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How late it was, how late (1994)

Contexts 1: Red Clydeside and the Year of Culture

In chronological terms, Kelman was a published short-story writer and a produced dramatist long before his first novel was in print. In 1978, for example, BBC Radio Scotland produced a play by Kelman called *Hardie and Baird: The Last Days*.¹ It concerns two leaders of a popular uprising of the radical reform movement in Glasgow in 1820. The uprising was put down brutally and quickly by British soldiers, having been manipulated and brought out into the open by government agents. Kelman's play is set in John Baird and Andrew Hardie's prison cells in Stirling and is largely based on surviving letters penned by the two men while in captivity that were brought to light by historical recovery work published in 1970.² It is unique in Kelman's work – across drama and prose – in being an historical subject from the long and distant past. Almost everything else he has written is explicitly set, or makes most sense as being set and expressed, in or near the contemporary moment, or in a near future (there are many short stories where time and place as context are not signalled and do not matter, where they do not have an active intrinsic function, but where the language appears to be contemporary and produced from a loosely definable place, so the text can therefore be extrinsically located).

There are obvious aspects to the 1820 uprising which made it attractive to Kelman as fit subject for his work: it suffered some historical neglect (and arguably continues to do so); it signals the dawn of the rich tradition of Glaswegian working-class radicalism; it confirms that British rule and English hegemony was (possibly is) based on the threat of force; it is plainly heroic; and it was a democratic

and proto-socialistic uprising, and one not organised by the landed or the aristocracy, but by working men, by brave 'ordinary' people who were part of widespread social discontent and clamour for reform in the midst of the depression following the Napoleonic wars. The weavers Hardie and Baird were not on their own: the call for a strike on April 5th 1820 was responded to by as many as 60,000 workers, and lasted a week.³

Interestingly, Hardie and Baird's story was revisited in 1908 by the Independent Labour Party to stimulate the working man 'to play a man's part in the present-day struggle for Liberty, which can only be realised in Socialism'.⁴ Subsequent to this publication, between 1915 and 1919 especially, the greater Glasgow area became known as 'Red Clydeside': widespread unrest over poor housing and poor pay flared into rent strikes and labour strikes, and most contentiously strikes during the war at munitions factories, which panicked Lloyd George's government. The unrest – not all of it socialist but most of it working-class – reached crisis point on 'Bloody Friday', January 31st 1919, when, as Iain Mclean puts it, a 'vast demonstration of unofficial strikers [was] roughly broken up by the police, and the next day six tanks lay in the Saltmarket with their guns pointing at the citizens of Glasgow'.⁵ Small wonder that Lenin thought a British revolution would start in the city.⁶ Stewart's historical pamphlet on Hardie and Baird was republished in 1920 by the Reformers' Bookstall of Glasgow.⁷ In 1922 ten of the fifteen MPs representing Glasgow were Labour. The city remains a solid centre of power for the Labour party, and a fertile seedbed for more radical and left-wing activism.

By 1978, Hardie and Baird's martyrdom might well have been popularly and educationally neglected, as Kelman claims, but they were certainly held aloft as 'symbols for the future'⁸ of socialist activism at the dawn of the twentieth century. Perhaps Kelman intended to revive their symbolic role in the struggle. A thoroughly researched knowledge of radical history is central to Kelman's own political activism, to his understanding of Glasgow, and to his purposeful rejection of authorised versions of history:

Radical history is more complex than others. Not only is the history itself repressed, so too is the radical movement. Repression is exercised by any ruling authority, left or right. Individuals are marginalised when it appears in the interests of a party hierarchy. Names are marginalised, glossed over, forgotten. So too are the issues, the disagreements, the arguments.⁹

Like the 1920s, the late 1970s and early 1980s saw huge ideological battles between left and right – some of them violent – across the United Kingdom. While it is ostensibly historical, *Hardie and Baird* is as much about a period which signalled the decline of the power of unionised labour, as it is about the events of 1820 which foreshadow the Chartist, Trades Union and Labour movements of the nineteenth century. This is a play about working-class martyrs responding to a call for liberty, emancipation and social justice, though these putative leaders have already failed at the start of the play. It might be a play which therefore confirms the inevitable failure of revolutionary activity in the face of a violently oppressive and ruthless state machine. With Kelman's additional re-write for the stage, it becomes a play whose dates bookend the rise and fall of radical British socialism: 1820–1990. 1990 was the year Glasgow became Cultural Capital of Europe, something which Kelman, Tom Leonard and many other Glaswegians railed and rallied against. In 1989 Tom Leonard wrote 'A Handy Form for Artists for use in connection with the City of Culture' which lists optional reasons for declining participation in the 'City of Culture', among which are:

*a) places and people are worth something as to whether or not they can be described as "of Culture" b) that desirable thing-to-be-owned, Culture, is now owned by Glasgow.*¹⁰

As we shall see below, the legitimate constitution of 'culture', its ownership and its governance, were to be debated furiously in responses to Kelman's work in 1994; the debate in 1990 was equally heated. For Leonard and Kelman, and many other artists and commentators in Glasgow,¹¹ the very name of the 1990 event meant it would omit, even suppress, working-class culture and left-wing artistic endeavour, covering the rough-hewn past of labour and unemployment with a pedestrianised, sanitised commodification for a city of consumers, merchants and tourists, not for its workers or dole queues. For People's Palace curator Elspeth King, the Year of Culture was 'not by, for or of the people of Glasgow. It is a classic example of cultural imperialism, done in the cause of economics.'¹² Most controversially of all the wrangles that characterised Glasgow in 1990, King herself was ousted from her job. The People's Palace she curated, on Glasgow Green, is a museum of the city's social history in which, significantly, a portrait of Kelman by Alasdair Gray now hangs. Glasgow Green continues to be the city's rallying point for

demonstrations and protests and Kelman himself has spoken himself at mass meetings there.¹³ That Glasgow council was determined to sell off a part of this historic Green in 1990, to a leisure company, added fire to growing resentment at the council's work towards the Year of Culture.¹⁴

If Glasgow Green signified the council's ignorance of social history for some, a parallel symbol of the Year of Culture's organisers' attitude to Glasgow art was located in their intention to hide Ian McCulloch's 'Strathclyde' mural – the 'Glasgow Guernica' – in the new Royal Concert Hall behind a curtain. This formed concrete evidence for many that art which did not fit the organisers' version of Glasgow was to be hidden from the purview of tourists, separated from officially-sanctioned work;¹⁵ the Labour party leader of Glasgow council, Pat Lally, thought it 'looked bloody awful' and 'extremely garish'.¹⁶ So, more broadly, to spend between £40 million¹⁷ and £50 million¹⁸ of public money on a cultural project which quite literally attempted to 'curtain off' art which did not fit the feel-good future the organisers wanted to promote, and to do so at a time when Glasgow was suffering acute social deprivation and mass unemployment, was unavoidably going to be controversial. It is important to remember that '22.6 per cent of Strathclyde Region's labour force were looking for work in April 1989'.¹⁹ This painful context was the root of Kelman and Leonard's concerns; many other commentators felt the same way.²⁰

The collusion between the right-wing national Thatcher government and the local Labour party led by Pat Lally seemed to be confirmed by the latter's hiring of the services of PR firm Saatchi and Saatchi to promote the Year of Culture, at a cost of £2 million. Saatchi and Saatchi had successfully worked for the electoral campaigns of the Conservative party. For Lally this was a 'commercial commission' not a political one;²¹ for Kelman the involvement of Charles Saatchi, a very rich businessman, art collector and Conservative party donor, was confirmation that the Year of Culture was primarily in cahoots with 'big business'. Its aim was to put culture into the service of a Thatcherite post-industrial capitalist expansion of commerce and the widening corporate interests of mercantile Glasgow (*SRA* 3; 11–12). For Kelman, any art which, by accident or design, is complicit with the value system of its financial sponsors has lost the ability to call itself art, because it, and the artist, are no longer fully free of inherently coercive and exploitative market forces (*SRA* 27–36). Art has to be a

guarantor of all manner of freedoms, which must include autonomy from any investment of institutions whose driving principal is the accumulation of capital.

For official organisers of the Year of Culture such as Neil Wallace (deputy director of festivals), Kelman, Leonard and King were part of a bitter group, promoting 'pathetic, factless, plank-walking anti-1990-ism' which was an 'embarrassment to this city and all of its cultural workforce.'²² For Pat Lally, opposition to the events was led by 'a motley group of whingers', 'the little group of Scotia Bar Trotskyites and anarchists who paraded under the banner "Workers City"'.²³ The organisers eventually arrogated the rancour their events caused. Their official history of the year concludes:

Glasgow's tradition of open political dissent was also serviced by the Year of Culture celebrations: if constructive debate and criticism was welcomed and engaged, unfounded diatribe was not, especially by the members of the city's cultural organisations who were striving to make 1990 a success. No one ever pretended that a year as Cultural Capital of Europe would solve deprivation in Glasgow, nor was that a direct objective.²⁴

Kelman's responses to the 'Year of Culture' organisation were by no means entirely negative. Lally is quite right that the novelist was an active part of a collective called 'Workers City', based around the poetically and politically vibrant Scotia Bar (and subsequently the Transmission Gallery²⁵) and established to counteract the mainstream event. The possessive plurality of the name 'Workers City' was designed to counter the rising profile of the 'Merchant City', a business district of central Glasgow which the council had redeveloped and rebranded. Both City labels were written and defined by class politics and competing versions of the city's history, as Kelman himself puts it:

The name 'Workers' City' carries obvious connotations but it was chosen to directly challenge 'Merchant City', highlighting the grossness of the fallacy that Glasgow somehow exists because of the tireless efforts of a tiny patriotic coalition of fearless 18th century entrepreneurs and far-sighted politicians. These same merchants and politicians made the bulk of their personal fortunes by the simple expediency of not paying the price of labour. (SRA 1-2)²⁶

Kelman was also active in an alternative intellectual organisation 'The Free University of Glasgow', and helped set up an international

conference in Govan in January 1990. Two keynote speeches at ‘The Self-Determination and Power Event’ were made by Noam Chomsky, attending on Kelman’s invitation (*AJS* 14–16). Chomsky discussed ‘nationalism, the exercise of political power by leaders who do not answer to citizens, instruments of social control and isolationism’.²⁷ Kelman has written an extended essay on Chomsky and philosophy (*AJS* 140–86), and there are clear radical, anti-establishment, left-wing points of affiliation and allegiance between the two, illustrated in detail through Kelman’s activities in 1990. When he feels it is necessary, Kelman surfaces as a vocal public figure of radical resistance to state-authorized activity, be it over the neglect of sufferers of asbestosis, the criminal justice bill, the closure of steelyards, the institutionalised racism of the police or the management of culture and history. To have a radical figure of international stature such as Chomsky attend a highly successful and innovative conference in Govan with over 300 delegates from all walks of life, at the very beginning of 1990, outside any institutional framework and without any establishment authorisation, was little short of a political and cultural coup for Kelman and his various event collaborators. So impressively high-profile was it, in fact, that the press assumed it was a part of the official Year of Culture.²⁸

For both those in favour of the Year of Culture, and those against, 1990 marked a style-shift in Glasgow’s public, authorised self-conception. This is not to say that there is any available evidence that Glasgow’s citizenry noticed any substantial or material change in their city or in their actual lives, but rather that the *style* of understanding and representing Glasgow, for some, altered. Willy Maley shows how significant 1990 was to comprehending the major changes in twentieth-century Glasgow:

In the last century Glasgow has passed through three stages, from being Second City of the Empire, after London, to being a centre of socialist agitation as the hub of Red Clydeside, to its promotion as European City of Culture in 1990. The transition from imperialist complicity, through masculinist workerism, to post-industrial heritage museum has been far from smooth.²⁹

With this context in mind, the revival of *Hardie and Baird* in 1990 should be regarded as part of a communal project to develop and maintain awareness of rich working-class and socialist histories of Glasgow – what Maley calls ‘masculinist workerism’ – in a time of

change, and from which the civic authorities seemed desperate to escape in the pursuit of an economic and mercantile valhalla. *Hardie and Baird* is overshadowed by the impending execution which was the lot of these two local heroes. Alongside fellow radical weaver James Wilson, Hardie and Baird are now fully memorialised by civic authorities in Glasgow, Strathaven and Paisley. Because the play starts after the heroes have been captured, the predominant direction is towards their inescapable doom.

Avoiding the 'I' through Sammy's eyes

In Kelman's 1994 novel, *How late it was, how late*, Hardie Street police station is the fictitious place where protagonist Sammy Samuels loses his sight, having been beaten senseless by 'sodjers' (*HL* 19). There is in reality a police station on Glasgow's Baird Street, but no Hardie Street in the city. Kelman puts that wrong to rights in his novel. His fictitious street might also be named in honour of the Lanarkshire-born working-class Keir Hardie (1856–1915), first leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party (1906), though given Kelman's critical take on party-sanctioned political activities, this is unlikely. Either way, Hardie is an evocative name in Glasgow. Like both historical Hardies from Red Clydeside's rich history though, Sammy is a working-class hero, albeit of a very different sort. The political dimension of the allusion to Hardie is significant: Sammy militarises his war with the authorities. He calls policemen 'sodjers' – which is both a phoneticisation of soldier, and a compact way of getting Sammy's relationship with the police into a playful name for them: 'sod you' sums up their response to Sammy, and his attitude to them too. Sammy marks a change from any previous novel's protagonist, as Kelman expresses it:

How Late is different in a sense, because the central character I think is more positive, a character who's used to action, and is used to having to fend for himself and fight his way out of difficulties. In the other three novels I think characters are in a situation where, it's a kind of anti-existential thing in a way, it's almost like, when will action be pre-determined – and it's not going to happen.³⁰

The whole novel is voiced from Sammy's perspective, if complicatedly so. The first word of the novel stands as an assertion of a fresh concentration of Kelman's developing stylistic confidence: 'Ye' (*HL* 1).

The second-person pronoun is phonetically rendered, is immediate and intimate, actually refers to Sammy himself, and is in Sammy's voice. This narrative is by no means exclusively in the second person, but in favouring 'ye' and 'he', it studiously avoids the 'I' form, unless in direct speech when Sammy is in conversation with someone else.

A Disaffection's Doyle suggests the ubiquitous nature of the first person is a key reason for dropping it:

Naw but the I's were the worst. Everywhere you looked always this fucking I. I I I. I got really fucking sick of it I mean it was depressing, horrible. I mean that's exactly what you're trying to get rid of in the first damn bloody fucking place I mean christ sake, you know what I'm talking about. (*D* 145)

Typically, Doyle does not fully explain what he is in fact 'talking about', but we can imagine that he wants to resist the decadent and bourgeois fetishisation of the individual in writing; for Doyle, as for Kelman, the 'I' might not be inclusive, cannot be immediately and stylistically social, nor indeed socialist. But as Willy Maley notes, the problem is that 'to tackle the issue of class from the perspective of individual human beings, [is] a strategy that could be said to entail an adoption of a bourgeois standpoint, the individual itself being a construct of middle-class culture'. This version of the Marxist delineation of the conflict between bourgeois individualism and working-class collectivism, enables Maley to locate a problematic tension in Kelman's work:

As a writer, Kelman wants to maintain close links with his roots, his origins, his culture, his working-class background, yet the characters he creates in his fiction find themselves out on a limb, isolated from the communities from which they arise.³¹

This argument could lead us to regard the novel as a form which is always already middle class, because it rose with and out of the rising middle classes and the concomitant expansion of capitalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Nancy Armstrong confirms that the novel's 'original mission' was 'to open a space within the field of social positions for previously unacknowledged forms of individualism'.³² Kelman could of course agree with this mapping of the development of the novel; indeed it could be a primary reason for his intention to break with inherited formal and national traditions. But Raymond Williams complicates matters. The

application to fiction of a distinction between the individual and society is, he claims, a reductive bourgeois construct itself:

The range of actual writing similarly surpasses any reduction of 'creative imagination' to the 'subjective', with its dependent propositions: 'literature' as 'internal' or 'inner' truth; other forms of writing as 'external' truth. These depend, ultimately, on the characteristic bourgeois separation of 'individual' and 'society' and on the older idealist separation of 'mind' and 'world'. The range of writing, in most forms, crosses these artificial categories again and again, and the extremes can even be stated in an opposite way: autobiography ('what I experienced', 'what happened to me') is 'subjective' but (ideally) 'factual' writing; realist fiction or naturalist drama ('people as they are', 'the world as it is') is 'objective' (the narrator or even the fact of narrative occluded in the form) but (ideally) 'creative' writing.³³

Without wishing to dismiss Maley's anxieties entirely, I would like to focus a response to the problem he raises through Kelman's complex of resistances to the first person, and interpret his decisions across all of his work as the realisation of a criss-crossing of 'artificial categories again and again' that is offered as a possibility by Williams. When Maley elsewhere concludes that Sammy illustrates 'possessive individualism, bourgeois individualism, taken to its extreme',³⁴ he is reading Sammy as if he were inherently and ineluctably without society, social relation, social responsibility. But the narrative voice itself militates against that reading.

That the first word of *How late. . .* is 'ye', suggests that Kelman, through Sammy, is stylistically including 'you': the collective possibility of any reader. 'Ye' opens this particular, singular presentation of a human's experience through the possible plurality of the deictic second-person pronoun: 'Ye' could be plural or singular – and in fact is both at the same time. This in turn suggests that the sort of alienation the characters variously experience, while being specifically rooted to a locale, to a certain context of life and language, is also generally, socially applicable and in evidence in many – possibly any – other experiences. The 'ye' enacts a complicating resistance to the decadent, potentially anti-social(ist) focus of liberal humanism upon the individualised self. Complicating because not total, and complicating too in its overlapping and shifting use of the third person, but rarely the first person. If omniscience reconstitutes and enables authority, and if the 'I' atomises the social into individualised,

bourgeois, anti-social units in capitalist competition with one another, then the narratological and grammatically non-standard combination of 'ye' and 'he' enacts a levelling set of communal artistic relations and effects even while constructing empathy for the suffering, alienated anguish of the existential male individual. Put more directly, the deictic possibilities of Sammy's 'ye' grants access to his 'I', an everyman's 'he' and by force of pluralising direction, both my singular reader's 'I' and our collective readers' 'we'. 'Ye' opens the novel into a non-standard voice of sociable inclusivity. Though Kelman has written numerous short stories in the first person (e.g. 'Old Francis', 'A History', 'The one with the dog', 'of the spirit', 'Renee', 'Manchester in July', all *GFB*), and his last two novels are also in the first person as we shall see, the formal avoidance of it for the first four novels up to and including *How late. . .*, can only be explained if he is concerned that the use of the 'I' voice might be reproductive of individualistic, bourgeois self-fashioning, rejection of which is foundational to his artistic project. At the same time, the first four of his novels are committed to the evocation of an individual, and that individual is not given an omnisciently-rendered community or social context in which that same individual is to be understood. The social emerges instead through the interaction of individuals, but always through the position and/or perspective of just one of those individuals, a focalised male lead. No matter how alienated the lead male might be, no matter how separated he is from friends or family in body or mind, he is always a social being, if problematically so. The individual is therefore always 'a manifestation of social life', to quote Williams, quoting Marx,³⁵ even if his thoughts are predominantly private. Maley's problem might therefore be solved by relaxing distinctions between subject and object, internal and external, individual and social. Kelman seems to be worrying at exactly those distinctions in his use of 'ye' and 'he' to problematise and reconstitute the 'I'.

Kelman will not replace the 'I' with omniscience, because like Alain Robbe-Grillet, he regards the author-god as being impossibly corrupted, and redolent of false consciousness:

Who is this omniscient, omnipresent narrator, who is everywhere at the same time, who sees both sides of everything at the same time, who follows at the same time the movements of the face and those of a conscience, who is simultaneously aware of the present, the past, and the future of every adventure? He can only be a God.³⁶

The existentialist dismissal of omniscience and the first person, is based upon an understanding of both as fictional mythological structures which deceive: they inhere a set of values which are secured by the comfort of the possibility of both complete knowledge, and the right of authority to judge and dispense a legitimised version of truth. Albert Camus suggests that use of the 'I' can likewise be a deceptive tool of appropriation by discourses of power, which point is both formally and thematically relevant to *How late. . .* The distance between the language of authority and the language of the individual being spoken for, stylistically bridged by the use of 'I', actually serves to alienate the subject being referred to, according to Meursault's account in a key moment in his trial in *The Outsider*:

I thought my lawyer's speech was never going to end. At one point though I listened because he said, 'It's true I killed a man.' Then he went on like that, saying 'I' every time he meant me. I was very surprised. I leant over to one of the policemen and asked him why this was. He told me to be quiet and a moment later added, 'Lawyers always do that.' It seemed to me that it was just another way of excluding me from proceedings, reducing me to insignificance and, in a sense, substituting himself for me.³⁷

The subject is transformed into an object for the jury to conceive of; the appropriation of his identity is of course just an act, and is generated by Meursault's unwillingness to compromise his expressed reasons for the murder to help his defence counsel. The defence counsel's strategy is to negate Meursault completely in his choice of discourse, while grammatically becoming him. As I hope to show below, Sammy's real subject position is equally 'reduced to insignificance' by the linguistic strategies of his 'representatives', and employees of the state who use their linguistic codes to substitute Sammy's own. And like Meursault's, Sammy's situation is undermined by his refusal to compromise his own presentation of himself in the face of the welfare, police and legal systems and their demands for 'consistency' from the subject. On Sammy's departure at the end of the novel, he is aware that legal proceedings will continue without him (*HL* 362), as he has signed over certain representational rights to his 'rep' Ally: Sammy and Meursault are both deemed a hindrance to their representatives' work. Their function in the legal process is much less than secondary: it is nought. They are utterly negated by the legal process surrounding them. They no longer have a subject

position of their own. Indeed, Ally ensures he can carry on with the case even if Sammy dies (*HL* 298–9).

Kelman, like Patrick Doyle, wishes to avoid the ‘I’. In Sammy, he creates someone who loses his ‘eye’, his sight. This is not a simple pun: Sammy does not see, therefore he is. ‘He’, and ‘ye’, not ‘eye’, so not ‘I’. The novel wakes him into blindness, into a transformation. He becomes the prophet of Glasgow, the blind seer, who has vision without sight, who feels every nook and cranny of his territory with his fingers, becoming the idealised model of the purist realist subject. He is a sensitised individual, expressing experience not through the individualising ‘I’ but through the still singular, yet always possibly plural, ‘ye’. As he faces institutionalised language systems, like Meursault he is excluded from controlling how his language is represented by amanuenses – copying down statements, filtering his language, transforming evanescent, momentary, extempore fluidity of speech into the evidence, authority and history of permanent, stolid, typed transcription. The state in Sammy’s world is that invasive, possessive lawyer in *The Outsider*, always pushing the individual in directions he does not wish to go, always demanding conformity to a set of assumptions and preconceptions by which the individual would be punished if unable to compromise his version of events. And compromise is what Sammy’s legal ‘rep’ Ally both exemplifies and demands.

Sound and site

Sammy is Kelman’s first fully formed celebrant of the musicality of Glasgow voice. The novel also shows an enriching development of Kelman’s exploration of the relationship between site and sound, locality and accent, identity and speech. Because of Sammy’s blindness, the sight of the eye is replaced by a raised awareness of sited voice, the voice of locality, of situation. Like most of Kelman’s protagonists, Sammy is not wedded to the sounds of Glasgow alone. Sammy has a fully musical ear, always with a song in his head, always gathering remembered lyrics to console and empower; he is a budding songwriter too (*HL* 261). His musical passion is aroused most predominantly by American ‘outlaw’ country music (*HL* 60, 155), blues and folk singer-songwriters like Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, Bob Dylan and Patsy Cline; notably he rejects soul as propaganda (*HL* 155–6). Here it seems necessary to refute in part

Uwe Zagratzki's³⁸ reading of the novel as showing the structural influence of only African-American blues. Of necessity this interpretation has to ignore Sammy's *actual* musical tastes. Sammy 'needs' music (*HL* 60), and it is a music which is in fact predominantly 'white', not that the colour of the artist makes any difference at all to Sammy, as he certainly never mentions it. Like Patrick Doyle in *A Disaffection*, Sammy is very critical of racist language (e.g. *HL* 345); as Sue Vice points out Sammy 'is politically correct in his internal and external utterances on the subjects of women, gay men, and racial difference'.³⁹ But his musical taste has very little to do with African-American blues directly.

In fact Sammy's 'lone-star belt buckle' was to be his passport to the centre of his musical universe: Texas (*HL* 8). The 'lone-star state' is home to southern country, and 'western swing', the latter the subject of an extended account of a musical pilgrimage by fellow contemporary Scottish novelist Duncan McLean.⁴⁰ Sammy fantasises about a pilgrimage to Luckenbach, Texas, the place Jerry Jeff Walker recorded his groundbreaking 'outlaw country' *Viva Terlingua* live album of 1973. Luckenbach was memorialised further in Waylon Jennings' and Willie Nelson's 1970s hit single, 'Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)'. Sammy responds to the romance of male community evoked by this song, wanting 'to team up with Willie and Waylon and the boys' (*HL* 250), quoting this impulse directly from the song itself; typically Sammy elsewhere censors this sentimental, romantic fantasy of international travel and musical pilgrimage (*HL* 255), though it comes up again at length (*HL* 285–6). Interestingly, 'Luckenbach' sounds exactly like 'looking back' when sung by Waylon Jennings; as I hope to show, Sammy's mind has to trawl through memories, simultaneously with reconfiguring itself in the present through its enhanced reliance on sound and remembered space. He has to 'look back' in memory because he cannot 'look around' visually. For all his retrieval of memories, like so many of Kelman's characters, the direction of Sammy's travelling mind is into the future and away from Glasgow. To mis-apply Wordsworth, Glasgow is too much with him, late and soon, and it is almost 'too late' to make a change. But change he feels he must.

While Sammy is blind to issues of a singer's colour, country and blues are clearly important as working-class forms for him, as song lyrics and half-remembered sounds are interwoven into his thoughts throughout the novel, especially when he is alone. In the absence of

trustworthy peers ('there was nay cunt ye could trust', *HL* 251), and the continuing estrangement of his girlfriend Helen, music provides Sammy with his most reliable social network, and it helps him voice various experiences. In his study of country music and Texan working-class culture Aaron A. Fox finds that 'voice' is everything:

[F]or working-class Texans, the voice is a privileged medium for the construction of meaning and identity, and thus for production of a distinctive 'class culture.' Song and singing comprise the expressive apotheosis of this valued vocality, and song, in turn, is locally understood as a consciously elaborated discourse *about* (the) voice. Through song and its attendant forms of expressive, technical, critical, and playful talk (especially narrative and humor), working-class Texans construct and preserve a self-consciously rustic, 'redneck,' 'ordinary,' and 'country' ethos in their everyday life.⁴¹

So while the romance of travelling to Texas might well be beyond Sammy, the working-class sociability of its sound, the articulacy of its musical language, colours the tapestry of his newly aural world, while also celebrating the 'ordinary' – a key facet of Kelman's project from the start – providing a form of comradeship for Sammy which encourages a playful, discursive coping with difficult circumstances. In other words, even though it emanates from a world apart, the music reaffirms Sammy's class identity. Following Fox's lead, we can safely say that this particular style of music values the authenticity of voice, all voices, and by implication Sammy's voice, while nearly all other reported voices in the novel condemn his voice and his language. The country music which is at the centre of his musical passion is also subversive, and is therefore deliberately ignored by the mainstream media because it might threaten the security of the state if listened to widely: whatever the actual truth about 'outlaw country' as a form of political subversion, Sammy's interpretation is hugely significant. For Sammy, music is not an aesthetic experience without political dimensions; his music of choice substantiates and legitimises his antithetical positions and silently subversive intentions. If more people were allowed to listen to 'adult' music of this kind 'there would be a fucking revolution' (*HL* 156).

At times voiceless music surfaces into the text as Sammy details the sounds he hears in a pure musical notation, textualised in the novel as concrete poems,⁴² of his own creative making:

He got down on his knees to feel the floor, cold but firm, cold but firm.
The palms of his hands flat on it; he had this sensation of being

somewhere else in the world and a music started in his head, a real real music, it was hypnotic, these instruments beating out the tumatumatumti tumatumatumti tum, tum; tum, ti tum; tum, tum; tum, ti tum, tumatumatumti tumatumatumti byong; byong byong byong byong byong; byong, byong byong, byong, byong byong. (*HL* 11; cf 31)

Here Sammy is on the floor of his cell, having just realised he is blind. Fleetingly he transcends his concrete situation through the abstraction of imagined music. This silent music, fully conceptualised, is quickly muffled by floods of pain and ‘a whole crash of thoughts’ (*HL* 11), but it at least effects a temporary respite from awareness of his imprisoned circumstances. The concrete musicality of the song-poem lifts him momentarily out of his concrete cell. Sammy loses his sight, loses perception of colour, dark and light, depth and perspective, but regains his ear, elevates his sense of touch, and reconfigures the importance of memory, of unseen rhythm, and of unwritten story. Removed from access to written textuality, Sammy inhabits a purified and intellectualised aural and oral. In this sense, Sammy is Kelman’s ideal subject: articulacy and sound are more important than writing for Sammy while blind, even if paradoxically in the form and forum of this printed novel.

‘he was reading all kinds of things’

It would be a mistake to conclude, as many critics have, that Sammy is always illiterate, alien to the world of literature, blind or not: to do so is to follow the underlying assumption Doctor Logan reveals when he asks Sammy if he is ‘a reader’ (*HL* 218). Adam Mars-Jones for example reads Sammy’s world as a ‘piling up of inarticulations’, while Kelman’s control of punctuation ‘belongs to a different world from Sammy’s’.⁴³ Likewise David Punter suggests Sammy’s poor literacy is graphically displayed by ‘the perfect spelling of terms like “dysfunctional” [in the speech of a council worker which] can have a relation to Sammy’s literacy that is only ironic’.⁴⁴ Punter assumes that because Sammy does not often use words with Hellenic and Latinate roots like ‘dysfunctional’ himself, he cannot therefore know *how* to spell such words; he is, in effect, literarily and linguistically dysfunctional. A parallel moment in Alex La Guma’s *Time of the Butcherbird*, set in South Africa, reveals how violent such a question can be: a white Bantu Commissioner asks an ‘old black man’ the question ‘Can you read?’⁴⁵ Both La Guma’s commissioner and

Kelman's doctor Logan imply that reading is – perhaps should remain – the privilege of the powerful. It is not too crude to suggest that such divisions, policed as they are in both novels by the educated, empowered official of the state, form microcosmic instances of apartheid: in La Guma's world in terms of race, class and culture, in Kelman's in terms of class and culture. While the contexts differ hugely, the manner by which the two novelists reveal the prejudices of officialdom over the education and literacy of the people it officiates, is exactly the same, proffered in an unapologetically interrogative invasiveness.

The doctor's question of Sammy has to be addressed in detail, not only because it is illustrative of the social gulf between the two, which the doctor is positioned to police (for another relationship tense with class politics between a patient and a doctor, see the short story 'In with the doctor', *GFB* 118–132), but also because it opens up the question of Sammy's literacy. Sammy has frequent recollections of fiction, which range from explicit references such as *John Barleycorn* by Jack London (*HL* 29), to the more frequent unnamed references, such as:

He once read a story about a Jewish guy and a black guy and they met in this New York cafe and drank coffee, they were both skint, and the way they knew one another was skint and used to being skint was because they both took triple helpings of cream and sugar. Fucking bullshit. (*HL* 198)

He read a story once about a guy that vanished. But it was unbelievable. So fuck it. (*HL* 255)

This story he had read once, about a German guy, maybe it was Scandinavia (*HL* 286)

'He once read. . .' and derivations of the same phrase almost acquire the status of a musical refrain. Each of these references is broken off by Sammy's blunt rejection of their relevance and value, or, in the latter's case, by his own hunger which elides the full-stop (a reference to Norwegian Knut Hamsen's novel *Hunger* of 1890 perhaps). Nevertheless it is clear that literature is unproblematically a part of *his* culture, something which reactions to the novel almost always ignore, whether positive or negative. To ignore such references is necessary in the critical construction of Sammy as illiterate, but it also does damage to his frame of reference, and narrows the interpretative avenues for the novel as a whole. For example, Sammy,

desperate for some blind role models, tries to remember a blind 'officer in some army' in a 'French novel maybe. Or Russian' (*HL* 127). This could be the partially sighted General Kutuzov in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. In the war with Napoleon, Kutuzov is Tolstoy's heroic spirit of Russia: a commonsensical general who is cautious with the lives of his troops and never tempted by the glorification of war, in contrast to the tyrannical vanity of Tolstoy's Napoleon. It is no stretch to read Sammy in his militarised fashion, continually 'battling on', as a Glaswegian Kutuzov: hard-nosed yet pragmatic; intellectual and combative; isolated and criticised on all fronts; weather-beaten and macho; disparaged but enduring.⁴⁶ There is another possible Russian reference which is also worth pursuing:

He once read a story about that, some poor cunt that worked as a minor official for some government department and he beavered away all hours but everybody thought he was a dumpling, everybody he knew, they all thought he was a dumpling, poor bastard, that was what he was, a fucking dumpling. (*HL* 40)

The affectionate recollection is possibly of Akaky Akakievich from Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat*.⁴⁷ Akaky's surname is 'Baskmackin, which all too plainly was at some time derived from bashmak'.⁴⁸ 'Bashmak' is Russian for 'shoe'. Through Sammy's opening and subsequent references to the loss of his own stolen shoes (e.g. *HL* 1, 127, 247 and 325), and repeated considerations of the state of his feet, it might be that Kelman is trying to evoke both Akaky Akakievich, Gogol's bureaucratic functionary who is fatally robbed of his prized overcoat, and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* who, somewhat like Sammy, has slept in a ditch after having been beaten. The play opens with Estragon frantically trying to air his painful feet. His companion Vladimir philosophises: 'There's man all over for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet.'⁴⁹ Back in *How late . . .*, the police go on to abuse and humiliate Sammy physically by characterising his exposed toes as 'angry-looking', 'red and purplish', 'like a penis' (*HL* 180). The shoes, as Sammy confirms, are 'crucial, crucial' (*HL* 325). Sammy's ill-fitting, uncomfortable, borrowed or stolen footwear shows the delicacy of his survival, while the novel at the same time tries to put us 'in his shoes'. Kelman's wider point might be that our lives are as fragile and as absurd as Sammy's, and in wearing his shoes for the duration of the novel we are supposed to feel uncomfortable too.

How late. . . embeds allusions into the narrative of which Sammy does not ostensibly seem aware, while also confidently allowing Sammy to recall a wide range of world literature – an explicit surfacing of knowledge denied to Rab Hines and Tammias in previous novels, even though both are readers. To suggest Sammy is illiterate, un-literary or otherwise remote from writing and reading, is to carry the novel in that direction too. Very often, as we shall see, critics regarded both Sammy and the novel as sub-literary and beneath the concerns of culture. They are evidently mistaken. Ian Bell rightly proposes that Sammy's name might allude both to Kafka's Gregor Samsa and John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*.⁵⁰ Sammy and his novel are fully, and confidently, literate and literary. To suggest that Sammy would not know, *could* not know, how to punctuate or spell the way Kelman or council workers do, is an assumption verging on prejudice which Kelman is always fighting. To assume, as Mary McGlynn does, that Kelman deliberately draws characters who 'can access language likely to be beyond their purview' is to miss his fundamental point: broad and deep reading, complex metaphor and imagery, sophisticated and hybrid languages, *are* all within the possible range of any speaker, of any tongue, of any class, no matter what their 'limited education and background' as McGlynn says of Sammy.⁵¹

Apart from a note left to Helen – in which Sammy, like Kelman's narrator, inconsistently deploys contraction apostrophes but not all those that standard usage would (*HL* 360) – we do not have access to Sammy's writing. But this whole novel is, in a structural sense, *his* narrative, including the presentation of semi-colons and standard spelling of polysyllabic terms. A logical imperative of the conjoined voices of character and narrator, and the resulting singular subject position of Sammy with his neutralised narrator, is that we have to believe that he could write the novel too. If the novel does not explicitly construct Sammy as the novelist, as the writer of his own tale, we do know at least that he is a reader, and an avid one too. He is sorry that his blindness means he will not be able to read anymore. It is, he says, a 'pity about the reading. From now on it would have to be these talking books' (*HL* 66). In effect, Sammy enables Kelman to play with this novel as if it were a 'talking book', a book of voice, of sound, above and away from, blind to, print. Impossible of course: our access to this supposed oral world is always through print, and it 'talks' only through the activation of the reader – but it is still an artful illusion with which Kelman intricately plays.

The manner in which Sammy understands his blindness, from the start, is articulated through his reading, through remembered textual experience. In the passage that follows, Kelman manages to provide the materialisation of Sammy's blindness as a bleeding, and expanding, of the text itself, which any reader of *How late. . .* cannot help but 'see':

Next time he woke it was black night again, and sore christ he was really really sore; aches all ower. The whole of the body. And then his fucking eyes as well, there was something wrong with them, like if it had still been daylight and he was reading a book he would have had double-vision or something, his mind going back to a time he was reading all kinds of things, weird things, black magic stuff and crazy religious experiences and the writing started to get thick, each letter just filled out till there was nay space between it and the next yin: no doubt just coincidental but at the time man he was fucking strung out with other sort of stuff so he took it extremely personal, extremely personal man ye know what I'm talking about. (*HL* 9–10)

This passage typifies the manner in which Sammy responds to and manages problems. He assesses his physical situation: his pains, his damage; then through simile, and then memory, he tries to express, ostensibly to himself, a conception of what he is experiencing. Here he has recourse to a black-out of the pages of texts which themselves are about 'crazy religious experiences': the print expands to cover the page. Kelman provides his readership with a materially imaginable process for Sammy's blindness, which is most readily imagined by making the print of *How late. . .* itself bleed across the page. At the moment Sammy realises his vision is transformed, Kelman's audience has to process an image which it will most easily imagine through the immediate physical presence of the page it is reading. Kelman makes the text become physically dynamic, spreading across, moving beyond its usual boundaries. I have pointed out how bookish Kelman's characters are: Hines, Tammas, Doyle – all are readers. But Sammy marks a development in the complexity of both literary and textual device, and in the way in which Kelman chooses to manage the text's own literariness, and Sammy's own textual life. His blindness here is conveyed by the text as both semiotic, lexical units, but also through text as icon, as image of black ink. And this is a secular spiritual experience, if only crazily so: it is a transformation, a darkening, an inverted road-to-Damascus moment remembered through the 'extremely personal' sensitised reading Sammy has enjoyed in the past.

To further enhance the spiritual and psychological effects of Sammy's transformation, Kelman offers other religious echoes. The waking into blindness is the third time that Sammy has awoken so far in the novel, indeed the novel starts with 'Ye wake' (see *HL* 1 and 7); just ten pages into the novel and we have had three mentions of Sammy waking, a trinity of risings, and on the third, a transformation. Because Sammy's body has been battered and beaten by state-legitimised, and militarised, authorities, a biblical echo is clearly made to the resurrected Christ who rises on the third day (Luke, 24.7). Christ's mocking, scourging soldiers become Sammy's kicking sodjers. A lower-case, talismanic 'christ' is summoned here by Sammy as he awakes into his transformed state, but idiomatically and secularly so. Sammy was brought up in 'an atheist house, a godless house' (*HL* 63). But in his gathering of embedded references to Christ together with other forms of allusions to other doomed heroes early on in the novel – such as Andrew Hardie, Estragon, Akaky Akakievich – it is unmistakable that Kelman is marking Sammy out as a martyr, a hero, doomed to suffer at the hands of the state. But like Christ's, Sammy's is a suffering that, to a degree, he brings on himself. He knows that 'it's the system' and that 'they're sodjers, trained to kill' (*HL* 63 and 64). Against such forces he can only finally admit that they will determine that he 'was the cause of the sight loss; him himself' (*HL* 248). He knows full-well when he makes his decision to punch and run (*HL* 3), that he might have a brief moment of all-important control in resisting the sodjers, but that they will punish him for it. He knows that his charge away from them, while joyful in its anapaestic imperatives – 'get to fuck get to fuck' (*HL* 5) – can only be a brief burst of laughter before the inexorable beating.

The beating the police administer is not detailed very much. The first two boots go into Sammy's stomach. The police then drag Sammy into a close and, as narrator, and in a delicate withdrawal typical of Kelman when dealing with violence or sexual activity, Sammy decides on 'drawing a curtain here' (*HL* 6). What is elided is the type of physical violence which Irvine Welsh, for example, revels in; this elision marks out how different Kelman's intentions are. He does not wish to exploit the potential of the horror scene, or stimulate the cheap thrills of watching torture: this is the generative moment of drama, the event which, with a little delay, causes Sammy's blindness. It is the springboard of the novel, no less so than Patrick Doyle's finding of the pipes. And yet we are not permitted to see it. Kelman

avoids prurience at all costs – avoiding sexual as well as violent detail – perhaps to avoid the sentimentalism of a Zola-like naturalism⁵² – but also because the act which causes blindness is itself made blind to us. Avoiding the gore enhances the subtle effect of mystery which pervades this novel: it does not undermine Sammy’s reliability, but it does show him to be in control of his own story, even while this is not a self-aware narrative (it does not explicitly know itself as a book or as a story). It also shows that there will be some things to which we will always be blind, no matter how seemingly ‘honest’ the guiding narrative. Sammy does not wish to revisit this scene in the retelling, does not see a need for a detailed scourging scene: as he says ‘nay point prolonging the agony’ (*HL* 6). We are to know that Sammy is a victim of disproportionate police violence, of a fight where he is outnumbered and predetermined to lose, and these points are enough for Kelman, and more than sufficient for Sammy. If Kelman legitimised the use of vernacular for the narratives of significant contemporary novelists like Niall Griffiths, Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh, he was never a model for their various sub-*Clockwork Orange* ‘horror show’ excesses.

Sammy’s soft-palmed sensitivity

If Sammy’s musical ear becomes more significant on the loss of sight, equally an enhanced discovery of touch and sound is provoked, of tactility and material renegotiation of private and public spaces. The dynamics of the narrative are dominated by an active interpretation of space and sound; the loss of visual sight literally and necessarily elevates Sammy’s critical insight into matters material, matters local, matters micro, matters of site and situation; but the sight loss also abstracts his mental processing into recoveries of memories and associations, which are both organisationally pragmatic and aspirationally hopeful. Sammy becomes the sightless prophet not of a possible or ideal future, but of a material, at times oppressively close, concrete present: he has to concentrate on ‘the day-to-day stuff, the minute-to-minute points of order. The actual living’ (*HL* 248): in other words, the everydayness, the facticity of being. Sammy has to touch his world more intimately, has to heighten his materialist understanding of his local world, and the city starts to live through this defamiliarising process, even through the agency of something as day-to-day as Glasgow rain: ‘These wee murmurs and groans and

fucking sighing noises; and these drips, like a burst pipe.’ (*HL* 286) In Sammy’s ears, the city comes alive.

Sammy’s new-found and vulnerable loneliness means he must coax and motivate himself through a complex renegotiation of recollections of actions and space, while always reminding himself that his defining characteristic is that he is ‘a battler’ (*HL* 47). Sue Vice reads these two different modes as a Bakhtinian mixing of discourses:

Sammy’s inner discourse alternates between a material and precise realism (details of his struggles to walk home and use the lift when he is newly blind, the encounters with officialdom, such as DSS employees and the doctor) and a Beckettian existentialism (he ponders on the hardships of life, the reasons for carrying on, lessons to be learned from prison, and so on).⁵³

The two modes of discourse intertwine: Sammy often starts a journey with detailed considerations of precisely where he is in space, which fraught situation he then copes with by existential pondering and recollection as the journey gets underway. Immediately he is outside and blind, he develops a technique for feeling out his world made new to him. This ‘patacaking’ (*HL* 38) is a tool for the novelist’s defamiliarising of the familiar urban landscape – the laying of hands onto walls, streets, the junctions of buildings, the shapes of closes, kerbs, alleyways, doors, stairs: all become sites of comforting reassurance when recognised, when felt out, when patted and petted, but also they always threaten to dissociate, disorient, discompose and destabilise. Fingers enquire and confirm the texture of his experience, at the same time as Sammy is no longer able to access written text. The recognition of places and noises is always possibly wrong, as his usual cognitive processes are thrown into disarray by the lack of definite visual information. In a sense, Sammy does become an unreliable narrator and courier of his own story, as he is newly unsure of his location. The children’s game and nursery rhyme of the same name soften Sammy’s ‘pat-a-cake’ interpretation of his new environs into a delicate infantilisation: ‘How do ye walk’ he asks himself, as he ‘patacakes’ (*HL* 38). Patacaking opens his fighter’s fists into soft-palm sensitivity. Hands are unsure of themselves, leading an unsteady, fragile and tentative body in its new explorations, reorientations and relocations. When he is first turned out onto the street outside the police station, it is the memory of the children’s game which nurses him, which constructs his technique for coping, for

moving, for enduring, for waiting. As Beckett puts it, he is to 'keep going, going on':⁵⁴

The door shut behind him. There was the steps. He poked his foot forwards to the right and to the left jesus christ man that's fine, to the right and to the left, okay, fucking doing it ye're doing it; okay; down the steps sideways and turning right, his hands along the wall, step by step, reminding ye of that patacake game ye play when ye're a wean, slapping yer hands on top of each other then speeding it up. (*HL* 33)

This is the birth of a differently-sentient being: the police violence has parented a newly vulnerable individual, thrust out into a busy urban environment of modernist concrete and hard edges which is, and is not, his own. This is a transforming inverted birth within a realist frame, parallel to the surrealist swallowing, digesting and ejecting of Lanark in Alasdair Gray's novel, by which process Lanark ends up in an inverted hospital where the patients are food for the sustenance of 'The Institute'.⁵⁵ The Institute's sole purpose is to sustain itself by feeding on its patients. Gray's surreal parody is developed by Kelman though in a more realist mode. Like Lanark, Sammy is infantilised by the state, in the sense that his independent and assertive strength to survive has been kicked out of him, leaving him vulnerable, ironically enough, to further abuse by other wings of the state through a dependency which the state itself created. Subsequent boots of oppression will come from failing bureaucracy rather than flailing policemen, though it is vital to remember that Sammy has been witness to 'cunts fucking dying, getting fucking kicked to death' (*HL* 57), and has had a cell-mate die at the hands of prison officers (*HL* 189 and 202). It is not metaphorical *at all* for Sammy to think of the state as violent, nor can it be deemed paranoid or exaggerated if he considers the police to be always a threat to his life. In summary, the state's blinding of Sammy is part of a continuum of abuses he has suffered and witnessed since falling foul of it as a teenager. The state does not work for this individual, but against him; it does not trust him, it inspects and suspects him, and expects him to conform.

To return to the passage above, Sammy's version of the 'patacake' game is solo rather than social as it would be for a child. The absence of playing partners renders his isolation all the more threatening, makes him a child in a world of danger. But the recollection of the childhood game more directly reassures, makes the laborious task

of feeling out a way through adversity into dynamic, receptive play. Sammy finds comfort in the sure, repetitive, rhythmic sounds of his hands on hard surfaces. The mixture of second person and third person subjects in this passage, of past and present tenses and the repeated idioms of encouragement ('doing it ye're doing it; okay'), form a rapidly switching, multi-modal, potentially discombobulating, but ultimately confirmatory narrative style which typifies the novel when Sammy is alone. Sammy has to comfort himself, in the complete and continuing absence of anyone else to do it for him.

Sammy's blindness necessitates a heightened and newly unfamiliar, envisioned version of the city space, negotiation through which requires the continuous activation of memories at every tentative step: the articulation of reference points, the forging of multiple links to build scaffolding and ladders between what was seen with eyes before, and what is touched and heard now. The hero interprets through newly refreshed senses channelled to him by fingertips and feet, ears and nose, but the cautious reliance on these newly significant senses is bolstered and enriched by fragments of memories and remembered maps: the essential process by which Sammy is to gain safe passage, to ensure his own physical and mental security. Sammy's ventures into the outside world form psychological memorialisations of his recent and distant past, and often become relieved and happy celebrations, of his local sphere, his locality, the self-reflecting sounds of familiarity, of a language which comforts. Voice is orientation, location, and confirmation of identity. As part of his deposition to the police, Sammy admits how important accent is to him:

He wasna y a homebird. He wasna y used to it. So he liked going out, he liked the pub, no just for the bevy, he liked the crack as well, hearing the patter. Even considering ye were home three years, ye still enjoyed it.

I'm no kidding ye, he said, even just out walking first thing in the morning, ye forget where ye are, then that first Glasgow voice hits ye; it makes ye smile, know what I'm saying, cause it's a real surprise. (HL 160)

Here Sammy's deposition is conveyed as reported speech in the third person, then moves to direct speech with a mixture of the generalised second person and first person: it adopts and enacts many perspectives, forms an inclusive, collective, confident portrayal of his vibrant social context. Sammy might be using his happy recollection of

Glasgow voice and the confidence of his delivery to present himself as a relaxed, therefore innocent, man. Though the Glasgow voice seems properly significant to Sammy, the context of his describing its repeatedly happy 'surprise' as a part of his deposition to the police whose own 'voices came from different places' (*HL* 160), might mean that he is using the celebration of Glasgow partly to critique the non-Glasgow voices among the team of police interrogators, specifically a police officer whose 'accent sounded a bit English' (*HL* 162). The English accent might also be significant in that it suggests that police who are not local are investigating Sammy: Sammy has national detectives on his trail, which further suggests he is involved in something much more serious than just hitting a policeman (but we will never know for sure).

As his is a large and fully dynamic city, Sammy's encounters with other sighted inhabitants cannot be predicted. People he bumps into are mostly people he cannot blindly trust, because he simply does not know them, and cannot 'read' them. Throughout the novel there is an evident hunger for talking with 'somebody he could trust' (*HL* 150), not just because he is blind, but because he wants to recover his lost memory of the weekend which immediately precedes the start of the novel: it is a blindspot, a blank in his memory, and the journey of the novel is in part an exploration and a partial filling in of that blind spot (*HL* 26). This novel is a mystery, a socially-upended detective novel:⁵⁶ the victim-criminal tries to fill in that blank space of a lost Saturday, while studiously avoiding details of what exactly his criminal activities have been, leaving us to speculate, to do the detective work, if indeed we have a policeman's impulse to get to 'the truth'. If we do act on that impulse, we must also question its validity as the basis for a critical and interpretative tool, especially as Sammy himself is so determined to put his imprisoned past behind him. The sympathy of the novel is so fully with thirty-eight-year-old Sammy, perennially in and out of prison since the age of nineteen, that we can only define him as a 'criminal' if we reject him completely, and take the censorious position of the police. And the police are clearly not the arbiters of 'truth' in this novel. This was a frequent critical failing particularly among reactions to the novel on its winning the Booker prize in 1994, indeed not just from those critics who rejected the book outright. To ignore the huge questions the novel worries at – questions about the fairness and validity of the legal system, the state prison system, the police, the health and social

security systems – is to ignore the novel's overall agenda, and to ignore Sammy's politics, to render him blind 'to history and politics and philosophy' as Willy Maley would have it.⁵⁷ This is a novel which asks questions about human rights from a local, practical, actualisable platform: what rights is Sammy actually, pragmatically allowed? Over what rights does he have sole control? How does the state help him? Is the state for or against the rights of the individual? Why does the state not function as a supportive prop for the vulnerable?

The blind populous anonymity of sighted city life, becomes in Sammy's newly individuated vision, a traumatic and fraught experience of fleeting moments of half-trusted or accidental intimacy: the touching on the arm as people help him cross the road (*HL* 53); the brushing against someone's clothes (*HL* 247); the fall into the street and the call for help (*HL* 41); sounds of passing laughter (*HL* 127); the feeling of someone walking beside him (*HL* 256); the offer from a prostitute (*HL* 287). Sammy's awkwardness with his new situation lies in his desire not to be helped, to blunder on, to follow his own path: as with Hines and Doyle, Sammy understands his transformation as one of a loss of control, of his own volition, his own independence. This confident independence – undermined and rendered at times impossible through his blindness – shows Sammy to be a very different personality from Doyle and Hines. Sammy is self-assured and self-contained in a manner to which Hines and Doyle can only aspire. For all his evident sensitivities, Sammy is more bluntly anarchic, more directly rebellious in the face of institutions, than either Hines or Doyle manage. Doyle and Hines are malcontent self-agitators for personal rebellion and reform. Their heated considerations of kicking against employers, state and institutions remain detached: extensively and potently articulated but nevertheless mostly unactivated. Sammy, by contrast, is a decider, a maverick soldier for his own cause, having associations with real – rather than Doyle's imagined – political radicals and, in the police's definition people who carry out 'acts of terrorism' (*HL* 178) (though we should be chary of trusting such blank definitions coming from the state authority. Any maintenance of 'truth' in this novel is located with Sammy). But all three leading men do have the same critical and politicised position in relation to the state; all three are suspicious of police, but only Sammy can be fully justified in thinking he is being watched. Evidence presented to him when he is arrested and interrogated for the second time, for example, is a photograph taken

of him eleven years ago, in London (*HL* 199–201), a photograph which he cannot see (so like Sammy we cannot be sure it exists). Even the dating of the photograph is unstable: the police say it was ten years ago; Sammy asserts it was eleven (*HL* 201). Hines is monitored by his employers' clocks, while Doyle imagines being tracked by government spies, but only Sammy actually has been under state-sponsored surveillance. The eyes of government are everywhere, looking through his cell door (*HL* 8–9), possibly looking at him in lifts (*HL* 91). The pressure of the police looking at Sammy is immense, and increases (or threatens to increase) throughout the novel: 'the more we look at you the more there is to see' they say (*HL* 200) – and it is an indeterminate 'they' because Sammy has no concrete idea who is actually interrogating him. He knows he would have more power in the interrogation if he could look back at each interlocutor (*HL* 204). The eyes of the oppressed individual are blinded: he is no longer able to see himself, and his disability makes him monstrous to others: as David Punter puts it 'Sammy becomes "that which nobody wants to see"'.⁵⁸ Sammy, if representative of the colonised masses as Punter reads him, is blinded and herded by the all-pervasive control through observation and inspection of the anonymous state machine. In this novel, looking is power, and Sammy has none, because a boot of the state has stamped out his sight.

The blind gap between orality and textuality

This novel was published ten years after the setting of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The state indoctrinator O'Brien provides his charge, Winston Smith, with an image: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever."⁵⁹ Sammy is the product of that stamping: blinded by the oppression of the state, imprisoned, provoked, questioned, bullied, threatened, beaten and bribed. Sammy does not wilt like Smith, and the novel projects no exaggerated dystopia. Yet the focalisation of this individual who is perennially in conflict with authority is certainly meant to provoke considerations of state authority and autocracy, particularly in relation to the ways in which language is used to manage Sammy, and to alienate him, and his own language, from the machinations of standard English state processes and procedures. There is not always a direct or simple conflict between Sammy's working-

class vernacular and state-authorised standard English, indeed such categories don't fully represent the far more nuanced and complicated linguistic world Sammy hears. At the DSS, the young man who takes his initial statement slips from official, formal language into talk of football – he talks to Sammy in two registers: the language of his own culture and the language of his job. In engaging in this exchange of mutual masculinity – shared memories of football in this case – Sammy also relaxes into trust. It is at this point that he slips further and admits that the police 'gave me a doing' (*HL* 96–8). His sight loss has disadvantaged him here – his memories of football perhaps dominating because he cannot 'see' where he is or to whom he is talking. Realising his mistake, remembering the function of the interview, Sammy swiftly requests that the involvement of the police – the causal relationship he had alluded to – be deleted from his deposition, but the keyboardist refuses, claiming he does not 'have the authority' (*HL* 98). Neither does Sammy, evidently. Sammy's life is out of control because it has fallen into a blind gap between orality and textuality. Because he has become fully oral, text is beginning to dictate his life, and he cannot control that text with any security. When his oral version of his life is written, it is nothing to do with him at all.

Perhaps following *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Kelman also suggests that the state does not permit Sammy to construct his own version of history, the story that would most suit his cause. Because the register of this 'Preliminary Officer' is mixed, Sammy forgets that he is being 'assessed'. With the subsequent more senior Officer the same is true: she is given the markers of a Glasgow accent, but has recourse to an explicatory, legalistic discourse which is designed to control Sammy's account into due process. Sammy gets caught in a multiply-binding labyrinth: in order to pursue his claim of disability benefit, he has to say how he became blind. If he tells the truth, he then has to take legal action against the police, something he is determined not to do, because he wants the least trouble possible. Police mean trouble, and nothing but: 'There's nay such thing as a good fucking uniform' (*HL* 195). If he cannot secure the financial support of the state, what avenue, other than crime and the black market, is left open to him to ensure his survival? His criminality and now his blindness have made a monster of him, as David Punter points out, so nobody wants him. The Officer advises him:

I would point out the inconsistency however Mister Samuels: on the one hand you say that is the case; on the other hand I can imagine some saying, well if it's true why is he not taking any action? (*HL* 105)

Inconsistency will be Sammy's downfall: the standard process, the procedure, of the state demands consistency of its subjects' behaviour. Persistently the novel sets up a conflict between procedure and behaviour. The state is standardising, homogenising, essentialising; the individual is inconsistent, variegated, distinctive, but is repeatedly told not to be, or that he cannot be. 'No one is unique' says the Doctor (*HL* 222).

As Sammy navigates the corridors and officials of state bureaucracy, he encounters Ally. Ally wants to represent Sammy in the latter's claim against the police, a procedure in which Sammy is only involved because he could never be in full control of the way in which his oral account was written down by the Preliminary Officer. It is at a key juncture of three agents involved in Sammy's 'case' that Sammy is most under pressure and stress: the police, having interrogated him at length, drop him off at the Doctor's with their by-now customary orders and threats – 'ye're going in alone' and 'we'll be waiting' (*HL* 211). Sammy is dealt with abruptly by the female receptionist he mentally names 'Missis La di da' (*HL* 212), his tension and stress elevated by his class reading of the power politics of her imperatives, her accent and her masterful management of silences (*HL* 216). She is therefore reminiscent of *A Disaffection's* Old Milne, who Doyle characterises as being a master of conversational silence, which always gives the Headmaster the upper hand, *D* 151).

Here, inhabiting and exploiting Sammy's police-driven, medical, bureaucratic blind nadir, Ally awaits, a sighted predator of unknowable provenance. Practically, if Sammy can convince the Doctor of his blindness, if the interview goes well, he might eventually have some degree of financial security. As Sammy goes deeper into the labyrinth he gets increasingly disempowered and increasingly stressed, and at this low point, Ally appears: guardian angel or exploitative pariah? The provenance of Ally is kept from Sammy, and so from us: that Ally will not confess to his origins other than saying a 'wee bird' told him about Sammy (*HL* 214) renders Sammy's resistance to his intervention fully logical. The mainstay of Ally's advice is that because Sammy's case is not at all 'straightforward' (*HL* 215) whatever Sammy does, or whatever stories he tells about what he or the police did, he must at all costs be 'consistent' (e.g. *HL* 234–5, 294, 300 and 309).

Inconsistency will result in Sammy being engulfed yet further by the state machine. While it is impossible to be certain of Ally's specific origins, he says enough to suggest that he is probably of a working-class background. But he is some sort of legal representative, a functionary of the court system, perhaps an autodidact, and shows all the pragmatism of someone who wants to succeed materially. He is, at heart, a compromiser. Because of that, and because of Kelman's forthright condemnation of cultural compromise, Ally is not fully to be trusted. In a convincing reading of Ally, Matt McGuire adroitly suggests that, as Sammy's agent, he brings into question 'the role of the author as potential agent of subjugation within the act of literary creation'.⁶⁰ But the detailed construction of Ally's duplicity suggests that Kelman cannot logically have himself in mind, as McGuire suggests. McGuire might have a logical case if Ally can be read allegorically as representative of writers who do not write in 'their own language', and so who have, in Kelman's terms 'lost their culture'.⁶¹

Ally tries to talk Sammy's language, to close in on Sammy's position. He says to Sammy that he has been imprisoned, but he might be using this as a hook to get Sammy to trust him: it does not work as Sammy replies 'Dont con me' (*HL* 236). Ally clearly does know the processes and systems of the state machine as if he were an initiate, party to the inner workings of the enforcement of legislation. He provides both access to, and a slippery avoidance of, the material truths which are compressing and limiting Sammy's scope for manoeuvre. Aware of the legal process through bitter experience, Sammy still has no clear sense of his circumstances before Ally appears, magically, outside Doctor Logan's office to represent Sammy's case for him. Sammy bluntly, repeatedly rejects Ally's offer: Ally nevertheless manages to seize access to assist Sammy when he is most vulnerable, during an outburst of rage at the Doctor's intransigence. Ally is both insidious, and someone who claims Sammy's trust. He both speaks Sammy's language, and attempts to restrict and police it, telling Sammy to 'watch yer language; sorry, but every second word's fuck. If ye listen to me ye'll see I try to keep an eye on the auld words' (*HL* 238). Ally gives Sammy a rolling lesson in how and when to compromise, gives him advice on 'when ye bow and when ye scrape; when ye talk and when ye hold yer wheesht – ye follow me, when to shut the auld gub: all-important' (*HL* 239). Ally is ruthless in the pursuit of 'compen' for his clients, ruthless in

the pursuit of his one-third share of all eventual payments. He is ruthless too in the sheer volume of his language: Sammy is more dominated, word-for-word, in conversations with Ally than he is even with the police or the doctor.

Ally also defines 'them' (state functionaries) against 'us' (working classes? the accused? victims of the state?), but quickly slips into an admittance that his position is actually in between the two parties: 'The closer I get to courts and tribunals the more like them I get. Ask the wife and she'll tell ye. If ye listen ye wouldnay know the difference.' (*HL* 240). George Orwell's 1945 satire of political revolution *Animal Farm*, throws stark light on Ally's position: the pigs, leaders of the animals' revolution against the humans, eventually become indistinguishable from those against whom they rebelled.⁶² Ally is corrupted in his compromise, by his adoption of the language of state procedure, by his proximity to the state machine, by his collusion with it and by his occasional subservience to it. For Sammy, Ally's submission to the state is a sort of death; what Ally describes with pride – his negotiation of the language and culture of institutional power structures – is for Sammy exactly 'how they suffocate ye; all their fucking protocols and procedures, all designed to stop ye breathing' (*HL* 321). Language compromise is at the heart, it embodies, signifies everything in Ally's version of how to survive. This is clearly signalled in his story of a letter he wrote while in prison which, when published in a newspaper had 'SIC' beside his 'victomising' (*HL* 300). For Ally, this was his fault, and he should have known better, should have controlled his language more; for Kelman, the SIC is the tool of oppression, the tool of judgement, the place where violence happens, where authority stamps its boot on the language of the powerless. As Primo Levi says, the SIC asks how can we trust the author? It puts a sterilising distance of condemnation between us (writer and reader) and the fool quoted.⁶³ Ally spells his own 'victomhood' 'wrong': Kelman's point is that he is a victom of his own language use, because the power of standard language polices and denigrates and effectively criminalises non-standard use, just as the legal system defines and punishes 'non-standard' behaviour.

The critical question here is whether Sammy is right to eventually resolve himself to trust Ally albeit in a limited fashion, 'as far as it went' (*HL* 362). To begin an answer, we should turn to a linguistic feature of Kelman's work which I identified in the introduction to this book. Kelman, along with Tom Leonard, is committed to the

value of inconsistency as a linguistic policy in the rendition of authenticity in their textual practices. As I outlined in the introduction, some critics have identified this as a strength (e.g. Edwin Morgan) and some as a weakness (e.g. Mac Daly). But Kelman defends his right to orthographic and punctuational inconsistency in the face of publishers' homogenising standards just as he defends his right to the utilisation of oral Glaswegian working-class language practices in literature in the face of the primacy and normalisation in literary practice of the linguistic variety usually called Standard English. Relevant to this battleground is the rationale through which Ally begins to coerce Sammy into types of behaviour which the legal system will recognise as 'consistent'. Ally wants Sammy's behaviour to be consistent, because he wants it to be recognised as logical and coherent by the judging state machinery. Inconsistency is therefore rendered into a weakness, into unacceptability always with the inbuilt threat of being converted into guilt.

Tangential to Sammy's perceived inconsistency is Ally's assessment of the legal efficacy of the 'language' Sammy uses. Of course, Ally is not the only person to warn Sammy that his language is not appropriate: his word 'cunt' is not accepted for input into the police computer (*HL* 160); the Doctor finds Sammy's language 'offensive' (*HL* 225). But Ally is the most persistent and materially self-interested agent of all in the governing of Sammy's manner of communication. Ally speaks in an accent like Sammy's, but he also deploys at much greater length the language of 'the system'. But he is able, and willing, to see, assess and judge Sammy through the eyes of the state: he is, therefore, ultimately a compromiser, and someone who seeks behavioural, linguistic and cultural compromise from his client, so that the 'best' outcome can be achieved from any litigation. Ally asks that Sammy 'look at it from the big picture' (*HL* 239). In other words, and reading this suggestion through Kelman's understanding of traditional realist narrative forms, Sammy should take the omniscient perspective of the courts on his own situation, and so adopt the value system inherent in the makeup of that perspective.

If the client, Sammy, is obdurate in his initial assertion of independence from any need for representation at first, Ally is equally stubborn and relentless in pursuing this possible client. Ally's name as he gives it to Sammy (just 'Ally', with no surname) puns on a number of possible aspects to his multifaceted positions: he presents himself as an *allied* force in the service of Sammy, as someone with

whom Sammy ought really to have natural *allegiance*; Ally occupies the *alleys* of the legal labyrinth, knows passages through the backways and narrow thoroughfares of the legal system; he is a tough, embattled *alley* cat; and finally he presents himself as being in the business of *allaying* his clients' fears. These multiple meanings emerge slipperily from his name, and model the mode of loquacious effluence Ally adopts to drown out the doubts and fears of his clients. In Ally's floods of legalese, Sammy does indeed seem limited of awareness, narrow of experience and blunt of intent. By sheer volume of speech alone, Ally bullies Sammy's own very limited spoken responses into submission. Ally eloquently sets out how vulnerable Sammy is, thereby attempting to increase Sammy's dependence on Ally himself. And he occasionally adopts an understanding of the situation which seems diametrically opposed to Sammy's arch enemy, the Doctor. For example, Ally makes Sammy smile when he asserts that 'every case is unique in its own way' (*HL* 310), which is clearly opposite to the Doctor's own assertion (*HL* 222). Yet Ally still maintains an objectifying presentation of Sammy's position, and in fact is suggesting that although all cases are in fact unique, in court the safest presentation of a case is to make it seem 'unexceptional' and 'consistent'.

Ally's unwanted intrusion into Sammy's life means that he is a potent threat to the latter's dominant intention to be independent. The ease with which Ally inveigles his way into Sammy's world is further evidence of just how vulnerable the latter is. The prime example of Ally's ability to permeate Sammy's life is his utilisation of Sammy's fifteen-year-old son to take photos of his father's bruises: Sammy did not give Ally permission to contact Peter, nor did Ally even forewarn Sammy that this might be a possibility. Peter's visit to Sammy, and his help in his father's departure from Glasgow, close the novel. Inadvertently, Ally has ensured that Sammy has finally encountered someone he can fully trust, resolving one aspect of the novel's quest at least. In reply to Peter's questions, Sammy feels compelled to lie three times (*HL* 343, 353 and 354). This triple repetition is surely designed to echo and invert the Biblical Peter's triple betrayal of Christ (John, 13.38–18.27), and it balances perfectly with Sammy's trinity of wakings which precedes his blindness. In contrast with the Biblical Peter's lying for self-preservation, Sammy's lying twice about the cause of his blindness, and once about his relationship with Helen, seems to be designed to ensure Peter does

not worry excessively. The otherwise open conversation enabled by the mutual trust includes Sammy's account of the effects of prison on his youthful relationship with Peter's mother. Although Peter's friend Keith is also present, this is the first fully intimate conversation Sammy has had in the novel. Because of the book-length absence of any mutual trust and intimacy until the arrival of Peter, when it finally does arrive, it has a powerful emotional effect (*HL* 336). Peter asks to go with his father on his bus journey south; rebuffed, he helps his father prepare for and fund the journey, secretly giving Sammy all of his savings (*HL* 373). The final three words of the novel are 'out of sight': we leave the novel as Sammy leaves Glasgow and his son. Like so many of Kelman's protagonists, Sammy joins the Scottish diaspora, helped along by an intensely moving inversion of the usual provision of economic security from father to son. The final scenes with Peter prove the strength of Sammy's core code of honourable and loving trust, a paternal warmth mostly hidden until now.

Contexts 2: *The Glasgow Gospel* and the Booker

As discussed above, Sammy repeatedly refers to the police as 'sodjers'. Notably one English reviewer of *How late*. . . thought they were literal, military soldiers, in so doing denying Sammy the power of metaphor.⁶⁴ Kelman's phonetic spelling of 'sodjers' is consistent in the novel. This particular word can offer a micro-case-study for the status of the Glasgow accent. The word forges a bridge to another text, published in 1992, which is written in 'Glasgow's distinctive vernacular', or so its back-cover blurb claims. Scots dictionaries confirm that 'Sodger' is the legitimised standard spelling. In his Glaswegian-dialect translation of parts of the *New Testament*, Jamie Stuart uses this standard Scots spelling:

The sodgers forced Jesus tae cairry his ain cross tae the place o execution, Golgotha, oan the ootskirts o the city. But oan the wey, Jesus wis staggerin under the great weight o it an a man in the crowd, Simon fae Cyrene, wis made tae cairry the cross instead.

At Golgotha the sodgers nailed Jesus tae the cross, hoistin him up alang wi two robbers, wan oan either side.⁶⁵

Stuart's book is one of the most bizarre products in the resurgence of publishing confidence in the Glasgow dialect. If Kelman and

Leonard are partly responsible for that renewed confidence, then the behemoth of the Year of Culture also has a PR claim, convincing publishers as it did that Glasgow was a marketable commodity after 1990. *The Glasgow Gospel* is relevant otherwise for three reasons. Firstly, it shows how varied the politics of purpose for dialect writing can be across the Scottish publishing scene. Secondly, it shows how much Kelman's own dialect forms actually lack the phonetic or Scots density about which reviewers often complain. And thirdly, its prefatory pieces, all written in standard English, incredibly re-inscribe prejudices about the Glasgow tongue while supposedly celebrating its value: Hugh R. Wyllie's foreword calls Glasgow's language 'pithy and pungent patter'; in the introduction John Campbell says 'the Glaswegian can't be anonymous. His brashness makes that impossible.'⁶⁶ Jamie Stuart and his two supporters are self-avowedly Glaswegian, and foreground the 'pungent' 'brashness' – among whose pejorative synonyms we could choose 'overpowering aggression' – of the language their city speaks. Their characterisation indicates a pride in a minoritarian language which is insecure of its boasts in the face of the dominance of the major textual tongue, standard English. That the prefatory pieces have to be written in standard English in order to guarantee legitimacy for the project adds to the blighted self-positioning of Glaswegian dialect.

What defence can remain then, when that same 'overpowering aggression' is perceived by critics and reviewers of *How late. . . ?* If Glaswegians themselves characterise and anthropomorphise their own language this way, even as they purport to defend it, it is small wonder that when Kelman's novel generated widespread international attention through winning the 1994 Booker prize, it was roundly attacked for its language on many different fronts. But Kelman was long used to this. *The Busconductor Hines* was rejected by Richard Cobb, chairman of the Booker panel in 1984, because it was "written entirely in Glaswegian". "I found him very heavy-going and only read two chapters," confessed Cobb. "It was in dialect, like Burns's poems."⁶⁷ Ten years later, Simon Jenkins of *The Times* thought that *How late. . .* had a language neither 'Older Scottish, or Scots English, or Lallans, or any dialect of Burns's "Guid Scots Tongue" but instead, was 'merely Glaswegian Alcoholic With Remarkably Few Borrowings'.⁶⁸ For many English reviewers – especially those whose interest in Kelman was generated by the glitzy cultural gossiping of the Booker prize rather than by intrinsic literary pursuits – the

language of Kelman is brutalising, amoral, desensitised, difficult and unsophisticated: Jenkins compared reading his work with being accosted by a Glaswegian drunk on a train. Eric Jacobs concurred: the novel was 'like an encounter in a Glasgow pub when you are sober and the man who buttonholes you is seriously drunk. He jabs you in the chest, blows smoke in your face, dribbles his drink all over and rambles incoherently on.'⁶⁹ Another critic said the book should have been rejected by the Booker panel because his wife pointed out that it was not written in English.⁷⁰ The Leader in the *Daily Telegraph* claimed that, together with Conservative Cabinet Minister Michael Heseltine punning on the word 'balls', the novel's success indicated a worrying 'pollution of the language which forms an essential part of our culture.'⁷¹ The Leader in *The Times* was happier that the novel had won because of the 'factitious row' that ensued, but summarised it as a 'rambling monologue of Glaswegian low life, narrated by the sort of lumpenproletarian Scottish drunk one might cross Sauchiehall Street to avoid'.⁷² Max Davidson dismissed the novel as 'the ravings of a Glaswegian drunk' and declared that its prize-winning was not the product of 'literary preference, but guilt.'⁷³ Of course, among the furore over the novel, Kelman had many defenders. Robert Crawford predicted that negative critical response would be produced by a 'reductive stereotype of the Scottish writer as working-class bruiser',⁷⁴ and he was right. Ian Bell thought the 'blindness of so many commentators to the book's deep humanity is a terrible indictment of their limitations in sympathy and understanding'.⁷⁵ But even positive reviewers like David Buckley heard 'the fierce rhythms of Glasgow vernacular',⁷⁶ a characterisation not far removed from the 'overpowering aggression' to which the prefatory comments to *The Glasgow Gospel* concede. Years later, the legacy of the initial uproar over the language of the novel continues to distort understanding of Kelman's work: writing in 2000, Susan Taylor Chehak contends that the novel 'employs the "ordinary" language of modern Scottish thugs, complete with just about every slang word that you've ever heard, and then some.'⁷⁷

Many issues clashed when Kelman won the Booker, and because the prize has such cultural cachet, the novel has been the focus of a lot of serious and extended criticism too. Anxieties over literariness, national language and nationality (both Englishness and Scottishness), morality and class were to the fore. Even if two of the judges, Alastair Niven and Alan Taylor, were Scottish, the elevation of Kelman's novel

to a pedestal of London-based establishment esteem exposed deep-seated concerns not just about the novel as a piece of fiction, but also about the historical realities of its supposed origins. To give any status to these origins would be to damage the nature, value and purpose of 'culture'. By far the most extreme version of this perception was offered by Gerald Warner:

That the novels which are the main contenders for the prize should be characterised respectively by expletives and anal sex speaks volumes about the values of 'serious' literature today. 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.⁷⁸

Warner's article emerged at the time of the announcement of the shortlist of finalists for the prize. Warner's moral fibre was also rubbed up the wrong way by the shortlisting of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Folding Star*, which contained offensive 'limp-wristed attractions' and which, if it won the prize, would become 'endorsement of sodomy as an eligible "lifestyle"'. Warner makes explicit here that he wishes not only such literature to remain beneath the interest of culture as he defines it, but the *real* people, milieu and moralities Kelman and Hollinghurst are variously concerned with too. They are to be deliberately ignored because they are beneath the processes and interests of societal valuation and cultural acknowledgement. Warner's understanding of the management of culture is bleakly hierarchical and blankly élitist (to use a word to which Kelman often has recourse): it determines that some better people own, maintain and deserve the benefits of culture, and that some worse people do not, should not and cannot. Certain literatures and certain peoples are not as 'cultured' as Warner and his world, indeed they are not 'cultured' at all. Kelman predicted it all, in 1988:

Writers have to develop the habit of relying on themselves. It's as if there's a massive KEEP OUT sign hoisted above every area of literature. This is an obvious effect of the hopeless elitism referred to earlier. But there are other reasons. The very idea of literary art as something alive

and lurking within reach of ordinary women and men is not necessarily the sort of idea those who control the power in society will welcome with open arms. It is naive to expect otherwise. Literature is nothing when it isn't being dangerous in some way or another and those in positions of power will always be suspicious of anything that could conceivably affect their security.⁷⁹

Warner's article and the many others which came close to it in intention, raised that 'KEEP OUT' sign high, daubed in brash Tory blue English letters, against which Kelman was compelled to kick. Kelman gave varying reports as to why he did not attend the Booker award ceremony in 1989 when *A Disaffection* was shortlisted: either he 'had a previous engagement, teaching an evening class',⁸⁰ or he could not afford the price of travel to London, nor the required formal dinner jacket, a material reality the organizers could not comprehend, according to Kelman.⁸¹ In 1994, however, he did attend, attempted to deliver his winner's speech, and was cut off after thirty seconds. His speech was published in various newspapers the same week of the ceremony. Kelman was as forthright as Warner:

A couple of weeks ago a feature writer for a quality newspaper suggested that the use of the term 'culture' was inappropriate in relation to my work, that the characters peopling my pages were 'preculture' or was it 'primeval'? This was explicit, generally it isn't. But, as Tom Leonard pointed out more than 20 years ago, the gist of the argument amounts to the following, that vernaculars, patois, slangs, dialects, gutter-languages might well have a place in the realms of comedy (and the frequent references to Billy Connolly or Rab C Nesbitt substantiate this) but they are inferior linguistic forms and have no place in literature. And a priori any writer who engages in literature of such so-called language is not really engaged in literature at all. It's common to find well meaning critics suffering the same burden, while they strive to be kind they still cannot bring themselves to operate within a literary perspective; not only do they approach the work as though it were an oral text, they somehow assume it to be a literal transcription of recorded speech.

This sort of prejudice, in one guise or another, has been around for a very long time and for the sake of clarity we are better employing the contemporary label, which is racism. A fine line can exist between elitism and racism and on matters concerning language and culture the distinction can sometimes cease to exist altogether.⁸²

Further on Kelman announces his allegiance to a 'movement, towards decolonisation and self determination'. This self determination is

postcolonial and one that sees the literary establishment, including the Booker prize process itself, as one which inherently tries to appropriate and so negate the effect of anything that is dissident, or outwith its remit. So, logically, at the supreme moment of public inclusion of Kelman within the contemporary British canon – at the moment of his sanctification as an author by an establishment which deems his work worthy of interest – he rejects the foundation and hierarchies of capitalising prize culture itself; he takes the money, but attacks the commodifying and judging process which grants it. Logically perhaps, one of the judges, Julia Neuberger, rejected Kelman, saying that his winning of the prize was a ‘disgrace’.⁸³ The book likewise revealed itself to be resistant to absorption into the capitalist current: the usually highly fertile boost to sales generated by winning the prize was widely perceived not to have happened in the case of *How late. . .*,⁸⁴ though the actual success was evident in terms of sales at least according to Kelman’s publisher, who, in February 1995, claimed that the novel ‘sold 30,809 copies since winning the Booker prize on October 11, 1994, bringing total sales to 41,165. It entered the *Sunday Times* bestseller list in May, and went to number 2 on October 23’.⁸⁵ The perception of its poor marketability was generated by a widespread sense of the novel’s lack of literary worth (led in kind by the Director of Dillons who did not want his stores to stock it⁸⁶); this moralising conjecture, combined with the impatience of business, seems to have blinded some to its real success in terms of actual sales.

There is a wider critical problem here, which has dogged the writing of this book, which arguably dogs all criticism of Kelman. Kelman’s version of criticism is that it always seeks to appropriate that which it wants to control and manage. Criticism therefore has a colonising structure of relation to the texts or subjects it discusses: it is territorially aggressive, asserting its language and value systems as ways of understanding the other; and it is linguistically discriminatory, because it maintains itself in a language which keeps that same other out. If the relationship between a standard-speaking omniscient narrator and regionally or class-accented character is inherently reproductive of a social hierarchy of power which disenfranchises those who do not speak the standard and empowers those who do, then what of the relationship between critical language and Kelman’s texts? At times I have raised the issue of the appropriateness of terms critics use to discuss both Kelman’s world and working-class life and

culture in general, especially where the vocabulary seems to be unnecessarily remote from the language of the culture being described, explained and/or accounted for, and especially where the critical language seems implicitly to effect a judgement or condemnation of characters, contexts, actions and words. But my own critical language, the language you are reading, is standard English, with the occasional lapse into the abstruse and academic lexis of someone desperate both to impress, and to be as accurate as possible. I have tried to inflect my critical methodology self-reflexively at times (as I am doing now), as a direct response to the way in which Kelman constructs the relationship between his own work, and critical work, as he describes it, reported in interview as follows:

‘A lot of the ritualistic behaviour that goes on in the literary establishment, it’s charades, really. It’s a form of colonization, or a form of imperialism, and one of the effects of that is colonization.’

Write a book, he says, on whatever subject you choose – South Africa, Aids, drugs, someone dying of asbestos disease – and you will be regarded as part of the establishment, as one of the perpetrators of the crimes. ‘Their act of fellowship with the writer is a kind of appropriation, a method of extending domination over the subject, as if they also owned the experience of the novel. It’s a kind of continuing disenfranchisement.’⁸⁷

If Kelman is right, the critic is caught in a double bind: a monograph like the one you are reading is a product of a system of professionalised academic life in cahoots with an academic press, produced through research leave partly funded by a government body. In that, its publication could be read as a ‘ritualistic’ material product of a culture industry and educational establishment, even if its commitment to the subject of study is indeed a sort of ‘fellowship’, even if it respects and considers the politics and processes of its own relationship to its subject. With this model to hand, all criticism is an act of ‘appropriation’ and ‘domination’: there is simply, and sadly, no way out. This very sentence disenfranchises Kelman’s subject matter, because it attempts to explain and so control his ideas; his position would be that the standard language of this book is commonly regarded as edifying, whereas the discourse of working-class culture is relegated by the very act of critical interpretation, explanation and accounting. Elsewhere Kelman has defined the creative against the critical – as if the two were mutually and morally exclusive absolutes.⁸⁸

The model suggests that creativity should always be genuine and sincere, honest and pure of intention; criticism on the other hand is nefarious and double-dealing, corrupting and territorial. The 'wider process, or movement, towards decolonisation and self determination' which Kelman reads his work into, through his understanding of criticism, is denied that same self-determination through an encroaching colonisation by criticism. The only way out of this relationship is critical silence.

Notes

- 1 The play was re-written for a stage production at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in 1990 (*HB* 102–80).
- 2 The most detailed investigation, and a source of the letters Kelman uses for his play is *The Scottish Insurrection of 1820*, Peter Berresford Ellis and Seumas Mac A'Ghobhainn, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2001). Their claim that the uprising was driven by a nationalist imperative does not convince other historians, for example, W. Hamish Fraser, *Conflict and Class: Scottish Workers, 1700–1838* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1988), 109–13.
- 3 T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560–1830* (London: Fontana Press, 1969), 419. Although Hardie and Baird are not mentioned by name, Smout does offer an extended account of the 'Radical War' of 1820 and credits it as the start of 'proletarian'-led workers' reform movements.
- 4 William Stewart, *Fighters for Freedom in Scotland: The Days of Baird and Hardie* (London: Independent Labour Party, 1908), 6.
- 5 Iain Mclean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983), 1.
- 6 Alasdair Gray, *Lanark* [1981] (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), 244.
- 7 William Stewart, *Fighters for Freedom in Scotland*, 2nd edn (Glasgow: Reformers' Bookstall, 1920).
- 8 Fraser, *Conflict and Class*, 169.
- 9 From Kelman's introduction to Hugh Savage, *Born up a Close: Memoirs of a Brighton Boy* (Glendareul: Argyll Publishing, 2006), 19. This introduction is Kelman's most substantial historical account of socialist activism in twentieth-century Glasgow.
- 10 Tom Leonard, *Reports from the Present. Selected Work: 1982–94* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 212–13, Leonard's italics.
- 11 See Kelman, 'Art and Subsidy, and the Continuing Politics of Culture City', *SRA*, 27–36. See also Kelman's introduction to Savage, *Born up a Close*, 9–16. For succinct accounts of the controversies of 1990 and 1994, see Moira Burgess, *Imagine a City: Glasgow in Fiction* (Glendareul:

- Argyll Publishing, 1998), 297–311 and Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 7–11.
- 12 Quoted in David Kemp, *Glasgow 1990: The True Story Behind the Hype* (Gartocharn: Famedram, 1990), 31.
- 13 For example, in June 2002 Kelman spoke at a rally on Glasgow Green, organised by the Scottish Socialist Party, designed to offer an alternative republican critique of official celebrations of the Queen's jubilee. See Kay Jardine, 'Sheridan and his citizens hold an alternative party', *Herald*, 4 June 2002, 2. According to Graeme Esson, 'as Kelman reminded the crowd, [Glasgow Green] has a rich history of left-wing gatherings down the decades', 'A city divided over the Jubilee', *BBC Scotland News Online*, 3 June 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/2023059.stm> (accessed 8/08/2006).
- 14 For council leader Pat Lally's defence of both the 'Elspeth King Affair' and the selling of Glasgow Green, see Pat Lally, with Neil Baxter, *Lazarus Only Done it Once: The Story of My Lives* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 83–9.
- 15 Kemp, *Glasgow 1990*, 32.
- 16 Lally, *Lazarus Only Done it Once*, 93–5.
- 17 Lally, *Lazarus Only Done it Once*, 67.
- 18 Savage, *Born Up a Close*, 9.
- 19 Carl MacDougall (ed.), *Glasgow's Glasgow: The Words and the Stones* (Glasgow: The Words and the Stones, 1990), 14. Ironically enough, this book was funded by Glasgow District Council as part of 'Glasgow 1990: Cultural Capital of Europe'. For a withering critique of the £3.5 million publicly funded exhibition of which this publication was a part, see Kemp, *Glasgow 1990*.
- 20 See Seán Damer, *Glasgow: Going for a Song* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990) and Mark Boyle and George Hughes, 'The Politics of the Representation of "The Real": Discourses from the Left on Glasgow's Role as European City of Culture, 1990,' *Area*, 23 (1991), 217–28.
- 21 Lally, *Lazarus Only Done it Once*, 67.
- 22 Quoted in Kemp, *Glasgow 1990*, 19.
- 23 Lally, *Lazarus Only Done it Once*, 87 and 91.
- 24 Dominic D'Angelo, Joseph Farrell et al, *The 1990 Story: Glasgow Cultural Capital of Europe* (Glasgow: Glasgow City Council, 1992), 34.
- 25 William Clark, 'Remembering Hugh Savage and Workers City', in Savage, *Born up a Close*, 251.
- 26 See also Farquhar McLay (ed.), *Workers City: The Real Glasgow Stands Up* (Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 1988), 1–4.
- 27 Robert F. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 217.
- 28 See Olga Wojtas, 'Shrugging off the guru's mantle', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 26 January 1990, 15.

- 29 Willy Maley, 'Denizens, Citizens, Tourists, and Others: Marginality and Mobility in the Writings of James Kelman and Irvine Welsh', in David Bell and Azzedine Haddour (eds), *City Visions* (Harlow: Pearson, 2000), 60.
- 30 Michael Gardiner, 'James Kelman interviewed', *Scottish Studies Review*, 5:1 (2004), 106.
- 31 Maley, 'Denizens, Citizens, Tourists', 66.
- 32 Nancy Armstrong, 'The Fiction of Bourgeois Morality and the Paradox of Individualism', in Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel. Vol. 2: Forms and Themes* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 387.
- 33 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 148.
- 34 Willy Maley, 'Swearing Blind: Kelman and the Curse of the Working Classes', *Edinburgh Review*, 95 (1996), 107.
- 35 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (Moscow, 1961), 105, quoted in Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 194.
- 36 Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'New Novel, New Man' [1961] in '*Snapshots*' and '*Towards a New Novel*', trans. Barbara Wright (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965), 139.
- 37 Albert Camus, *The Outsider* [1942], trans. Joseph Laredo (London: Penguin, 1983), 100.
- 38 Uwe Zagratzki, "'Blues Fell This Morning" – James Kelman's Scottish Literature and Afro-American Music', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 27:1 (2000), 105–17.
- 39 Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 102. For another Bakhtinian analysis, see J. C. Bittenbender, 'Silence, Censorship, and the Voices of Skaz in the Fiction of James Kelman', *Bucknell Review*, 43:2 (2000), 150–65.
- 40 Duncan McLean, *Lone Star Swing: On the Trail of Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997).
- 41 Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 20.
- 42 See Ken Cockburn and Alec Finlay (eds), *The Order of Things: An Anthology of Scottish Sound, Pattern and Concrete Poems* (Edinburgh: Pocketbooks, 2001).
- 43 Adam Mars-Jones, Review of *HL*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 April 1994, 20.
- 44 David Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 116.
- 45 Alex La Guma, *Time of the Butcherbird* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1979), 11. See Kelman's essay on La Guma (*AJS* 95–102).
- 46 Prince Vasili characterises Kutuzov as follows: 'He can't ride a horse, he falls asleep at meetings, and he's completely immoral! He earned a marvellous reputation in Bucharest! Never mind his qualities as a general, at a time like this how can we appoint a man who's on his last legs and

- blind? Yes, blind! What a splendid idea – a blind general! He can't see a thing. All right for a spot of blind-man's bluff! . . .', Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* [1863–69], trans. Anthony Briggs (London: Penguin, 2005), 785.
- 47 Akaky Akakievich leaves the living world with the following summary: 'So vanished and disappeared for ever a human being whom no one ever thought of protecting, who was dear to no one, in whom no one was in the least interested . . .', Nikolai Gogol, *The Overcoat* [1842], trans. Ronald Wilks (London: Penguin, 1972), 102.
- 48 Gogol, *Overcoat*, 72.
- 49 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* [1955], in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 13.
- 50 Ian A. Bell, 'Empty Intensifiers: Kelman Wins "The Booker" (At Last)', *New Welsh Review*, 27 (Winter 1994–95), 14.
- 51 Mary McGlynn, "'Middle-Class Wankers" and Working-Class Texts: The Critics and James Kelman', *Contemporary Literature*, 43:1 (Spring 2002), 61.
- 52 For a comparative analysis of Zola and Kelman, see Graeme MacDonald, 'Writing Claustrophobia: Zola and Kelman', *Bulletin of the Émile Zola Society*, 13 (1996), 9–20.
- 53 Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 102.
- 54 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* [1959] in *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Calder, 1994), 293.
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- 56 Thanks to Graeme MacDonald for making this point to me in 1995.
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- 58 David Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 118.
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- 63 Primo Levi, 'Sic!', in *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 93–4.
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- 65 Jamie Stuart, *The Glasgow Gospel* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1992), 49.
- 66 Stuart, *The Glasgow Gospel*, vii and ix.
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- 69 Jacobs, 'Eyeless and legless', 33–4.
- 70 Miles Kington, 'Revealed: how the Booker changed Cheltenham', *Independent*, 17 October 1994, 15.
- 71 [Hastings, Max?], [Leader:] 'Polluting the language', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 October 1994, 26.
- 72 [Stothard, Peter?], [Leader:] 'Traditional bookmanism', *The Times*, 12 October 1994, 19.
- 73 Max Davidson, 'Critic's view', *Daily Telegraph*, 13 October 1994, 9.
- 74 Robert Crawford, 'Northern exposure', *Sunday Times*, 17 April 1994, 8.
- 75 Bell, 'Empty Intensifiers', 14.
- 76 David Buckley, Review of *HL*, *Observer*, 'Review', 3 April 1994, 19.
- 77 Susan Taylor Chehak, *Don Quixote Meets the Mob: The Craft of Fiction and the Art of Life* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2000), 234.
- 78 Gerald Warner, 'Time for a disaffection from literary slumming', *Sunday Times*, 25 September 1994, 8.
- 79 James Kelman (ed.), *An East End Anthology* (Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 1988), 2.
- 80 Julia Llewellyn Smith, 'The prize will be useful. I'm skint', *The Times*, 13 October 1994, 17.
- 81 Sue Wilson, 'Battling on', *The List*, 25 March–7 April, 1994, 9.
- 82 See for example: 'Elitist slurs are racism by another name', *Scotland On Sunday* 'Supplement', 16 October 1994, 2; 'The speech he had no time to make at the Booker ceremony', *Sunday Times*, 16 October 1994, 21; 'Vernacular', *Brick: A Literary Journal*, 51 (Winter 1995), 68–9.
- 83 Dalya Alberge, 'Booker judge says winner is disgrace', *The Times*, 12 October 1994, 1.
- 84 See for example: Gillian Bowditch, 'Glasgow disowns prize novel', *The Times*, 13 October 1994, 2; Marianne Macdonald, 'Bookshops bemoan "Mogadon" Booker', *Independent*, 2 October, 1994, 1.
- 85 John Potter (Managing Director, Secker & Warburg), Letter, *Sunday Times*, 19 February 1995, 2. A week later, bookshop manager Cynthia Reavell asked 'whether the 30,000 copies sold are actually copies bought by individuals from the bookshops; or does this impressive figure represent copies subscribed in most cases on a sale-or-return basis by the book trade?' Her question went unanswered. *Sunday Times*, 26 February 1995, 2.
- 86 Gardiner, 'James Kelman interviewed', *Scottish Studies Review*, 5:1 (Spring 2004), 109.
- 87 Ian Bell, 'Four letter truths', *Observer*, 'Review', 27 March 1994, 16.
- 88 *An East End Anthology*, ed. Kelman, 1–2. Rob Pope suggests otherwise: 'the relation between "criticism" and "creativity" . . . is better conceived as a *connection* rather than a *distinction*, reciprocally defining rather than mutually exclusive', in *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), xviii (Pope's italics).