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Disrupting the City: Urban Cris(e)s in Contemporary British Literature and Art
'Historicizing Disruption: Past & Future'

Focalisation, Flight and *flânerie*: James Kelman's *How Late It Was,* *How Late* and the crime novel

Focalisation, fuite et flânerie : How Late it Was, How Late de James Kelman et le roman policier

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Résumés

English Français

This paper analyses James Kelman's 1994 novel *How Late It Was, How Late* through the prism of the crime novel and the figure of the *flâneur*. The novel revolves around Sammy, a Glaswegian criminal with a fondness for 'wandering', and who loses his sight after a violent encounter with the police. We argue that Sammy's sight loss can be seen as emblematic of the dispossession experienced by marginalised working-class people whom the surveillance state seeks to supervise at every turn. Moreover, the novel's peculiar third-person focalisation, in which we seem to inhabit the point of view of the protagonist without having full access to his secrets, implicates the reader in the very systems of surveillance from which Sammy is seeking to take flight. Moreover, in exploring how language is policed and dictated by the state, the novel seemed to anticipate some of the controversies attending its Booker Prize victory, especially as concerns its urban demotic and gritty subject matter. Sammy is a blind *flâneur* trapped in a Kafkaesque carceral society which has transformed the once-familiar city streets into a labyrinth. We therefore argue that *How Late It Was, How Late* is less a work of urban realism than a self-reflexive reworking of the crime novel.



Cet article analyse le roman de James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994), à travers le prisme du roman policier et de la figure du flâneur. Le roman tourne autour de Sammy, un

criminel glaswegien qui a un penchant pour la flânerie (« wandering ») et qui perd la vue après une rencontre violente avec la police. Nous explorons comment l'aveuglement de Sammy peut être considéré comme emblématique de la dépossession vécue par les personnes marginalisées de la classe ouvrière, surveillées à tout moment par l'état. Nous constatons que la focalisation interne sur Sammy, selon laquelle nous semblons habiter son point de vue sans avoir un accès complet à ses secrets, implique le lecteur dans les mêmes systèmes de surveillance auxquels Sammy cherche à s'échapper. En outre, en explorant la manière dont le langage est contrôlé et dicté par l'état, le roman semble anticiper certaines des controverses qui ont accompagné sa victoire au Booker Prize, notamment en ce qui concerne sa démotique urbaine et le milieu défavorisé auquel se déroule le récit. Sammy est un flâneur aveugle piégé dans une société carcérale kafkaïenne qui a transformé les rues de la ville, autrefois familières, en labyrinthe. Nous constatons donc que *How Late It Was, How Late* est moins une œuvre de réalisme urbain qu'une réécriture autoréflexive du roman policier.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : carceral, crime, detective, flâneur, focalisation, Kelman, labyrinth, crime novel, surveillance, urban, hardboiled, Tartan noir

Texte intégral

- 1 James Kelman's Booker-prize winning novel *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994) is centred on a Glaswegian criminal with alleged connections to political violence. Sammy loses his sight—and, it seems, some of his memory—after a violent encounter with members of the city police constabulary. Forced to negotiate an urban environment that is characterised by Kafkaesque bureaucracy and multifarious surveillance, Sammy refuses to yield to police pressure to reveal his whereabouts on the 'lost' Saturday night, seeking anonymity in another city.
- 2 With a tightly focalised point of view and gritty vernacular, the novel adopts a forceful working-class perspective. Sammy's marginality and blindness can be seen to signify a broader social discourse in the novel about who has the right to *see* and, by extension, to *represent* the city. However, beyond questions of authenticity and social class, there also emerges a playful engagement with the crime novel and figure of the *flâneur*. With a professed love for 'wandering' (Kelman 285), Sammy seeks the 'obliteration of the individual's traces in the big-city crowd' that Walter Benjamin saw as the 'origin of the detective story' (43). Moreover, Sammy's flight from state surveillance is mirrored by his flight from the reader's desire for knowledge, thereby manoeuvring us into a figure of pursuit in a labyrinth that is as much textual as it is urban. Disrupting any preconception of Kelman's work as urban realism, *How Late it Was, How Late* emerges instead as a reworking of the crime novel that shares many common motifs with the 'metaphysical' detective story.

Urban Voices, Self-reflexivity and the Crime Novel

- 3 *How Late It Was, How Late* (henceforth referred to as *How Late*) begins with Sammy awakening on the street from a night of heavy drinking before instigating a fight with men he assumes to be undercover police officers. The resulting beating reduces Sammy to blindness but, having spent most of his adult life in prison, and being jobless, he gets little sympathy from either the police or the various agencies to which he



appeals for help. He finds himself in a bureaucratic bind whereby he cannot prove his blindness to the authorities to claim disability benefits without making a claim of compensation against the police, a claim he is unwilling to make.

4 It is well documented that the novel caused outrage upon winning the Booker Prize in 1994, with one of the jury members even breaking ranks to call the novel 'frankly . . . crap', 'deeply inaccessible', and its victory a 'disgrace' (Sharkey 46). Simon Jenkins, reviewing the novel in *The Times* newspaper, famously called Kelman 'an illiterate savage', who had simply transcribed 'the rambling thoughts of a blind Glaswegian drunk' (Wood 2014). Much of the criticism centred on the novel's abundant swearing but often veered into elitist sneering about what constituted a milieu fit for literary treatment. *How Late* is after all an unapologetically *urban* novel: one of betting shops and housing schemes, dodgy pubs and stolen goods.

5 With its tough language and criminal milieu, some have noted that 'Kelman's fiction has a noirish tint' but 'detached from the narrative mechanics of the abnormal event and its investigation' (Hames 2015, 1). Yet Kelman has seemed keen to distance himself from the 'tartan noir' genre of Scottish crime fiction which was originally 'coined by [US crime writer] James Ellroy to describe the work of Ian Rankin', and is considered to be a 'fusion of US hard-boiled fiction with the political and cultural specificity of Scotland in the late twentieth century' (McGuire 27). Indeed, in 2009 Kelman launched a notorious broadside at the Scottish literary scene, claiming that if the country were responsible for awarding the Nobel prize for literature it would go to 'a writer of fucking detective fiction' (Flood 2009). A thinly veiled attack on the author of the Inspector Rebus novels, this was despite the fact that Rankin has cited Kelman as an influence.¹ And yet *How Late* is an urban crime novel of a kind, with Sammy portrayed by the police as a 'a hotshot' (Kelman 210) with a 'reputation' and a 'mean man in a corner' (167). Sammy refuses to let them intimidate him with threats to put him back in prison, musing to himself that the cops 'think they're walking down the mean streets of New York or some fucking place, Chicago, they're all fucking Al Pacinos, Humphrey Bogart man ye know what I'm talking about' (Kelman 190).

6 Tartan or not, *How Late* shares what noir pioneer Raymond Chandler called in 1950 a 'revolutionary debunking of both the language and the material of fiction' (Chandler 103), that took longer to arrive in the detective genre than in other literary modes. Chandler's *noir* was in part a reaction to the crime novel of Agatha Christie which, as Dennis Porter argued, 'took its own vernacular for the norm of correct English speech and . . . found it necessary to put the speech of farm laborers, shopkeepers, and cockneys into quotation marks' (Porter 135). Kelman has spoken of a similar project in his fiction, highlighting the fact that 'the Scottish voice would always be in the dialogue and never form a nationality in itself' (Gray 571). He breaks down these conventions not only through experimentation with phonetic transcription, but also, as David Leishman explains, a 'militant rejection' of the rules of punctuation which 'establish lines of demarcation between different utterances and their respective levels of language' (Leishman 126). Incidentally, Kelman's fiction was first published in the U.S. where 'greater acceptance of writing in nonstandard English has helped Scottish writers gain legitimacy back in Britain' (Pitchford 721).

7 Hardboiled notably gave crime 'back to the kind of people that commit it' but 'had style' despite being 'in a language not supposed to be capable of such refinements' (Chandler 104). The style in *How Late* has been the subject of serious academic enquiry, with many scholars focusing on the artistry in the novel's orality. Rather than 'ventriloquise an unselfconscious "oral culture" engaged in "natural" verbal activity' (Hames 2010, 91), it has been argued that Kelman's departure from standard English is ultimately estranging because it 'foregrounds its own materiality' (89). From



the novel's opening passages, in which *nobody* reads 'naybody' and *wasn't* becomes 'wasnay' (Kelman 2), we are confronted with an idiolect which draws attention to itself in a way that 'blocks and reverses our normal habit of effacing the level of words as we reconstruct the world of the text' (McHale 148), a characteristic often associated not with realism but postmodernism.

8 The novel's self-reflexive touches are not limited to its use of non-standard English. They are also apparent on a thematic level and seem to anticipate the Booker controversy and even comment upon it in specifically class terms. In one of his encounters with officialdom, Sammy complains that 'these middle-class bastards. . . talk to ye and ye're allowed to reply but ye cannay speak unless spoken to' (Kelman 216). Various state agencies deny him the right to respond to his situation in his own idiom. This is made ironic in a comment by a doctor who, having examined him, announces: 'in respect of the visual stimuli presented it would appear that you were unable to respond' (Kelman 219). Sammy is indeed unable to respond: he is rendered speechless on learning there is no objective way that he can prove his blindness.

9 This kind of jargon or 'mock-bureaucratic, . . . legalistic register' (Shanks 12) is part of the novel's class-conscious play of language that many of its early critics chose to ignore, as if the writer was unable to express himself in anything other than expletives and unpunctuated sentences. Anticipating the controversy over the use of language in *How Late*, Sammy is 'co-opted into talking by agencies which he knows will use his speech against him' and 'mediates and regulates' his own statements (Gardiner 105). When registering for disability benefit at the Department of Social Security, for example, Sammy realises that everything he says is being typed into a computer database. Wanting to revise what he thought was an off-the-record remark about the police giving him 'a doing', he is told he can only 'clarify' but not delete it, and is manoeuvred into using a euphemism: namely that the officers had used 'physical restraints' (Kelman 103).

Blindness, Focalisation and Walking in Sammy's Shoes

10 *How Late* is characterised by what Gérard Genette called *fixed internal focalisation*, where 'we almost never leave the point of view' (Genette 189) of the principal character. Yet, as we will see, joining Sammy's perspective is never a straightforward process, and is intertwined with a broader questioning of seeing, surveillance and who controls both public space and discourse. This is particularly evident in the emergence in the novel of a figure called Ally. Claiming to be a 'rep' who promises to help Sammy with a compensation claim against the police in exchange for a third of the winnings, Ally is an ambiguous character because like Sammy we cannot 'see' him and must take him (or not) on his word. He claims to work as a 'representative' or 'rep' of compensation claimants, but is not fully 'represented' in the novel. As Sammy speculates, he could instead 'represent' the police or other state agencies, working for them as a spy or 'spook' (Kelman 231). Indeed, his name is suggestive: is Ally in fact an *ally* at all?

11 That Ally wants to 'represent' Sammy fits a broader discourse about the agency allowed to marginalised people to represent themselves in their own language. As Sammy tells Ally, 'There's a difference between repping somebody and fucking being somebody' (Kelman 241). Echoing the manner in which working-class Scottish voices in literature were confined to the dialogue, subjugated in a system of linguistic hierarchies,



Ally tries to seize 'control of the language, rules, and perspective by which Sammy will be represented' (Hames 2009, 515). The irony of the upset caused by the swearing in the novel is underlined by Ally's own attempts to rein in Sammy's tongue: 'ye're gony have to watch yer language', he tells Sammy, 'every second word's fuck. . . ye'll see I try to keep an eye on the auld words' (Kelman 238). Ally's attempts to get Sammy to compromise and play by the official rules ultimately fails, reflective of Kelman's own refusal to compromise his values and vision.

12 Keeping 'an eye on the auld words' also has a self-reflexive irony, recalling both the agents of state surveillance who seek to police and transcribe his speech, and Sammy's own control (or lack thereof) over his own narrative. There are also questions about Sammy's reliability and the extent to which we are privy to his consciousness. As Ally himself says about the difficulty of proving Sammy's compensation claim: 'naybody can jump inside yer head and take a look and go: Alright, the guy's blind' (Kelman 235). Indeed, the actual state of being blind is not described in any great detail in the novel, opening up an uncertainty that is compounded by many acts of evasion on Sammy's part. He often has to wrestle his thoughts away from a particular subject not only as a means of avoiding painful truths but also, apparently, of hiding things from the reader: 'There were things ye didnay want to think about cause . . . ye just fucking couldnay man' (Kelman 268).

13 And yet to emphasise Sammy's control over his own story is perhaps to simplify the narrative situation. Concerning the aforementioned police beating, for example, there is a final sense of looking away as he is chased into a dead end, at which point there is a deliberate elision: 'But ye're as well drawing a curtain here', we are told, 'nay point prolonging the agony' (Kelman 6). As Scott Hames illustrated, this is a reference to another Sammy, namely Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, who famously became 'eyeless in Gaza' (Hames 2009, 497) having had his eyes put out. But who exactly is 'drawing the curtain' is unclear, and there are various suggestions of possible authorial intrusion that problematise the novel's purportedly tight focalisation. The way Kelman seems to merge third person narrative and interior monologue is characterised by 'ambiguity and indeterminacy' (Shanks 10), most explicitly when Sammy's train of thought is apparently interrupted and superseded by another voice, albeit one sharing his vernacular:

Okay, cutting a long story short here. . . . The guy was fuckt I mean put it that way, he was fuckt, there's nay sense prolonging it? If ye're wanting to play fair: alright? let it go, fucking let it go, a wee bit of privacy, . . . ye give the guy a break... (Kelman 51)

14 Again, we might wonder who is this figure who intercedes on Sammy's behalf to stop 'prolonging' Sammy's misery. The appeal to a 'wee bit of privacy' is particularly telling, complicating the reader's position vis-à-vis the narrative. We are not given all the information such a tightly focalised narrative might suggest. Yet, as we will see, the restrictions put on us as readers are among the aspects that give the novel its structure of mystery.

15 Another problematising facet of the focalisation is the frequent recourse to the second person 'ye' for 'you' instead of 'he'. Not only is it a phonetic transcription of the vernacular 'you' but also a kind of amalgamation of 'you' and 'he'. Indeed, it is the very word that opens the novel: 'Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering you; these thoughts; . . . the words filling yer head' (Kelman 1). Here the disappearing body anticipates Sammy's blindness, as do the 'smothering' thoughts that fill 'yer head', which seem to describe the reader's claustrophobic inhabiting of Sammy's point of view. As Simon Kövesi argues, this is part



of the novel's project to make Sammy a social creature, instead of the bourgeois individualist 'I', which 'might not be inclusive', [and] cannot be immediately and stylistically social, nor indeed socialist' (Kövesi 128–129). 'Ye' might thus be seen as encompassing the reader, seeking to 'generalize [Sammy's] condition' by making of the reader a 'potential addressee' who has 'known the same feeling' (Pitchford 705). And yet there is a playful element to this; no doubt Kelman was aware how some readers might recoil from this 'smothering' sense of kinship or identification, as evidenced by the revulsion felt by many critics at the time of its publication.

- 16 If the novel 'tries to put us "in his shoes"' (Kövesi 138), this inhabitation is allegorised by the fact that Sammy has in fact woken up in someone else's trainers. However, Sammy complains throughout the narrative about the discomfort of this ill-fitting, unstylish footwear: 'whose fucking shoes were they they werenay fucking his, that was a certainty' (Kelman 10). Inhabiting Sammy's world has its limits, it is suggested, as further symbolised by his blindness. Kelman seems to invite us into Sammy's shoes while simultaneously reminding us of the conceit by asking us give him a 'wee bit of privacy'. Denying Sammy his 'eye/I' is thus part of a broader discourse in the novel about who has the right to observe and to represent the working-class urban experience (one borne out by the hostile reaction to Kelman's Booker win). This interrogation is linked, as we will now see, to the problematic notion of observation as a form of social control.

Flight from Supervision

- 17 Subject to investigation over his connections to union boss ('a convenor of shop stewards', Kelman 201) Charlie Barr, Sammy is reluctant to say anything to the police of their encounter the night before his beating. The nature of Charlie Barr's activities remains vague: we learn that both his and Sammy's 'faythers, they palled about. . . . Politically, whatever' (Kelman 308). There is a suggestion of radicalism for which Glasgow was once infamous, but the details are scarce, not least because Sammy is not only reluctant to tell the police, but also the reader. The political dimension is significant, however, showing a further level of engagement with the crime novel. Indeed, in his social history of the detective story, Marxist critic Ernest Mandel identified the conflation of 'the rebellious proletariat with the 'criminal classes' (an expression that crops up repeatedly in popular Anglo-Saxon detective stories)' (Mandel 44). Although we learn about Sammy's prior involvement in robberies ('an extra body making up for a guy that was no longer available', Kelman 138), one convoluted reminiscence of his criminal activities is sharply elided with another reference to *Samson Agonistes*: 'nay point prolonging the agony' (Kelman 143). Charlie Barr, on the other hand, does not feature in these recollections and is thus literally a 'bar' to knowledge, the secrecy around him one of the novel's enduring mysteries.
- 18 Also inconclusive and more sinister is what has happened to Sammy's girlfriend, Helen. The police suggest that she has 'disappeared in highly suspicious circumstances' (Kelman 184), but seem more interested in tormenting Sammy about it than investigating. There is a sense that the investigation into Charlie Barr's and Helen's disappearances are somehow connected, and it is not clear whether Sammy knows more about it than he claims. 'if something bad had happened man ye had to start asking yerself', he speculates at one stage, 'if like she was dead or something if somebody had done her in man ye had to say it' (Kelman 174). There follows a couple of sentences which are missing punctuation and end without any continuity, as if they were part of a recorded transcript of someone stopping short of confession. Is Sammy refusing to talk



to the police about Helen's disappearance because he is afraid of Charlie? He 'didnay want Charlie knowing' (Kelman 208) that he had even been interviewed.

- 19 Sammy claims the Saturday preceding the beginning of the narrative was 'a blank' (Kelman 21). Indeed, the figure of 'the amnesiac' has been used as a premise for a number of innovative crime stories in which the individual whose memory has been erased 'brings together two functions of the detective story: the detective and the corpse', being 'simultaneously the one who advances and the one who blocks the story' (Botta 218). This chimes with Simon Kövesi's argument that *How Late* is 'a socially-upended detective novel' in which:

. . . 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 . . . do the detective work, if indeed we have a policeman's impulse to get to 'the truth' (Kövesi 146).

- 20 We cannot, however, take all Sammy's claims about amnesia at face value. Nor does he always try to 'fill in that blank space'. The revelations that do come are less due to police enquiry than his apparent failure to stop his mind 'going off at tangents' (Kelman 81) and his efforts to rein in 'things he didnay want to think about' (Kelman 155). The fact that Sammy is a criminal and has suffered sight loss is vital to the novel's engagement with the detective genre since, as D.A. Miller argued, such narratives often entail 'a power play' which is 'always implicitly punning on the detective's brilliant *super-vision* and the police *supervision* that it embodies' (35). If Sammy is the subject of 'supervision/super-vision', where does that leave the reader? In seeking full access to Sammy's secrets, are we made complicit in some way? Could, as Nicola Pitchford argues, the novel 'implicate the reader's desire for total disclosure in the larger systems of surveillance that Sammy is trying to escape' (706)?

- 21 The watching figure of the reader is arguably allegorised in the novel by a spectral presence Sammy senses when he is supposedly alone, one he refers to variously as his 'guardian angel' (Kelman 260) and 'goodie ghost' (Kelman 326). Sammy initially encounters this figure after losing his bearings on his way home from the bus stop:

Somebody was walking beside him. He stopped suddenly. Nothing. He carried on. The somebody was with him. So he stopped again; again suddenly. The somebody stopped beside him. . . . He was gony say something but at the same time he didnay, because there would be nay cunt there. (Kelman 254)

- 22 Eventually Sammy rediscovers his sense of direction and finds his way out of the urban labyrinth, grateful for the intervention of this seemingly benign presence. Although he admits to himself that there was nobody *really* there, he distinguishes between the 'goodie ghost' that 'got him out of trouble' and 'these evil bastards dogging yer footsteps all the time' (Kelman 326), namely the surveillance state. Who could the 'goodie ghost' be? Is it the reader who merges 'he' with 'you' to become 'ye', or rather the author, discretely pulling the strings?

- 23 The surveillance to which Sammy is subjected extends beyond the police to the agencies to which he must appeal to register his blindness. He imagines the doctor who examines him, for example, 'studying Sammy over the top of his reading specs' (Kelman 217). Sammy's paranoia at being watched is evident from the opening passages in which he gets into a fight with police 'who are themselves in plainclothes but easily recognized by their eyes' (Hames 2009, 3). It seems that Sammy has been identified for membership of the so-called criminal classes all his life, expressed in the novel in optical terms. In a recollection of his early years, he tells us: 'it's like when ye're a wean at school and there's this old woman teacher who takes it serious when



you . . . are having a laugh and . . . suddenly she looked straight at ye and ye can tell she knows the score' (Kelman 12). In these encounters, we appreciate that the state systems of surveillance extend, as D.A. Miller suggested, 'from obviously disciplinary institutions (such as the prison) to institutions officially determined by 'other' functions (such as the school) down to the tiniest practices of everyday social life' (18).

24 When asked by the police about the 'lost' Saturday night, he claims that he can only remember 'patches' (Kelman 161). Asked to elaborate, Sammy hesitates, noticing that the 'guy doing the keyboard had also stopped. They were waiting' (Kelman 161). As with his appointment at Health and Welfare, during which his comments are transcribed, the 'guy at the keyboard' taking note of everything he says seems both to stand for the surveillance system according to which nothing he utters is 'off record' and also, self-reflexively, the author. Yet Sammy does not yield fully to this process; the patches and blanks will remain as such so long as he does not articulate them.

25 Sammy's blindness is analogous to entrapment in a carceral system whereby, in Michel Foucault's words, 'one is totally seen, without ever seeing' (202). For Foucault, the surveillance state was the expansion of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison design in which 'full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap' (200). This sense of entrapment is evoked clearly in an early passage in which Sammy awakens from his drunken slumber to find people crowding over him, watching: 'These eyes looking. Terrible brightness and he had to shield his own cause of it, they were like godly figures and the light coming from them was godly or something but it must just have been the sun high behind them shining down ower their shoulders' (Kelman 2).

26 The theme of the carceral runs throughout the novel, with Sammy recalling both his experiences in prison and a sense of the world around him becoming like a penitentiary. He refers variously to feeling 'hemmed in' (Kelman 133), 'surrounded' (317), 'cornered' (242) and being 'closed in very very quick' (273). We are reminded again of the origins of the detective story, the 'threadlike causal organization' of which 'favors stories of entrapment' (Miller 30). While Sammy's blindness 'meant he was more trapped' (Kelman 189), the novel forces us to share Sammy's point of view; itself claustrophobically prison-like. Yet there are seemingly parts of Sammy's mind we cannot reach, which manoeuvres us into the uncomfortable position of sharing the police's desire for knowledge. Rather than Sammy's guardian angel, perhaps after all we are just another one of 'these evil bastards dogging yer footsteps all the time' (Kelman 326).

27 Tellingly, Sammy's flight from the surveillance apparatus is expressed in optical terms such as being 'out of sight out of mind' (Kelman 140) and 'invisible' (140), and that he is preparing 'to vanish' (331). Indeed, the final passages detail his apparent departure from Glasgow in terms that might suggest a prison escape², ending with his disappearance in a taxi, 'out of sight' (Kelman 374). And yet once again we are manoeuvred into the position of the watching figure from which Sammy must ultimately also take flight.

***Flâneurie*, 'metaphysical' detectives and the urban labyrinth**

28  As a member of the so-called criminal classes, Sammy is not welcome on the Glasgow streets in which he expresses a fondness for what he calls 'wandering': 'Sammy had aye liked wandering. . . . he loved it, the auld wandering' (Kelman 285). Being blind, Sammy

tells us elsewhere, negates this freedom not only because of the obvious fact there 'there's nay point wandering if ye cannay see fuck all' but also because 'ye dont go out unless ye're going someplace, someplace in particular' (Kelman 126). This reminds us that in Walter Benjamin's vision of the *flâneur*, the street walker was essentially a leisured idler who became socially useful, through the early detective stories of Edgar Allan Poe, by becoming a sleuth: 'If the *flâneur* is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer' (40–41). That Sammy has lost his eyesight is thus doubly significant: he is a *flâneur* who cannot justify his idleness through his observations of society. Moreover, he is reduced to 'getting from a. to b.' (Kelman 260), and thus less likely to be accused of 'loitering with intent' (Kelman 44). The 'protocols and procedures' of state bureaucracy, Sammy complains, are 'all designed to stop ye breathing, to grind ye to a halt; ye've no to wander and ye've not to breathe' (Kelman 321).

29 As Benjamin explained, *flânerie* was the activity of a bourgeoisie which had 'endeavoured to compensate itself for the inconsequential nature of private life in the big city' (46) by transforming street walking among urban crowds into 'a new subject in lyric poetry' (60). As a member of the 'criminal classes', Sammy has no such luxury, as emphasised and allegorised by his blindness. For Baudelaire, the *flâneur* also wished 'to remain hidden from the world' but, rather than someone who 'rejoices in his incognito' in 'the heart of the multitude' (97), Sammy is confronted with a defamiliarised urban landscape and finds instead the panoptical gaze of society turned against him.

30 Sammy's loss of freedom to wander is allegorised from the novel's first page when he awakens to discover that 'he was wearing an auld pair of trainer shoes' instead of his 'leathers' (Kelman 1). He suspects a friend, ironically nicknamed 'the Leg', of having drunkenly taken his shoes while at someone's house over the lost weekend. In one passage he asks a passer-by for help crossing the road and describes being 'led down off the pavement and [. . .] trying to find his feet, . . . but he couldnay do the pace, dictate it' (Kelman 53). Not only is he wearing someone else's shoes, he has been forced to walk at a pace dictated by others, stripped of his right to 'set out on the wander' (Kelman 325).

31 The once familiar Glasgow neighbourhoods are transformed into a labyrinth from which he can only escape with the help of his 'guardian angel'. He 'didnay seem to be getting anywhere', he remarks at one stage, 'maybe he was fucking going in circles' (Kelman 128). Robbed of his sight and his 'leathers', he must negotiate the urban landscape partly by touch, feeling the surfaces with what he describes as 'patacakes' (Kelman 38). Despite this 'defamiliarising of the familiar urban landscape' (Kövesi 143) and the frequent, unwanted detours, Sammy is driven to 'push ahead, ye move, ye just move' (Kelman 46).

32 Thus, *How Late* could also be viewed as a 'metaphysical' detective story which was a largely post-war rereading of the genre. Among the subgenre's tropes are: 'the world, city, or text as labyrinth'; 'the missing person, the 'man of the crowd,' the double, and the lost, stolen, or exchanged identity'; and 'the absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation' (Merivale and Sweeney 8). As we have already seen, there are some unusual hints of exchanged identity in the novel, notably Sammy's awakening in someone else's shoes. Indeed, his 'absent "leathers"' are a 'prologue to a novel of vanishings' (Craig 83) for which there is no *kind of closure*: namely, the *missing person* cases that include Charlie and Helen, as well as Sammy's eyesight and the details of the preceding weekend. The labyrinth, meanwhile, was a common way to describe large urban sprawls in 19th century literature and especially early detective fiction.³ Moreover, as Kate Summerscale explains, it was often



also used to describe the complex plotting of such mystery stories⁴:

The word 'clue' derives from 'clew', meaning a ball of thread or yarn. It had come to mean 'that which points the way' because of the Greek myth in which Theseus uses a ball of yarn . . . to find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth. . . . A plot was a knot, and a story ended in a 'denouement', an unknitting. . . . (68)

33 Sammy's labyrinth is both mental and physical but there is no unknitting of the novel's clues; indeed, in its lack of (dis)closure the novel could be seen as a 'text as labyrinth'. In this respect *How Late* shares much with writers with the greatest influence over the metaphysical detective story genre such as Borges and Robbe-Grillet, but also, 'the writer to whom they both owe their greatest debt, Kafka' (Porter 248). For Kafka, Dennis Porter argues, 'the labyrinth is the presiding metaphor for human experience' (Porter 248). Amongst Kafka's works it is probably *The Trial* which exerted the most obvious influence on Kelman's writing, a novel in which 'Kafka projects the nightmare vision of the law itself as a labyrinth' (Porter 248). The dead ends of the unhelpful state institutions in Kelman's novel are mirrored by the blind alleys of Glasgow's streets in which Sammy finds himself closed in against the 'tenement wall . . . feeling the grit, the brick' and often 'going naywhere, naywhere' (Kelman 37).

34 If inhabiting Sammy's perspective can be claustrophobically prison-like, it is fitting that the labyrinth in which Sammy finds himself is as much psychological as urban. Sammy not only struggles to 'dictate' the 'pace' (Kelman 53) of his own wanderings, he attempts to do so with his mind: 'no letting the head wander. Which was a problem, ye kept going off at tangents; yer mind. . . . Ye just stuck by it, yer plan, yer map, if ye've mapped things out' (Kelman 81). Sammy does not share his map with the reader, nor does he leave a thread of clues/clews to unravel. There is a good argument to be made, then, that Sammy's apparently successful disappearance 'out of sight' at the end of the novel is not only an escape from the surveillance apparatus but also from the gaze of the reader whose desire for disclosure is not wholly satisfied. Again, we are forced to reflect upon whether we represent for Sammy a 'guardian angel' or one of the 'evil bastards'. This is apparent in one passage in which he attempts to navigate himself out of the labyrinth:

Sammy was down and walking, his hands outstretched to find the wall; when he turned to his left and along till he found the close. There was footsteps ahead of him and then halfway down the close there was footsteps from behind; these bastards tailing him probably. (Kelman 211)

35 Sammy feels pursued through the streets even when he is most ostensibly alone. Passages like this one in the novel recall another trope of the 'metaphysical' detective story, 'The Man of the Crowd'. For Walter Benjamin, Edgar Allan Poe's famous short story which was:

like the X-ray picture of a detective story. In it, the drapery represented by crime has disappeared. The mere armature has remained: the pursuer, the crowd, and an unknown man who arranges his walk through London in such a way that he always remains in the middle of the crowd. This unknown man is the *flâneur*. (Benjamin 48)

36 That Kelman was explicitly alluding to, and experimenting with, Benjamin's *flâneur* is also evident in Sammy's desire for anonymity. Sammy is too well-known in Glasgow and seeks to disappear into the multitudes much as the *Man of the Crowd* does in Poe's short story, which, for Walter Benjamin, was the 'original social content of the detective story'; namely, 'the obliteration of the individual's traces in the big-city crowd' (Benjamin 43). At one time Sammy expresses his admiration at the fact that, in London,



as 'soon as ye step down onto the ground; everybody merges into the scenery, no looking at one another. And then you're anonymous. . . . that was what it was all about, getting fucking anonymous' (Kelman 255).

Conclusion

37 While, through inner focalisation, Sammy's narrative begins with an expressed hope that his 'body will disappear', the state apparatus seeks to transcribe his speech into text that cannot be erased, photograph him and cajole him into taking legal representation: all of which entails a formal inscription of the individual. He has to seek anonymity in a different city because he finds himself cornered by a bureaucratic and legal labyrinth made literal by his blindness: turning once familiar streets into a maze-like prison. Sammy seeks flight from a society in which his wandering is reduced to a pace and path dictated by others: presumably where he can be best watched by the authorities. Despite the novel's fixed internal focalisation, we are both trapped in Sammy's perspective but also doubly trapped by his refusal to submit himself fully to our desire for disclosure, a desire that finally forces us to question our own position in a system of power relations and class hierarchies.

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Notes

- 1 Ian RANKIN has written, for example: 'I'd grown up thinking books had to be written in Standard English. The writings of James Kelman had shown me this needn't be the case' (52).
- 2 See, for example: 'It's like cops and robbers this int it! he said, stupit carry on. Mind you but if ye do see somebody . . . suspicious, anybody, give me a shout' (KELMAN 363).
- 3 See, for example, Arthur CONAN DOYLE's Sherlock Holmes novel 'The Sign of the Four': 'our cab dashed on, and was soon involved in a labyrinth of streets . . . interminable lines of new, staring brick buildings—the monster tentacles which the giant city was throwing out into the country' (108–109).
- 4 See, for example, Wilkie COLLINS's *The Moonstone*: 'I began to feel that I might trust Mr Murthwaite to lead me blindfold through the last windings of the labyrinth, along which he had guided me thus far' (336).

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