CHAPTER 8

Alienation and Community in Contemporary Scottish Fiction: The Case of Janice Galloway’s *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*

*Alex Thomson*

**Abstract**

The refusal of innovative Scottish fiction published in the 1980s and 1990s to appeal to community as a solution to social alienation has led to it being accused of nihilism. This chapter explores this stylistic ambivalence through a case study of Janice Galloway’s *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*.

**Keywords**

Alienation – contemporary Scottish fiction – community – critique – Janice Galloway – *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* – William McIlvanney – *The Kiln*

While commentators have agreed that the 1980s and 1990s saw the development of distinctive new styles of fiction in Scotland, the nature and consequences of those developments remain disputed. For James English, the ‘strong emergence’ of Scottish fiction in the period, ‘formally and linguistically as well as thematically [distinguished] from the accepted norms of the English novel’, is part of a larger differentiation of British fiction ‘into a whole range of commercially and symbolically important subcategories’.1 Responses by Scottish critics confirm this symbolic importance: the addition of significant new novels to continuing strengths in drama and poetry has been seen as crucial to the literary revival of the period. This reflects the novel’s status as the preeminent modern literary form, as well as the greater portability of fiction to international audiences. Writing in 1993, Gavin Wallace argued that:

The period since 1970 is likely to be seen with hindsight as a phase in which the Scottish novel flourished with a maturity and consistency

---

reminiscent of the heyday of Galt, Scott and Hogg in the nineteenth
century or Gibbon, Gunn, McColla [sic], Linklater and Mitchison in the
twentieth, producing reputations of an analogous stature and influence
which have extended well beyond the native.²

Yet studies of this period repeatedly identify an apparent contradiction: the
formal innovation and artistic success of the Scottish novel is often paired with
a strongly negative assessment of contemporary Scottish society. For Douglas
Gifford, it is ‘the paradox of what looks like a revival of Scottish writing, but
the theme of which is pessimism about the very events the revival describes’;
a revival ‘whose subject matter is the dearth of real culture and aesthetic
freedom in modern Scotland’.³ Cairns Craig contrasts ‘the bleak and depressing
worlds inhabited by […] typical characters of post-devolutionary Scotland’
with their representation ‘in novelistic styles that are radically innovative and
energetically ambitious’.⁴

For some commentators, the negativity and alienation of the new Scottish
fiction is simply a reflection of social reality. Echoing James Kelman’s comment
that ‘all you’ve got to do is follow some people around and look at their exist-
tence for 24 hours and it will be horror. It will just be horror’, Gavin Wallace
suggests that:

A substantial majority of the most significant novels, in fact, published
since the 1970s comprise a catalogue of Kelman’s ‘horror’ in its range of
constituent complaints: the spiritual and material deprivations of unem-
ployment and decaying communities; failures to find – or accept – self-
fulfilment in education, work, emotional relationships; inarticulacy and
alienation escaped through alcoholism; destructive mental instability;
the paralysing hyper-awareness of class and cultural differentiation;
crippling incapacities to give love, or to receive it.⁵

of the Novel in English, vol. vii: British and Irish Fiction Since 1940, ed. by Peter Boxall and
⁴ Cairns Craig, ‘Devolving the Scottish Novel’, in A Concise Companion to Contemporary British
Fiction, pp. 121–40 (p. 127).
‘Voices in Empty Houses: The Novel of Damaged Identity’, in The Scottish Novel Since the