is an elegiac emblem. As they take in the dead docks and the wasteland that surrounds them, George's narrative recounts a history of working-class culture and politics. The scene dramatises a lack of hope – 'Once upon a time, Chrissie ... once upon a time ... – and the narrative recalls the 'the ship repair men, scalers, dockers ... The kids playing alley oh, the little shops on the corner ... and on the third Saturday an organ grinder and his monkey ...'. The camera moves from the derelict warehouses to the new container port as George recalls the emergence of the welfare state, as a time of promise and of 'politics and power and come the day when we'd have inside toilets and proper bathrooms. Of Attlee and Bevan, Hogan and Logan ...'. The post-45 settlement that was meant to sweep away the misery working people had faced in the thirties; the memories of an intimate culture and entertainment; the sense of cohesion, of a class for itself:

GEORGE: Forty-seven years ago. I stood here, a young bull, and watched my first ship come in ... They say that memories live longer than dreams ... But my dreams, those dreams, those dreams of long ago, they still give me some kind of hope and faith in my class ... I can't believe there is no hope, I can't.

George expresses a powerful 'structure of feeling', speaking across the generations, evoking a specific historical and political condition, in an attempt to reinstate a particular identity for his generation of the working class, or of working-class men. He would agree with Walter Benjamin on the need to remember, lest one is written out of history altogether by the enemy. Thus he is trying to 'seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'.²¹ But the changed political constellation of the present renders him a residual figure. He dies leaving an isolated Chrissie scurrying around the industrial wasteland, directionless.

If George is meant to represent 'a lifetime of discursive struggle against the economic order'²² then his death must signify *at least* the end of a certain type

of working-class political organisation and opposition to the dominant. If we are not witnessing the total demise of the meanings and values ascribed to a class, we do see them coming under intense pressure. At the same time, George's very articulation represents a challenge to this threat. This occurs time and again throughout the series, embodied in the dilemmas and disappointments (as well as their struggles to fight back) of each of the Boys and finally encapsulated in George's 'last ride'. This, in turn, brings us up close to Williams's use and meaning of 'structure of feeling', and its thematic and structural links – as it is articulated in the text – to a sense of a 'knowable community'. If, in this final episode of *Blackstuff*, a particular present is dying, it seems the case also that any Utopian dreams of the future are being stifled too, and the sheer bleakness of the melodramatic portrayal of it all suggests that the 'hope' George speaks of cannot outlive him. The mayhem in the pub at the close of the final episode seems further to emphasise this; yet before the final credits we see Chrissie, Loggo and Yosser turn their backs on the meaningless anarchy in the Green Man to seek solutions of a different kind.

James Kelman's writing of the 1980s has been closely concerned with exploring urban 'class geographies'. His short stories pursue themes of alienation and dispossession, and reconstruct the everyday life of work and the hopelessness of long-term unemployment. Kelman's writing articulates extremes of personal or existential anxiety, his characters often at the mercy of conditions beyond their control. Speaking of his own writing, he has claimed to represent the unrepresented, maintaining that mainstream literature has produced only caricatures of the working class.²³ In this sense, then, Kelman is searching for the 'authentic' voice of the Scottish working class, infusing and introducing the power and energy of the demotic into his narratives. Yet this very search and its expression stem from a feeling of loss.

It would be hard to fit Kelman into a tradition of working-class writers, the nearest comparison, taken from the thirties, would be with Lewis Grassie Gibbon. One would search Kelman's writing in vain, however, for those 'epic' figures of thirties writing: the 'heroic' Communist or working-class autodidact with a Marxist analysis to relieve the workers' ills. These conventions, which were vital elements of working-class writing in the 1930s, are replaced by quite different ways of seeing. In Kelman's work no-one is fighting in particular for a 'cause', but merely to get by. Focusing on working-class lives, Kelman writes of the oppressive nature of social space and material conditions. He addresses the lives and experiences of those pushed to the margins of society, and the city emerges as the locus of unequal social relationships and functions of power. In the short story, 'By the Burn', the protagonist, desperate to arrive at a job interview on time, has to negotiate a patch of wasteland close to the tower blocks where he lives. But he is late, and it has started raining, and the land is churned up: 'the fucking bogging mud man a swamp, an actual swamp, it was a fucking joke'.²⁴

Typically, this character is placed in a condition of 'extremity': 'High time they extended the path along this way for the poor cunts living up the flats, the fucking council, it was out of order the way they didn't bother.' (*TB*, 240) The schemes were fine until 'you wanted to go some place'. (*TB*, 242) The desolate landscape (full of bad memories, avoidable disasters, personal despair), represents the urban as fragmented, or divided between declining and thriving areas. Often the figure of the vagrant, or the isolated unemployed man wandering the streets, maps these fragments and tenuously draws them together. Kelman's short-stories provide virtual 'snap-shots' of metropolitan life, fleeting glances, and the experiences of the working-class figures come across as all too short, or, conversely, painfully drawn out, and lost in 'empty-time' (as in the experience of joblessness). Vernacular speech predominates in his stories, and is spiked with so-called obscenities, producing a 'voice' stretched continually between the poles of a (potentially) productive anger and a (usually) debilitating despair. The city becomes the site of meaning, or of non-meaning, experienced through the consciousness of the (invariably male) protagonist.

In 1983, Ken Worpole wrote that 'displacement, fragmentation, cosmopolitanism, the life of the streets rather than in the homes ... are likely to be the new conditions of experience for the next generation of working-class people',²⁵ and added that this would inevitably be spoken of in working-class writing. Kelman's stories trace this condition through the figure of the down-and-out, the man on the dole, or through representations of urban and industrial dereliction. So we hear, matter-of-factly, 'I'm just skint. People are skint these days you know.' Or: 'It's a fucking dump of a city this, every cunt's skint.' In another story from *Greyhound for Breakfast*, we hear: 'He had bypassed his own street and kept on towards the Cross. The traffic was heavy; lines of buses at the terminus. People who still had jobs ... He arrived at the pier. It was derelict. He stood by the railway peering through the spikes. The ferry boat went from here to Partick'. (*GFB*, 215–16) Later we are told that 'the docks was a creepy place but, deserted and fucking derelict. And this pier, how you could see the actual particles of coal dust lapping in on the surface of the water, on the steps for fuck sake, if you wanted to commit suicide you'd choose a better place, you wouldn't want to choke ...' (*GFB*, 229) The 'scenic', or spatial, dominates this empty time; yet the writing still registers a concept of the historical, tracing the decline of an older mode of production, and centring its residue (in a human and material sense) in the protagonist's thoughts, reflecting a specific 'structure of feeling': the River Clyde with 'its rubbish lapping on the sides ... you couldn't see into it ... so cloudy, so fucking mawkit' (*GFB*, 216/217); the dead docks, the unemployment and 'every cunt's skint'.

The transient and displaced symbolises a specific historical condition which in turn articulates a new 'structure of feeling' relating to the new 'post-industrial' experiences of working-class life. The routine of work, or factory

discipline, yields to that notion of what I have termed (borrowing from Walter Benjamin) 'empty time.' These figures have nothing to do, they no longer seem to have any place in a 'knowable community' that has no meaning. The unemployed man, or urban vagrant, traverses a de-centred post-industrial landscape; and the rootless individual constitutes the diaspora of the un- or under-employed seeking work. But the nature of work has altered too. There is no factory or mine here; and the camaraderie of the shop-floor and the solidarity of the pit-face is absent, along with the wider consolations or certainties of community. There is instead the diaspora workforce of the story 'Renee' (in *Greyhound for Breakfast*): the migrant Portuguese women, the displaced Yorkshireman and Scot, the girls from the 'south-east tip of England', crystallised in the city and in the service industry. This diasporic workforce live in hostels and service the fantasy of a post-production world. These images, and conventions, contrast sharply with representations of working class labouring and family life from the 1930s or the 1950s and 1960s; though 'Renee', in a subtly understated form, highlights the importance of articulating the still exploitative conditions and the daily deprivations imposed by economic necessity, which thwart (as in the case of Jock and Renee) the most elementary forms of pleasure.

The stories speak of discontinuity, as the developments of the 1980s, with their pattern of decline and uneven development, shattered the mould in the West of a traditional industrial capitalism. With the destruction of jobs and communities, we see the transformation of the urban fabric – of the public space of the city. Kelman's writing plays into these conditions. Public space becomes a dead-end: the corner café, the cinema are places where his characters kill time, filling the minutes and hours with the cheap commodities from the bottom end of the market-place. Figures sit alone and alienated in cafes, desperate for 'a bit of breathing space instead of all this crowding in on a person, stuffy rooms and all that smoke engulfing you, making you feel, making you feel ...' (*TB*, 92). If Kelman's work can be accused of being repetitive, it is because he responds to the endless repetition of commodity production and exchange, which is lived as 'empty time' through which we only catch glimpses of alternative possibilities.

Thus Kelman's narratives place us firmly within this newly complex totality, concretised in the changes in the city, as it is transformed by capital flows in and out, and by bureaucratic agencies intent upon containing the poor. This 'structure of feeling' in the writing, reading the signs of social and historical change in the metropolis itself, articulates a concern with working-class life on the margins, a pre-occupation with dispossession, the loss of identity and crisis. Thus in Kelman's novel, *A Disaffection*, the hero, Pat Doyle – working, but as a teacher and thus 'embourgeoised' and removed from his origins – struggles with a painful estrangement which distorts his consciousness of those with whom he would empathise:

SALE! BIG REDUCTIONS!! The last man in the queue looked at him [Pat] as if to say something. He was dressed in a fawn trenchcoat and tweedy bunnet ... with a really thin face ... The shoes were cheap efforts ... No good ... No good at all. He [Pat] pursed his lips, indicating his dissatisfaction with the quality to the rest of the queue, but they appeared not to be bothering about his opinions. How come they were going to buy such shite. Because they were skint. Because they had no fucking dough. People would buy anything if it was cheap.²⁶

This static picture of human life embodies the reification of commodity fetishism. Pat's movement in and out of the queue contrasts with the silence and 'immobility' of those he elsewhere refers to as the 'poor auld flagellants'. Pat does not have to make do with 'shite', and here he is forced to rehearse the unhappy consciousness, or bad faith, of the declassed intellectual, removed from his roots. He is Sartre's 'objective traitor' who, as Fredric Jameson has put it in a different context, 'is forever suspended between the classes, yet unable to disengage from class realities and functions, and from class guilt'.²⁷

In this novel, Pat rages constantly at a world he can do little to change. His philosophising merely rehearses Marx's dictum that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, the point is to change it', but if the agents of that change – the working class – are now for Pat simply passive consumers then maybe nothing will alter. The profundity of Pat's disaffection emerges in a disintegration, or conflation, of language itself, exemplified in his use of the term 'capitalistobliquesocialisticexploitative', where distinct political discourses are collapsed and become indistinguishable. This might be seen as signifying the 'end of history' for Pat; the dialectic frozen into a bizarre mutation where political choice or affiliation become redundant. When later he utters in anger, 'how come he wasn't blowing it up', the irony, and the contradictions, intensify as we realise – as is surely clear – that it is impossible to destroy something you cannot in the first place properly name. A crisis of agency is bound to a crisis of identity: throughout the narrative the personal pronouns used by Pat include 'I', 'yous', and 'they', but never, hardly ever, 'we' or 'us'. The collective social identity which might mobilise agency becomes impossible to inscribe. This is the 'structure of feeling' so often dominating Kelman's writing.

The problem of language arises in a different way in Tony Harrison's work. Much of Tony Harrison's poetry has been at pains to demonstrate how the use of language and its class connotations both silence and disenfranchise the working-class subject, imposing further constraints on the subordinated. Harrison has addressed this condition through the figure of his baker father in such poems as 'Marked with a D'. We hear that 'he hungered for release from marked speech / that kept him down, the tongue that weighed like lead.'²⁸ One thing Harrison's poetry succeeds in doing is to

bring into tension the dominant ideology which posits a homogeneous culture, which is viewed as a kind of axis of equivalence suggesting parity. I want to look at this aspect of Harrison's verse before moving on to my main concern, his poem 'V'.

The baker's man that no one will see rise
and England made to feel like some dull oaf
is smoke, enough to sting one person's eyes
and ash (not unlike flour) from one small loaf (155)

The 'structure of feeling' expressed in 'Marked with a D' is typical of Harrison's unfinished selection called 'The School of Eloquence'. Here 'England' has effectively 'silenced' his father, the 'settled' language of what is in fact an overpowering and alienating tongue designed to keep him in his place – 'The baker's man that no one will see rise'. Language is both class struggle and class domination, as the poem 'National Trust' indicates:

here at the booming shaft at Towanrouth,
now National Trust, a place where they got tin,
those gentlemen who silenced the men's oath
and killed the language that they swore it in.

The dumb go down in history and disappear
and not one gentleman's been brought to book;
Mes den hep tavas a-gollas y dyr (Cornish)
'the tongueless man gets his land took' (121)

Harrison seems to be pointing to both linguistic and material appropriation by the powerful, something not recorded in the official history books. 'Working', through the story of Patience Kershaw, attacks those Victorian values gaining ground in the 1980s, which were purported to express the essence of the national spirit.

Among stooped getters, grimy, knacker-bare,
head down thrusting a 3cwt corf
turned your crown bald, your golden hair
chaffed fluffy first and then scuffed off,
chick's back, then eggshell, that sunless white.
You've been underneath too long to stand the light.
You're lost in this sonnet for the bourgeoisie. (124)

The poem describes the labour of a fourteen year old girl in the mining industry, a victim of early industrial practice and Victorian values. Harrison is using his poetry to present a form of labour history. Culture – poetry – is appropriated to expose the barbarism of the ruling class, who cloaked their

activities in discourses aligned to concepts of progress, modernisation and 'values'. In rescuing the girl's suffering from historical oblivion, the poem dialogues the social and cultural past (and present), suggesting that the values of this period were not universally beneficial but were, for some, quite deadly:

Patience Kershaw, bald hurryer, fourteen,
this wordshift and inwit's a load of crap
for dumping on a slagheap, I mean
th'art nobbut summat as wants raking up.

I stare into the fire. Your skinned skull shines.
I close my eyes. That makes a dark like mines.

Wherever hardship held its tongue the job
's breaking the silence of a worked-out-gob. (124)

Written during the Miners' Strike of 1984–5, Harrison's controversial poem 'V' contains an epigraph taken from Arthur Scargill: 'My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words.' John Lucas has described 'V' as a Condition of England address, giving voice to the irreconcilable tensions of two cultures and thus giving 'the lie to the government's pretence to speak for the nation and to that wider cultural orthodoxy which endlessly claims to be at once representative and authoritative'.²⁹ The 'V' of the title is an emblem of division (versus) and conflict, and Harrison wants it to symbolise division within both the class-mobile poet himself (the scholarship boy), and the nation. Though the poem hardly refers directly to the strike, the skinhead Leeds United supporter stands in for the victimised miners (not to mention other working-class youths), thus dramatising the divisions endemic in English society. More than this, the 'skin' symbolises that 'structure of feeling' we have already referred to as a sense of loss.

'These Vs', the poem tells us, 'are all the versuses of life ...

class v class and bitter as before,
the unending violence of US and THEM,
personified in 1984
by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM, (238)

The poet lists more conflicts signified by V: 'Hindu/Sikh, soul/body, heart v mind', and registers his personal despair at the graffiti sprayed upon his parents' grave by an angry United supporter in a Leeds cemetery. This leads on, from an initial, bitter response, to a disquisition on the profound alienation and dispossession of working-class youth in Thatcher's Britain. In the voice of liberalism the poet tries to rationalise the skin's 'art-work', hoping it might

symbolise 'deep aspirations', and thus construing them as a 'call to Britain and to all the nations / made in the name of love for peace's sake'. (241) After all, 'V' can represent more than conflict: the Churchillian overtones associated with the symbol connote victory and pride, a particularly strong moment of national unity. These mystifications get short shrift from the skin:

Aspirations, cunt! Folk on t'fucking dole
have got about as much scope to aspire
above the shit they're dumped in, cunt, as coal
aspires to be chucked on t'fucking fire (241)

The skin's uncompromising stance is a clear rejection of the poet's liberal platitudes. But he expresses the contradictions within his own position too. BNP politics and its associated xenophobia leads him both to reject and to embrace a nation that offers him nothing, and the scapegoats for this condition, of course, are the 'PAKI GIT' and the 'NIGGER'. But in the end the working-class youth has no real identity at all:

Ah'll tell yer then what really riles a bloke.
It's reading on their graves the jobs they did –
butcher, publican, baker. Me I'll croak
doing t'same nowt ah do now as a kid.

If mi mam's up there, don't want to meet 'er
Listening to me list me dirty deeds,
and 'ave to pipe up to St. fucking Peter
ah've been on t'dole all mi life in fucking Leeds!

Then t'Alleluias stick in t'angels' gobs
when dole-wallahs fuck off to the void
what'll t'mason carve up for their jobs?
The cunts who lieth 'ere wor unemployed? (242)

Deprived of work, the skin is deprived of his own sense of self-worth. It seems that all the time Harrison uses the skin's mode of address to force us to contemplate public discourses of national belonging and citizenship; more than this, however, the poem's 'structure of feeling' speaks of the crisis of the industrial working class.

In the graveyard, the stones tell the skin the very story of his history and culture, a culture where work and self-respect were and are closely associated. The work performed by past generations of working people, the skills they acquired, no matter how exploited they were in the process, are now actively withheld. This cannot be rationalised, or romanticised in poetry by the outside observer working with words. The skin asserts as much:

Don't talk to me of fucking representing
the class yer were born into any more.
Yer going to get 'urt and start resenting
it's not poetry we need in this class war. (244)

The poet stands above a worked-out mine.

Subsidence makes the obelisks all list.
One leaning left's marked Fuck, one right's marked SHIT
sprayed by some peeved supporter who was pissed (240)

The image here suggests that infrastructural decay produces a corresponding collapse at the cultural level. For Harrison, the skin is a semantic figure of ambivalence, and like himself, both inside and outside working-class culture. The Miners' Strike – the resonant sub-text of the poem – represents not merely the reality of class conflict but, in defeat, the potential demise of a certain class formation and way of life. In many respects, then, the skin will have to inherit the crumbling industrial landscape once worked by George Malone and those ageing male figures in Kelman's short stories, now themselves seeking a 'place'. A sense of loss, an accumulating experience of 'placelessness' (despite his nationalistic rhetoric of belonging), is the final motivating force for the skin's anger (and the poet's, for that matter); symptomatic of that very 'structure of feeling' I have been seeking to identify throughout this essay.

* * * *

For Williams experience is mediated through the process of 'structure of feeling'. While the writers discussed here produce a 'structure of feeling' in their work which speaks of loss and crisis, there is also a sense of resistance and struggle: the articulation of a practical consciousness resisting the platitudes, pressures and limits of the official ideology of a period. At the same time as a language, a way of understanding, is seen as breaking down, there emerges an intense effort to reinstate it. In the process meanings and values are articulated, contested or reaffirmed; forms and conventions within the writing are reproduced in significantly altered ways to express what represents a profound historical experience.

Overwhelmingly, this writing has shown a concern with a 'knowable community' of working-class people; a 'structure of feeling' encoded in key moments and characters. *Boys from the Blackstuff* stands out in this context, and the figure of George Malone most memorably embodies that 'moment of danger' invoked by Walter Benjamin, as the political settlement and historic gains that George's generation had won come under threat. It could be argued that the overall strength of *Blackstuff* lies in its refusal of defeat or nostalgia: George dies, no political resolution is offered, but the Boys know

that they have to move on. Silence, or a failure of articulation, is a dominant tone in Kelman's writing, however: an insufficiency of language relating strongly to the question of 'structure of feeling' and lived experience. This is encoded at both an individual and collective level, where older conventions associated with the writing of working-class life yield to new ones which speak of social relations, and the 'knowable community' as fractured, in crisis. Pessimism is the dominant key, which suggests that a 'structure of feeling' need not be radical, though still oppositional. Harrison uses the moment of the Miners' Strike to suggest not merely loss, but cultural degeneration; alienation stemming from a denial of identity which then finds degraded form in the taking on of a sub-cultural way of being. We cannot escape the sense of loss evident in any of these narratives, constituting the symptomatic moment of their production and made the more strongly felt by the working-class backgrounds of the authors themselves.

With its relation to conventions and community, 'structure of feeling' represents practical and social consciousness: it signifies 'what is actually being lived', articulated in revolt against officially sanctioned forms of the time. So Williams sees 'structure of feeling' as occupying the space at the juncture of the 'language and the lived'; and its lack of a full articulation is the result of 'tension, disturbance, blockage'.³⁰ What emerge are changes within the language, produced when a straining for expression occurs in the field of the 'lived'. Language use is thus seen as intersubjective, both constitutive and constituting: linguistic-structures produced in the flux of new understandings, politics, possibilities of change.

On this account, art constitutes an area of knowledge, a place of 'cognitive mapping'. Selected images, rhythms and experience offer identifiable structures and social content – providing 'evidence of forms and conventions [semantic figures] which can be related to the emergence of a new structure of feeling'.³¹ Finally, then, 'structures of feeling' are social experiences *in solution*; and though not *inherently* radical, can be oppositional to the social order, or 'official consciousness' of the time.

The political and economic changes in Britain during the 1980s transformed the nation's social landscape. The profound processes of de-industrialisation, and the ramifications for working-class identity, culture and politics, are still being felt – initiating what some would gladly call the 'un-making' of the British working class. It is evident that new voices have entered the political arena, a fact identified and celebrated by Williams in his last book, *Towards 2000*. It has been these voices – the 'new social movements' – that those on the left now identify as replacing the working class in any radical politics. This, though, was not Williams's view; he pointed instead to a potential dynamic between these new voices and the 'older' ones, as resources of hope which suggest a condition far more complex than some would be prepared to admit.³²

Notes

1 The concept of 'structure of feeling' holds a central place in Williams's work. It relates in key ways to his later idea of 'knowable community'. The writers I discuss have their roots in the working class, and their writing focuses powerfully on aspects of working-class experience: in this context articulating a 'structure of feeling' which speaks of community in crisis and fragmentation, concerns symptomatic of the changing social relations and political pressures of this period. In particularly acute ways, these writers struggle to articulate shared meanings and feelings at the level of lived experience, speaking a 'structure of feeling' in conflict with dominant ways of seeing. This is not necessarily to suggest an unproblematic and homogeneous 'structure of feeling' in some simple way related to class: these writers' concerns with working-class life are framed in crucial ways also by gender and generation. For debates on Williams's use of 'structure of feeling', and for discussions of what some writers see as the problematic status of associated terms such as 'experience' and 'community' see T. Eagleton (ed.), *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1989); D. L. Dworkin and G. Roman (eds) *Views Beyond the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics* (New York, 1993), especially chapter 1; J. Eldridge and E. Eldridge, *Raymond Williams: Making Connections* (London, 1994), pp. 111–45. Feminist perspectives are provided in Jane Miller, *Seduction: Studies in Reading and Culture* (London, 1990), chapter 2; Jenny Bourne Taylor, 'Raymond Williams: Gender and Generation', in Terry Lovell, *British Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 296–308. Andrew Milner provides an interesting and largely positive retrospective on aspects of Williams's work in 'Cultural Materialism, Culturalism and Post-Culturalism: The Legacy of Raymond Williams', in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 11:1 (1994), 43–75.

2 R. Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London, 1979), pp. 156–72.

3 P. Middleton, 'Why Structure of Feeling?' *News from Nowhere*, 6 (1989).

4 *Ibid.*, 34.

5 *Ibid.*, 35.

6 R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), p. 132.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

8 R. Williams, *Writing and Society* (London, 1981), p. 163.

9 R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 131.

10 R. Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 162.

11 J. Eldridge and L. Eldridge, *Raymond Williams: Making Connections* (London, 1994), p. 140.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

13 In B. Millington and R. Nelson, *'Boys from the Blackstuff': The Making of TV Drama* (London, 1986), p. 33.

14 B. Millington, 'Boys from the Blackstuff' in G. Brandt (ed.) *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 120.

15 D. Lusted, *What's Left of Blackstuff?* (London, 1984), p. 43.

16 W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1968), p. 149.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

18 J. Tulloch, *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth* (London, 1990), p. 271.

19 I am thinking here of Fredric Jameson's theorisation of narrative as a political intervention, in his *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London, 1981). For Jameson a narrative can be seen as a political fantasy often unconsciously articulating actual and potential social relations within the extra-textual range of political economy. There is some consonance here, I would argue, with Williams's 'structure of feeling'.

- 20 D. Lusted, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- 21 W. Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 255.
- 22 J. Tulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
- 23 D. MacClean, 'James Kelman Interview', in *The Edinburgh Review*, 71 (1985), 72.
- 24 J. Kelman, *The Burn* (London, 1984), p. 239. Other extracts referred to are from *Greyhound for Breakfast* (London, 1987). All further references will be to these editions and will be made in the text.
- 25 K. Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives* (London, 1984), p. 65.
- 26 J. Kelman, *A Disaffection* (London, 1989), p. 208.
- 27 F. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, (London, 1991), p. 38.
- 28 Tony Harrison, *Selected Poems* (London, 1987), p. 155. All further references will be to this edition and will be made in the text.
- 29 John Lucas, 'Speaking for England?' in N. Astley (ed.), *Tony Harrison* (Newcastle, 1991), p. 352.
- 30 R. Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 164.
- 31 R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 137.
- 32 This type of action emerged in a quite radical fashion during the 1984–85 Miners' Strike. There were signs of re-articulation around the activity (both national and international) taken by the Liverpool dockers in their fight with the city's port authority. The problem is maintaining such links and keeping alive its momentum; Tory hegemony in 1984–85 had in the end a profoundly stifling effect on the movement, today's new political context (despite the worryingly reactionary pronouncements emanating from 'new' Labour) may provide fresh possibilities.