

# Late, but Timely

## James Kelman's Reappraisal of Modernism

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### Modernism, Ethics, Politics

**A**LTHOUGH HAILED as one of the flagbearers of the second wave of the “Scottish Revival” and placed among the most important contributors to the current global popularity of working-class fiction, James Kelman’s writing doubles down on its author’s iconoclastic rejection of all categories, be they cultural, ethnic, national or social. A reluctant and incredulous recipient of the Booker Prize in 1994, when *How Late It Was, How Late* famously caused one of the jurors to exclaim in horror “it’s crap”<sup>1</sup> and a reviewer to describe the novel as “literary vandalism,”<sup>2</sup> Kelman occupies the privileged position most frequently assigned to him—that of an icon of “Scottishness” and of socialist aesthetic—with intense unease. On the one hand, he insists that “my culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that right,” as, for instance, in the Booker Prize acceptance speech.<sup>3</sup> On the other, his novels, short stories and interviews are bent on subverting fixed versions of community (or, indeed, any kind of community) and comforting tropes of nationalistic integration. While aware of the power struggle involved in the creation of artistic canons and their potential as instruments of cultural and social hegemony, he does not shy away from recycling the conventions and strategies sanctified by these very canons.

In fact, Kelman’s triumphant appropriation of modernist strategies for the purposes of rendering a working-class consciousness in *How Late It Was, How Late* is proof of his ability to manipulate cultural capital, not only as a means of literary legitimation, but for making important ethical and political points, as well. In this respect, my reading complements Michael Gardiner’s conclusion that

*there is a way of looking at Kelman, especially the late 2000s Kelman, which is less about fitting the work into a central modernist tradition, than about seeing the ways in which literary modernism is itself identifiable in terms of its problematic relationship with centres and traditions.*<sup>4</sup>

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Discussing the Glaswegian writer's refashioning of "world English," rather than confining it to the Scottish vernacular, Gardiner focuses on his "post-Booker novels."<sup>5</sup> However, as I will attempt to prove, it is possible to place even earlier texts within the same fruitful engagement with an extended version of (global) modernism, seen as a constellation of affects, ideas and formal experiments, rather than a temporally and spatially bounded phenomenon. Using sophisticated combinations of stream of consciousness, free indirect discourse, first-, second- and third-person narration, pictorial poetic devices, unexpected typographic arrangements, Kelman's "working-class novels" triggered a revolution of the genre that has since then produced global hits of the likes of *Trainspotting*, or, more recently, Douglas Stuart's Booker-winning *Shuggie Bain*.

With its relatively scant plot, its focus on rendering the minute workings of its protagonist's consciousness, and its use of what has been described as an "extreme version of free indirect discourse,"<sup>6</sup> *How Late It Was, How Late* presents the reader with a bewildering juxtaposition of radical realism and technical artifice. Such a refashioning of narrative voice is supported by a specifically modernist treatment of narrative time, evidenced in the slow pace of the narration, set in striking opposition with the speed of present-day capitalist flow or its technological vortex, the abolition of closure and the impossibility of evolving towards a different future. This will become the central premise of the present essay: that it is through its particular notion of time, embodied in the sense of "lateness," and not only through the radicalization of "voice," that the novel aligns itself to a literary tradition that it reworks from the inside. The tardiness of the novel's protagonist, manifested both through a kind of original narrative tension (as he is continuously attempting to achieve various, often contradictory, petty goals), and as a suspension of progression, subjects readers to concerted efforts of interpretation, forcing them to adjust to divergent timelines, nonmaterialized futures and haunting pasts. The "patacake"—the childish rhythm invented by Sammy to map his movements through the city after going blind—encapsulates the chronotope of the text, its spatiotemporal confusion and its amalgam of regression, stasis and lateral motion:

*Patacake patacake; patacake patacake. My fucking christ. That was what ye did but patacake patacake, ye kept going, ye kept going. It was gony turn fine in a minute. It was all gony disappear. In a puff of smoke. Ye want a happy ending. I'll give ye one. So okay, ye've had this bad time. Ye've been blind. Ye've lost yer sight for a few days and it's been bad. Ye've coped but ye've fucking coped.*<sup>7</sup>

Despite widespread opinions to the contrary, as Aaron Kelly has suggested, the label "realism" sits uneasily with Kelman's poetics, given the former's traditional reliance on narrative progression and impulse towards totalization, tending to obscure the politics of representation.<sup>8</sup> Through its refusal of the potential for order and renewal inherent in the very form of the novel genre, with its sequencing of eventful progression and cause-and-effect emplotment, *How Late* emerges as a modernist prolongation of the questioning of the ideal of social coherence and utopian temporality produced by modernity.

The question of modernist politics has been posed so many times, and it involves so many antinomic dimensions, that it seems a daunting task to summarize it here. The hy-

pothesis I am following is that Kelman utilizes these very antinomies in order to reassign new aesthetic and political goals to what Fredric Jameson called modernism's "supreme vocation"—the utopian impulse to transform the world through art.<sup>9</sup> However, his energies are summoned not in pursuit of a utopian future, since the latter, like he protagonist's own name (Sammy Samuels), will always mirror what has come before. As the reader comes to realize and Sammy's former wife already knows, Kelman's characters "didnay think there was a future":

*That was that fucking moment, the future! No the past: no the past. He brought that up. Well he didnay really; it was just to get to the future, he had to bring a bit of the past in, so he could get there, so it was out there and part of it and then he could really start—the two of them could, the gether. Cause he knew it was possible. But she didnay. She didnay think there was a future. That was her problem man she didnay think there was a future. She was just taking it as it comes, one day at a time. Cause deep down she thought they were doomed.<sup>10</sup>*

An equally famous argument put forward by Jameson regards modernist style as a "strategy of representational containment"<sup>11</sup> when faced with the multitudinous "others" of global imperialism and the countless new spaces it comprised. On this view, "style" sublimates the dilemmas of spatial fragmentation and difference into aesthetic closure that produces a compensatory sense of community—a theory that Jameson confirms by analyzing Joyce's postcolonial counterreaction in *Ulysses* to discontinuities of form and space.<sup>12</sup> Jameson's definition of the functions of modernist style surely admits qualifications, since it does not do full justice to the artists' self-reflexive awareness of the tensions involved in both narrative's drive towards totalization, and the ethical and political consequences of colonialist globalization. Scottish modernist writers such as Nan Shepherd, Lewis Grassie Gibbon or Nel M. Gunn came up with their own methods of subverting the imperialism of English cultural authority that have less to do with Joyce's radical revolution, and more with localized, historicized appropriations of aesthetic forms. Their model, together with an early admiration for "an admixture of these two literary traditions, the European existential and the American realist"<sup>13</sup> provide a different grounding to Kelman's experimental writing, one that does not work to contain, but to redeem the apparent conservatism or isolated elitism of modernism by capturing the moment-by-moment experience of a character situated on the farthest margins of society.

In the essay "Elitism and English Literature, Speaking As a Writer," Kelman recalls his youthful ideals of "want[ing] to write as one of my own people, . . . to remain a member of my own community."<sup>14</sup> They were quickly followed by the realization that no available models for such writing existed in the British tradition, which relegated characters Kelman would have recognized himself in to dialogue, to an external perspective and to the status of the other. A former inmate, a petty thief and occasional construction worker who goes blind after an altercation with the police that he cannot remember at all, Sammy Samuels the antihero illustrates the author's interest in writing about

*homeless folk having to survive out in the streets or living off the edges of rubbish dumps; a literary art being created out of life on supplementary benefit, concerning itself with drug*

*addiction, child prostitution, glue-sniffing, alcoholism, kids of sixteen being forced onto the streets; stories, poetry and song about old people surviving the outrageous costs of medicine, heating and public transport; the latest round of humiliations being endured in the offices of the DSS or the Gas Board or the Housing Department or wherever the daily humiliation happens to be occurring this morning; police brutality, racial abuses, sectarian abuses, trade-union corruption, political corruption, and everything else that comprises the reality of this country.*<sup>15</sup>

The same essay describes the author's youthful excitement at finally recognizing himself and his environment in the language of an iconoclastic landmark of the modernist tradition, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: "I had never heard anything like that, it was amazing; so that was how these salt-of-the-earth English working-class country yokels spoke! well well well."<sup>16</sup> (When his mother realized what the book was, she burned it.) It is of course this very same tradition that Kelman's nonfictional pieces go on to excoriate for arrogating to themselves the realm of culture through the exclusion of the economically and ethnically dispossessed. Not even D. H. Lawrence can shake off the sharp distinction between the authoritative standard English used by the narrator and the voices of the socially peripheric:

*Whenever I did find somebody from my own sort of background in English literature, they were confined to the margins, kept in their place, stuck in the dialogue. You only ever saw them or heard them. You never got into their mind. You did find them in the narrative but from the outside, never from the inside, always they were "the other." They never rang true, they were never like anybody you ever met in real life.*<sup>17</sup>

In "And the Judges Said..."—the essay that lends the title to the entire collection—Kelman explains:

*In prose fiction I saw the distinction between dialogue and narrative as a summation of the political system; it was simply another method of exclusion, of marginalizing and disenfranchising different peoples, cultures and communities. I was uncomfortable with "working-class" authors who allowed "the voice" of higher authority to control narrative, the place where the psychological drama occurred. How could I write from my own place and time if I was forced to adopt the "received" language of the ruling class? Not to challenge the rules of narrative was to be coerced into assimilation, I would be forced to write in the voice of an imagined member of the ruling class.*<sup>18</sup>

This has led to a host of critical explorations of Kelman's innovative rendering of working-class language and "voice." The best example is perhaps Craig Cairns's classic and insightful essay on Kelman's early writing, "Resisting Arrest." Craig describes this highly particular synthesis between the "voice of narration" and the "voice of the character" as an act of "linguistic unity" meant to counteract the dissolution of community and to replace political isolation with textual "solidarity."<sup>19</sup> Craig went on to investigate the

“inner heterocentricity” Kelman inherits from the Scottish modernist revival—more specifically, from Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s “social heterocentricity.”<sup>20</sup> According to Craig, Kelman’s alternation of the first, second and third person in his “self-narrating” novels accounts for the transformation of the individual subject in the space of dialogue and accommodation of the other, “the site in which the community’s voices happen, and in their happening constitute the ‘I’ which it is the novel’s business to narrate.”<sup>21</sup> To extrapolate on Craig’s term, there’s a “heterotemporality” created in the text as well, manifested in Sammy’s attempts to “cope” with a variety of versions of history, a problematic newness that nevertheless repeats itself, and his awareness of the authority of time over everything:

*The thing is he was going naywhere, naywhere. So he needed to clear the brains, to think; think, he needed to fucking think. It was just a new problem. He had to cope with it, that’s all, that was all it was. Every day was a fucking problem. And this was a new yin. So ye thought it out and then ye coped. That was what a problem was, a thing ye thought out and then coped with, and ye pushed ahead; green fields round every corner, sunshine and blue skies, streets lined with apple trees and kids playing in the grass, 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, sitting there watching ye from above, the gentle wee smile, leading the children on. That was fair enough. It was just the now. It was this minute here. That was all; once ye got through it ye were past it.*<sup>22</sup>

A recurring chorus in the novel is provided by the phrase “nay time,” that inscribes linguistic and local specificity to the experience of time. Some of the means through which the novel achieves its heterotemporality involve both the multiplicitous nature of voice, and an exploitation of the divergences of Glaswegian dialect. This engages the novel in a confrontation between the globalizing nature of standardized time, and the “nay time” of Sammy’s blind wanderings through Glasgow. According to Craig Cairns, Scottish fiction finds itself “out of history,” founded on the incapacity to integrate the heroic temporality of triumphant modernity that it had nevertheless taught to Europe through the form of the historical novel “invented” by Walter Scott in the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> However, *How Late* aligns itself to a historical present that is simultaneously challenged through the shared notion of lateness that has enveloped our planetary temporal sensibility, and it does this from a particular Scottish perspective. As Scott Hames has recently pointed out, the programmatic resurgence of the vernacular in recent Scottish fiction paradoxically both confirms Pascale Casanova’s emphasis on the importance of belonging to a national linguistic community within the arena of world literature, and upholds its marginality and refusal of integration by hegemonic power. This results in the legitimation of a “radical particularism and self-fashioning (for the individual, in the name of the group)” by means of falling back on the essentialist trope of Romantic authenticity. Following Aaron Kelly’s suggestion in his important analysis of Kelman’s fiction, Hames reminds us that such strategies have the potential of commodifying working-class culture, which is sold back as a signifier of the nation as a whole.<sup>24</sup> This triggers a rejection of prevalent readings of *How Late* as the mouthpiece for devolutionary art and politics,

on the grounds that the novel discards the devolutionary trope of power as parliamentary representation, creating instead an ontology of voice as “the medium of being,”<sup>25</sup> capable of performing both individual identity and its immersion into the lifeworld without resorting to preexisting discourses or mimetic gestures.

Where do the transformative political and ethical effects of Kelman's aesthetics lie, then? As Hames suggests, they are to be found in the Shklovskian effects of defamiliarization—forcing the reader to reconsider interpretive habits. In his contribution to *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, Hames had already explored at length the estrangement properties of Kelman's use of the vernacular in writing, its foregrounding of the materiality of language and therefore of the process of signification. The Glaswegian idiom is therefore less a source of Romantic authenticity, but the very instantiation of self-conscious artifice: not recording and reproducing, but stylization.<sup>26</sup> Reading *How Late* (or other novels, for that matter) as placed in the service of concretely historical purposes such as devolution, or the betterment of working-class life, would be misrecognizing the skepticism Kelman shares with the modernists and ignoring the richness of temporal potentialities materialized by the texts.

## Lateness As Modernist Subversion

**I**N A recent study that recasts the temporality of modernity from a new perspective, Ben Hutchinson suggests that, contrary to received wisdom, modern European literature is founded on a sense of the lateness of the present, of its arrival in the wake of a more meaningful past, which should be interpreted as “an expression of the modern's continuing quest for legitimacy.”<sup>27</sup> Attempting to define its own, original normativity, modernity is necessarily thrown back on a questioning of the past that it cannot separate itself from. As a consequence, “lateness simultaneously defines and undermines the ‘modern’”<sup>28</sup> and “is experienced in real time, as the overwhelming, over-determining presence of the past.”<sup>29</sup> In the same vein, Tyrus Miller had already defined certain orientations within modernism as “late” in the sense that such works as those by Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes, Samuel Beckett or Mina Loy combine despair and utopia, “the compulsion to decline and the impulse to renewal”:

*each work tended toward formal singularity, as if the author had hit a dead end and had to begin again. In content, too, these works reflected a closure of the horizon of the future: they are permeated with a foreboding of decline and fall, of radical contingency and absurd death.*<sup>30</sup>

Late modernism shares with *How Late It Was, How Late* a sense of the fragility of living under the auspices of a permanent ending, coupled with the realization of the impossibility of regeneration, which constitutes the bridge between the modernism of the first half of the twentieth century and its continuation into its final decades. It is not the “postmodernist” lateness that precludes any possibility of authenticity or originality, but

a crepuscular experience of inhabiting a continuous apocalypse that will not, because it cannot, be followed by revolution. We therefore need to analyze modernism and its legacy by putting aside the myth of heroic renewal too often invoked as its defining program, and which might instead be considered at best a part that comes already eroded by the suspicion of its inevitable failure, or dystopian potential.

To come back to the central point of this essay after a rather long detour, although less noticed and discussed than Kelman's sophisticated use of narrative perspective, it is his treatment of novelistic time that points in the direction of modernism. The bare-bones plot covers less than a week in Sammy's life, but this condensed span is subjected to numerous variations in pace and intensity; it reaches back to Sammy's life as a child, to his failed marriage and his already past relationship with the absent Helen; it projects discontinuous presents and failed futures in which Sammy, in turn, is ignored and further marginalized by society, or, on the contrary, succeeds in gaining attention and independence. In the novel, the old "auld" is featured no less than 170 times, with meanings reaching from literal to the figurative: "auld [Bob] Dylan," "the auld eyes," "the good auld authorities," "auld Helen," etc. Everything is "old" to Sammy who thinks of himself at 38 as "just seem[ing] alder, cause of the life he had led."<sup>31</sup>

Aaron Kelly links the novel's production of "lateness" to a response to the advanced stages of "late capitalism" with its dehistoricization of experience and production of the Jamesonian schizophrenic present.<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to dispute the validity of such an interpretation, but I want to suggest that it might also be productive to approach the notion via the affinities between the tardy temporality of the text and the lateness of modernism. In my reading, the phrase is reinterpreted in order to capture not only the pervading sense that the future has already failed to arrive, but also Kelman's ironic awareness of the paradoxical persistence of modernist themes and conventions in his writing. This irony translates itself less as parody or pastiche, and more as cautious reinvestment in the capacity of modernist form to perform (rather than represent) the ethical tensions latent in a reconsideration of individual responsibility and agency against the background of social fragmentation. The temporal disintegration staged by the novel's formal lethargy or Sammy's continuous making and unmaking of plans of action, intended to erase any trace of him from everyone else, nevertheless affords a multiplicity of possible timelines to briefly emerge, only to be rapidly supplanted by yet another possible future that runs aground. In the course of the novel, Sammy's ruses involve lying to the police, social workers, Ally, his neighbor Boab and even his son Peter about his next movements, providing cab drivers with false destinations and changing his mind during the trip, or repeatedly deciding to be a "new man" only to fall back on his old habits. A typical example is provided by Sammy's self-contradictory rant to Peter and his friend Keith at the end of the novel, as they guide him first towards Peter's home to get the boy's savings, then towards a nearby pub (aptly named "The Swan," even if Sammy is ignorant of the Proustian allusion), and eventually towards the taxi that will presumably take him to Glasgow's central station. These probably unnecessary precautions create a host of temporal alternatives that go unrealized, but also have a deleterious effect of Sammy's attempt to master the present:

*Good; so yez dont take it right to yer houses; know what I mean, ye get it halfway between the two. Okay? Tell ye something for nothing by the way, this is good training for that fucking navy racket: see when yez join, yez're gony spend most of yer time dodging these bampot officer bastards, know what I'm talking about, they treat ye like servants and it's gony annoy ye to fuck, so this is good training for doing yer vanishing act. Right... here: Keith—you hang onto the stick again, just take it home with ye. Then bring it back out when ye meet up with Peter. And I'll get it back off ye at the Swan, cause that's where I'm headed, I'm gony be swanning it up, so I'll see yez there as soon as possible. Dont make it too soon cause I want at least two fucking pints boys know what I'm talking about this is thirsty work. I'm only kidding; just whenever.<sup>33</sup>*

It is no coincidence that the first lines of the text lay the foundation of a temporality that is simultaneously inaugural, amnesiac and impotent (“Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts; but ye want to remember and face up to things, just something keeps ye from doing it, why can ye no do it”);<sup>34</sup> throughout the text, Sammy continuously attempts to begin anew, and laments the tardiness of most events or decisions. Sammy’s lack of memory as to how he had come to “edge back into awareness”<sup>35</sup> with his body sore and his new leather shoes replaced by a pair of worn-out trainers will not be filled in. Even if he is able to reconstitute some of the weekend’s events from the information derisively provided by the police, the lawyer Ally’s investigations or his friends accusatory remarks, we will never have the full picture of the causes of Sammy’s forgetfulness and blindness.

The trope of blindness is another strategy to mark the slowing down of temporality. We might draw on Hames’s remark that the plot is triggered by “the politics of seeing and being seen,”<sup>36</sup> and his insightful analysis of the dialectic between gazing at others (or not being able to) and the other’s gaze in the making of Sammy’s (lack of) agency. The fact that he is not blind from the beginning does not only allow Kelman to dramatize all the ironies of Sammy’s reaction, but also to ironically point at questions of belatedness both in the case of the protagonist’s mind, and, since they are often indistinguishable, the act of narration itself. The darkness in the prison cell initially prevents Sammy from realizing he has gone blind, functioning as a trope for the normalizing of authoritarian violence and state-sanctioned surveillance. However, the terms in which he receives this new awareness—“How the hell was it happening to him! It’s no as if he was earmarked for glory!”<sup>37</sup>—might warrant quoting at length. Unexpectedly, rather than being taken aback, Sammy equates lack of sight with “glory,” and hails it as a “new beginning”:

*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. . . . He was definitely blind but. Fucking weird. Wild. It didnay feel like a nightmare either, that's the funny thing. Even psychologically. In fact it felt okay, an initial wee flurry of excitement but no what ye would call panic-stations. Like it was just a new predicament. Christ it was even making him smile, shaking his head at the very idea, imagining himself telling people; making Helen laugh.*<sup>38</sup>

Sammy's blindness also prolongs the interval between the occurrence of events and his interpretation of them. The instantaneity of vision, the foundation for hypermodern speed, is replaced with the slowness of touch, the medium of immersion in and belonging to the material world. The lag between experience and interpretation further reduces the protagonist's agency, but also, since the audience's knowledge of the events is not guided by a prescient narrator, but is simultaneous with Sammy's, the same deceleration is visited upon the reader, who is thus extracted from the whirlpool of consumerist modernity and invited to share the protagonist's marginality. Lack of sight also points to another of the major themes of the novel, the inquiry into the perils of the liberal belief in individual agency and claim of mastery over the world, whose disintegration demonstrates its illusiveness under the pressures of economic and social collapse: the diminishing space of action experienced by Sammy and most of Kelman's characters is also a failure of exacerbated individualism and masculinity.

"Funny how ye tell people a story to make a point and ye fail, ye fail, a total disaster," Sammy muses early in the text.<sup>39</sup> Interpretation might be thwarted, the narrative may be delayed and there may be "nay time" left, but it is precisely through this kind of awareness that Kelman's novel will never lose its modernity.



## Notes

1. See Mary McGlynn, "How Late It Was, How Late and Literary Value," in *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, edited by Scott Hames (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 24.
2. Simon Jenkins, "An Expletive of a Winner," *The Times*, 15 October 1994: 20.
3. James Kelman, "Elitist Slurs Are Racism by Another Name," *Scotland on Sunday: Spectrum Supplement*, 16 October 1994: 2.
4. Michael Gardiner, "Kelman and World English," in *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, 110.
5. Gardiner, 101.
6. Gardiner, 102.
7. James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Vintage, 1998), 34.
8. Aaron Kelly, *James Kelman: Politics and Aesthetics* (Oxford–Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), 147.

9. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 80.
10. Kelman, *How Late*, 135.
11. Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," in *The Modernist Papers* (London–New York: Verso, 2007), 152–169.
12. Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," 168–169.
13. Kelman, *How Late*, 39.
14. James Kelman, "*And the Judges Said...*": *Essays* (London: Vintage, 2003), 63.
15. Kelman, *And the Judges Said...*, 70–71.
16. Kelman, *And the Judges Said...*, 58.
17. Kelman, *And the Judges Said...*, 59.
18. Kelman, *And the Judges Said...*, 40.
19. Craig Cairns, "Resisting Arrest: James Kelman," in *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams*, edited by Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 108–109.
20. Craig Cairns, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 102.
21. Cairns, *Modern Scottish Novel*, 103.
22. Kelman, *How Late*, 37.
23. See Craig Cairns, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996).
24. Scott Hames, *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution: Voice, Class, Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 268.
25. Hames, *Literary Politics*, 288.
26. Scott Hames, "Kelman's Art Speech," in *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*, 86.
27. Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.
28. Hutchinson, 6.
29. Hutchinson, 12.
30. Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1999), 13.
31. Kelman, *How Late*, 52.
32. Kelly, *James Kelman*, 165.
33. Kelman, *How Late*, 369.
34. Kelman, *How Late*, 1.
35. Kelman, *How Late*, 1.
36. Scott Hames, "Eyeless in Glasgow: James Kelman's Existential Milton," *Contemporary Literature* 50, 3 (2009): 506.
37. Kelman, *How Late*, 11.
38. Kelman, *How Late*, 9–10.
39. Kelman, *How Late*, 17.

**Abstract**

Late, but Timely:

James Kelman's Reappraisal of Modernism

Keeping in mind the inherent power plays between “central” and “peripheral” literariness summoned by Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late*, my essay attempts an examination of the ways in which the novel recasts the tropes and conventions of “high modernism” as tools for political affirmation and generic reappraisal. Kelman's stylistic and narrative choices do not only perform the task that has mainly been attributed to him, that of providing a voice to the dispossessed, but also pose implicit questions about the role narrative conventions play in the reader's interpretative habits, and of fiction's political and ethical impact on the world. Most importantly, however, I will investigate the notion of “lateness” present in the novel's title as the repository of modernism's conflation of dystopian disintegration and (impossible) utopian hope, and Kelman's main tool for appropriating and reevaluating literary tradition.

**Keywords**

modernism, lateness, working class fiction, literary ethics, literary politics