

# "And the judges

**This text comes from a talk delivered at a lecture to students of art at Glasgow School of Art in November 1996.**

AT THE AGE of 15 I had vague notions about art but it was music that excited me. We were listening to people like Buddy Holly, Fats Domino, Del Shannon, the Everley Brothers, and into my sixteenth year The Beatles exploded the scene, then bands like The Animals, Them, The Stones, and local bands doing similar stuff here in Glasgow, the Poets, the Blues Council, the Pathfinders, Alex Harvey and so on. The major influence was blues but allied to this was country and western music; these musicians had a massive impact on Great Britain and Ireland during the late 1950s, early 1960s. They sang of their own existence, in their own voice, from their own emotion, whether rage, hatred or love. At the root of what they were about was self respect, and they had assumed the right to create art. This I see as the essential thing the young working class musicians in this country were learning. In literature if anything similar was taking place I knew nothing about it. I continued reading, aside from the lives of the Impressionists which I'll refer to later, it was mainly American literature. Stories about pioneering communities, gamblers and rounders; boys who liked horses and wanted to be jockeys or newspapermen; tramps, cowboys, gangsters; small towns and big cities. All were rooted in a life that was recognisable, more or less, the lived-in, the everyday.

One thing these fictional characters held in common was that they were not having the life snuffed out of them by an imposed hierarchy. It was a breath of fresh air. The English Literature I had access to through the normal channels is what you might call state-education-system-influenced reading material. People from communities like mine were rarely to be found on these pages. When they were they were usually categorised as servants, peasants, criminal 'elements', semi-literate drunken louts, and so on; shadowy presences left unspecified, often grouped under terms like 'uncouth rabble', 'vulgar mob', 'the great unwashed'; 'lumpen proletariat', even 'riotous assembly'.

Equally significant for myself was a strain in European literature that asserted the primacy of the world as perceived and experienced by individual human beings. These individual human beings were mainly government clerks or mixed-up members of some kind of minor land-owning class. It was a society far removed from my own, both in place and time. But for some reason I could read the work of these 19th century writers, mainly Russian, with a definite empathy. Gogol and Dostoevski made me chuckle in ways that seem a contradiction in terms in respect of mainstream English Literature. Irony requires some sort of a mutual recognition of selfhood, and I was not excluded from it. English literature did not allow this, people like myself were a sub-species and generally excluded by definition.

So it was from an admixture of these two literary traditions, the European Existential and the American Realist, allied to British rock music, that I reached the age of 22 in the knowledge that certain rights were mine. It was up to me what I did. I had the right to create art. Not that I thought in these terms, I just wanted to write stories. But I didn't have to write as if I was somebody not myself (eg. an imagined member of the British upper-middle-classes). Nor did I have to write about characters striving to become other persons (eg. imagined members of the British upper-middle-classes). I could sit down with my pen and paper and start doing stories of my own, from myself, the everyday trials and tribulations; my family, my boss, the boy and girl next door; the old guy telling yarns at the factory; whatever. It was all there. I was privy to the lot. There was no obligation to describe, explain or

define myself in terms of class, race or community. I didn't have to prove anything. And nor did I have to prove anything about the people roundabout me, my own culture and community. In spite of dehumanising authority they existed as entire human beings; they carried on with their lives as though 'the forces of evil' did not exist. My family and culture were valid in their own right, this was an intrinsic thing, they were not up for evaluation. And neither was my work, not unless I so chose. Self respect and the determination of self, for better or for worse. Most of this was intuitive, but not all.

It was the same existential tradition in literature that is also a point of departure for some materialist strains of left-wing thought which, ultimately, are as authoritarian as the right-wing. These ideologies also debase and dehumanise individual existence, forcing people into 'the scheme of things', not allowing them the freedom to live as whole beings. Unlike fantasy and romance 'committed' artists here reveal their commitment in their work—their particular form of socialism or whatever—as a function of its representation or approximation to 'the real world', i.e. naturalism, or 'social realism' so-called. Stories, paintings, music, drama and so on are duty-bound to concern 'the harsh reality', i.e. the effects of, and the struggle, against the capitalist system. The central characters rarely have time to tell a joke, fall in love, get drunk or visit the lavatory, although sometimes they are allowed to visit museums, libraries and art galleries, or do evening classes with a view to 'bettering' themselves.

The establishment demands art from its own perspective but these forms of committed art have always been as suffocating to me as the impositions laid down by the British State, although I should point out of course that I am a socialist myself. I wanted none of any of it. In prose fiction I saw the distinction between dialogue and narrative as a summation of the political system; it was simply another method of exclusion, of marginalising and disenfranchising different peoples, cultures and communities. I was uncomfortable with 'working class' authors who allowed 'the voice' of higher authority' to control narrative, the place where the psychological drama occurred. How could I write from within my own place and time if I was forced to adopt the 'received' language of the ruling class? Not to challenge the rules of narrative was to be coerced into assimilation, I would be forced to write in the voice of an imagined member of the ruling class. I saw the struggle as towards a self-contained world. This meant I had to work my way through language, find a way of making it my own.

When I was making my first stories it didn't occur to me that I was breaching linguistic and social taboos. My only concern was how to enter into my own world, how to make use of myself, my own experience, my own culture and community, and so on. Time was short and energy limited. I was having to earn a living; myself and my wife were bringing up two kids. So necessity informed my working practices, my creative methods. The problem of 'the blank page' or 'writers' block' only really arises when you have certain freedoms, perhaps essentially economic. Eventually I had as a project to write a group of stories set wholly in Glasgow, that self-contained Glasgow, not subject to the yays or nays of ruling authority. I got into the habit of evaluating my own work, training myself to recognise when a story was finished as well as it could be finished, when it was working and when it was not working. I didn't need outside opinion, although when it came it was always welcome, even my first criticism when I was about 25, that I used "the language of the gutter" and whereas I was free to do whatever I wanted I was certainly not free to thrust this language in

the face of other people. I've spoken about this elsewhere and won't go on about it. Instead I'll read a poem by Tom Leonard, from his sequence *Situations Theoretical and Contemporary*:

And their judges spoke with one dialect,  
but the condemned spoke with many voices.  
And the prisons were full of many voices,  
but never the dialect of the judges.  
"No one is above the Law."

There is a notion that art is sacrosanct and it is a dubious notion; there is also the notion that the practise of art is sacrosanct which is just nonsense. If you explore that notion more deeply I think you'll find that the only context in which it has meaning is political, it implies hierarchy, it assumes freedom for some and economic slavery for others; for some there is the luxury of time, not having to worry about how to get by in the world, you can be a free spirit, it is your right as an artist, you are set loose from the everyday trials and tribulations of an ordinary person because first and foremost you are not an ordinary person, with all the diverse responsibilities which that might entail, you are an Artist. It is part of the same myth, or disinformation, that as a young artist you should take it for granted that by working hard and by doing things properly economic necessity will be borne away, as if by magic on a high breeze—or perhaps on a mighty zephyr, us artists talk a different language from other people.

Maybe the only artists who ever talk about the sanctity of art and its practice in that manner either have a form of private income or are earning good money, perhaps by teaching art or else maybe they have managed to cut adrift of their adult obligations, perhaps by choosing to remain adolescents, perhaps by moving into voluntary exile, which is something most artists dream about at some point or another. It's better not to discuss artists who are forced into exile. In fact it wouldn't surprise me if the study of such artists is being withdrawn quietly from the national curriculum, if it was ever on it, since it might tempt students into pondering over the British State and its relation to people who try to seek safety in exile, asylum-seekers is what they are called.

The most contemporary example might be Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian writer who was murdered by the Nigerian State authorities several months ago. I strongly recommend his work, read his novel *Soza Boy*, also what he says about his use of English in the author's note at the beginning. Part of what the authorities found so objectionable was his commitment to his own culture, that of the ogoni people. What would have happened if this artist had arrived incognito and unannounced in Britain seeking sanctuary to continue practising his art? Would he have escaped being sent back to the torturers and murderers, and kept here pending a decision? Would he have survived the prison chosen for him by our Heathrow immigration authorities pending that decision? or would he have been found dead in a British cell, suffocated in mysterious circumstances, cause unknown? or would the Home Secretary and the British Government make a special case for him because he was not only a well-known writer but supported by Amnesty International?

Imagine the education authorities did allow a proper study of the work of contemporary artists-in-exile, all those exiled in London at this very moment in time, or better still imagine the art establishment held a genuine Best of British art exhibition, open to any artist domiciled in Britain, artists from the Middle East, Africa, the Sub-Continent, Turkey, Kurdistan,

\*The first line of a poem by Tom Leonard, the last in his sequence *Situations Theoretical and Contemporary*, from his *Reports from the Present* SELECTED WORK 1982-94 (Jonathan Cape, London, 1985).

# said... " \*

## James Kelman

South East Asia, anywhere at all. I'm sure the specialist-art-authorities would have no hesitation in selecting the work on its merits. Would they have to conceal the difficult bits, the political bits, and the political bits are the biographical bits, the lives of these artists are a political issue? Then too we might have to look at bits that focus on the collusion between this country and the despotic regimes that sent these people into exile in the first place.

Of course us artists are not supposed to talk about political issues, we are too idealistic, we don't have a firm enough grasp on reality. We are supposed to leave that to the responsible adults, those who aren't artists. Obviously it's not only artists who are required by the State to be children, it applies across the board: as a working rule the only folk capable of making proper judgments are Cabinet ministers, certain members of parliament and the house of Lords, certain members of the State and certain media-commentators. The rest of us allow our judgment to be impaired, clouded by sentiment etc.

But being an artist is not a licence to remain an adolescent for the rest of your life. Some of the mythology surrounding art gives us to understand that a special case is made for those who create poetry, music, paintings, stories, drama etc.—whatever the media—that artists are allowed to remain children. Either that or we are forced to remain children; it occasionally seems like that this is what society requires of its artists, in one way or another, that we remain children. But I'm an adult human being and if I want to express an opinion then I'll express it. I'm not going to enjoy it if my opinion is downgraded simply because I'm a story-teller or artist. It's quite remarkable really the different ways whereby the State requires its artists to suck dummytits, even when we're walking with the aid of zimmers, like kids we are to be seen and not heard.

Some of the points I'm raising here were never clearer than during the turmoil surrounding the European City of Culture carry on. Here to my mind was a classic example of the exploitation of art and artists. It's still a taboo subject. One is not supposed to mention it, just recall it hazily, but with affection, as the time our ayn wee city of Glasgow made it onto the international map. Anything is justified because of that. Look at the publicity the city got! It was only five years ago and already it's a sort of legend, a mythical kind of thing, mythical in the sense that it isn't open to analysis, not available for critical examination, not then and not now. If you attempt such a thing you're a boring spoilsport.

But it was definitely a classic exercise in respect of how art and artists are regarded by the authorities, with a mixture of contempt, distrust and fear. Once again we were children, usually spoiled brats. Those of us who refused to stand up and sing our party-piece for the visiting adults were sent to bed without a chocolate biscuit. The authorities were unsure how the visitors treated their own naughty children. However some of them lost their temper and gave us a smack in public. The city's PR team, including most media

commentators, responded in mitigation, and with one or two exceptions they took great pains in pointing to how naughty we were, how sorely we had tried the patience of the adult authorities, didn't we appreciate the embarrassment we spoilsports were causing? Surely we knew it was all for our own good, we didn't even have the wit to see this, not knowing which side our bread was buttered, how could we be so disloyal, but that's to be expected of artists, their selfishness is a byword, they luxuriate in their perpetual infancy, their rosy-hued idealism, meanwhile us adults must enter bravely into the real world, the world of the everyday, the world of compromise and necessity, if the good old adult authorities didn't get their hands dirtied why then all us artist-children would be in a right pickle and the amazing thing is we wouldn't even know it, because the world of adult-authority is mysterious and secretive and beyond the ken of infants.

There was another approach to us artists, this one was utilitarian; it appealed both to our sensibilities and to our reasonableness. Okay the politicians and paid arts administration, the so-called cultural workforce, might make mistakes but it's always well-intentioned and in the interests of everybody, and come on for Christ sake nobody's perfect. We all know how crass it all is but play along, don't rock the boat, you might get something out of it, some kind of commission maybe, a chocolate biscuit, a year's supply even, who knows, if not now in the long run, and if you don't maybe some other artists will, you might even know some of them.

In this scenario the then leader of the district council was portrayed as mister happy-go-lucky, a well-meaning kind of simpleton, but one who not only had a heart of gold, he was a patriot, he loved his Glasgow, he might make a wrong move now and again but it's all for the good of the cause, above all he loves his ayn wee city.

And okay, what if he is a Philistine, at least he is an unashamed card-carrying one. And anyway, while we're on the subject, surely the preciousness and pomposity of artists needs a good smack in the face now and again and this is what the leader of the district council is doing, he is showing all you artists up for the bunch of arty wankers you really are. Yeh, that too was in there. We were being asked to show solidarity with the politicians and arts administration either because it was in our own best personal interest, the best interests of artists in general, or the best interests of the city itself. In this utilitarian argument art had nothing to do with it, art was kept out of it. And in a sense this was a paradigm of the Year of Culture, art had nothing whatsoever to do with it. Never mind that it was precisely art as the product of individual people that was being highjacked and ripped off so mightily. The artists were being asked to conceal or disown their existence, all for the good of the cause. Part of the underlying thinking behind the authorities' strategy was that if such a thing as art does exist then it certainly isn't being created in Glasgow although for some peculiar reason foreigners see things differently. I can't resist that classic line from the former leader of the council, now the proud recipient of Glasgow's

highest office, the present Lord Provost, to paraphrase: I might not know what art is but I'll milk it for all it's worth.

It's always interesting to see how the various State authorities try to separate not only living-artists from society but art itself. The educational system is one such authority, a crucial instrument of the state. Think of the resources, economic and intellectual, all that time and energy, being spent or wasted in spurious discourse, spurious activity. Areas of academic endeavour are actually devoted to theories of art where we learn that the text or artwork is all that matters, forget the artists who created the thing, their lives are unimportant, forget too the social conditions in which they worked, such things are irrelevant. When it comes to art with a capital A it makes no difference whether an artist is a multi-billionaire landowner or some poor bastard dying of malnutrition, let's examine the work. As responsible art critics we learn to establish proper criteria, objective criteria. (Note that art-critics are always responsible by definition.) As responsible and mature art critics we can award the artwork marks out of ten as a function of our unbiased and objective evaluative criteria, once we have done this we may wonder, if we are so inclined, whether or not the artist led an easy life, or if the society in which he moved was difficult or not, but it is unimportant, for we can both recognise and evaluate beauty wherever we find it, in a sewer or a gilded palace. All that kind of shit.

The fundamental issue concerns their own criteria. Never mind what they are, where do these criteria come from? They have to come from somewhere. The thing is they don't come from anywhere. There is no ultimate evaluative criteria. It just seems that way, that there are criteria within society that somehow exist a priori, like god; unchanging, immutable, eternally fixed. And just like that whole set of priests, rabbis, mullahs and ministers these specialist-critics and expert-judges—those who bestow the final verdict—they do so from a position of absolute authority. We have to take their judgment on trust, the validity of the criteria is not up for discussion. We are to have faith in the specialist-art-critics because their integrity is vouchsafed by an Unimpeachable Source.

But what is the source? Well, that should go without saying. If you persist in such questioning you show a marked breach of faith. There is a stage where even the most skeptical among us are obliged to bow the head not in sullen silence but in silent reverence.

The people who come armed with these special criteria always have the final word, because authority is invested in them. Aye but who invested authority in them? The wisest authorities in the land, a tiny but dedicated circle of men and women who are expert in every field imaginable, not only that but they have the qualifications to prove it. Aye but what qualifications? Many qualifications, a veritable plethora of qualifications. Who says so? And what kind of qualifications are they? Who do they 'show' them to? Where do they get them?

Older people here will remember the minor furore caused in a West Highland town a few years back

# “And the judges said..” *continued*

when they held a festival of The Best of British Music. The organisers were good at publicity and managed to get press releases carried in most of the national media. When the programme for the festival was released people up and down the country were amazed to find that only music composed by local musicians had been selected. That's right, with the freedom to choose from anywhere in the land the Best of British festival was entirely composed by musicians based in the town itself. This caused a real stramash. The national media arrived in force. They discovered the selection-panel consisted of only one man, some local guy.

The pressure mounted till eventually it couldn't be ignored by the authorities; an enquiry was set-up, headed by a committee of three 'specialist-judges' from the art establishment department of music. What they wanted to know was firstly where the funding for this so-called national festival came: was it just local private money or did the cash come from the public purse, from the Scottish Arts Council or even god help us from the Arts Council of Great Britain? The next thing they did was find out about the local guy, the so-called judge. What were his qualifications and where exactly did he get them? Was it just some kind of music diploma from his local secondary school or what? They discovered he hadn't gone to the Royal College of Music in Scotland, never mind the one down in London and when they went to examine his credentials they couldn't find any. Next they tried to examine the criteria by which the guy had arrived at his final selection but that proved impossible and what little they did pick up they just couldn't make head nor tail of them, the criteria the guy used. After that they had a quick listen to the selected compositions but that didn't help matters at all, most of it seemed to be 'West-Highland-town-type music', in the words of one of the specialist-art-judges. (He later apologised for his lack of clarity on that one but said he didn't know how else to describe it.)

At last the specialist-art-judges approached the organisers and told them their man had no qualifications at all, they had checked his credentials, all of that, he just wasn't qualified, not only that but the guy had never been further south than Dalmally in his life, never more north than the Kyle of Lochalsh.

But the organisers defended their judge and insisted on the validity of the guy's selection, that it was both unbiased and objective. They backed him all the way. According to them he had a great ear and was scrupulously fair, it was traditional too, it ran in his family, his father and his father before him, they had been unbiased judges as well. And their township needs this kind of honest, unbiased criticism because it's also a port and ferries arrive daily, it's a cosmopolitan place. And then they flummoxed the specialist-art-judges; never mind his qualifications, they said, what about yours? I bet you've never even been to the town. And they were right. None of three 'specialist-art-judges' had ever set foot in the place although occasionally they flew over it on their way to art conferences in Canada or Iceland.

There was a similar sort of rumpus happened over an exhibition of contemporary European Art which took place in France, I forget which city, maybe it was Paris. This time there was a panel of genuine attested art-critics making the selection. But the explosion here was that not one solitary piece of work by any living French artist was chosen. Imagine that, none of the art being created by the French community was judged good enough for the exhibition. It was extraordinary. It was said at the time by many French people that their country's art might not be good enough for Europe but it was certainly good enough for them. Never

mind the European community they said, French art is good enough for the French community. But not everybody agreed, a few French art experts went along with the panel of judges and issued a statement to the effect that French artists should work harder in future so that they might bring their art up to scratch, scratch being the European standard, whatever that happened to be at the time.

I'm speaking today as a writer of fiction of course. But here's another example that isn't fiction:

During the European City of Culture in 1990 there was an exhibition of British Art held in Glasgow. The director of museums and art galleries was responsible and he caused much controversy when he excluded the work of certain local artists. He is reported to have done so on the grounds that their work wasn't good enough.

A very interesting comment from someone holding such an office. Let's assume that his motives were unimpeachable and that he approached the task of selection in a scrupulously fair manner. Let's also assume there was no political pressure coming from the team at George Square. Nor were there any sort of 'quota issues' involved, and I mean by this that if in the director's own considered opinion there had been no home-based artwork 'good enough' then nothing by the city's artists would have been chosen at all, as in the French example. As far as I know the possibility that he might choose nothing at all by local artists wasn't referred to by the director but in the context of this argument it is surely implicit, if not the argument is spurious. And we would just have to lump it. Top officials are often forced to make painful decisions which we might not like but which are always for our own good in the long run. It's no good us hiding our head in the sand, if our art isn't good enough then why not admit reality and just try and improve it so that one day we can be acceptable at a national level. I mean I can imagine an exhibition of The Best of Contemporary World Art being held in Houston, Texas where we find empty galleries, the judges having decided that none of the art submitted was of a high enough standard. Fortunately for the administrators of the European City of Culture embarrassment was avoided, artwork by certain Glasgow-based artists was considered 'good enough' by the director.

Amidst all the nonsense I'm trying to draw attention to a couple of problems with these 'not good-enough' and 'best-of' arguments, that distinctions have to be drawn between the art of a community and the art of a community-at-large. I'm saying that the value of the art of a community seems to be a function of an extended community. We are forced to have our art evaluated relative to what takes place, in this wider community. Our art is not judged on its own merits. Yet once we actually look at this wider community we find it isn't really very wide at all; in fact it's toty, it's toty and it's exclusive, it's restricted to the values of the elite group of people who form the controlling interest of this country. What you find is that our society is premised on the assumption that the criteria by which art is evaluated within this elite group are the only criteria which truly matter. These criteria are the same criteria by which all art thought worthy of the name is evaluated throughout the entire country. Artwork from different cultures and communities cannot have intrinsic aesthetic value. It may have merit on a relative scale (which is minor by definition) but it has no aesthetic value in its own right. Only when measured by the standards of the elite culture, judged by its criteria alone, can the artwork of particular cultures be awarded authentic value. Every culture in the land is subject to it, subordinate to its standards, controlled by those who are trained to affirm it whether by birth,

adoption or assimilation.

But since this elite group controls most everything else anyway it should go without saying. So much so that it's seldom said at all. And only then by those out with the controlling-group; fringe-people, social-misfits, failures, folk with chips-on-their-shoulders; conspiracy-theorists, provincials, racists, fundamentalists, nationalists, radicals, subversives, extremists, etc.

Obviously I'm not saying that somebody who takes control of a community's museums and art galleries must be born and bred within the community itself. Nor am I even suggesting that s/he has to have an intimate knowledge and understanding of a community's particular cultural traditions. It's just that by adopting this argument for the exclusion of certain local artists the criteria used by him, these pertaining to a wider cultural standard, some sort of greater conceptual base, these criteria cannot recognise the inherent value of the art of a particular community. The crucial point for Glaswegians about the "not good-enough" controversy was that here we have somebody in charge of a community's museums and art galleries, number one authority in control of the history, traditions and cultural inheritance of the city, and he seems not to understand, even intuitively, that aesthetic value is intrinsic to the art of any community, any community at all.

The argument also allows and makes use of another hierarchy-based fallacy, that the artwork produced within one culture is superior to that of another. Now it might well be possible that the artwork produced by one culture is 'better' than that of another. That's fine by me. I'm wary of folk who adopt relativist positions; it usually means they won't take criticism. But what I do want to know is the criteria used to establish value. Surely it's not too much to ask of our finely matured art authorities.

Maybe people with an interest in other areas of Scottish life will see parallels. Why, for instance, is there no national theatre in this country? Is Scottish theatre not good enough to warrant such a thing? What do we mean when we say of a country that its theatre isn't 'good enough'? Is it possible for somebody brought up in Scotland to make such a statement? Maybe. I'm not saying it isn't, not necessarily, I just want to know about the criteria, what criteria are being applied, how is the evaluation being made, who the hell is making that judgment?

It became clear to me early on that writing stories did not offer a living, and no matter how much I resented this it was stupid to blame it on my partner. It wasn't her fault that the thing I gave most of my time and sweat to had no economic value. If I felt like changing the World then at the same time I would have to work it so that the burden of looking after the children didn't fall solely on my partner's shoulders. I didn't expect her to have three economic burdens, the two children and myself. And I remember discussing this many years ago with Tom Leonard and with Alasdair Gray, that if you couldn't be both a parent and a writer then maybe there was something wrong with being a writer. It's a perennial discussion for most artists, I was chatting about it as recently as last month with an 84 year old woman, the American writer Tillie Olsen. Some of you may know of her, she has written one of the seminal works of this century on creativity, it's entitled *Silences*, and I recommend it here and now to anyone who hasn't read it.

The way I'm talking might sound like a denigration of art, it isn't. But we have to be able to see art in the context of society as it exists, it cannot be separated from it. Art is not an eternal verity. Let us take it as given that life without art is so unthinkable that it may as well be a contradiction in terms of what it is to be a

human being. But when all is said and done art is created by human beings, by people; and people live in societies of people. I'm not speaking as an art historian but as a practising artist, a writer of stories.

I used to read the biographies of artists, in my mid to late teens, mainly the Impressionists but it was the lives of these artists that drew me to art as a maturing teenager, not the art itself. I thought Modigliani was great, he was a kind of hero. After that came his art, I looked at his art. I also thought Pissarro was great, again this had nothing really to do with his painting, it was because his home was a welcoming place, plus the fact he and his wife had a pot of soup at the ready for the skint and hungry young artists of the community. Again with Cezanne and Emile Zola, I liked them both. I didn't give a damn about their violent quarrel, I wanted to speak to Cezanne on behalf of Zola, if Emile is willing to forgive and forget then why can't you for Christ sake Paul come on, shake hands, life is difficult enough.

Obviously there is a sentimental side, it's allowable in adolescence. For several years I thought Turgenev was a stuck-up aristocratic mean-minded shit, and I didn't read him. Then at last I did read him, and found his work was great, why the hell was I so prejudiced! Dostoevski was to blame. I was so stuck on Dostoevski I had followed him blindly, even when he attacked Turgenev without telling me about his own gambling problems and how poor old Turgenev had loaned him dough till finally he couldn't any longer, and Dostoevski damned him for it. So I had graduated to a more mature understanding of the reality of that personal situation.

I can't imagine somebody studying the life and work of Vincent Van Gogh and not being moved by it, not being outraged by the conventional view that suggests he was a kind of naive idealistic madman. In spite of all that we know of the man's life the conventional view continues to be the premise, so that if we want to argue the point the burden of proof is on us. Why, why should that be? And we have a writer like Franz Kafka, we are to ignore the life of the man, we are to search his texts for its hidden mysteries, symbols and other coda about nightmare bureaucracies and despotic tyrannies as metaphors for this that and the next thing, including the immutability of a Christian god, given that Kafka was Jewish, we can involve ourselves however we like but rarely how it

was to exist in Prague at the turn of the 20th century, or the fact that the artist himself spent so much of his working time and energy trying to assist working-class people get their insurance claims settled through the various levels and rung upon grinding rung of state bureaucracy. How convenient for state authorities everywhere, that somehow or other whatever discourse there is via the normal media channels always seem to stop short of looking at the nature of society as lived in by the creators of art.

More recently, within the past fifteen years, I've come to see as exemplars artists such as Sorley MacLean whose death last Sunday came as a blow to so many people. He could not be divorced from his culture, not from his community. Throughout his life he fought all such nonsense, all such propaganda, because I also believe that it is propaganda. Apart from his poetry he produced a classic work of criticism which, as its own sad commentary on the current affairs of Scottish art, is now out of print. In one of his essays, entitled *Is there a hope for Gaelic?* he writes:

It is natural for a poet to love his own language if it is the language of his ancestors and dying, even if it were a poor defective thing. Gaelic is not a poor language, in art at any rate. Though it had only its ineffable songs, which cannot be put in other words, it would still be a priceless medium of expression. Therefore the Gaelic writer must be 'political', and in our day the teaching of the language is the prime business of its 'politics'.

At the Booker Prize ceremony a couple of years ago I upset some people by what I was arguing, which was not a plea for separatism, nor for nationalism, nor for the world to recognise the supremacy of Scottish culture—all of which was reported by various media. Nor was it an argument in favour of the local at all costs, an acceptance of the mediocre just because it happens to be a home-grown product. It is simply to say that the existence of my culture is a fact and why should that be denied? It's an argument not for the supremacy of my culture, just for its validity, and by extension, the validity of any culture. There is no such thing as an 'invalid' culture, just as there is no such thing as an 'inferior' or 'superior' culture. What else is a culture but a set of ideas, beliefs, and traditions held by any given community of people: a set of infinite extension, shifting and changing. Cultures will function in the same way as languages, not to mention the people

who use them: unless dead they live. I'll end with another poem by Tom Leonard. It was my original intention to read this one at the end of the Booker ceremony. But eventually I didn't, I've got a habit of going in the huff and I just thought to hell with them, but I'll finish with it now, it's a beautiful poem, entitled

*Fathers and Sons*

I remember being ashamed of my father  
when he whispered the words out loud  
reading the newspaper.

"Don't you find  
the use of phonetic urban dialect  
rather constrictive?"  
asks a member of the audience.

The poetry reading is over.  
I will go home to my children.