‘To Bring Profoundest Sympathy’: Jenkins and Community

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Abstract

Over the course of his career, Robin Jenkins repeatedly returned to the theme of community. In many of his novels he juxtaposes a placed, and often utopian, community with an individual protagonist in some form of exile. In The Missionaries (1957), Some Kind of Grace (1960), and Willie Hogg (1993) he depicts geographically and intellectually permeable utopias. In The Thistle and the Grail (1954) and A Would-Be Saint (1978), Jenkins examines the relation between active communal experience, specifically football, and traditional community structures. Reading these texts in relation to both sociohistorical accounts of secular community and contemporary philosophical perspectives reveals the extent to which Jenkins ultimately locates the importance of community not in a particular place, but in time: utopian or shared communal experience leads to a vision of a personal future. Jenkins's discussions of community ultimately lead to an ethics of individual action that is consistent throughout his work.

Keywords


Over the course of his career, Robin Jenkins repeatedly returned to the theme of community. The catalyst for many of his novels is the intrusion of an outsider into a pre-existing, geographically-determined community, while other novels concern the conflict between different communities, or even different ideas of community. Far more than many of his contemporaries, however, Jenkins is interested not only in community as ‘a real society in a real world’, in Iain Crichton Smith's formulation, but in its utopian possibilities.¹ This focus arguably arises from Jenkins's oft-noted preoccupation with questions of good and

¹ Iain Crichton Smith, Towards the Human: Selected Essays (Edinburgh: MacDonald, 1986), p. 46.
evil, as well as innocence. In his aligning of moral questions with notions of social responsibility, Jenkins considers what it is to have one's knowledge of good and evil come from individual encounters with a particular collective, as well as geographic, experience. In this he is aligned with contemporary thinkers such as Jacques Ranciére, who argues that '[t]here is no longer any need to be summoned to the desert to know good and evil. It is only a matter of walking and looking. Truth is not in some distance that the voice or the sign could point out, at the risk of betraying them.'

For Jenkins, likewise, knowledge of good and evil is based not in received precepts or inherited religion, but in walking and looking, or in the specifics of individual experience. Utopian communities are not located elsewhere, but are frequently permeable, such that anyone can enter them. At the same time, many of Jenkins's novels are also concerned with the desire for a communal experience based on retreat; many of his characters respond to the ethical ambiguities and difficulties of contemporary life by founding a world away from the world, or by leaving community entirely. This utopian impulse, and its eventual failure, occupies a number of Jenkins's texts. In this, he again calls to mind Ranciére, who argues that utopia is not a place that exists nowhere, removed wholly from society, but rather 'the ability of overlapping between a discursive space; the identification of a perpetual space that one discovers while walking within the topos of the community'.

The founding of such a discursive space is one of the central concerns of all Jenkins's work. Throughout his fiction he examines not only the constitution of community, but also the perpetual desire for it. In both novels set in Scotland and more far-flung locations, and in texts focused on both the sacred and the secular, Jenkins always returns to the question of the innate human need for community, and the impossibility of any community to cohere.

As numerous critics have noted, community is a central topic in much Scottish fiction. For Francis Russell Hart, the 'the moral primacy of community' is one of the most noteworthy features of Scottish fiction, while Cairns Craig argues that one of the central conflicts in many Scottish novels is between the 'fierce communal ethic of the repressive forms of Calvinism' and the isolated, and hence 'fearful', individual.

Smith's story 'The Existence of the

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3 Ibid., p. 19.