



Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

Eyeless in Glasgow: James Kelman's Existential Milton

Author(s): SCOTT HAMES

Source: *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (FALL 2009), pp. 496-527

Published by: University of Wisconsin Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40664361>

Accessed: 28-06-2016 04:14 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Wisconsin Press, Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Contemporary Literature*

SCOTT HAMES

Eyeless in Glasgow: James Kelman's Existential Milton

Critical reaction to James Kelman's 1994 Booker Prize was notoriously stormy. A large section of the British intelligentsia responded, John Linklater observed, with "a supuration of racist, xenophobic class hatred" (8). James Wood published a vindication of the award stressing Kelman's affinities with Franz Kafka and James Joyce, but (Sir) Simon Jenkins's likening of the winner to an "illiterate savage" sticks longer in the public mind.¹ Even Jenkins's colleagues at the London *Times* were bewildered by the ferocity of Kelman's detractors. "From some of the English reaction," Alan Chadwick observed, "you might have thought he had been found in the Queen's bedroom." But the Scottish reaction, too, was less than enthusiastic. A former lord provost of Glasgow, Dr. Michael Kelly, boasted of having "no intention" of reading the first (and to date only) Scottish winner of the prize but deplored the novel's language and politics nonetheless. Kelman's sudden cachet as a left-wing agitator even caught the attention of the shadow chancellor. Eager to shake an already dour public image, but ever wary of appearing too Scottish, too socialist, or too intellectual, Gordon Brown let it be known that he "hadn't made it to the end" of the book in question (qtd. in Poole 8).

The book in question was largely missing from all this. The vast majority of media comment barely managed to describe *How Late It Was, How Late*, let alone consider its literary merits. This is a familiar

1. Jenkins was knighted for services to journalism in 2004. Wood, it should be noted, was one of the Booker judges that year.

omission from prize-giving routines, of course, but the particular focus and intensity of the Kelman furor makes such thorough inattention to the text remarkable. The shrill debate over the “literary” status of *How Late*’s language and subject matter was largely unilluminating, but it did provoke some serious reflections concerning the nature of cultural value in 1990s Britain. Rather than considering how Kelman’s *book* negotiates and subverts cultural authority, however, critical discussion rapidly shifted to the politics of art and society more broadly. Any close analysis of *How Late*’s technical and stylistic achievement was drowned out by a more general and emotive discussion of cultural snobbery in not-yet “Cool Britannia,” with the result that Kelman’s novel occasioned a debate conducted mainly on sociological rather than artistic ground. As a result, the caricature of the novel generated by the Booker controversy rapidly eclipsed the literary achievement the prize itself had recognized. Even the majority of Kelman’s defenders tended to imply that he was an essentially documentary “dirty realist,” and that his use of Glasgow vernacular entailed the transcription of oral speech. This misconception is with us still. The novelist James Meek has recently and cogently observed that “a generous but misdirected romanticism . . . would like to imagine Kelman warbling his native fuc-knotes wild, simply sluicing a measure of his authentic working-class soul onto the page” (8). This romanticism, I will argue, is not only politically misdirected but critically misdirecting: readings which positioned *How Late* as a triumph of brute, ethnic naturalism traduce what is in fact a sophisticated work of modernist mythic appropriation and obscure the deeper radicalism of a writer whose politics are anarchist-existential, not socialist-realist.

Kelman’s critical reception has developed a great deal since 1994, but there is a submerged, intertextual element of his best-known work which has escaped serious analysis.² Given the revealing debate over cultural value that the Booker occasioned, there is a pleasing irony in *How Late*’s unlooked-for engagement with John Milton, a figure of

2. For more recent work on Kelman, see *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, edited by Scott Hames, forthcoming in 2010. It should be noted that Kelman was one of fourteen nominees from twelve countries for the 2009 Man Booker International Prize, won by Alice Munro.

unimpeachable “literary” gravity and prestige. The novel dismissed by Rabbi Julia Neuberger, one of the Booker judges that year, as “just a drunken Scotsman railing against bureaucracy” (qtd. in Grant 33) is in fact densely allusive to *Samson Agonistes*. For this to be so often overlooked dramatically exposes the limits of the cultural “expertise” by which such pronouncements gain their authority, neatly proving Kelman’s long-standing point (in “‘And the Judges Said . . .,’” for example) about the self-serving, mystificatory function of such expertise. Would Neuberger summarize Milton’s closet drama as just some idle Hebrews railing against God? Would perceiving that *How Late* is a loose adaptation of Milton have altered Jenkins’s estimation of the novel as “ordure”? The temptation to smug rejoinders of this kind is strong, but far too much attention has already been paid to the novel’s critics at the expense of the book itself. This essay is not yet another riposte to those who dismissed *How Late* as fashionable “gutter literature,” but an examination of the novel’s very considerable debts to Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, viewed in the particular context of Kelman’s existentialism. My aim is to demonstrate that Kelman’s engagement with the problem of cultural value is less romantic, but also more equivocal, than has been assumed, and that his rewriting of Milton complicates his literary politics—his trenchant, career-long interrogation of narrative authority, linguistic freedom, and aesthetic legitimacy—in especially pressing ways.

At first glance, James Kelman would seem an unlikely imitator of Milton. A figure of such dusty canonical prestige, and with such strong associations of elevated Christian tradition, sits uneasily alongside Kelman’s outspoken distrust of elite literary culture, even despite Milton’s libertarian and revolutionary credentials. That said, it is notable that political aspects of Milton’s work which have proved irksome to Marxist critics—especially, in Annabel Patterson’s words, “his continual assertion of what is generally castigated as the ‘bourgeois ideology’ of individual self-determination” (9)—are precisely the aspects of Kelman’s literary politics fretted over by the academic left.³ This coincidence offers

3. Willy Maley, for example, takes issue with Kelman’s representation of class, characterizing *How Late* as “possessive individualism, bourgeois individualism, taken to its extreme” (107).

a hint into Milton's appeal and begins to suggest why *How Late It Was, How Late* draws continually on the dramatic resources of *Samson Agonistes*. Like Kelman's novel, Milton's poem is concerned with the fundamental nature of liberty, explores tensions between individualism and responsibility to family, tribe, and comrades, and revolves around a dialectic of self-mastery versus the determining influence of outside forces. Most importantly, *Samson Agonistes* locates the conflict between these forces in the inner life of a single, embattled, mortal man, rather than dramatizing opposed elements in a cast of representative types. The presentation of Samson's inner conflict thus becomes the key technical difficulty of Milton's Christian tragedy, and the dramatic technique employed—the Chorus—strongly parallels the narrative method of *How Late*, and the nebulous position of its (usually) third-person narrator.

I am not the first to suggest connections between the two texts. While earlier critics have alluded to parallels between *How Late* and Milton's poem, no sustained analysis or interpretation of specific textual allusions and thematic resonances has so far appeared. David Sexton complained at the time of the Booker debacle that critics reading *How Late* as the "semi-documentary" outpourings of Kelman-as-barbarian were obtuse not to notice that the novel "is a take-off of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, despite Sammy's name, and the way he announces his intention to shave but never quite gets round to it in almost every chapter"; reviews by Ian A. Bell and Gill Hornby (to whom I owe the title of the present article) also alluded to Miltonic echoes. James Wood pursued these observations in his defense of the novel's literary credentials and used them to situate Kelman in the tradition of prison literature; his article draws interesting connections between Kelman's existential novel and those of Albert Camus, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Samuel Beckett but does not pursue the Miltonic subtext to any great depth. Much later, Nicola Pitchford revisited earlier commentary on the novel's intertextuality but with the somewhat distorting aim of "insist[ing] on the Scottishness (or Glaswegianism) of *How Late It Was, How Late*" (719). For Pitchford, "noting the novel's similarities and even its debts to the *English* literary canon" has the function of troubling English cultural dominance: "seeing Kelman as a latter-day

northern heir to—and gifted adapter of—Milton may be even more damaging to any English claim to have a monopoly on culture and tradition than it is to situate him among ‘foreign’ peers” (719). Here the significance of the novel’s relationship to Milton’s poem is subordinated to the extraneous agenda of literary nationalism.

By contrast, I see the Miltonic subtext as central to the novel’s aesthetic achievement and its immanent literary politics (that is, the contestation of values within the text, rather than the public debate provoked by the Booker). After exploring the thematic and political significance of the novel’s complex debts to *Samson Agonistes*, I will suggest that the dramatic method of Milton’s poem was an influence on Kelman’s approach to diegetic narrative discourse in *How Late It Was, How Late*. So far as these connections imply a shrewd engagement with rather than a flippant rejection of canonical English writing, they reveal a neglected intertextual facet of Kelman’s project, and a deeper irony in the 1994 controversy surrounding Kelman’s literariness. A few years before *How Late*’s Booker Prize, the critic and novelist Jonathan Coe questioned the stream of illustrious comparisons (Beckett, Camus, Joyce) bestowed on Kelman’s third novel, *A Disaffection*, and third collection of stories, *The Burn*. “These efforts to find a niche for Kelman in a gallery of familiar literary ‘giants,’” Coe observed, “seem to . . . suggest nervousness in the face of a talent which is recognisably large but which is also, and quite openly, engaged in a long-standing struggle against the very values which lie behind such judgments.” Promoting Kelman to cosmopolitan relevance by recruiting him to a prestigious Great Writers Club is undoubtedly to miss the point of his work. I argue that Kelman’s engagement with Milton is not only consistent with the struggle Coe alludes to but should in fact be read as a refinement and elaboration of it.

Establishing the Comparison

Leaving aside the running joke in the novel about the ex-convict Sammy needing a shave but never quite getting round to it, the most important parallels between the two texts can be summarized

as follows.⁴ Both Samson and Sammy are captive and blind, “Made of [their] enemies the scorn and gaze” (*Samson* line 34). Samson is an “agonist,” a grappler; Sammy is “a mean man in a corner” (*How Late* 167): “A battler man that was what he was. One thing about the Sammy fellow, a fucking battler. If ye had asked him he would have telt ye: nay brains but he would aye battle like fuck” (47). Samson is endowed with the same “ill proportion”: “Immeasurable strength they might behold / In me, of wisdom nothing more than mean” (206–7). Sammy spends the course of the novel struggling to cope with the repercussions of his unprovoked attack on the police; Samson’s *agon* ends in “violent revenge for injuries which are,” as Catherine Belsey points out, “the direct consequence of [his] own actions” (94). In the course of his struggle, Sammy refuses the assistance of Ally, an advocate (the Scots-law equivalent of an English barrister) who intends to solicit his compensation claim against the police department; Samson refuses his father, Manoa, who attempts to ransom him from the Philistines. In Milton’s poem, Samson challenges Harapha to “mortal fight” (1175) in “some narrow place enclosed” (1117), where he will meet the giant armed “only with an oaken staff” (1123); in *How Late It Was, How Late*, Sammy challenges the bouncers at Quinn’s bar, would-be “hardmen,” to fight in the enclosed vestibule of the pub entrance and brandishes his wooden walking stick like a weapon (270–71). When he is rearrested, we learn that Sammy is fencing stolen shirts and jackets (176–78); the Biblical Samson, too, trades in stolen garments (see Judg. 14:12, 19). There is no direct equivalent to the treacherous Dalila in *How Late*, but Sammy’s troubles, like Samson’s, undoubtedly started with “blabbing” to his girlfriend, who has since disappeared. Samson rebukes himself for revealing the secret of his strength to Dalila:

4. The text abounds with clues to the significance of Sammy’s facial hair, particularly its length as an index of his returning strength. A brief selection of such hints: “Then the auld fucking beard man the stubble, it was gony be at the hairy stage if he didnay watch it, and that would be tricky. He had a bit of a sensitive neck at the best of times. When he was a boy he couldnay shave without leaving scars and rashes all ower the place [“no razor must touch his head . . .” Judg. 13:5] . . . He wasnay gony shave at all, he was gony grow a beard” (151–52); “Plus he was gony shave. That was part of the deal. Even if he cut his throat and died in the attempt, he was gony wipe that chin clean, clean. Cause when he walked out of here the head was gony be held high, he was gony be cleanshaven man, fresh and fucking brand new” (324).

With blandished parleys, feminine assaults,
Tongue-batteries, she surceased not day or night
To storm me over-watched, and wearied out.
At times when men seek most repose and rest,
I yielded, and unlocked her all my heart,
Who with a grain of manhood well resolved
Might easily have shook off all her snares.

(403–9)

And Sammy scolds himself in similar terms: “[S]o okay, the bold Sammy, he made the fatal error, he came clean with her. No totally clean but clean enough to mess things up. . . . He could have told her nothing for the rest of his life and it would have been fine it would have been took for granted, nay danger, nay problem, on ye go. But he had to go and blab” (134).

Both texts balance the responsibility of the protagonist for his own predicament against the supreme power of the Law (divine in Milton’s case). Early in *Samson Agonistes*, the Chorus warns Samson against the temptation of legalism, the sin of holding to his own rules a God “Who made our laws to bind us, not himself, / And hath full right to exempt / Whom so it pleases him by choice/. . . / For with his own laws he can best dispense” (309–11, 314). This property of earthly laws is described in identical terms by Ally in *How Late*: “Ye have to understand about the law, it isnay there to apply to them it’s there to apply to us, it’s them that makes it” (310). As Sammy plans his final escape from this law, it is recognizably Samson’s fate that he wishes to avoid: “Time to move so he had to move; cause if he didnay it was all gony come crashing down, in one way or another, right on top of him” (273). In Kelman’s godless universe, there is no possibility of Sammy sacrificing and redeeming himself, though his premeditated attack on the unsuspecting policemen does resonate with Samson’s apparent ambush of the Philistines. Both texts end with the hero offstage after being led away from prison by a boy, toward some uncertain deliverance. We are left with the rejoicing Chorus in Milton’s poem, and in *How Late* apparently on our own, abandoned by the ghostly narrator.

Almost none of these connections are self-evident to a reader not attuned to the novel’s intertextuality. As David Sexton pointed out, the most salient Miltonic echo in *How Late* is that the hero is a blind

convict called Sammy Samuels, who makes repeated references to his intention to shave without ever doing so. Taken only this far, a cursory reading of *How Late* as a tragicomic “take-off” on *Samson Agonistes* seems fitting. While we are reminded very early in Milton’s poem that Samson is “a person separate to God, / Designed for great exploits” (31–32), the unemployed petty criminal Sammy freely admits on more than one occasion that “[i]t’s no as if he was earmarked for glory!” (11). Kelman’s Sammy has the lowly status of those Milton’s Chorus describes as

the common rout,
That wand’ring loose about
Grow up and perish, as the summer fly,
Heads without name no more remembered.

(674–77)

The Chorus deigns to mention this “ingrateful multitude” (696) only by way of contrasting its claim on God’s mercy with that of their “glorious champion.” But read more closely, this inversion—Samson’s “demotion” into Sammy—signals not a departure from the Miltonic subtext but a rhetorical transformation of it. I read the disparity between the two protagonists’ public distinction as a clue to how Kelman would have the novel’s intertextual dimension politically “unpacked.” The significance of this conspicuous inequality is illuminated by the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, in which Milton upbraids his contemporary tragedians for the “poet’s error” of “introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath been counted absurd; and brought in without discretion, corruptly to gratify the people” (*Selected Poetry* 180). Milton’s neoclassical concern to preserve “the gravest, moralest” tragic decorum is utterly antithetical to Kelman’s own cultural politics. In an important essay, Kelman describes an early recognition of his community’s exclusion from serious literature:

Whenever I did find somebody from my own sort of background in English Literature there they were confined to the margins, kept in their place, stuck in the dialogue. You only ever saw them or heard them. You never got into their mind. You did find them in the narrative but from without, seldom from within. . . .

[T]he narrative belonged to them [an educated elite] and them alone. They owned it. The place where thought and spiritual life exists. Nobody

outwith the parameters of their socio-cultural setting had a spiritual life. We all stumbled along in a series of behaviouristic activity; automatons, cardboard cut-outs, folk who could be scrutinised, whose existence could be verified in a sociological or anthropological context. In other words, in the society that is English Literature, some 80 to 85 percent of the population simply did not exist as ordinary human beings.

("Importance of Glasgow" 81, 82)⁵

As though to prove Kelman's point, Gerald Warner offered the following reflections during the Booker uproar:

Kelman has defended the monotonously foul-mouthed vocabulary of his books: "If the language is taboo, the people are taboo. A culture can't exist without the language of the culture." He fails to recognise that, in reality, what he is describing is not properly a "culture," but the primeval vortex of undevelopment that precedes culture. If the literary gurus who consider his work "daring" had any real instinct for adventure, they would unfashionably proclaim that there is a good cultural case to be made for Kelman's people remaining taboo.

Samson's "degradation" into Sammy may be read as Kelman's refusal of literary decorum in the service of social apartheid. Just as Pitchford notes "Kelman's rejection of the misogynist implications of Milton's poem" (719) in the novel's treatment of women, we can read the frank assertion of Sammy's inglorious background as a rebuttal of elitist rules defining the cultural realities proper to serious literary art. Sammy is, to be sure, a "reincarnation" of Milton's Samson, but one deliberately fashioned to counter the reverence for transcendent cultural authority suggested by Milton's appeal to classical tragedy and Biblical epic.⁶ Notably, in the protracted

5. Kelman concludes this essay by insisting: "Apart from direct experience I have access to other experiences, foreign experience, I have access to all the areas of human endeavour, right back from the annals of ancient history; in that sense Socrates or Agamemnon is just as much a part of my socio-cultural background as the old guy who stands in the local pub telling me of the reality of war as experienced by his grandfather in the Crimea War" ("Importance of Glasgow" 84). Clearly, by these criteria, Milton is fair game too.

6. The novel's references to country and western, folk, and blues music can also be read in this light, the timeless authority of "Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripedes" (*John Milton: Selected Poetry* 181) being replaced by the currency of Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan, and Willie Nelson. It might be objected that privileging *How Late's* more "elevated," covert intertexts traduces this demotic gesture, but my interest here is in how the novel engages with forms of *literary* authority, even while challenging and transforming them.

newspaper controversy that followed the novel's Booker victory, no critic pointed to this allusive negation as the novel's own, highly "literary" preempting of the elitist values displayed by commentators in their histrionic (and very well-documented) attacks on the novel.⁷

How Late It Was, How Late as an Existential
Retelling of *Samson Agonistes*

How Late It Was, How Late is not a straightforward or deferential "updating" of Milton's poem, but a selective appropriation of its dramatic materials (and canonical prestige) by a twentieth-century radical modernist. Both texts explore ethical and formal problems concerning liberty, representation, and legitimacy, Kelman mapping the Christian moral framework of Milton's poem onto his own existential humanism. Viewed from this perspective, *How Late* challenges the reader to reconcile the concrete particularity of Sammy with the abstract universality of Samson. In Sammy's sphere, the private and irreducible *experience* of failure and oppression is played off liberal-democratic schemas of justice and social equality, embodied by state bureaucracies such as the police and health and social services. These institutions grant individual citizens an abstractly equalized status by interpellating them as universal "customers," specific only as instances of the idealized totality the institution exists to serve (the public, civil society). This mode of relation evacuates the individual of his "existence," what Jean-Paul Sartre calls his "individual being here and now" (630), and constitutes him or her as a generic object, the abstract equivalent of anyone else (the doctor who examines Sammy after his blinding insists "No one is unique" [222]). Sammy's deeply ambiguous "rep" admits that this depersonalization becomes naturalized the more one identifies with governmental discourse: "The closer I get to courts and tribunals the more like them I get" (240); "Ye get too used to the arguments, muttered Ally, ye forget to look at the person, I can be as bad as them" (311). The existential tradition to which Kelman subscribes stands against this pattern, but not in the straightforwardly humanistic sense suggested

7. For commentary on these attacks, see Gilbert, Harris, McGlynn, Müller, Norris, and Pitchford.

by an authentic “looking at the person,” an intersubjective bearing-witness which glimpses and affirms the subjectivity of the Other in a relation of mutuality. Sartre insists that “conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others”:

While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me. We are by no means dealing with unilateral relations with an object-in-itself, but with reciprocal and moving relations.

(364)

The tension of Sammy’s relationship with Ally is of just this kind: between Sammy’s “being” and Ally’s “repping” of Sammy’s being as a juridical-discursive object. As we shall see, this tension informs the narrative technique of the novel, as well as its intertextuality.

The politics of seeing and being seen are at the root of the novel’s initiating conflict. It is being stared at by strangers that provokes Sammy’s explosive confrontation with the “sodjers” (police), who are themselves in plainclothes but easily recognized by their eyes; “these kind of eyes, they stay with ye” (3):

he was fucking going places; and he moved on and around down the lane; and a guy here looking at him too! How come they were all fucking looking at him? This yin with his big beery face and these cunning wee eyes, then his auld belted raincoat, shabby as fuck; he was watching; no watching but fucking staring, staring right into Sammy.

(3)⁸

Sammy’s condition as the novel opens, slumped in a corner after an alcoholic blackout, “objectivates” him (Sartre 257) in respect to the normative social gaze, fixing him in a position of inferiority and disgrace. Self-consciousness about his own appearance excludes Sammy from the symmetrical gaze of social equals, and this amounts to a sort of social “blindness” by which he is stared at as

8. This man in the belted raincoat and the passersby, whom Sammy assumes to be tourists and then undercover police, evoke the opening scene of *The Trial*, in which Joseph K. is arrested by a man dressed in “a closely fitting black suit, which was furnished with all sorts of pleats, pockets, buckles, and buttons, as well as a belt, like a tourist’s outfit” (Kafka 13).

though unable to stare back, “like some fucking down-and-out winey bastard” (3). Samson captures the indignity of real blindness in similar terms, complaining of his physical vulnerability but also of the dehumanizing “contempt” of the seeing.

O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!
 Blind among enemies, O worse than chains,
 Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!

 Inferior to the vilest now become
 Of man or worm; the vilest here excel me,
 They creep, yet see, I dark in light exposed
 To daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong,
 Within doors, or without, still as a fool,
 In power of others, never in my own;
 Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half.

(67–69, 73–79)

Once he too has been blinded, Sammy bemoans his condition exclusively as an *object* of the social gaze, never again to be its subject. In the first moments after waking up with “sightloss” (following a beating by the undercover police he has provoked), he ponders the implications of never seeing again—and, as importantly, never again seeing others seeing *him*:

With one weird wee image to finish it all off: if this was permanent he wouldnay be able to see himself ever again. Christ that was wild. And he wouldnay see cunts looking at him. Wild right enough. What did it matter but what did it matter; cunts looking at ye. Who gives a fuck. Just sometimes they bore their way in, some of them do anyway; they seem able to give ye a look that’s more than a look: it’s like when ye’re a wean at school and there’s this auld woman teacher who takes it serious even when you and the wee muckers are having a laugh and cracking jokes behind her back and suddenly she looks straight at ye and ye can tell she knows the score, she knows it’s happening. Exactly. And it’s only you. The rest dont notice. You see her and she sees you. Naybody else. Probably it’s their turn next week. The now it’s you she’s copped. You. . . . The auld bastard, she’s fucked ye man. With one look. That’s how easy you are. And ye see the truth then about yourself. Ye see how ye’re fixed forever.

(12)

As Northrop Frye observed of Milton's Samson, his "inability... to stare back is his greatest torment" (*Anatomy* 223). Worse still, perhaps, is accepting the bleak "truth" of this gaze. The intimately piercing look of the schoolteacher forces a private acknowledgment of what the eyes seem to perceive, rather than assert. Here precisely is the experience of Sartrean "shame of self": "the recognition of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging... I do not for an instant think of denying it; my shame is a confession" (Sartre 261). While the role of the objective gaze which regulates and "fixes" the individual's place in a social grouping is foregrounded here, more important to the novel's politics of perception is the look that "bores its way in" to the inner life, glimpsing private truths as if the social self were utterly transparent. From the point of his blinding onward, Sammy's entire world is shrunk to this private inward territory, and his sense of "sovereignty" over this inner life becomes correspondingly important.

Samson describes this self-enclosed condition as "a living death" (100) and his bodily reality as a morbid carapace: "Myself, my sepulchre, a moving grave" (102). Enforced inwardness may be experienced as a form of entrapment, but Samson's escape route, too, comes from the "*inward* intervention of divine grace" (Belsey 93; emphasis added). In fact, all the dramatic action that leads to Samson's liberation is internal. Before agreeing to attend the Philistine festival, Samson tells the Chorus, "Be of good courage, I begin to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my thoughts" (1381-83). In the messenger's account of the ensuing scene at the temple, Samson stands still between the pillars, "as one who prayed, / Or some great matter in his mind revolved" (1637-78). Even the Chorus explains the carnage that follows as the mentally inflicted wrath of God:

Among them he a spirit of frenzy sent,
Who hurt their minds,
And urged them on with mad desire
To call in haste for their destroyer.

(1675-78)

Just as Sammy's blindness and gaps in memory allow him to drop "out of sight" (374) of the gaze of power, the "blindness internal" (*Samson* 1686) of Samson's enemies allows him to wreak his revenge and fulfill his special destiny, "with God not parted from him" (1719). Yet as he stands between the pillars, the emphasis falls on the *self-given* character of Samson's escape from this dungeon-self:

Hitherto, lords, what your commands imposed
I have performed, as reason was, obeying,
Not without wonder or delight beheld.
Now of my own accord such other trial
I mean to show you of my strength, yet greater;
As with amaze shall strike all who behold.

(1640–46)

This autotelic reading of Samson's deed is supported by the reaction of Manoa, who first rejoices that "Samson hath quit himself / Like Samson" (1709–10) before construing his "death so noble" (1724) in terms of national revenge and religious vindication.⁹ Sammy's "vanishing," too—both from the police and the narrator—is an act of conclusive self-determination. John Guillory has argued that Samson's final act of freedom need not be interpreted as "internalization of the law," the enactment of a divine edict: "For once Milton has not defined freedom trivially as the alternative of obeying or disobeying the law, but rather located it in those hypothetical moments when the law is set aside" (217).

This view of *Samson Agonistes* as Kierkegaard's critique of Kant *avant la lettre* invites a more detailed existential reading of *How Late* and its Miltonic debts. In fact, Milton originally planned to base his Christian tragedy—as Kierkegaard would later base *Fear and Trembling*—on the story of Abraham and Isaac. Joan S. Bennett describes Milton's sketches for "Abram from Morea" as centering on "the agonizing doubts experienced by his family and friends concerning his faith and God's justice when Abram departs with

9. Sharon Achinstein notes that the climactic scene of *Samson Agonistes* represents "A striking deletion from the biblical account . . . Milton's drama leaves out [Samson's prayer to God (Judg. 16:28–30)], but includes Samson's words of warning to the Philistine crowd, thus leaving open the question of divine participation in Samson's bloody work" (415).

Isaac for the sacrifice" (*Reviving Liberty* 154). In *Samson Agonistes*, "Milton retained these confused questionings for his Chorus" (154) but made the personal *agon* of the ambiguous and guilt-ridden Samson the focus of the drama. Bennett sees this two-tiered focus as crucial to the poem's vision of freedom: the blind faith and prating legalism of the Chorus shows that its members "are servants under bondage," whereas Samson "reaches the limit of the old [Mosaic] law and hence is able to transcend and fulfill it" (124). In a reading which strongly recalls Kierkegaard's reading of Genesis, Samson is liberated into a condition of Christian "antinomian purity" (119) that the Chorus (and Manoa) are unable to compute rationally or reconcile with customary piety.

"They Who Have Put Out the Peoples Eyes
Reproach Them of Their Blindnesse"

The problem of blindness and responsibility in *How Late It Was, How Late* is encapsulated by a highly suggestive quotation from Milton used as an epigraph to Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's political economy of the mass media, *Manufacturing Consent* (1988). Given his esteem for Chomsky, it is likely that Kelman would have encountered this reference in one of Chomsky's best-known political works, if not in the 1642 anti-prelatical tract where it originates. Milton's words come tantalizingly close to a précis of the novel's plot as well as its moral problematic: "But now with a most inhumane cruelty they who have put out the peoples eyes reproach them of their blindnesse" (*An Apology Against a Pamphlet* 1:44).¹⁰ As Laurence Nicoll has pointed out, blindness is a very economical device for establishing the "existential" nature of Sammy's predicament: "Sight loss necessarily defeats any attempt at achieving . . . observer status; Sammy can no longer stand back and observe the world, he now has to act and engage with it" (158–59). Sammy's decisions must be taken from within his own concrete situation, without regard for abstractions such as "society as a whole." But the

10. Note that this pamphlet predates the deterioration of Milton's vision beginning in 1644, which left him entirely blind by 1652.

ethics of this engagement are conditioned by the newly blind Sammy's massively amplified sense of the world's randomness and contingency, as reflected in his erratic sense of responsibility for his predicament:

He had aye been a bit stupid. And there's nay cunt to blame for that except yerself. Ye aye come back to that same thing. Nay point blaming the sodjers if you've ladled into them in the first place; fuck sake man ye canny blame them for giving ye a doing.

(15)

Ach it was all his own fault anyway.

What was his own fault for christ sake there he went blaming himself for something that had fuck all to do with him it's fucking typical. It was nay his fault he was fucking blind! Ye kidding! Fuck sake man.

(46)

Look miss what I'm saying is the polis didnay intend to make me lose my sight I mean if they went at me with a blade and then dug out my eyes then I'd be straight in for compensation, know what I mean, but they didnay, they gave me physical restraints, and I wound up with a dysfunction.

(105)

This last, intentionalistic scheme of justice has a Miltonic antecedent in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*: "[T]he vulgar judge . . . according to the event and the learned according to the purpose of them that do it" (763). But this perspective seems hopelessly inadequate when viewed in light of "the system" overall, the objective regime of the Law:

It wasnay a case of blaming the sodjers, that was stupid, nay fucking point; it's the system; they just take their orders. Mind you there only is the one fucking order: batter fuck out the cunts so they know who's boss.

(63–64)

For all its uncertainty, Sammy's reality is *determined*—by forces that are capricious and frequently hidden from view, but not random in their operation, or beyond rational comprehension. Sammy's very assumption that the activity of the State is thoroughly ordered and rule-governed—"all their fucking manuals and all their guidelines and procedures" (64)—would seem to preclude his frequent anxiety about "tempting the fates" in his dealings with its agencies.

Believing there is a knowable, rational pattern of causes and effects at work in his life—that his situation is not fundamentally absurd but *explicable*—we might expect Sammy to make greater efforts to “think . . . it out” (37). Instead, he continually falls back on a bad-faith mythology of order: “And things aye work out. It’s just whether it’s for the best or the worst. But they do work out, in the long run” (66). This “working out” is simply the gradual narrativization of what comes to pass, the backward-facing rationalization of the necessity of *what is* which provoked Kierkegaard’s well-known retort to Hegel: “it is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards, but they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards” (7).

For Stanley Fish, the “temptation to understand” and rationalize events in this self-serving retrospective way is central to Milton’s poem, both for its characters and in the experience of the reader (who presumably knows the ending and its conventional Christian meaning in advance). This temptation “encourages us to believe that events occurring under the aegis of Providence can be rationally understood” (Fish 391), in a way that falsifies Samson’s actually intractable dilemmas and fudges the irreconcilability of the formulas and categories by which the reader might hope to make sense of them. In Fish’s close reading, the entire poem is a nest of incompatible explanations and rationalizations of its foregone conclusion: far from offering “consolation” (*Samson* 1757) and “new acquist / Of true experience” (1755–56) to a Chorus that retires “calm of mind, all passion spent” (1758), “the universe of *Samson Agonistes* [is not] one in which the phenomena of experience open themselves up to the organizing power of discursive reasoning” (Fish 402). In *How Late*, it is the capriciousness of worldly power, not the will of God, that trumps discursive reason. For all his bluster about “knowing the system,” and resentment at being treated as “an ignorant bastard, a fucking dumpling” by people who “always want to tell ye stuff” (136), Sammy is resigned to imperfectly understanding his predicament. In any case, the Law has its basis in force, not reason; “understanding” its operation would not alter his prospects before it:

There's never any point working it out. It's a waste of energy. Especially when ye've nay control. If ye've got some sort of control then alright, it can be worthwhile mulling it ower, looking for ways in, ways out, that kind of stuff. The important thing is
there's nay fucking important thing.

(191)

The gratuitous acts which bookend the novel—his spontaneous attack on the “sodjers” and elaborate preparations to skip town while avoiding detection—show Sammy defining himself through free but somewhat irrational action. Samson’s own choice and freedom have been read in corresponding existential terms. John Guillory suggests that Samson’s ultimate act is warranted “in accord with his interiority” (217)—by some kind of free, doubt-laden choice—rather than being objectively legislated by divine necessity. Sharon Achinstein observes that Samson’s “cosmic uncertainty about God’s ways and means may be the condition of faith” (418), and from this angle Samson’s sudden and for Stanley Fish “inexplicable” resolution to attend the temple is “authentic” in terms Sartre would recognize:

With Samson we move beyond the limits of choice dictated by the intersection of the situation and the Law, and accept the awful responsibility of freedom. For once exceptions to the rule are admitted, reliance on the rule becomes impossible, and every decision is again a discrete crisis requiring the individual’s participation. Samson decides to go to the temple, but not because the Law sanctions his going, or because the Law forbids it; his “may” admits both possibilities without insisting on either. His going is a gesture, signifying his refusal to be paralyzed by the inability of the Law (or of any other formulaic construct) to answer unambiguously every question put to it. He goes without knowing how he will come off and *because* he does not know how he will come off.

(Fish 417)

Repping and Being

The politics of representation in *How Late It Was, How Late* also demand to be read in existential terms. The novel’s ethical problematic is most clearly stated by Sammy while arguing with his would-be

solicitor: "There's a difference between repping somebody and fucking being somebody" (241). The "rep" this speech is addressed to, Ally, corresponds to Milton's Manoa at the thematic and intertextual level but can also be read as a reflexive commentary on the politics of narrative form. His very name proposes an ethical and rhetorical "alliance" with Sammy's interests, though it is notable that third-party observers of their first meeting wonder if Ally, who claims to have learned "the system" while in jail, is in fact a police officer (215). This profoundly ambiguous character—even his name, Kelman suggested in an interview, is doubtful—embodies a number of tensions and uncertainties surrounding narrative authority.¹¹ Ally's resonance with Samson's father underscores the paternalism of the conventional narrative technique that Kelman is most directly criticizing here—the third-party narrator who "reps" the thoughts and experiences of the character within the discourse of power and objective authority. This echo is equally striking at the level of character: both Manoa and Ally are possessed of a "bustling" and "facile optimism" (Daiches 240–41) and seem pitifully naive, in the eyes of Samson/Sammy, for seeing their predicaments in other than absolute terms: "[Ally] was a poor cunt. Ye can only feel sorry for guys like that" (249). Ally himself has few illusions about the justice of the law, but his willingness to "[p]lay the game" in order to "do them in" (320) is, to Sammy, morally and intellectually discrediting. As with Manoa's efforts to "prosecute the means of [Samson's] deliverance / By ransom or how else" (603–4), Ally approaches Sammy's problem as remediable by some objective process of law or negotiation. Both Manoa and Ally are refused by protagonists who regard their fates as determined by incontrovertible forces which operate above the (tribal/civil) law.

11. "There are things that haven't been picked up on within the novel, like in relation to racism. . . . One of the things, for me, is that the character is only identified 'Ally' by the character Sammy; if this had been written as in the objective bystander sort of God-voice narrative, then it could have been written 'Ali'; it would make more sense since he seems to be from the sub-continent" (James Kelman, Personal Interview). This hint remains opaque; "Ally" mentions that another of his clients has family in Bangladesh (298), and that his wife is "what ye call a country girl . . . kind of what ye call peasants" (301), but this tells us nothing about his own ethnicity.

Ally's complicity with corrupt authority is reinforced by his strong affiliation with the "telling," diegetic narrative discourse, established throughout his first encounter with Sammy: "[I]t's best if I ask you questions and you give me answers" (233). Preparing to "speak on behalf" of his client, the advocate seizes control of the language, rules, and perspective by which Sammy will be represented:

Sammy nodded. Okay, there's a lot of what ye've said I agree with
Ye canna disagree!
Look

Naw pardon me but you look, just to get it right, see ye canna disagree, it's pointless even talking that way, it just means ye don't understand the state of play. See what you've got to realise is all I ever do is state facts; if I ever give ye an opinion I'll tell ye.

(236)

[I]f I tell ye something ye dont like ye've got to look at it from the big picture. Ye've got to look at what we're doing as if we're standing there in front of the judge and everything we say's been taken down and used in evidence.

(239)

This voice defines "the state of play" rather than struggling to describe and understand it, and Sammy's object-discourse is always answerable to its. Here is the dubious authority of the "God-voice," interrogated throughout Kelman's work; in yoking Ally to this Olympian narrative stance, the author sets him up for a fall. But this fall is not so straightforward or politically self-vindicating as we might first expect. Ally might easily have been drawn as a "well-meaning" and sympathetic bourgeois liberal—that is, one of Kelman's typical readers—the limits of whose identification and solidarity with Sammy could have been embarrassingly exposed by some simple device (for example, Sammy expressing enthusiasm for serious political violence) and traced back to the complacent distance from actuality presupposed by our structured orientation to Sammy's plight. In fact, Ally's fond willingness to "put [himself] in [Sammy's] shoes" (311) comes close to this unhorsing; Sammy repeatedly reminds him, "Ally ye dont know what ye're talking about" (310). But by founding Ally's "alliance" with Sammy on mutual financial self-interest ("needless to say if you lose I lose"

[233]), rather than on fine sentiments of sympathy or justice, and by making the character himself worldly and shrewd, Kelman complicates the politics of this “objectivity” and presents it as a necessary concomitant of fighting the system by its own rules. The ethics of the narratorial pact Ally symbolizes thus shift from the question of his own compromised position (a shyster; the third person) to the wider discourse in which that position is constituted (the Law; general protocols of realist fiction).

The difference between “repping somebody and fucking being somebody” (241) may be unimpeachable in existential terms, but how can it be honored in novelistic technique? While preparing Sammy’s case, Ally observes:

[T]he likes of you and me, we’re stuck with each other. You need me to give ye a hand with the procedures and protocols and I need you to help me out with the personal evidence, medical and otherwise—for what it’s worth, the problem being you can only see it from inside yer own body, and that isnay good enough cause it isnay open to what they call verification.

(303)

A diagram of Kelman’s narrative method is discernible here, placing in tension the particular and the general, “being” and “representation.” For Ally, we can read third-party empathetic narrator; for Sammy, character. Ally’s “procedures and protocols” are the conventions of realist discourse, by which the narrator is tasked with the mimetic realization of Sammy’s concrete drama (“personal evidence”). This “evidence” must be authenticated by readers’ contact with the texture of the character’s inner life, but for it to be rendered “verifiable” and enter the empirical-rational imaginary, it must be “shown” as well as felt. Successful “repping,” in short, requires that the narrator translate the character’s “exceptional circumstances” into the “general principles” of factual judgment and readerly identification (*How Late* 309). Kelman’s equivocal third person hovers between these poles of authentically “showing” and discursively “telling,” without ever answering our doubts about the extent or location of its speaker’s “being” in the fictional world.

Ally’s compromising “objectivity” attempts to mediate between the law and the situation in just this way; that Sammy cannot bear to have his moral autonomy eroded by Ally’s assistance perhaps tells

us more about him than about the rep. The question “Who was conning who?” (245) is a real one. The third-person narrator of *How Late* powerfully shows that not all “empathetic” narrators—and that is what Ally represents in formal terms—can be seen simply as accomplices of a repressive discursive power. Manoa, too, is perhaps hard done by Samson’s (and Milton’s) libertarian purism. Achinstein notes that Manoa

searches for an earthly solution to his son’s problems, busily attempting to secure his release by a ransom reward because he hopes to preserve his son’s safety and health at all costs. . . . But Samson will not accept the cost of such a ransom. . . . To win freedom through a ransom is an ignoble option. . . . Manoa’s suggestion . . . is [of] the wrong kind of ransom, a literal liberation which none the less would leave Samson’s spirit crushed.

(419–20)

From Samson’s perspective, the cost of this ransom is not material but spiritual: consenting to it would interfere with his covenant with God, through which he ultimately reaches a higher freedom. Sammy’s eventual rejection of Ally, so as not to compromise his own moral integrity and sovereignty, is a secular version of this refusal. Despite the historical distance this transformation highlights, Sammy’s scornful insistence on autonomy (“He had nay intention of using a rep. . . . Nay cunt was gony get him out of trouble; nay cunt except himself” [245]) rehearses Milton’s equation of individualism and freedom. If Samson rejects the “ignoble option” of Manoa’s earthly liberation because it would traduce his higher purpose and deliverance, Sammy makes the analogous choice for existential rather than Christian reasons. His choice ultimately to reject Ally’s assistance is not about “holding out” for a personal reckoning with transcendent authority, but a desire to preserve the *immanent* character of his struggle against the earthly law, rooted in the actuality of direct experience. Sammy refuses “compensation” as a degraded, apersonal form of justice rooted in abstract equivalence, which would compromise the concrete basis of his *agon* with the authorities (“It’s just personal” [232]). He rejects the bureaucratic moralism represented by Ally and chooses Samson’s “strenuous liberty” (*Samson* 271) over the prospect of being “stuck back in the process” (233). In Sartre’s terms, Sammy refuses to “insert [his]

action [back] into the network of determinism" (482), wherein his future decisions would be conditioned by the rationality of "the system" that Ally embodies. By the rules of that game, Sammy knows that "if I fucking win I lose" (233). The same might be said for Kelman's Booker Prize: in one sense it is hardly surprising that *How Late's* politics of form should have been traduced by a media spectacle whose social typology dictates that all working-class novelists be promoted as authentic and "gritty," all nonwhite novelists as imaginative and sensual, and so on.

Choric Narrative Form

My interest here is with the intertextual dimension of the novel's interrogation of "repping." Milton boasts in his preface to *Samson Agonistes* that the "chorus is here introduced after the Greek manner, not ancient only but modern" (*Selected Poetry* 181). In comparing its function to novelistic narration, Catherine Belsey shows just how modern Milton's Chorus is, exposing a number of parallels with the double-voiced narrative technique of *How Late It Was, How Late*:

Drama has no place for the narrative voice which offers to discipline the gaze of the reader by aligning it with God's. . . . In *Samson Agonistes* the Chorus performs some of the functions of [this absent] narrative voice. The Chorus tells important parts of the story: it describes Samson's outward appearance (lines 118–23) . . . ; it narrates his past history (lines 128–50); and it introduces and describes the characters to the blind Samson and the unknowing spectator or reader.

(92–93)

The Chorus does the job of an externally focalized third-person narrator, orienting the responses and understanding of the audience vis-à-vis the character (in accordance with authorial intentions), while also *acting* as an onstage model for the spectators, witnessing, questioning, and attempting to make sense of the characters in ways the audience can identify with. Samuel Taylor Coleridge described the Greek Chorus as "ideal representatives of the real audience, and of the poet himself in his own character, assuming the supposed impressions made by the drama, in order to direct and rule them" (192). In fact, the Chorus was used in a wide variety of ways in

Greek drama, and the Chorus, verse style, and episodic structure of *Samson Agonistes* do not adhere to any single classical model.¹² Milton's Chorus is hardly ever an authorial mouthpiece, and during the course of the play outgrows its detached, pious commentary (in Northrop Frye's memorable description, "standing around uttering timid complacencies in teeth-loosening doggerel" [*Return* 108]) to eventually behave as strongly personalized characters, emotionally and spiritually involved (however confusedly) in the *agon* of the poem. Just as Kelman's empathetic third person is both witness and accomplice to Sammy, Milton's Chorus is both bystander and participant in Samson's plight.

The most important function of the Chorus, given the subject of Milton's tragedy, is to generalize and make "public" Samson's profoundly private and inward crisis. Replacing "external action with internal," Milton's Christianizing of a Hellenic dramatic form "render[s] invisible the moralizing certainties we hunger for" (Achinstein 418). For Fish, these moralizing certainties are simply absent from *Samson Agonistes*, and the Chorus's few attempts at discursive religious reasoning end in confusion and even heresy. But perhaps this is the point. The Chorus members play a key role—both as imagined "characters" and as an authorial device—in conveying and dramatizing the radical contingency of Samson's predicament, as well as providing a model for the reader's own, morally dislocating experience. Being composed of "certain friends and equals of his tribe" (*Selected Poetry* 181), Samson's Chorus is well-placed to generalize about his private circumstances. But even before it has addressed him, the Chorus describes Samson as the paragon of its own human frailty ("O mirror of our fickle state, / Since man on earth unparalleled!" [164–65]). Rather than universalizing Samson's inward condition ("Prison within prison" [153]) for the benefit of the implied audience, it makes *itself* an audience to the spectacular degradation of "Irresistible Samson" (126) and projects dread of its own weakness onto his miserable example. The Chorus hastens to interpret and generalize Samson's condition even before acquainting themselves

12. For a detailed study of the poem's classical influences, see Parker 139–50. "The inadequacy of most generalization becomes evident when we search for Milton's specific models for the Chorus of *Samson Agonistes*" (139).

with its particularity. They are like Ally, who gets “too used to the arguments” and “forget[s] to look at the person” (311) before assimilating him or her to the abstract taxonomy of the law. In their hasty pigeonholing, as Fish observes, the Chorus is “trying to categorize Samson. . . . If it can place him, it is no longer obliged to understand him. He becomes a particular instance of a general and implacable truth” (399). This pattern begins as a selfish mode of explaining (that is, explaining away) Samson’s suffering in conceptual terms that do not really touch the nature or intensity of his spiritual crisis.

By the end of the play, the Chorus relates to Samson’s predicament on much more exacting terms. Having renounced its “platitudinous consolations” (Fish 406), it in fact becomes so emotionally involved in his *agon* as to relinquish all claims to objectivity and disinterested commentary. At the depth of Samson’s death-welcoming hopelessness (*Samson* 640–51), “the Chorus experiences the full horror of Samson’s anguish” (Fish 405), just as it later becomes visibly excited and “inspired by Samson’s courage in the encounter with Harapha: ‘Oh how comely it is and how reviving’” (Bennett, “A Reading” 236). In the final lines of the play, it exclaims, “we, as next participate” (1507) in Manoa’s premature joy at Samson’s ransom, and in hope of God’s restoration of Samson’s strength and eyesight. This trope of “participation” is in fact central to Milton’s poetics, according to the critic Jon S. Lawry. Milton’s work directly involves the reader in its intellectual and moral drama, operating by means of “a participative enactment, a *methexis*” (v). It is suggestive that Lawry should detect in this technique the ideal of Sartre: “a recent essay upon the ‘radical’ tendencies of the recent French novel and play all but writes a prescription for Milton’s seeking of enactment rather than description (beyond that point, of course, Milton and Sartre radically diverge)” (5). The narrative voice in *How Late* analogously seems to “show,” by way of verbally performing or materializing, Sammy’s emotions: “the third time ye go under the third time ye go under, too fucking late jesus christ too fucking late man fuck that for a game he was fucking fighting he was gony fucking fight, fight the bastards man fuck them” (291). Our very mode of perceiving Samson’s and Sammy’s conditions, the Chorus and empathetic narrator, force us actively to partake in their dramas. E. M. W. Tillyard objects that “the Chorus’s odes do nothing to universalize

the individual's suffering" (284), but the Chorus undoubtedly does universalize the spiritual crisis, the doubtful "situation," in which Samson's suffering occurs. Politically speaking, this situation is the real target of Kelman's novel and—interpreted autobiographically—of Milton's poem. Just as the Chorus draws us into Samson's inward crises by seeming to enact his (in Christian terms) *essential* and universal struggle, the narratorial device of the "self-addressing ye" effects compulsory readerly involvement in *How Late*.¹³ By analogous means, we, as much as the Chorus, participate in Samson's despair, doubt, and eventual "rousing motions." In Lawry's words: "We take our stances in the general human fall . . . the Chorus and Manoa embody the experience of themselves and of all other men" (19); "The audience is asked to 'stand' within the drama beside the hero and his interlocutors" (352). This gap between the hero and his witness is also where the third-person narrator of *How Late* orients the reader. But the ethics and metaphysics of Kelman's technique are of course very different. Nicola Pitchford describes the ambivalent representation of authoritative knowledge-power in *How Late*, which seems always to imply the concomitant "colonization" of sovereign self-knowledge and autonomy. Thus the doubleness of *How Late's* narrative voice dramatizes an ongoing struggle over the power of seeing and knowing which belongs unproblematically to God in Milton's universe. As Pitchford concludes:

[T]he novel questions continually whether to author one's fate. . . and to narrate it are indeed the same thing, or whether Sammy as narrator is merely a character in someone else's story, the helpless chronicler of his own social entrapment, after the fact. Either way, Sammy's options are sorely limited; but this question is precisely what Kelman's narrative strategy, his refusal of clear distinctions between the narrator's voice and the characters', foregrounds.

(709)

13. The "self-addressing ye" is Cairns Craig's term for a characteristic Kelman device in which the second person functions as the first (see the opening pages of *How Late*). Craig argues that *How Late* "narrates itself to itself," but in forms which preclude Sammy's realization as an autonomous ego; his "inner heterocentricity" is constituted by dialogue, otherness, and sociality (102). Gradually, the reader's position (and investment) as *addressee* becomes deeply bound up with the very selfhood being narrated.

But this is not to confuse the all-knowing God-voice in Milton with the very partial and flawed knowledge of his Chorus, which is “not necessarily any more knowing than the protagonist himself” (Belsey 95). As social and spiritual generalizers of Samson’s condition, his first and ideal witnesses correspond very closely to the imagined “locals” of the storytelling scenario that Kelman posits to explain the novel’s seemingly extradiegetic narrator:

So you could say this story is told by a man to other men in a pub and he is telling the story about another guy, and this other guy is a guy who would normally be drinking in the pub with the same people.

(“K Is for Culture” 26)

Catherine Belsey detects a novelistic “voice of common sense” (94) in Milton’s Chorus (made up of Samson’s “friends and neighbours” [*Samson* 180]) and argues that *Samson Agonistes*’ focus on inward drama anticipates both the territory and structure of modern narrative fiction:

Interiority as the motive force and explanation of action, the story of a special, marginal individual, and a narrative voice which proclaims the truth of the fiction: these features of Milton’s final poem all point in the direction of the novel. *Samson Agonistes* remains a drama, without a single, clearly authorized voice to fix its meaning.

(95)

If the modern novel’s chief innovation lies in “showing” the particularity of consciousness and the drama of inner life, a dramatic Chorus surely belongs on the other, earlier, “telling” side of the narrative ledger, orienting readers to the general rational and ethical categories that allow us to understand the “objective” drama of characters. The Chorus of *Samson Agonistes* is severely limited as reliable authorial envoys: it utterly fails, in Belsey’s terms, to align the reader’s perspective with the omniscient gaze of God. But it is excellent as an ideal spectator, not despite but because of its limitations. As Fish puts it, “the important point . . . is not the correctness of what [the Chorus] says, but the startling precision with which it articulates the misgivings we ourselves have felt, both as human beings and as readers” (406). Itself seduced by the specificity of Samson’s condition, the recalcitrance of his doubt-laden experience,

and its resistance to their complacent categories, this Chorus succeeds in “showing” Samson precisely by failing to “tell” him in its general and conceptual mode. It is thus, despite the legendary and didactic aura of the story, that Milton’s readers gain a strong impression of Samson’s particularity, the mirror image of the Chorus’s fallibility. In Fish’s reading, readers must recognize both in essentially humanistic terms:

[The imperfection of the Chorus] attests to the truth Milton is at pains to impress on us: limited though it may be, the human perspective is the only one we have. And from the vantage point of that perspective, the Chorus reports faithfully what it sees. More than that, it reports what we see. The reader who is ready to condemn the Chorus should first ask himself whether its observations differ from his own.

(406)

In just these terms, the narration of *How Late* achieves a tension between the sympathy of the reader for Sammy’s represented condition and an incipient awareness that this sympathy is worthless to Sammy and cannot bear on his *experience*. The narrator occasionally interrupts the direct presentation of Sammy’s consciousness by “drawing a curtain” (6)—not to curtail the agony of our identification with Sammy’s torments, but because from an existential point of view, we have no right to “see” what we cannot ultimately “feel.” The irreducibility of Sammy’s experience is honored by omission: as close as we get to his subjectivity, we are distanced from him by the use of the third person and made aware of a human actuality in excess of what is narrated.

“[T]his is the tragedy which ignorance has admired, and bigotry applauded,” said Dr. Johnson of *Samson Agonistes* (376). If it is unwise to judge an artwork by its admirers, so too its revilers. The point of demonstrating *How Late*’s intertextuality has been to highlight the formal cunning and philosophical depth of a writer better known for rejecting than contesting the authority that lies behind such judgments. I have tried to show that the novel’s handling of perspective, judgment, and subjective experience are in dialogue with the forms of Milton’s poem, and that Kelman, writing from a

very different world, holds his own. In the essay "And the Judges Said . . ." (written after the Booker), Kelman rejects the notion of metropolitan validation which implies that "[o]nly when measured by the standards of the elite culture, judged by its criteria alone, can the artwork of particular cultures be awarded authentic value" (51). To be sure, my aim has not been to show that *How Late It Was, How Late*, in subtly rewriting Milton, is after all "up to the standards" by which it was both celebrated and attacked. The point is that *How Late* uses—and matches—the *aesthetic* strength of canonical writing, to expose elitist claims to its authority and prestige. This is why Kelman's struggle for cultural self-respect should never be confused with an "attack on literature": "it's just an attack on the values of the people who own literature—or the people who think they own literature" ("Interview with Duncan McLean" 69).

That said, the novel's formal enactment of the "difference between repping somebody and fucking being somebody" (*How Late* 241) is a reminder that "including" the dispossessed in literary fiction does not bear on their actual existence. The banality of this truth should not obscure the resistive potential it opens for Kelman's dissident art. In his Booker acceptance speech, Kelman situated his work within a literary tradition that assumes "1) the validity of indigenous culture; and 2) the right to defend in the face of attack" ("Elitist Slurs"). He concluded this genealogy with a claim of right, and a distinction between dominance and legitimacy, with pungent Miltonic associations: "[M]y culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that right. They may have the power to dismiss that right, but the authority lies in the power and I demand the right to resist it." But if cultural authority boils down to elite prerogative, why seek or accept its tawdry garlands? Why, in Samson's terms, attend the Philistine temple (London's Guildhall) and legitimate the Booker's "idolatrous rites" (*Samson* 1378) at all? Samson's submission to Philistine hubris contains its own revenge; and "If I obey them, / I do it freely" (1372–73), he insists. In his appropriation of Milton's Samson, Kelman too has his eyes wide open.

University of Stirling

WORKS CITED

- Achinstein, Sharon. "Samson Agonistes." *A Companion to Milton*. Ed. Thomas N. Corns. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. 411–28.
- Bell, Ian A. "Empty Intensifiers: Kelman Wins 'The Booker' (at Last)." *New Welsh Review* 27 (1994): 12–14.
- Belsey, Catherine. *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988.
- Bennett, Joan S. "A Reading of *Samson Agonistes*." *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*. Ed. Dennis Danielson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. 225–41.
- . *Reviving Liberty: Radical Christian Humanism in Milton's Great Poems*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Chadwick, Alan. "Colourful Language." *Sunday Times* [London] 23 July 1995: n. pag. *LexisNexis*. Web. 30 Jan. 2009.
- Coe, Jonathan. "Voices on the Caledonian Road." *Guardian* [London and Manchester] 25 Apr. 1991: 25.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Greek Drama." 1813. *Lectures and Notes on Shakspeare*. London: Bell, 1908. 187–95.
- Craig, Cairns. *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999.
- Daiches, David. *Milton*. London: Hutchinson, 1957.
- Fish, Stanley. *How Milton Works*. London: Harvard UP, 2001.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. 1957. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000.
- . *The Return of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1965.
- Gilbert, Geoff. "Can Fiction Swear? James Kelman and the Booker Prize." *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English since 1970*. Ed. Rod Mengham. Cambridge: Polity, 1999. 219–34.
- Grant, Katie. "Just a Wee Drap of Paranoia." *Spectator* [London] 29 May 2004: 33. *LexisNexis Professional*. Web. 2 Nov. 2009.
- Guillory, John. "The Father's House: *Samson Agonistes* in Its Historical Moment." *John Milton*. Ed. Annabel Patterson. Longman Critical Readers. London: Longman, 1992. 202–26.
- Harris, Richard. "'Completely Inaccessible': James Kelman, the Booker Prize, and the Cultural Politics of Subaltern Representation." *To the Other Shore: Cross-Currents in Irish and Scottish Studies*. Ed. Neal Alexander, Shane Murphy, and Anne Oakman. Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, 2004. 68–76.
- Herman, Edward, and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent*. 1988. London: Vintage, 1994.
- Hornby, Gill. "Found Eyeless in Glasgow." *Times* [London] 24 Mar. 1994: 40.
- Jenkins, Simon. "An Expletive of a Winner." *Times* [London] 15 Oct. 1994: 20.
- Johnson, Samuel. "A Critical Examination of *Samson Agonistes*." 1751. *Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*. Ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss. Vol. 4. London: Yale UP, 1969. 370–76.

- Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. 1925. *The Complete Novels*. Trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir. London: Minerva, 1992. 13–128.
- Kelly, Michael. Letter. *Scotsman* [Edinburgh] 14 Oct. 1994: 14.
- Kelman, James. "'And the Judges Said...'" [1996 lecture.] *'And the Judges Said...': Essays*. London: Secker, 2002. 37–56.
- . "Elitist Slurs Are Racism by Another Name." [Booker Prize Acceptance Speech] *Scotland on Sunday* [Edinburgh] 16 Oct. 1994: Spectrum Supplement 2.
- . *How Late It Was, How Late*. London: Secker, 1994.
- . "The Importance of Glasgow in My Work." *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political*. Stirling, Scot.: AK P, 1992. 78–84.
- . "Interview with Duncan McLean." *Edinburgh Review* 71 (1985): 64–80.
- . "K is for Culture." *Scottish Trade Union Review* 68 (1995): 24–29.
- . Personal Interview with David Borthwick, Scott Hames, Liam McIlvanney, and Katherine Meffen. 29 May 2002.
- Lawry, Jon S. *Shadow of Heaven: Matter and Stance in Milton's Poetry*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1968.
- Linklater, John. "RLS Posted and Gladstone Bagged." *Glasgow Herald* 24 Dec. 1994: 8. *LexisNexis*. Web. 30 Jan. 2009.
- Maley, Willy. "Swearing Blind: Kelman and the Curse of the Working Classes." *Edinburgh Review* 95 (1996): 105–12.
- McGlynn, Mary. "'Middle-Class Wankers' and Working-Class Texts: The Critics and James Kelman." *Contemporary Literature* 43.1 (2002): 50–84.
- Meek, James. "Dead Not Deid." *London Review of Books* 22 May 2008: 5–8.
- Milton, John. *An Apology against a Pamphlet Call'd 'A Modest Confutation of the Animadversions upon the Remonstrant against Smectymnuus'*. 1642. *Prose Works, 1641–1650*. 3 vols. Menston, Eng.: Scolar, 1968. [Facsim. ed.; orig. pp.]
- . *Samson Agonistes*. 1671. *Selected Poetry*. Ed. Jonathan Goldberg and Stephen Orgel. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. 180–226.
- . *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. 1649. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Odyssey, 1957. 750–80.
- Müller, Amanda. "How James Kelman Survived the Booker Prize." *Flinders (Australia) University Online Journal of Interdisciplinary Conference Papers* 2 (2002): 47–52. Web. 9 Aug. 2006.
- Nicoll, Laurence. "Existentialism in the Novels of James Kelman." Diss. U of Edinburgh, 2001.
- Norris, Sharon. "In the Blood? Scots and the Booker." *Edinburgh Review* 111 (2003): 7–23.
- Parker, William Riley. *Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in "Samson Agonistes"*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1937.
- Patterson, Annabel. Introduction. *John Milton*. Ed. Patterson. Longman Critical Readers. London: Longman, 1992. 1–23.
- Pitchford, Nicola. "How Late It Was for England: James Kelman's Scottish Booker Prize." *Contemporary Literature* 41.4 (2000): 693–725.

- Poole, Steve. " 'Do You Find It Hard to Fall in Love?' . . ." *Daily Mail* [London] 5 Aug. 1995: 8. *LexisNexis*. Web. 30 Jan. 2009.
- Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. London: Methuen, 1957.
- Sexton, David. "A Curse on the Booker." *Sunday Telegraph* [London] 16 Oct. 1994: n. pag. *LexisNexis*. Web. 30 Jan. 2009.
- Tillyard, E. M. W. *Milton*. London: Penguin, 1966.
- Warner, Gerald. "Time for a Disaffection from Literary Slumming." *Sunday Times* [London] 25 Sept. 1994: n. pag. *LexisNexis*. Web. 30 Jan. 2009.
- Wood, James. "In Defence of Kelman." *Guardian* [London and Manchester] 25 Oct. 1994: T9. *LexisNexis*. Web. 30 Jan. 2009.