

**“Edging Back Into Awareness”; *How Late it Was, How Late*, Form,
and the Utopian Demand**

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You taught me language, and my profit on't

Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you

For learning me your language!

No-one manages openings quite like James Kelman. Here is our point of entry into *How Late It Was, How Late*, this essay's case study:

Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts; but ye want to remember and face up to things, just something keeps ye from doing it, why can ye no do it; the words filling yer head: then other

words...His feet were back in view. He studied them; he was wearing an auld pair of trainer shoes for fuck sake where had they come from he had never seen them afore man auld fucking trainer shoes. The laces werenay even tied! Where were his leathers? A new pair of leathers man he got them a fortnight ago and now here they were fucking missing man know what I'm saying, somebody must have blagged them, miserable bastards, what chance ye got.¹

This is Sammy Samuels, an out-of-work builder's labourer recovering from a big night, and about to receive a blinding beating from the Glasgow police. *How Late is Was*, *How Late* is the record of his journey of survival through the de-industrialised and blighted landscape of a Scotland damaged by Thatcherism. Its one of the great novels of the 1990s and, on my first encounter with it, I read Kelman's style as a sort of bravura recreation of modernist stream-of-consciousness. But, on closer inspection, *How Late it Was*, *How Late* reveals itself as having a narrator quite distinct from Sammy himself:

Okay, cutting a long story short here cause Sammy's head was getting into a state and what was coming out wasnay always very good. The guy was fuckt I mean put it that way, he was fuckt, so there's nay sense prolonging it. If ye're wanting to play fair: alright? Let it go, fucking let it go, just let it go, a wee bit of privacy, know what I'm talking about, ye give a guy a break, fuck sake, sometimes its best just accepting that. (51)

Who is speaking here? This is a question with political consequences, and yet critics offer strategically vague evasions. For Liam McIlvanney "Kelman's novels are first person narratives told in the third person"² while, for Cairns Craig, this is an example of a "narrative voice hovering between that of the character and that of the narrator."³

Kelman is himself a committed and active socialist, and his novels have long concerned themselves with working-class themes, and so it is no wonder that he has attracted a left-wing readership. This narrative dilemma or confusion has an added political charge and import for these socialist readers because, in its searing and endless negativity, Kelman's work seems to set limits on the imagination and to repudiate alternatives or possibilities for opposition: "folk take a battering but, they do; they get born and they get brought up and they get fuckt. That's the story; the cot to the fucking funeral pyre" (11). *How Late it Was*, *How Late* takes class and class relations as its organising theme and raw material: if, in doing so, it succeeds only at the cost of denying any possibility of social transformation or break then this is bitter organisation indeed. Many readers find Kelman's

writing a bleak option, “possessive individualism, bourgeois individualism taken to its extreme”⁴ where “there is no hope of transformation: there is no sustenance in community.”⁵ On this reading, *How Late it Was, How Late*, is not a politically inspirational or valuable work, but merely another record of the depressing small-change of the present.

One solution to this dilemma is to harness the novel’s political energies by focussing instead on its realism, and on the sort of reliable information it produces about the effects of neo-liberalism and unemployment. But the novel itself, throughout and amongst its draining negativity, insists on a focus on social transformation and the need for breaks, and radical breaks at that. Sammy is, at times, no mean dialectician:

So what Sammy was feeling was the opposite of the opposite, in other words, he fucking was hemmed in man know what I’m saying, hemmed in: and it was gonny get worse, afore it got better; that was a certainty, it was gony get worse. His entire approach had to be changed. The whole set-up. Everything. (133)

I want to argue for a shift in focus around Kelman by arguing in this essay that this need – “feeling the opposite of the opposite” – can be used a spring-board to turn the very negativity of *How Late it Was, How Late* towards politically emancipatory and positive ends. The idea of the Utopian demand suggests ways that Kelman’s alleged pessimism can be transformed from a problem into the outline of a solution. Scholarship around Kelman is currently at an impasse, where his novels are either read at ever-increasing levels of philosophical abstraction – and thus removed from the promise of political intervention – or pressed into the service of an ideology quite alien to that of his own political energies, that of a de-classed Scottish nationalism. Reading this great realist for his Utopian demands was suggested to me by the programmatic intervention of *Archaeologies of the Future*. “Utopia can serve the negative purpose,” Jameson argues, “of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment ... therefore the best Utopias are those that fail most comprehensively.” “The Utopian remedy,” in his scheme, “must at first be a fundamentally negative one ... diagnostic interventions [are] maps and plans to be read negatively.”⁶ Kelman’s voice, and the political responsibilities he associates with it, are an instance of the Utopian remedy, where the very negative and hopeless initial reactions it produces in us are, in turn, spurs to consider deeper social implications.

Edging Back Into Awareness

The dominant mode for approaching Kelman at the moment is the philosophical, and the most interesting recent scholarship examines *How Late it Was, How Late* against a background of existentialism and the various philosophical questions around subjectivity raised by his characters and their dilemmas.⁷ This work is important, and certainly puts paid to the lies of literary journalism that paint Kelman as some sort of “illiterate savage,”⁸ but there is a danger that, in pursuing the argument at such a level of abstraction, vital energies in Kelman’s realism will be lost. One aims to rise from the abstract to the concrete, and so much of the concentrated political context of Glasgow in *How Late it Was, How Late* is skipped over by critics anxious to reach the novel’s philosophical crux; I can’t help but suspect there is an element of ideological repression at work. Sammy is scornful of “the gentry...at Ibrox Park” (67), is recommended a blind charity “out the Gallowgate...nay offense – if you’re a Tim I mean” (92) and associates with “Tam Roberts, the political” (168); in other words, *How Late it Was, How Late* is studded with reminders of sectarianism, something too many are in a hurry to forget. This is, to put it another way, not a novel about subjects thrown into Being, but much more about determinate political subjects thrown up against the barriers of sectarianism, anti-Catholic bigotry and the rest of that dense web which is Glasgow political life. It is, in Auerbach’s neat phrase, “fraught with background,” a background too quick a turn to the philosophical threatens to lose.

It would be false to take the philosophical reading as a complete retreat from the text’s political potential, though. Cairns Craig and others have used these philosophical investigations as a starting point for constructing a politics out of *How Late it Was, How Late*. Kelman’s “working class characters...are the sites,” Craig suggests, “not of a social – a class – conflict, but of an existential awareness from which most human beings are insulated by their society.”⁹ “The isolation of Kelman’s characters, in other words,” he continues in a recent essay, “replicates the isolation of the Cartesian/Kantian ego, but the linguistic structure and invocation of ‘you’ implies an entirely different conception of the self as always in relation with the Other.”¹⁰

Craig’s readings are richly rewarding but, finally, this argument must be considered unacceptable. Firstly, “existential awareness,” for those of us who agree with Jameson that “social collectivity [is] the crucial centre of any truly progressive and innovative political response to globalisation,”¹¹

must be connected with some sort of narrative of collective transformation or wider social and historical awareness if it is not to be mere utopian compensation (of the old-fashioned, mystical-compensatory, bad kind). More worryingly, though, Craig's suggestion that Kelman can produce an "entirely different conception of the self" – that these texts imply imagined communities populated by subjects of a new and post-Cartesian/Kantian kind – resolutely excludes half the human race. Kelman's fictional worlds are thoroughly male affairs, and any utopian constructions out of these worlds will exclude women quite completely, something that ought to give us pause for thought at the very least.¹²

Utopian Programmes

The philosophical reading is, then, necessary but insufficient; scholars as attentive as Gardiner and Hames uncover material and concerns for future investigation but the socialist reader, like Forster's India, is forced to say "not here" and "not yet." Other dilemmas still confront us. The most dominant of these, and the reading currently most active in inhibiting the political energies of the text from being released, is the nationalist case. More often asserted than argued, the nationalist case assumes that, because Kelman is Scottish and a writer, he must therefore be allied as a Scottish writer to the cause of Scottishness.¹³ Kelman himself has done more than enough to try and discredit this view ("it isn't a nationalist point I'm making; I'm a socialist, and I'm talking about class")¹⁴ but the nationalist case, travelling as it is with the stream of recent political trends, continues.

There is nothing in *How Late it Was, How Late*, though, to suggest much affinity with the ideologues of Scottish nationhood; indeed, the most constant cultural referents are to working life and music more than any putative unified Scottish culture, and Sammy's primary alienations are all structured around the logic of class. Not only are Sammy's experiences unlikely to be familiar to residents of Bearsden or Milngavie, nationalist readings also miss the extent to which the language Kelman insists on is a class language.¹⁵

Still, as Sammy himself is well aware, a story cannot escape its setting or the context of its readers' political world:

Funny how ye telt a story to make a point and ye fail, ye fail, a total disaster. Not only do ye no make yer point it winds up the exact fucking opposite man, the exact fucking opposite. That isnay a

misunderstanding it's a total...plus some folk, they're never happy unless they're giving ye a sharp fucking talking to...some of these other cunts man they think they know and they fucking don't. (17)

This “total disaster” points to where the *How Late it Was, How Late*'s political energies are at their most productive: in Kelman's demand for a working-class narrative voice.

A Stick of Dynamite: the Utopian Demand

Once the police have seized him, Sammy realizes how important making sense of his own life has become. He needs a story:

That was for him but no for the sodjers. It was him needed it, the story. Once it was there solid in that fucking nut of his then fine, it was alright; a stick of dynamite man that was what they would fucking need. Other stuff he could let slip, it didnay matter. Know what I'm saying, once the solid stuff was there, he could let slip the other stuff. (25)

This is a novel conscious of the importance of narrative and narrative forms, and of the political implications surrounding who structures and controls these forms: “there's a difference between repping somebody and fucking being somebody, know what I'm talking about, being somebody?” (241) Kelman has outlined a whole writerly methodology to attempt to recognise and overcome this problem: “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.”¹⁶ “I wanted to write as one of my own people”, he writes, “I wanted to write *and remain a member of my own community*.”¹⁷

This commitment helps explain the narrative dilemma I opened this essay with; far from being a variation on modernist stream of consciousness, *How Late it Was, How Late* has a conventionally third-person omniscient narrator, but one in solidarity with his subject and characters: “then they turned a corner into the back close. But ye're as well drawing a curtain here, nay point prolonging the agony.” (6) This solidarity is more than Auerbach's “concrete vigour of the venacular” and marks out areas for real literary innovation and inventiveness in the realist tradition. But it is the eloquent ugliness of the book – its much-noted obscenities, repetitions and borrowings – that mark this as a utopian demand. Kelman's

desire to write and remain a member of his community – he was for many years a construction worker before getting the chance to write full-time – is as much an organising question for his works as it is a statement of achievement. The Adorno of *Aesthetic Theory* suggests a way to approach this problem:

If artworks are answers to their own questions, they themselves thereby truly become questions...Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived. Only when art's other is used as a primary layer in the experience of art does it become possible to sublimate this layer, to dissolve the thematic bonds, without the autonomy of the artwork becoming a matter of indifference. Art is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogenous to it, its autonomy eludes it.¹⁸

What is heterogenous to the artwork here is the working class community and its own possibilities for expression and organisation; in answering the challenge to write a narrative that rejects “methods of exclusion” Kelman in turn produces a work which questions what an art of working-class expression (“art’s other”) might look or sound like. The formal and political advances this method offers for realism are thrown into relief when we consider Kelman against his predecessors. Dickens and Lawrence wrote their narratives in standard English and reserved ‘dialect’ or ‘class’ speech (as if standard English is not itself always already a ‘class’ speech so ingrained we no longer hear it) for moments bracketed off in quotation: Stephen Blackpool and Mellors ‘authenticate’ the very texts they are internally distanced from. In the Scottish context, Hugh MacDiarmid took the rather odd option of striving for realism by making up and then using a language nobody actually spoke, and dotting it with apologetic apostrophes – “a triumph o’ discord shairly” – every time it departed from standard spelling. Against this backdrop one can see how *How Late it Was, How Late*’s stylistic organisation truly becomes a question, in Adorno’s phrase, when it raises for the reader, with a shock, the very impossibility of the sort of community self-expression Kelman makes so central to his aims. Whatever *How Late It Was, How Late*’s aesthetic achievements, it remains a record of failure, as Sammy not only fails to narrate his own story but finds himself at the mercies of the state and its police. Sammy survives, but only just, and his struggle is one always on the edges of inarticulate incomprehension (“the trouble is most cunts arenay able to think. Including Sammy, let’s be honest, a bit of honesty” 288). Kelman cannot write and stay a member of his (working-class) community precisely because, for socialists like himself, the working class lack control of the means of

communication and expression as much as they lack control of the means of production. Stephen Dedalus recognised what implications this subjugation has for language and speech:

The language which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.¹⁹

Following this, *How Late it Was, How Late*, is, by its own author's ambitions, a failure, a carefully recorded story of "unrest of spirit."

What, then, of the Utopian demand? Kelman's demand suggested to me the discussion of full employment in *Archaeologies of the Future*. In the leftist demand for full employment, Jameson explains,

The Utopianism of the demand becomes circular, for it is also clear, not only that the establishment of full employment would transform the system, but also that the system would already have to have been transformed, in advance, in order for full employment to be established. I would not call this a vicious circle, exactly; but it certainly reveals the space of a Utopian leap, between our empirical present and the Utopian arrangement of this imaginary future.

The employment demand, furthermore,

Returns upon our present to play a diagnostic and a critical-substantive role: to foreground full employment in this way, as the fundamental Utopian requirement, then allows us to return to concrete circumstances and situations and to read their dark spots and pathological dimensions as so many symptoms and effects of unemployment.²⁰

The demand for a working-class voice and speech carries out a similar diagnostic task in the field of communication. *How Late it Was, How Late* is, undeniably, Sammy's narrative, but it is equally a narrative of inexpressive and caged un-expressiveness. The narrative stresses its typicality and unexceptional status ("its no as if he was fucking special but man I mean he wasnay earmarked for nay fucking glory" 115) in order to underline its tensions and limits; Sammy's constant swearing shows the limits of his language, the limits of control and expressiveness he has over his language and his life. They are, in Joyce's phrase, "so familiar and so foreign" because of the alienated and dislocated position of the

unemployed worker in society. Sammy's is a record of what Jameson identifies as the "psychic misery involved in chronic unemployment, the demoralization, the morbid effects of boredom and the waste of vital energies and the absence of productivity."²¹ A narrative of psychic misery and demoralization will not register the shock – and the urgency– of its material unless it fails: the un-alienated jobless worker able to find meaning through self-expression is a utopia of a quite different kind. Sammy's tale is the tale of a break-down and, as such, itself starts to fracture and breakdown. His language, under the strain of the Utopian demand, staggers under its own ambitions and materials. This novel is a record of that position, but it cannot be a solution to it. *How Late it Was, How Late* is alive to these tensions, and ends not with Sammy's transformation but with his escape, to England: "then the door slammed shut and that was him, out of sight." (374)

Kelman demands a narrative voice and a prose that eliminates the distance between author and character and, as part of this, demands a writing that keeps him part of his own community. But this is a community, whatever local rebellions and subversions doubtless exist, currently unable to express itself other than in the language provided for it by the ruling order and structure. In failing to carry out its own tasks, *How Late, It Was, How Late* demonstrates these tasks' necessity and vitality. "Utopian circularity," Jameson contends, "becomes both a political vision and programme, and a critical and diagnostic instrument."²² We need a working-class literature and working-class expression from authors still loyal to their communities of production precisely because we cannot have these things; working out why we cannot, and what social forces and structures inhibit our expressiveness and control of communication is spurred on by this realisation – as a "diagnostic instrument" – and by its implications. Sammy's swearing anger runs up against those very forces preventing the sort of expression *How Late It Was, How Late* presents itself as:

Mister Samuels, I have people waiting to see me.

Christ sake!

I find your language offensive.

Do ye. Ah well fuck ye then. Fuck ye! Sammy crumpled the prescription and flung it at him: Stick that up yer fucking arse!

Yes good morning.

Ya fucking eedjit! Sammy stood there. He started smiling, then

stopped it. Fucking bastard!

Yes, thank you.

Fucking thank you ya bastard. Sammy grasped at the desk; there were papers there and he skited them; he turned and headed to where he thought the door was but banged into something that fell and he stumbled, tried to right himself but couldnay fucking manage it and over he went, clattering into something sharp and solid and he cried out. (225 – 226)

That “something sharp” is more than “our minds’ invisible limits”²³ but is rather a reminder of concrete limits, of institutions, power and direct, class control. “Something sharp and solid” is the reason both why there can be no working-class cultural independence and communication and why, at the same time, we have to tirelessly demand it and seek it out.

How Late it Was, How Late stages these debates, a utopian vocation all of its own in these de-politicised and culturally homogenous times. My own tradition has always been insistent on this point:

It is fundamentally incorrect to contrast bourgeois culture and bourgeois art and proletarian culture and proletarian art. The latter will never exist, because the proletarian regime is temporary and transient. The historic significance and the moral grandeur of the proletarian revolution consist in the fact that it is laying the foundations of a culture which is above classes and which will be the first culture that is truly human.²⁴

That one can find, in a novel of the neo-liberal 90s, a debate being staged that allows this, the forgotten or well-nigh totally repressed tradition of cultural activism, to be cited and brought back to light; this is an instance of the debate *How Late it Was, How Late* initiates and acts as an example of its Utopian drive and demand. Kelman’s Utopian demand is both for a workers’ language and for a place (Utopia, or, as Jameson uses the term, socialism itself) where such a human language can be realised. As such an investigation, this novel plays its part in helping us to “get back fucking into condition...[to] map out the journey man map out the journey.” (80)

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NOTES

- ¹ James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994), p. 1. All further references to this text are contained in the body of the essay.
- ² Liam McIlvanney, "The Politics of Narrative in the Post-War Scottish Novel", *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. Zachray Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 203.
- ³ Cairns Craig, "Beyond Reason: Hume, Seth, Macmurray and Scotland's Postmodernity", *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Literature*, ed. Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 274.
- ⁴ Willy Maley, "Swearing Blind: Kelman and the Curse of the Working Classes", *Edinburgh Review*, 95, 1996, p. 107.
- ⁵ Cairns Craig, "Resisting Arrest: James Kelman", *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies: New Voices, Old Visions*, ed. Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 102.
- ⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: the Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. xiii, 12.
- ⁷ See here Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 152 – 171, Scott Hames, *The Literary Politics of James Kelman* (unpublished PhD thesis: University of Aberdeen, 2006) and Laurence Nicholl, "Facticity, or Something Like It: the Novels of James Kelman", *The Contemporary British Novel Since 1980*, ed. James Acheson and Sarah C E Ross (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005).
- ⁸ The judgement of *The Times*' critic, cited in Uwe Zagratski, "Blues Fell This Morning: James Kelman's Scottish Literature and Afro-American Music", *Scottish Literary Journal*, 27 (1), 2000, p. 105.
- ⁹ Craig, "Resisting Arrest", p. 105.
- ¹⁰ Craig, "Beyond Reason", p. 274.
- ¹¹ Fredric Jameson, "Globalisation and Political Strategy", *New Left Review*, II: 4, July-August 2000, p. 68.
- ¹² I owe this point to Carole Jones, suggested in conversation after her "Seeking Disappearance: Body Trouble in James Kelman's *How Late it Was, How Late*", *Men and Madness*, Manchester Metropolitan University, 29 June, 2007.
- ¹³ See, as a chemically pure example, Dietmar Böhnke, *Kelman Writes Back: Literary Politics in the Work of a Scottish Writer* (Berlin: Galdo and Wilch, 1999).
- ¹⁴ James Kelman, *"And the Judges Said..." Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2002), p. 87.
- ¹⁵ Attitudinal studies, in an added complication, show that Scottish national consciousness is often connected to class concerns and political programmes, and is quite unrelated to support for particular national programmes or aspirations. See

David McCrone, "Who Are We? Understanding Scottish Identity" in Caterhine Di Domenico, Alex Law, Jonathan Skinner and Mick Smith (eds.), *Boundaries and Identities: Nation, Politics and Culture in Scotland* (Dundee: University of Abertay Press, 2001). For my own tradition's account of Scotland's national development and the dynamics of Scottish national consciousness, see Neil Davidson, *The Origins of Scottish Nationhood* (London: Pluto, 2000) and his *Discovering the Scottish Revolution* (London: Pluto, 2003). Michael Gardiner ("Literature, Theory Politics, Devolution as Iteration", *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. Berthold Schoene, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), who is insistent on Scotland's culpability in the British imperial project, re-casts the debate by setting postcoloniality as an ethical choice and state of mind; that particular quarrel will have to wait for another occasion.

¹⁶ Kelman, "And the Judges Said...", p. 40.

¹⁷ Kelman, "And the Judges Said...", p. 63.

¹⁸ Theodor W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997 [1970]), p. 6.

¹⁹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1965 [1916]), p. 205.

²⁰ *Archaeologies*, p. 147.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 75.

²⁴ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2005 [1925]), p. 33.