

# Études britanniques contemporaines

Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines

56 | 2019

“Revolutions”

Hors thème/*Miscellanea*

---

## Interior Monologue as Social Critique in James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994)

ANNA TRAVIS

<https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.6857>

---

### Abstracts

English Français

James Kelman's use of interior monologue, in his novel *How Late It Was, How Late*, portrays a consciousness enacting Althusser's modern state paradox: a contradiction within the subject between the ideology of free subjectivity and the reality of subjection. Protagonist Sammy Samuel displays this contradiction when readers are thrown into his private voice of 'free' subjectivity, railing against the voices of social subjection. His interior monologue becomes a stoic core and autonomous realm, a direct, free-form inner voice, reacting to the sensory disorientation of blindness and confronting bureaucratic voices who refuse to 'officially' recognize his sight loss. Interior monologue potentially gives voice to oppressed subjects, but something more commanding is at work here. The 'inner space' in this fiction constructs a terrain for the dialectics of authenticity to fully inhabit. Sammy's autonomy, his motivation by rational principle, lies in his rejection of the welfare system, to whom he is a phase in a bureaucratic process. His interior monologue becomes an 'authentic' truth, addressed to the self in an idiolect that appears uncontaminated by social obligation or public expression.

L'utilisation par James Kelman du monologue intérieur, dans son roman *How Late It Was, How Late*, dépeint une conscience qui met en scène le paradoxe de l'état moderne mis au jour par Althusser : une contradiction entre l'idéologie de la subjectivité libre et la réalité de la soumission. Le protagoniste Sammy Samuel montre cette contradiction quand les lecteurs sont jetés dans sa voix personnelle, dominée par une subjectivité « libre », s'élevant contre les voix de la soumission sociale. Son monologue intérieur devient un noyau stoïque et autonome, une voix intérieure directe et libre, réagissant à la désorientation sensorielle de la cécité et confrontant les voix bureaucratiques qui refusent de reconnaître « officiellement » sa perte de vue. Le monologue intérieur donne potentiellement la parole aux sujets opprimés, mais quelque chose de plus imposant est à l'œuvre ici. L'« espace intérieur » de cette fiction construit un terrain sur lequel la dialectique de l'authenticité peut s'établir pleinement. L'autonomie de Sammy, sa motivation selon un principe rationnel, réside dans son rejet du système d'aide sociale, pour qui il n'est

qu'une phase dans un processus bureaucratique. Son monologue intérieur devient une vérité « authentique », adressée à soi-même dans un idiolecte qui apparaît comme non contaminé par une obligation sociale ou une expression publique.

---

## Index terms

**Mots-clés :** Althusser, authenticité, autonomie, bureaucratie, Kelman, monologue intérieur, stoïcisme, voix intérieure

**Keywords:** Althusser, authenticity, autonomy, bureaucracy, inner voice, interior monologue, Kelman, stoicism

---

## Full text

‘Just a drunken Scotsman railing against bureaucracy.’<sup>1</sup>

# Introduction

- 1 James Kelman's 1994 novel *How Late It Was, How Late* (*HL*) is an exemplar of how the phenomenon of authenticity is negotiated in later twentieth-century works of fiction, treated as a heroic quality embodied in a human subject defined and embattled by their social context. Threads of existential ontology can be traced in the protagonist's outlook within this late twentieth-century work, but a new strain of stoic inner voice, foregrounding authenticity as an evaluative concept—in relation to power external structures—is in evidence. The internal self, at this moment in the novel's history, is shown to still act as an affective site of sincerity, the place where an individual attempt to recover an innate unity, but one which society more explicitly jeopardises.
- 2 Centering on James Kelman's evocation of 'inner' voice, this paper will reveal possibilities of social critique in this writer's deployment of the interior monologue mode of narration. I will apply Louis Althusser's theory of 'Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)' and 'interpellation', set out in his *Lenin and Philosophy* essays of 1970, to the power struggle evident in the narrative of *HL*, thereby showing this form's capacity to expose power relations and social mechanics. In this novel's instance, these mechanisms are the welfare and legal ISAs and their suggested function of ensuring individuals are complicit in their subjection. On first impressions, it would appear perverse to use interior monologue as a form attempting to bear out the full implications of Althusser's theories of interpellation; that there is no inherent meaning in the individual, only subjects who exist when they are 'hailed' by ideology. The implied shrunken notion of agency would suggest these dynamics are best exposed in the flattening out of the subject in the social sphere, or in their external relations or conversations. My analysis however will elucidate the potentials of interior monologue to act as social critique and demonstrate the nature of this novel's break from realist tradition to achieve this.
- 3 Literary scholarship on Kelman has to date mainly situated his work within and against the tradition of Scottish working-class realism and existentialist models of interiority. This article however investigates how Kelman's style of interior monologue, with its emphasis on locution, attempts to create a newly detached imaginative territory and 'authentic' outcast voice, not in the modernist sense of a Virginia Woolf fictional stylistics that can function as a phenomenology of mind. Instead, I argue Kelman is part of a late twentieth-century continuation of modernist fiction that celebrates language's potential sense of freedom, through an undermining of conventional semantics and a focus on the texture of writing itself. *How Late's* aesthetics of dissolution does not simply wrestle with language's inability to represent anything however, a lament of many modernist characters, but conversely weaponizes language as social critique.
- 4 There is a philosophical legacy of conflicted, political subjectivity at the centre of the novel since its inception. Marshall Berman's historical characterisation of authenticity

in 18th-century France, authenticity is as an ideal that 'served as a trenchant critical tool against the traditional social structure which [...] ascribed rigid class identities, and forced [individuals] to act out the roles of personae in a ritual drama' (Berman 76). Other cultural theorists have suggested sincerity at this point in history becomes inseparable from 'an internal, inherent passion or affective charge' and both 'a mode of thinking and a state of the body' (James 259). The model of authenticity in both cases appears to emerge from the individual's attempt to recover an innate unity of self, which conventional society and privilege attempts to eradicate. Sammy Samuels, the protagonist of *HL*, exhibits a stoicism that highlights the extent of the inwardness of his expressions of sincerity, his affective charge revealed in his mode of thinking is necessarily invisible to the manipulative social agents that attempt to coerce him. 'It's you. They don't change but you have to. That's the fucking crack. It's back to yerself. So okay' (Kelman 324).

5 Much Kelman scholarship has centered on his experiments with language, in particular his 'phonetic orthography' (Craig 102) which, I argue, allows for a construction of subjectivity that expresses discontent towards the social inequalities of 1990s Britain. Hames has defended Kelman's monologue stylistics in respect to the 'real language of people' he attempts to recreate, against accusations of Romanticism, placing the author instead in a modernist tradition of making a poetic speech and 'double register of estrangement' encouraging the reader to perceive the verbal anew (Hames 94). What has not been noted in criticism of Kelman's work however is that, rather than producing an interior monologue which performs a philosophical dismantling of the self as a coherent self-contained subjectivity, as with Beckett's earlier protagonists in *Molloy* (1952) for instance, *HL* presents a stark return to literary presentations of the individual struggling to attain authenticity, whilst fatally determined by their social context.

6 A delimiting of the often loosely defined term stream-of-consciousness is necessary here, as is its distinction from interior monologue and the two forms common co-occurrence. My analysis draws upon William Tay's contrast of interior monologue as a 'chiefly syntactic arrangement' with stream-of-consciousness, defined more broadly as 'an ordering principle'.<sup>2</sup> In this sense stream-of-consciousness prose can be seen as the portrayal of the mind engaged in an 'ordinary' flow of associations, as distinct from 'purposeful' thinking. Four of Chatman's five key features of interior monologue are also used as points of investigation, in portrayals of inner self, within my case study novel, these are:

1. The character's self-reference, if any, is first person
2. The current discourse-moment is the same as the story moment [...]
3. The language-idiom, diction, word-and syntactic-choice-are identifiably those of the character, whether or not a narrator elsewhere intervenes.
4. Allusions to anything in the character's experience are made with no more explanation than would be needed in his own thinking.

7 Features 1 and 2 underlie discussions of Kelman's existentialist foregrounding of experience relayed in the present tense. Features 3 and 4 are key to the novel's exploration of character autonomy.

8 Sammy expresses what Webb Keane defined as a Protestant vision of the authentic self 'The subject [...] seeks to act as the source of its own authority'. In Protestantism, this source 'cannot be the physical body, material goods, or social standing, but a character and condition identified with its own interiority' (Keane 74). Sincerity becomes an account of how the individual's interiority is the chief site of that which might elude political coercion' (Keane 88). Late twentieth-century interior monologue continues to express these earlier models of authentic interiority but in a literary mode that articulates more explicitly class-based social critique. This takes the form of a creative challenge or riposte to the officially prescribed role of working-class individuals within post-war British society in *HL*. The novel's use of interior monologue portrays a consciousness enacting Althusser's modern state paradox, the creation of contradictory subjects, conflicted between the ideology of free subjectivity and the reality of

subjection. Sammy displays this contradiction when readers are thrown into his private voice of free subjectivity, railing against voices enacting his social subjection.

- 9 Interior monologue in this novel becomes a stoic centre of identity, an attempt to create a 'purely' autonomous realm. This symbolic territory is achieved by placing a direct, interior monologue (DIM) voice centre stage, reacting to the sensory disorientation of sudden blindness (inflicted by police), and confronting the ritualized, bureaucratic voices of public sector workers who refuse to 'officially' recognize his loss of sight.

## Existentialist Interiority

- 10 Jean-Paul Sartre's earlier twentieth-century novels, *Nausea* (1938) in particular, embody the literary philosophical assertion that authenticity is a state of being, residing in an interior self that struggles against pressures of social appropriation and negotiation. Sammy wakes into a state of sensory disorder at the opening of the novel. This *in medias res* beginning provides no contextualisation, or guidance to orient the reader: 'Ye wake in a corner... 'And oh Christ his back was sore' (Kelman 1). The immediacy of the DIM here magnifies the fact that social systems have become all pervasive yet useless in the face of the harsh onslaught of the subject's present. Kelman communicates such themes through the monologist's illusion of self-communication, often expressing a radicalism allied to existentialist views. The existentialist version of subjectivity has at its core a complete rejection of human agency as determined by prior conditioning. Sammy and Sartre view humans as dauntingly free: '[when an individual] *exercises freedom* rather than being determined by the prevailing public tastes and standards then he lives an authentic existence' (Sartre 22). 'His first free day as a blind man. A new beginning and all that shite. There were things to do and it was down to him to do them. Naybody else would' (Kelman 66). As in *Nausea*, the interior monologues of this central character reveal a battle for freedom from an imposed social order which holds prejudices regarding its citizen's free will. However, despite this inbuilt sense of resistance, the protagonist of *HL* is often content in his perceived failures 'He had aye been a bit stupid' (Kelman 15).

- 11 At the opening of the novel the reader jumps straight into the narrated situation with no context, putting Sammy's blindness and inner voice centre stage. Sammy's disorientation is conveyed 'live', the reader gaining a running commentary on his physical state discovering simultaneously with the protagonist the extent of his injuries. This literary technique evokes Nicoll's description of existentialist literature as using a sense of 'thrownness', where we find ourselves, without the comfort of explanation, suddenly within a situation (Nicoll 125): 'then closing the eye and putting his finger on the lid, then opening it and closing it and for fuck sake man, he couldnay see nothing' (Kelman 10). The immediacy of the narration here magnifies the fact that the social structures of the protagonist's setting are useless in the face of the harsh onslaught of the subject's present.

## Sammy Versus the DSS and Central Medical

- 12 Prior to the late 1960's ideology, in Althusser's view, was a matter of the unconscious and an inescapable dimension of existence for all classes. But with his publication of *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* in 1970, Althusser dramatically changed his position on Marx's conception of ideology. While he still viewed ideology as inescapable, he came to argue it was realised in real actions. Within an influential essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1969), he began to argue against traditional interpretations of Marx as an economic determinist, instead suggesting he assigns a 'quasi-autonomous' role to law and ideology in his later writings.

- 13 The consciousness at the centre of *HL* embodies Althusser's vision of the contradictory human subject the state creates. For Althusser the ideological state apparatus creates individuals conflicted between the 'ideology of themselves as having free agency and the reality of their subjection' (Althusser 181). Sammy highlights this contradiction, his internal voice of free subjectivity in contradiction to the evident voices of social authority. In Althusser's theory of interpellation human beings are considered to be independent with their own original thoughts, feelings and actions. For Althusser, the manner in which societies' system of relations between different practises interact with each other means that these practices and actions constitute the individual.
- 14 The idea of a free and self-defining individual for Althusser is an ideological concept, exhibited by Sammy early on 'His first free day as a blind man' (Kelman 66). Humans are called into being as the subjects of ideology. Ideology, in this view, not only supports false beliefs in one's individuality, but strips individuals of freedoms, by making obedience and subjugation part of their existence and making them complicit in their subjection: 'It was his own fucking stupid fault anyway man know what I mean ye blab, ye just blab' (Kelman 99). Sammy's blindness is also used by Kelman to highlight his intense concern with 'the extent to which one is rendered visible or invisible by ideology' (Sharkey 24) 'They chucked him his stuff and went about their business like he wasnay there, a mere formality, a dod of shite.' (Kelman 32)
- 15 Althusser's theories of interpellation suggest there is no inherent meaning in the individual, only subjects who exist when they are 'hailed' by ideology. The implied shrunken notion of agency here would suggest these dynamics are best exposed in representations of the social sphere. However, Althusser's notion of interpellation is an attempt to explain the process of how ideas enter consciousness and become concepts we believe are our own. This theory also attempts to explain how this process is initiated by the interests of dominant forces within an exploitative social dynamic. If we take Althusser's definition of interpellation as this process in which we encounter our culture's values and internalise them, it becomes clear how the interior monologue form can be a prime literary site for them to be excavated and exposed. As Zizêk conceives of interpellation in 1989, the subject becomes nothing but a gap in the social structure, the fissure between the real and its impossible symbolization. Interior monologue here becomes an aesthetic site where this 'causality that produces a series of effects in the symbolic reality of its subject' can be revealed (Zizêk 163). The inner conversation reveals the process of interpellation by showing a character presenting ideas as truths to themselves, then exposing these truths to a social reality that conflicts violently with them, and in whose interests they need to be perpetuated, as ideologies operating within individual complicit subjects.
- 16 For Althusser, interpellation, is a process by which we encounter our culture's values and internalise them in the act of being addressed or initiated into a discussion. In this formulation ideologies address people and offer them a particular identity. Roles are assigned to us by culture as 'ideology has the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects' (Althusser 56). This invisible process of consensus can be represented in the silent communion with the self that interior monologue attempts to evoke. Sammy's stoic philosophies are defiantly his, and he presents them as the only logical way for him to survive. A feature of interiority that adds to Sammy's sense of agency and self-definition however, in contradiction with Althusser's idea of the individual, are his descriptions of apperception; the act or process of the mind being conscious of its own consciousness. 'Edging back into awareness, of where ye are: here, slumped in this corner, with these thoughts filling ye' (Kelman 1).
- 17 Our performance of our relation to others and to social institutions that instantiates us as subjects is also apposite to the novel's treatment of Sammy's self-perceived masculine traits and to Judith Butler's understanding of performativity. The role assignment in labour, in particular physical, versus clerical and non-physical work, has played a significant role in constructing notions of working-class masculinity and subjectivity in twentieth-century fiction. This theme endures in Sammy when he muses 'The building trade wasnay a bad job then [...] Sammy liked looking about and watching the office lassies and shop lassies' (126). As Butler suggests, we can see how linguistic

constructions here create our reality in general through the speech acts (in this case 'internal' speech acts) that we participate in every day. By citing the conventions of social world around him Sammy enacts that reality, that is nevertheless a social construction at one remove from reality. In this instance in the novel 'gender is an 'act', broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority' (Butler 279).

18 The welfare bureaucracy Sammy encounters is a portrayal of a system that stemmed from the Conservative government's principles of free market economic expansion and privatisation throughout the 1980s. This ideology also initiated a switch of responsibility for social welfare from the state to the individual (Raynsford 90), echoes of which manifest in Sammy's nihilistic ramblings 'he was used to walking long distances, skint and fucking starving, cold and fucking with naywhere to go man all that kind of deprivation shite. Fuck all new in this game' (Kelman 46). The only ambition Sammy craves is to physically and spiritually survive the onslaught of the labyrinthine welfare and legal system and the traumatic injuries inflicted by state authorities: 'Anything, anything at all man he needed some fucking thing instead of this, this staggering about, like some fucking down-and-out winey bastard' (Kelman 3).

19 Within *HL* the medical bureaucracy's relationship to the state and police is as elusive as the machinations of officialdom that Kelman describes operating in Kafka's novel *The Castle*. 'In Kafka's work [...] it makes no difference whether an 'ultimate source' exists or not, not if its workings are so infinitely remote that they are forever inaccessible to mere mortals' (Kelman 2002, 267). These hidden workings of authority thwart Sammy's attempts to gain recognition, through the Doctor's and Social Services who 'deal with methods of interrogation as an exercise in an insane logic of iron consistency' (Gottelieb 34). Kelman utilises the tragic frameworks of Kafka's fiction where individuals continually confront elusive and mysterious social demands that are never made explicit. Sammy is aware of a system of DSS laws, within whose web he is caught, but does not hope to grasp their details, clear in the knowledge they are set up as fences guarding and entrenching class privilege. Sammy is never fully convinced he will win the battle for justice: 'protocols and procedures, all designed to stop ye breathing, to grind ye to a halt' (Kelman 321). 'They get to ye. Ye try no to let them. But they do. There's never any point working it out. It's a waste of energy. Especially when ye've nay control' (Kelman 191). In the novel, the institutional practices of the welfare state are even envisioned monopolising and bureaucratising hope itself 'ye're aye waiting. Waiting rooms. Ye go into this room where ye wait. Hoping's the same. One of these days the cunts'll build entire fucking buildings just for that. Official hoping rooms' (Kelman 213).

20 The elements of the social setting that are open for critique in the novel are a range of state agencies, the medical-legal bureaucracy, the judicial system and police, all of whom the protagonist fails to obtain answers or justice from. Sammy attempts to navigate an urban territory of high rise schemes, constructed in Glasgow in the 1970s and 80s, as part of an attempt at urban renewal of slum housing. At the mercy of the 'DSS Central Medical' machinery, the refusal to confirm his sight loss denies any route open to him, be that securing benefits, work or compensation for his injuries. The medical and benefit agencies Sammy encounters withhold any judgement in this regard, hanging his future in the balance: 'So ye're no saying I'm blind? It isn't for me to say. Aye but you're a doctor' (Kelman 225). This farcical interaction encapsulates key ideological shifts in the provision and delivery of UK healthcare in the 1990s. GPs became 'gatekeepers' to the rest of the health system, referring patients onto expensive, specialist services and there was 'a shifting conception of social services as 'enablers rather than direct providers. With regards to optical services, lenses and NHS frames were no longer being subsidized, with plans to abolish the free sight test' (Alsop 65-71). Ideologically this was part of a broader Conservative agenda to introduce an internal market into the NHS where health authorities managed their own budgets and NHS trusts were in competition with one another, the accompanying libertarian rhetoric defined healthcare as a matter of personal responsibility (Alsop 75|). Pertinent to the doctor's role in *HL*, are the assumptions of the healthcare system he operates within,

which the government of the day felt could make 'better use of healthcare resources [...] by reducing the clinical autonomy of doctors' (Alsop 76).

- 21 This political outlook extended to many facets of British life in the 1990s. Left-wing political activist authors, such as Kelman, expressed concern with this rhetoric surrounding public spending cuts, rising unemployment and abuse of worker's rights.<sup>3</sup> Since the eighteenth century there has been a tradition of British social protest novels, such as *Caleb Williams* (1794) by William Godwin, attempting to critique abuses of government power, where legal institutions destroy innocent parties. This tradition continues into the twentieth-century in works such as Jonathan Coe's *What A Carve Up!* (1994). Kelman similarly uses displaced and disenfranchised protagonists to critique a post-industrial landscape of what Kirk has called 'political exile' (Kirk 123). This is expressed in Sammy's detached, third person register of mock heroism 'So municipal solidarity man know what I'm saying, the bold Sammy gets to his feet' (Kelman 2). At times in *HL*, the idea of working-class community as the solution to this political exile is undercut by Sammy espousing his philosophies of animalistic self-reliance, in the face of his battle for physical and mental survival:

That was what it was about; it was a fucking move man the DSS, all sos yer fucking brains stopped working, so ye couldnay think, in case ye were sorting out some sort of plan. So ye had to stay alert at all costs. All yer senses ye needed them all; ready for anything man, know what I'm saying.  
(Kelman 100)

- 22 A core historical reason for the original adoption of universalist principles for UK social and welfare services was 'the aim of making services available and accessible to the whole population in such ways as would not involve users in any humiliating loss of status, dignity or self-respect' (Titmuss 42). *HL* presents a dystopian reality, in its depiction of the failure of this political vision. Gotteleib's theories on this genre of social critique elucidate how the moral scope of twentieth century literature can didactically engage readers to challenge social ideologies. The dystopian question raised by *HL* is how individuals, living under social systems that purport to be administering justice, yet appear to exist to miscarry it, reconcile themselves as victims of this aberration. Sammy rages against his enemies, the authorities who deem him unworthy of humane treatment. This fate is suffered under a social system where: 'Salvation is represented as a just society governed by worthy representatives chosen by an enlightened people' (Gottlieb 3).

- 23 Sammy's soliloquizing confronts an elite God head of the social system he endures. This move is only made imaginatively however, envisioning God as the final link in a bureaucratic chain. His deity is the head pen-pusher never seen, but controlling fate on a mysterious whim, described in blasphemous, mischievous tones, suggestive of a child's illustrated bible 'the good auld authorities and the headman up there in his wee central office, good auld god with the white beard and the white robe' (Kelman 37). Althusser argues there is not one (Repressive) State Apparatus, but a '*plurality of Ideological State Apparatus*' (Althusser 144). Moreover, 'the unity that constitutes this plurality of ISAs as a body is not immediately visible' (Althusser 144). In dystopian fiction, this sinister unity has been encapsulated in many forms, most famously in the Big Brother figure of George Orwell's *1984*, and, in this instance, the vision of God as bureaucrat.

- 24 Commonly, twentieth-century interior monologue involves a conflictual self-analysis, imagined as internal dialogue. The soliloquy function of interior monologue is its construction of an audience in the figure of a self, listening to its own performance or construction of itself. This narration is such an enclosed form, it appears to ignore the presence of a 'true' or 'outside' audience or reader altogether. In this fashion interior monologue can provide the sense we are 'eavesdropping' on inner conversation. Such narration evolves into DIM for Sammy, when reaching a frantic rhetorical mode and pitch 'yer breathing, whatever, so ye calm down. Ye need to be flat, that's how you need to be, so it goes in one ear and out the other. Get yer head right, cause if ye don't they'll fuck ye' (Kelman 210). Ironically, it is at this very moment of immersive, uninhibited confession that the necessity to disguise true feelings or motives and apply a social

mask ('Ye need to be flat') is revealed. Here internal thought processes are also something to be commandeered as self-defence, against 'they' (the state authorities).

25 In the final stages of the novel, Sammy defends God as we might a lone figure being teased in the pub, in as demotic and casual a tone as possible 'the auld god almighty, the central authority, he gets sick of all that complaining from us...and ye canna blame him, who's gony blame him, give the guy a break, know what I mean?' (Kelman 330). This illustrates how Sammy can stage himself as the fearless central authority in his world-view 'give the guy a break' (Kelman 330). Interior monologue here presents a socially abject subject who still somehow retains a sense of agency, as narrative focaliser.

26 Sammy's autonomy is allied to his rejection of the bureaucratic state forces of his day, whose instrumental treatment of him as merely a stage in a complex process, denies him agency. Kelman's use of interior monologue allows him to express fully his protagonist as a rational agent (sticking to his inner logic), and acting in accordance with survival philosophies as universal principles 'ye just plough on, ye plough on, ye just fucking plough on, that's what you do' (Kelman 37). Agency has been rescued by this protagonist through a consistent inner rationality. In DIM such logic appears as 'pure' principles, in that they are addressed to the self, away from external pressures or potential 'contamination' of truth, by social interaction or obligation.

27 DIM allows the reader to enter into a dialogic relationship with a protagonist's ethical dilemmas instigated by their attempts to exercise their autonomy. This literary form invites readers to evaluate the extent to which autonomy is eventually exercised, in a represented conflict of public versus private interests. This is the case if we take the question of autonomy to be the question of the independence and authenticity of a character's desires, values and emotions, that move them to act in the first place. This reader/character transaction also holds true if we take the imaginative space of DIM as in some sense an 'uncontaminated' sphere, permitting a self-confession of motives and desires.

28 The question of Sammy's autonomy ultimately rests on what theorists of subjectivity have described as 'authenticity conditions' (Berofsky 113). Berofsky argues there are two families of conditions suggested in conceptions of autonomy: competency conditions and authenticity conditions. Competency includes capacities for rationality and self-control and freedom from pathology or self-deception. Authenticity conditions concern the claim to self-governance and acting capably in response to values or desires, that are one's own. This embracing of personal will involves the capacity to endorse, reflect upon, or identify one's desires and values. Such versions of authenticity claim autonomy requires 'second-order identification with first order desires' (Berofsky 112). In other words, first order desires, if pursued authentically, result in ethically correspondent action. In particular, this view, suggests identification must be 'wholehearted' for the end action to count as autonomous. This influential logic of a self-interrogatory and wholehearted process of autonomy suggests it can be most richly played out and portrayed in an interior sphere. Fictional interiority, as expressed in the rhetorical features of interior monologue, attempts to engage the reader in the protagonist's perpetual process of measuring 'second-order identification with first order desires' (Berofsky 112). The attempt of interior monologue prose to convey the totality of consciousness also allows the reader the judgement of whether a character's identification of desires and motives is wholehearted.

29 DIM is the stylistic mode of fictional 'inner' voice most interconnected and concerned with the construction of authenticity, as a quality residing in an interior self that cannot be appropriated or negotiated. Humphrey defines the eavesdropping quality of DIM where 'the character is not speaking to anyone within their fictional scene, nor is the character speaking, in effect, to the reader' (Humphrey 25). A lack of narrative interception lies at the core of Kelman's seemingly 'seamless' style of protagonist narration. In *HL* this narrative strategy becomes part of Sammy's attempt to rescue dignity and autonomy, speaking only to himself, authoring his story, he avoids being swallowed by state agencies who attempt to construct his narrative. Kelman notes that Joseph K, in the second half of *The Trial*, 'is approaching a level of awareness such that whether he is innocent or guilty is irrelevant, his "trial" will continue' (Kelman 298).

This is also the nature of Sammy's fatalism: 'these bastards, always at their convenience, every single last bit of time, it was always them that chose it; ye never had any fucking choices' (Kelman 32).

- 30 The DIM's mode of presenting the conversation with the self-attempts to portray the processes and content of consciousness, before they are transformed into deliberate speech. This central motive of DIM puts Kelman in a unique position within the history of this form; because Sammy ruminates in explicitly speech-like pronouncements. Kelman's 'phonetic orthography' requires the reader to 'voice' silently the rhythms and tics of a character's speech, in this sense bringing Sammy's voice alive. The vernacular of Kelman's characters may appear 'raw' and 'artless', but this aspect of his work has been described by Hames as 'the most stylized and deliberately crafted' part of his writing (Hames 38). In Kelman's interior monologue poetics, when this protagonist breaks into public speech (but never speech marks) it is indistinguishable from his 'inner' language and mode of expression. In this sense Kelman provides Sammy with an authenticity lacking in the controlled speech of the public-sector workers and lawyers he encounters. These two speech modes (authentic and inauthentic) are violently contrasted in one the few moments of dialogue in the novel, to insist that Sammy has no social mask:

So ye're no saying I'm blind?  
It isn't for me to say.  
Aye but you're a doctor.  
Yes.  
So ye can give an opinion.  
Yes.  
Aye but to do with medical things.  
Mister Samuels, I have people waiting to see me.  
(Kelman 225)

- 31 By contrast, Sammy's moments of free indirect discourse, excel in their capacity to create the sensation in the readers they are 'eavesdropping' on 'an arrangement of thought units as they would originate in the character's consciousness, rather than as they would be deliberately expressed' (Humphries 37). Through the nuanced rendering of the rhythms, syntax and individual quirks of Sammy's demotic Glaswegian, Kelman attempts to immerse the reader within his/her anti-heroes' thoughts and worldview. Much of Kelman's writing is a confrontation with the greatest challenge to the writer of 'stream-of-consciousness' and interior monologue prose: 'to capture the irrational and incoherent quality of private unuttered consciousness and in doing so still to communicate to his readers' (Humphreys 62). Ultimately this impulse to capture the inchoate enables Kelman to convey the full contradictory predicament of the human subject in their relationship with the state, in Althusser's conflicted terms.
- 32 Kelman's mimesis of self-conversation develops a new mode of interior narration, creating a sense of following the drift of 'pure' speech, uninterrupted by framing devices or external commentary. Sammy's Glaswegian rhythms impersonate speech, not in a conventionally realist fashion, but through 'stylized narrative technique' that makes the spoken the exclusive language of narration (Craig 102). The reader is positioned to 'hear' Sammy's inner monologue not as traditional Scots dialect, but a phonetics that allows language to fuse together the author's own voice with the narration and dialogue. Sammy's inner voice is diametrically opposed to the deceptive legal jargon of the establishment, who seek to entrap and disempower him at every turn of the plot. In this way, the process by which official forces of Scotland's 1990s welfare system corrupts and contorts language is exposed.

## Solipsism or Social Commentary?

- 33 The issue of whether Sammy's internal idiolect constitutes social commentary needs to be addressed in a broader context of post-war modernism. Matz has described the narrative lense of Woolf and Joyce's interior monologue as a radical subjectivity of

experience that, instead of flaunting limited understanding, celebrated an enlightening intensification of knowledge (Matz 219). This tension between interior monologue as a vehicle to expose limited versus enhanced self and social understanding, is key to unlocking the meaning of *HL*. In the blurring of where interior monologue ends and direct speech begins we feel 'sealed' inside Sammy's mind by Kelman's innovative fusion of interior and exterior narrative modes. Sammy's all-pervading paranoid thought processes constitute the narration, contemplating and continually implying a sinister omniscience of the 'good auld authorities' who never fully come into his view, yet dictate the action, making him the object of surveillance. Blindness is extended to the storytelling form as Kelman continually undermines the possibility of any single, correct reading of a character, the only orientation is through blindness, which has shaped and enclosed Sammy's new interior space. Through a blind protagonist 'then closing the eye and putting his finger on the lid, then opening it and closing it and for fuck sake man, he couldnay see nothing' (Kelman 10). The readers are under the impression that they are delving more deeply into an interior space. Sammy's blindness makes his inner voice the brutal sole point of orientation and the narrative focaliser. Sammy's interior monologue demands that readers experience this peril most fully in its dramatic simultaneity, as they fumble in the darkness alongside him.

34 It is the quality of fictional interiority as immersion in incoherence, or painful, obsessive self-reflection, that partly formed the attitude towards modernist versions of the form, viewing it as a fictional solipsism incapable of dealing with social themes. Opposing the attitude towards interior monologue as an indulgent, solipsistic legacy of modernism, put forward by Georg Lukacs, I would argue it is precisely the technical and thematic demands made by the attempt to render the conversation with the self, that allows writers to present collective antagonisms in complex ways, throwing fresh light on social tensions or realities.

35 The later twentieth century novel traditionally uses DIM as a device to create the sense there is no narrative interception occurring. This strategy then requires readers to wrestle with the paradoxical gap between a protagonist's often brutal predicaments, their endurance of their inhumane social context and requires the reader to further question what forces demand these conversations remains interior. Only oriented through the lens of inner tumult, we gather an impending sense of the nature of the external oppressions that drive this pressure to contain within: 'he had never been this bad, surely to fuck. Bullshit. How many times had he said it, these very words, how many times! Crap. Obvious crap too so shut yer fucking mouth, just shut yer fucking mouth' (Kelman 28).

---

## ***Bibliography***

ALLSOP, Judith, 'Health', *The New Politics of Welfare—An Agenda for the 1990s?*, ed. Michael MCCARTHY, London: Macmillan, 1989, 53–82.

ALTHUSSER, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben BREWSTER, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

ALTHUSSER, Louis, 'A Letter on Art,' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New Edition. New York: US Monthly Review Press, 2001, 223.

BADIOU, Alain, 'Louis Althusser', *Pocket Pantheon: Figures of Postwar Philosophy*, London: Verso, 2009, 54–90.

BERMAN, Marshall, *The Politics of Authenticity*, London: Verso, 1970.

BEROFSKY, Bernard, *Liberation from Self a Theory of Personal Autonomy*, Cambridge: CUP, 1995.

BUTLER, Judith, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen CASE, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.

CRAIG, Cairns, 'Kelman's Glasgow Sentence', *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, ed. Scott HAMES, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010, 9–114.

CRAIG, Cairns, *Resisting Arrest: James Kelman in The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, eds. Gavin WALLACE and Randall STEVENSON, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1993, 24–44.

GOTTLIEB, Erica, *Dystopian Fiction East and West. Universe of Terror and Trial*, London: McGill University Press. 2001.

HAMES, Scott, 'Eyeless in Glasgow: James Kelman's Existential Milton', *Contemporary Literature* 50.3 (Fall 2009): 496–527.  
DOI : 10.1353/cli.o.0073

HAMES, Scott, 'Kelman's Art Speech', *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, ed. Scott HAMES, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010, 86–98.

HUMPHREY, Robert, *Stream-of-consciousness in the novel*, California: U of California P, 1968. 25.

JAMES, Susan, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, Oxford: OUP, 2000.

KEANE, Webb, 'Sincerity, "Modernity," and the Protestants', *Cultural Anthropology* 17.1 (2002): 65–92.

KELMAN, James, 'A Look at Franz Kafka's Three novels', *And the Judges said... Essays*, London: Polygon, 2002, 264–313.

KELMAN, James, *How Late It Was, How Late*, London: Vintage, 1994.  
DOI : 10.1162/bflr.1994.6.125

KIRK, John, 'On the Edge: Voicing the Politics of Resistance', *Twentieth Century Writing and the British Working-class*, ed. John KIRK, Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2003, 113–130.

MATZ, Jesse, 'The Novel', *A Companion to Modernist Literature & Culture*, eds. David BRADSHAW and Kevin J. H. DETMAR, London: Blackwell, 2006, 210–219.

NICOLL, Lawrence, 'Kelman and the Existentialists', *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010, 125–177.

RAYNSFORD, Nick, 'Housing', *The New Politics of Welfare*, ed. Michael MCCARTHY, London: Macmillan, 1989, 82–104.

SARTRE, Jean-Paul, *Existentialism and humanism*, London: Methuen, 2007, 22.

SHARKEY, Cameron, *Textual Resistance, Cultural Legitimacy and the Politics of Representation in the Fiction of James Kelman and William McIlvanney*. MPhil (R) thesis. Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2012, 70.

TAY, William, *Stream-of-consciousness and the Controversy over Modernism. Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 1.1 (September 1984): 8. (Chatham cited in Tay, 182–3).

TITMUS, Richard, 'Universalism versus Selection', *The Welfare State Reader*, eds. Christopher PIERSON and Francis G. CASTLES, Cambridge: Polity, 2000, 42–51.

ZIZEK, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, 163.

## Notes

1 Rabbi Julia Neuberger in response to *HL's* entry to the 1994 *Booker Prize*. Cited in: Alan CLARK, 'A Prize Insult to the Courage of Scotland's Finest', *The Mail on Sunday*, 23 October, 1994.

2 William Tay, *Stream-of-consciousness and the Controversy over Modernism. Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*. Vol 1. No. 1 (September 1984, p.8).

3 Kelman's talks "Opening the Edinburgh Unemployed Workers' Centre" and "Scottish Law and a Victim of Asbestos" are just two of many tackling such issues and collated in: "*And the Judges Said...Essays*." (see 'Works Cited').

## References

### Electronic reference

Anna Travis, "Interior Monologue as Social Critique in James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994)", *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 56 | 2019, Online since 21 March 2019, connection on 24 May 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/6857>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.6857>

## About the author

### Anna Travis

Anna Travis is a freelance writer, Art History Lecturer and PhD candidate at the University of Brighton, exploring models of authentic inner voice in fiction. Her current research centers on contemporary Anglo-American fiction and absurdist aesthetics. In 2018 she delivered a paper on the symbolism of mediocrity in the history of UK and US office-based fiction, at the David Foster

Wallace Conference, University of Illinois. She has also recently presented research on the figure of the inauthentic poet in Ben Lerner and Nicolson Baker's fiction at the British Association of Contemporary Literature Conference (BACLS). She has been a fiction reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* and has run adult education courses on Literary Theory, Twentieth-Century Poetry and Fiction.

---

## Copyright



*Études britanniques contemporaines* est mise à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.