

## **In Place of Dialectics: Freedom and Contingency in Russian and Scottish Fiction**

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In his recent extended essay, *The Curtain*, Milan Kundera laments what he describes as 'small context terrorism'.<sup>[1]</sup> This phrase is intended to designate a circumstance where a literary work is undervalued, misappraised, because it is assessed only in terms of the contexts and traditions of its author's homeland: what a novel means is simply where a novel comes from. For Kundera, the prevalence of this approach produces too much literary criticism that falls upon the wrong side of a contextual disjunction:

There are two basic contexts in which a work of art may be placed: either in the history of its nation (we can call this the *small context*), or else in the supranational history of its art (the *large context*).<sup>[2]</sup>

As Kundera has it, the more important, the more interesting and the more revealing context is the large, artistic one, for only here is a work properly seen, properly placed. The value and meaning of a text appear fully only in the international context; only when seen in terms of the history of the novel rather than as an occasion in the history of a geographical space. This is not, though, simply an instance of postmodernist self-reflexivity, for although texts do relate to other texts, they also and fundamentally relate to life. Hence Kundera further contends that artistic or aesthetic value is intimately entwined with what the novel reveals of existence. For Kundera, the novel in its 'large' context is existential because it involves 'the analysis of situations that shed light on major aspects of the human condition'.<sup>[3]</sup> It is the analysis and expression of these existential situations, these aspects of the human condition that drive formal developments and innovations: form is always an outcome of a thematic desire. To grasp a novel's meaning is not, then, to look to the history of its homeland or the passport of its author, but to see what existential situations the novel addresses.

My intention here is to follow Kundera's supranational approach and offer a 'large context' analysis of a dominant strand of modern Scottish fiction – principally novels by Alexander Trocchi and James Kelman – by reading it alongside, and relating it to, the forms and themes of the classic Russian novel of the nineteenth century. My concerns will, though, be less about what these texts have to say about Scotland or Russia and more about what they have to say about the ways novels are constructed and the concomitant implications for how we see and frame questions of identity; how we comprehend and answer existential questions. To do this, I want to combine Kundera's large context approach with a line of thought borrowed from Gary Saul Morson. Kundera's notion that the history of the European novel is a sequence of existential analyses is both corroborated and supplemented by Morson's sophisticated readings of Russian language fiction.<sup>[4]</sup> For Morson, the canonical writers – Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Lermontov, Turgenev, Chekhov – write against the dominant deterministic discourses, whether political, scientific or philosophical, that predominate in the nineteenth century. What drives a great deal of Russian language fiction is this desire to evade determinism and through an analysis of existential situations, posit a counter-narrative premised upon freedom and contingency. Fiction thus conceived offers an alternative to the world of laws, taxonomies and descriptions.

If Russian fiction begins with Pushkin, then Pushkin's fictions proceed from a sense of lack, of absence. In a note from 1824, Pushkin writes:

The causes slowing down our literature's progress are usually taken to be: (i) the widespread use of French and the neglect of Russian. All our writers complain of this – but who is to blame if not themselves? [...] we have as yet neither literature nor books; from childhood we have gleaned all our knowledge, all our ideas from foreign books, we have grown used to thinking in a foreign language [...] learning, politics and philosophy have not yet found expression in Russian [...].<sup>[5]</sup>

For Pushkin, the dominance of imported fictional models and imported languages leads both to a neglect of Russian experience and Russian language, and a failure to countenance that they might themselves be sufficient for the analysis and transmission of 'learning, politics and philosophy'. However, if we reduce the nationalistic component here, what we have is an attempt to overcome a sense of estrangement. Pushkin uses 'foreign' not only to denote that a text, a way of thinking, is from elsewhere but

simultaneously that this text, this idea makes me foreign: these ideas, these novels do not represent my existential situation and nor do they speak to me in a way that is recognisably mine. I cannot see myself or hear myself within its pages. This sense of absence and estrangement from the literary dominant is, of course, familiar in the work of Alexander Trocchi, James Kelman and William McIlvanney, all of whom look to the larger European and world context for literary support and literary precedents. Whilst Pushkin bemoans the foreign, Trocchi, Kelman and McIlvanney take from it the resources either to alter domestic literature by changing its accent and focus, or escape it altogether. Trocchi's Parisian sojourn and contacts with Burroughs, Beckett and Miller opened up other technical and thematic possibilities, new modes of existential articulation, which inform the construction of his *Cain's Book*. Indeed, Trocchi's indifference to domestic fiction famously attracted Hugh MacDiarmid's opprobrium: the latter dismissing the former as 'cosmopolitan scum' during an exchange at the Edinburgh Writers' Festival.<sup>[6]</sup> Kelman's use of world literature but particularly Russian, French, German and American is well documented in his *Some Recent Attacks* and *And the judges said ...* and William McIlvanney describes in his essay 'A Shield Against the Gorgon' how his own literary impulses were encouraged through encountering Camus:

I remember the joy of discovering Albert Camus' essay *Summer in Algiers* and realising that he was talking about my own people, with great insight and compassion. Such generously shared perceptions from other places and times were like finding out that what you had thought was a dialect was, in fact, a language and one spoken in many parts of the world. It gave me the confidence to believe that, while I was writing out of my own experience, I was also writing towards the experience of countless others. The accent might be Scottish. But the message, whether they wanted it or not, was for everybody.<sup>[7]</sup>

Camus introduces McIlvanney to the larger context that Kundera prescribes. The existential situations that McIlvanney thought were bounded by nation are, in fact, nothing of the kind: the particular and the local are ways of reaching the universal. Moreover, Camus also brings in Russian fiction, for as Ray Davison points out, Camus's novels are 'conceived in a profound spirit of dialogue' with Dostoyevsky.<sup>[8]</sup> It is, though, in a passage from Turgenev, that we find traces of a more profound explanation for Pushkinian resistance to 'foreign' ideas.

My good sir, you should appreciate my position. Judge for yourself what – what, if you'll be so kind – what good I might derive from the encyclopedia of Hegel? What is there in common, will you tell me, between this encyclopedia and Russian life? And how would you want it applied to our circumstances – and not only it alone, the encyclopedia, but in general German philosophy – and more than that – German science?[9]

Turgenev's Hamlet is not simply questioning Hegelian thought because it is German, rather he is questioning it because it typifies, is perhaps the culmination of, both systematic and abstract philosophy. Hegelian thought obliterates the local and the particular, absorbing all in the unfolding dialectic. In its phrasing, this quotation recalls a famous passage from Kierkegaard's Journals:

It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards. Which principle, the more one thinks it through, ends exactly with the thought that temporal life can never properly be understood precisely because I can at no instant find complete rest in which to adopt the position: backwards.[10]

For Hegel, 'the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk'.<sup>[11]</sup> That is, understanding, 'wisdom', is a retrospective, a retroactive activity but for Kierkegaard and Russian fiction, life is lived forwards. Systematic thought and systematic thinkers abstract the problematic of existence, making it a general theoretical exercise rather than an individual problem of living. Hegel becomes, then, a central figure in a revolt, for as Kierkegaard has it, Hegelian thought is acutely deterministic and acutely systematic. It is this resistance to the system, to the taxonomical urge inherent in the totalising thought of the nineteenth century that Russian fiction instantiates. This concern informs the subject matter of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*:

science will teach men [...] that they have not, in fact, and never had, either will or fancy, and are no more than a sort of piano keyboard or barrel-organ cylinder; and that the laws of nature still exist on the earth, so that whatever man does he does not of his own volition but, as really goes without saying, by the laws of nature. Consequently, these laws of nature have only to be discovered, and man will no longer be responsible

for his actions, and it will become extremely easy for him to live his life. All human actions, of course, will then have to be worked out by those laws, mathematically, like a table of logarithms, and entered in the almanac; or better still, there will appear orthodox publications, something like our encyclopaedic dictionaries, in which everything will be so accurately calculated and plotted that there will no longer be any individual deeds or adventures left in the world.[\[12\]](#)

For the underground man, systematic science is irredeemably functionalist, hence the keyboard metaphor and the allusion to *Hamlet*.[\[13\]](#) Moreover, the notion of the self developed by nineteenth-century science leaves free will as an illusion: science becomes an extension of the enlightenment project attempting to solve all mysteries by treating a person as a kind of causal outcome of anterior effects with the epiphenomenal consequence that free will is rendered illusory. The free is replaced by the determined; the contingent is replaced by the necessary. In the passage above, the keyboard suggests a programmed life, without alterity, without surprise. You press this key and F sharp will always and necessarily sound. In short, the systematic, the deterministic and the descriptive leave no room for the notion of freedom. It is this notion of freedom that animates and underpins a vital strand of modern Scottish fiction. For James Kelman, 'Human freedom is so inalienable a right that it can scarcely be described as a "right" at all, it is the very essence of what it is to be a person.'[\[14\]](#) For Kelman, and for Trocchi, this sense of freedom is architectonic. Like the Russian novelists, freedom is taken as a kind of existential *a priori*. It is what it is to be. Moreover, if fiction is somehow connected with the self, if fiction is as Kundera and the Russian novelists have it – an exploration and analysis of existential problems – then freedom will be not simply a theme, but also a mechanism, a principle of construction.

A formal consequence of the resistance to deterministic discourses can be seen in the attitude to plot and more generally, in the attitudes to narrative, narrators and the position of the author. In order to undo the constraining parameters of conventional, progressive narrative modes, the notion of plot as a central connective filament is either radically altered or simply dispensed with. Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* seems at first encounter unremarkable. Stylistically it seems to incorporate some of the conventional narrative types of the early nineteenth century – travelogue, romance, picaresque tale – but this sense of the familiar is undone by the innovatory structure. Lermontov builds the novel from discrete particles, segments. There is little causal or connective momentum between these sections. The sole connection, if any, is the presence of the protagonist

Pechorin, sometimes as a physical presence, sometimes as an object of discussion. What Lermontov does, then, is unsettle that nineteenth-century narrative convention where events are ordered, clearly connected and contain no surplus, no unexplored or unutilised information. In Lermontov's text, events do not accrue around an organising plot but are, instead, driven by chance. Chance is a fundamental narrative principle because it provides a means of undoing the novel's hitherto deterministic structure and admitting the possibility of possibility.

James Kelman's novel *A Chancer* is built upon and around precisely these principles. Kelman's protagonist, Tammas, the 'chancer' of the novel's title, spends much of the narrative gambling whether at work, racetracks or casinos. The gambling motif is, of course, a central trope of the Russian novel, where it has a dual symbolic function: cards are at once an instrument of prediction, and hence of fate, but are also a means of gaming and hence of chance. Gambling and card games permeate Russian fiction from Pushkin's 'Queen of Spades' to Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler*, and supply the thematic complexity in the 'Fatalist' segment of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*.<sup>[15]</sup> In Kelman's novel, Tammas' life is similarly built around the tensions between chance and fate, necessity and contingency. Kelman retains some of this symbolic accrual but ensures too that the thematic importance of gambling is carried over into the structure of the novel. Like Lermontov, Kelman eschews a coherent, connected narrative and instead uses a number of contiguous particles. The movement or connection between these segments is often absent and with few exceptions, each narrative particle could be moved around the novel, placed anywhere, with little or no loss of meaning. Each segment or particle is, then, contingent and this contingency feeds back into Tammas as character for he too is given to sudden changes of movement. 'It was just a change; I just felt like a change.'<sup>[16]</sup> This locution depicts the translation of cognition into action but importantly sudden action, action which seems inexplicable when the reader attempts to posit a determining antecedent event. This movement, which is a mainstay of both *A Hero of Our Time* and *Crime and Punishment* – the latter novel teems with instances of 'suddenly' – is exemplified throughout *A Chancer*. One example is at Billy's wedding.

A moment later Alec shrugged. Anyway, they're about to stick the records on. All the Scottish stuff first but they'll be dancing after that.

Tammas nodded.

It'll be a good laugh.

Aye. I'll just have a quick pint.

You'll come up but?

Aye, course.

Okay. Billy was wondering where you were as well.

I'll just be a minute tell him.

Okay.

Tammas turned immediately, left the close, crossing in the direction of the pub, but he carried on walking beyond it. A taxi had pulled to a stop at the traffic lights; he rushed up to it and climbed in. The driver was waiting for him to speak. Sorry, he said, Shawfield, Shawfield jimmy.

...

There had been a slight flurry of snow when they boarded the bus and now, as they alighted, it was coming down quite thickly and beginning to lie.[\[17\]](#)

The irruption of chance in the narrated events is clearly seen here. As he exits the wedding and takes the taxi, Tammas suddenly alters course. Significantly, no reason is given as to why Tammas leaves the wedding: he just does. No explanation, no reason, leaves an *uncaused* event, and such motiveless and random acts populate the narrative. These sudden swerves which correspond to the gambling act are Tammas' means of challenging the inevitable, of rendering open slight avenues of possibility, and again this quest for freedom is metaphorically enacted at the races.

He reached the wall dividing the track from the enclosure and stared about. The busfare home was not essential. It was not a bad evening, mild. The busfare would give him a bet. Coupled with the cash returned him by the conductor he had enough for a twenty pence bet on the tote, twice the minimum. He could stick the whole lot on a dog. Or split it two way, 10 on the 2nd race and 10 on the 3rd. Or keep the 20 pence for the nap he had chosen; it would be racing in the 4th. Or a forecast, a 10 pence reverse forecast. Or even a place-only bet of 20 pence. No need even to dig out a winner, just one to finish in the first two. [...] The place-only bet was correct, it was the correct thing to do. And so what if the dog actually won the race [...] it would not matter, it made no difference whether it won or was second, just so long as it was placed [...] He was standing amongst the small crowd directly beneath the row of bookies, checking the form for the race, studying times and weights and

distances. Yet it would not matter. The dog he decided on would either be placed or not. What dog did not make any difference.[\[18\]](#)

In this passage, betting possibilities – signified by the repeated ‘or’ – multiply almost endlessly and point to the use of a narrative technique that Morson describes as ‘sideshadowing’. If foreshadowing implies a sense of necessity, of events known to come, sideshadowing reminds us that other possibilities were available: the future need not have been what it was.[\[19\]](#) Here, the certainty of the busfare is exchanged for the uncertainty of a possible future, but this is not a totally open future since it contains only two live possibilities: either the dog will be placed or it will not. Choice is not completely open, but dependent upon the situation in which one finds oneself. What this stresses is that the important thing is to choose, decide.

Chance stops, undoes and extinguishes the idea of narrative as necessity. It also helps generate a surplus, a kind of ghost trace of alterity. If events happen only by chance, then they need not have been, they are contingent; there were, at the time the events happened, other possibilities, other paths not taken. This is not to suggest that possibility is infinite or limitlessly multiple, only that there are other possibilities inherent in any situation. In an overly determined narrative, events are like a chambered bullet with one possible trajectory. This sense of circumscription, of being cloistered within a causally necessary sequence is attacked by Trocchi in *Cain's Book*.

I am unfortunately not concerned with the events which led up to this or that. If I were my task would be simpler. Details would take their meaning from their relation to the end and could be expanded or contracted, chosen or rejected, in terms of how they contributed to it. In all this, there is no it, and there is no startling fact or sensational event to which the mass of detail in which I find myself from day to day wallowing can be related. Thus I must go on from day to day accumulating, blindly following this or that train of thought, each in itself possessed of no more implication than a flower or a spring breeze or a molehill or a falling star or the cackle of geese.[\[20\]](#)

This passage is headlined ‘There is no story to tell’, and it is precisely the notion of an already determined monological tale, a traditional ‘story’, that Trocchi’s narrator is unsettling. There is ‘no story’ because the passage above begins by dismissing the primary agent of conventional story, causality. Here, preceding events are unimportant

and thus have no determinative purchase upon those events that are subsequent. Causality would, as the narrator indicates, provide a simpler sense of story, but it would be false. The passage, indeed the novel itself, has no purpose, no *telos*, for as the narrator states an already known end would collapse the future. Plural possibilities would solidify into a single necessity. In opposition to an ordered world governed by logic and necessity, *Cain's Book* proposes a counter principle:

Loose ends, things unrelated, nightmare journeys, cities arrived at and left, meetings, desertions, betrayals, all manner of unions, adulteries, triumphs, defeats . . . these are the facts.[\[21\]](#)

Here, the chaotic, jumbled texture of immediate experience is left unordered, 'unrelated' by abandoning formal sentence structure. Connections are absent and any relations are temporal rather than causal. Moreover, in rejecting the plot device of 'startling fact or sensational event', Trocchi coincides with the narrative intentions of Kelman but points back to what Gary Saul Morson identifies as a pivotal component of Tolstoy's conception of narrative. For Tolstoy, 'real life is lived in the small and ordinary moments. It is both prosaic and undramatic and is lived best when there is no story to tell'[\[22\]](#). Morson continues that it is precisely these small and ordinary moments that inform the famous opening statement of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'[\[23\]](#) For Morson, '[t]he reason that all happy families resemble each other whereas each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way is that unhappy families, like unhappy lives, are dramatic; they have a story and each story is different. But happy families and happy lives, filled with undramatic incidents, do not make a good story'.[\[24\]](#) Here 'dramatic' is used in the sense of extraordinary, tantamount to the 'sensational event' in the Trocchi passage quoted above. This resistance to extravagant plotting is also a fundamental component of James Kelman's writing. The Russian context gives an alternative resonance to this frequently cited passage from Kelman's interview with Kirsty McNeill:

I think the most ordinary person's life is fairly dramatic; all you've got to do is follow some people around and look at their existence for 24 hours, and it will be horror. It will just be horror. You don't need any beginning, middle and end at all. [...] There's no need to be saying or thinking 'When's the murder or bank robbery going to happen?'. No such abnormal event will occur – the kind of event that seems to motivate

almost all mainstream fiction whether in book or screen form. In reality these events are abnormal.[\[25\]](#)

Kelman locates drama, in the sense of the existentially vital, in the undramatic, that is the unexceptional experience of everyday life. The exceptional, the conventionally dramatic is abnormal precisely because it is not the everyday. Murders and bank robberies are not everyday events. Notice too that the everyday is not structured with a 'beginning, middle and end'; it does not have an ordered plot, an established direction or intent. To convey this lack of an ordained trajectory requires a reworking of narrative practice. Asked how he approaches the construction of narrative, Kelman responds:

I don't start up stories with ideas, I just actually begin a story from nothing, like the way a sculptor operates, I just begin from writing some words down and gradually I make a story out of it [...] I don't begin with any idea of what the story will be, I just begin and go on from there.[\[26\]](#)

The lack of an already established idea is the lack of a determining conception, an essence, a kind of blueprint or schema that events are intended to correspond to. Again this has a precedent in Dostoyevsky.

So that characters might surprise him, Dostoevsky did not determine their fate in advance. For Dostoevsky, a plot is simply the record of what happens to happen [...] In Dostoevsky [...] plot loses its inevitability [...] like real people, characters act into the open future, and not in fulfilment of an overall plan laid out at the outset.[\[27\]](#)

The sense of an open future is vital if character, life, is to be seen as free, open, alive with possibilities. Character and novelistic construction in general must, to use Morson's terminology, be a matter of process rather than product. Morson distinguishes

between the sense of life as an open process, in which actions in the present truly matter, and as a finished product, in which the future is already given. [For if] life is product, then the present moment loses its presentness and becomes something resembling the portion of a recording we happen to be watching or the page we are reading in an already written novel. All outcomes are given. Dostoevsky believed that

such a view would utterly destroy the meaningfulness of concepts essential to our humanness: choice, responsibility, and creativity.[\[28\]](#)

Morson's conception of process is a sympathetic rearticulation of a central coordinate of Russian fiction and a notion that pervades the thought of Isaiah Berlin. One of the great chroniclers of Russian thought, Berlin's liberalism and cosmopolitanism is underwritten by a commitment to this 'humanness'. Choice and responsibility are only possible, only make sense, if we are free and thus Berlin's fondness for the work of Alexander Herzen. Herzen's hostility to Hegelian providential history, that relentless teleological unfolding, is famously summed up in Herzen's statement that there is 'no libretto' to history. Instead, history is 'all improvisation [...] all extempore'.[\[29\]](#) If everything is extempore, then life and the novel resemble less the classical score with its set movements and set trajectories and methods of thematic statement and becomes instead more akin to a jazz improvisation where melody moves according to whim and the impulse of the moment.

This concern with narrative freedom brings with it a repositioning of the relationship between narrator and the implied author. Instead of occupying the space above narrated events, the narrator occupies the same plane as both character and events. As Bakhtin points out, in a Dostoyevsky novel, 'the author speaks not *about* a character, but *with* him'.[\[30\]](#) The author does not, then, take a position overlooking his character and nor does he take a position with regard to his character.

The artist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness. [...] Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers. My only job is to be talented, that is, to know how to distinguish important testimony from unimportant, to place my characters in the proper light and speak their language.[\[31\]](#)

Chekhov's prescription of minimal authorial interference recurs in both George Douglas Brown and James Kelman. In her introduction to the Penguin edition of *The House with the Green Shutters*, Dorothy Porter quotes Brown's statement that the author 'should be an aloof individual, if possible, stating all sides and taking none'.[\[32\]](#) Both precede the Joycean paradigm of the indifferent artist, within, behind or beyond his work.[\[33\]](#) Like Chekhov, Kelman elects to replace an overseeing narrator with an immanent one: Kelman's narrators are always situated within the narrative; the limitations and constrictions of character and place are shared with the narrator.

If you're sticking to writing as well as you can that means not interfering.  
If somebody doesn't tell something to somebody else in my story, I can't  
jump in and be Nabokov and say 'Tell it to me'.[\[34\]](#)

The lack of omniscience is not simply a dislike for ludic Nabokovian form but rather a purposeful omission intended to maximise character freedom and minimise the space of authorial determinism. Consider the beginning of Kelman's *A Disaffection*:

Patrick Doyle was a teacher. Gradually he had become sickened by it.  
Then a very odd thing happened or was made to happen. He had been  
visiting the local arts centre and having a couple of drinks, found himself  
round the back of the premises for a pish, and discovered a pair of old  
pipes.[\[35\]](#)

Here there is an immediately supplied subject, Patrick Doyle, and an immediately supplied context: Doyle is a sickened schoolteacher. But, this context is limited, partial. We know what Doyle *was*, but we do not know what Doyle is *now*; we do not know what has caused Doyle's 'sickness'. This explanatory absence urges the narrative forward; the reader looks for, perhaps expects, these lacunae to be filled. Instead, uncertainties multiply. The third sentence is ambiguous and could be from the point of view of the narrator or, equally, the character. What increases the epistemic gap is the conjunction 'or'. If this 'or' is the narrator, then the narrator does not know, cannot foresee or look beyond the narrated situation. If it is the character, then he is equally limited. The position of the narrator is, therefore, at once precise and at once circumspect. This form has a precedent in Dostoyevsky. Consider the opening few sentences of *Crime and Punishment*:

At the beginning of July, during a spell of exceptionally hot weather,  
towards evening, a certain young man came down on to the street from  
the little room he rented from some tenants in S- Lane and slowly,  
almost hesitantly, he set off towards K-n Bridge.[\[36\]](#)

Here, there is the same admixture of apparent precision and ambiguity focused upon the narrator's use of 'a certain'. This ambiguity, together with numerous ellipses and elisions, gives the novel much of its recognisable climate but also suggests a subtle counter to the scientific imperative that would seek to replace the ambiguous with the certain. Human knowledge is necessarily partial, necessarily limited and our actions and decisions are

necessarily made out into an unknown and contingent future. The pretence to total knowledge or the notion that a system can somehow control, explain and accommodate all that there is or can be is, for Dostoyevsky, a falsehood and a vanity.

It is this, then, that informs the end of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov is in jail reflecting upon his crime and realises that his subjugation to the foreign, the abstract and the conceptual have seduced him from the concrete particular. His repudiation of these ideas is signalled by the narrator who states that 'In place of dialectics life has arrived'.<sup>[37]</sup> To suggest the idea of life as an open field rather than a determined path, the novel ends not with closure but with what Morson terms 'aperture', an opening, a gesture to other possibilities other possible novels. These other novels include the work of Kelman and Trocchi, both of whom take up and reprocess the aesthetics of their avatars, in turn reframing existential questions that will be explored by other writers, other artists. This returns us to the large context I mentioned at the beginning. Describing the aesthetic of the modern novel Kundera insists that it has

nothing to do with the thinking of a scientist or a philosopher; I would even say it is purposely a-philosophic, even anti-philosophic, that is to say fiercely independent of any system of pre-conceived ideas; it does not judge; it does not proclaim truths; it questions, it marvels, it plumbs; its form is highly diverse: metaphoric, ironic, hypothetical, hyperbolic, aphoristic, droll, provocative, fanciful; and mainly it never leaves the magic circle of its characters' lives; those lives feed it and justify it.<sup>[38]</sup>

The novel has then no sense of inevitable direction; no sense of a blueprint to which its development has to conform. It is, simply, free.

## NOTES

<sup>[1]</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 39.

<sup>[2]</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 35.

<sup>[3]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>[4]</sup> See in particular Morson's 'Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century Novel', in Malcolm V. Jones and Robin Feuer Miller (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 150-168 and his *Narrative*

*and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (London: Yale University Press, 1994).

[5] *Pushkin on Literature*, ed. and trans. Tatiana Wolff (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 78.

Given the scope and nature of this piece, some simplification and conflation is necessary. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev et al. do, of course, disagree about how the novel should be written but there is nonetheless a dominant tendency, a family resemblance, in the shared movement away from the general, the abstract and the theoretical and an increased concern with the lived, the particular and the concrete. Useful here is Aileen M Kelly, *Toward Another Shore: Russian Thinkers Between Necessity and Chance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

[6] For a discussion of Trocchi and MacDiarmid, see Edwin Morgan's 'Alexander Trocchi: A Survey' in his *Crossing the Border: Essays on Scottish Literature* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), pp. 300-11, and Andrew Murray Scott (ed.), *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds: A Trocchi Reader* (Edinburgh: Polygon: 1991), pp. vii, 204-6.

[7] William McIlvanney, 'The Shield Against the Gorgon', *Surviving the Shipwreck* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1991), pp. 217-237, 230-1.

[8] Ray Davison, *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), p. 1.

[9] Ivan Turgenev, 'Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District' in *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, trans. Richard Freeborn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 275-300, 286-7.

[10] Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 161.

[11] G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23.

[12] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground/The Double*, trans. Jessie Coulson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 33.

[13] From *Hamlet*, III.ii:

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you/ make of me! You would  
play upon me. You would seem/ to know my stops. You would sound me  
from my lowest note to/ the top of my compass ... Call me what  
instrument you will,/ though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

[14] James Kelman, 'A Reading from Noam Chomsky and the Scottish Tradition in the Philosophy of Common Sense', *Edinburgh Review* 84 (1990), 46-76 (p. 51).

[15] For a discussion of the significance of gambling in the Russian novel see Jurij M. Lotman, 'Theme and Plot: The Theme of Cards and the Card Game in Russian Literature of the Nineteenth Century', *PTL* 3 (1978), 455-492.

- [16] James Kelman, *A Chancer* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1985), p. 299.
- [17] *Ibid.*, pp. 226-7.
- [18] *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.
- [19] See Morson's *Narrative and Freedom*, in particular chapters two and four, and his 'Prosaics Evolving', *The Slavic and East European Journal* 41.1 (Spring, 1997), 57-73.
- [20] Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book* (London: John Calder, 1992), p. 147.
- [21] *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
- [22] Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 72.
- [23] Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear (London: Penguin, 2001), p.1.
- [24] Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p.72.
- [25] Kirsty McNeill, 'Interview with James Kelman', *Chapman* 57 (Summer 1989), 1-9 (p. 9).
- [26] "K is for Culture": Interview with Scottish Writer James Kelman', *Scottish Trade Union Review* 68 (January/February 1995), 24-9 (p. 26).
- [27] Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 99.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- [29] Herzen quoted in Isaiah Berlin, 'Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty', *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 82-113, 92.
- [30] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 63.
- [31] Anton Chekhov quoted in Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey* (London: Granta, 2003), p. 21.
- [32] Dorothy Porter, 'Introduction', *The House with the Green Shutters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 7-24, 17.
- [33] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 233.
- [34] McNeill, 'Interview With James Kelman', p. 7.
- [35] James Kelman, *A Disaffection* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), p. 1.
- [36] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. David McDuff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 33.
- [37] *Ibid.*, p. 630.
- [38] Kundera, *The Curtain*, p. 71.