THE AULD BOLLOCKS: JAMES KELMAN’S MASTURBATORS

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What a pile of fucking shite! What a pile of absolute gibbers! The very idea that such forms of conflict can be resolved! This is straight bourgeois intellectual wank. These liberal fucking excesses taken to the very limits of fucking hyping hypocritical tollie

The materialist critic reading James Kelman very quickly encounters a dilemma. How is it that this prose, so careful and ethically engaged, so alive to the challenges and demands of feminist critique, has been read by almost all its interlocutors, friend as much as conservative foe, as depressing and dispiriting? If, in Carole Jones’ words, “the masculine condition in the contemporary period” is Kelman’s “enduring subject,” then this is a subject that seems, on the evidence so far, to have produced almost wholly negative responses in its readers. The lonely men, so often single and jobless, of Kelman’s housing estates and working-class suburbs stand, in so much criticism, as symbols of historic defeat and disempowerment. Scott Hames, one of Kelman’s most insightful critics, describes his vision of post-industrial masculinity as “historically pessimistic.” “Kelman,” J D MacArthur argues, “wishes to portray a world view which is nihilistic and despairing […] where isolation is the norm,” while Cairns Craig describes his as a fictional world in which there is “no hope of transformation.” What value for an ethical criticism, then, if the readers programmed by such

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prose seem so universally glum? Where might we find utopian promise, re-programming, our ‘own portion of space’ and possible transformation? While not all critics focussing on Kelman’s ‘historically pessimistic’ vision do so with a view to masculinity, the two terms cannot easily be prized apart: the era of ‘no gods and precious few heroes’ is also that of the crisis of the ‘traditional’ subject of proletarian radicalism, until now figured as male, blue collar, and straight.5

It is against this critical backdrop that the full value of Carole Jones’ criticism becomes apparent. Jones, through a series of bravura interventions, has re-cast the terms of debate for feminist criticism of the Scottish novel and, with considerable originality and verve, provides us with a new lens with which to view Kelman’s challenge, and achievement. Few critics have been as attentive as Jones to the complexity of the contradictions and tensions at work in Scottish masculinity, itself an “infuriatingly knotted national trope not easily unravelled,” and to Kelman’s place within this ideological field.6 Kelman’s characters, for Jones, “represent an ambivalent engagement with masculinity that questions traditional ideas of male identity.” If “masculinised Scottishness stands in dread of feminised weakness” then Kelman’s representations of masculinity – his anxious, sick, passive and worried men – are ones that “appear to forgo hegemonic masculinity.”7 Where other critics find despair and depression, Jones draws our attention to a programmatic, and sustained, attempt to think – and represent – a maleness or masculinity developed outside, and against, patriarchal stereotypes and models.

Kelman’s masterpiece *How late it was, how late* is, for Jones, something of an exemplary text, and her reading identifies the Booker-prize winning novel as at once critiquing, and complicit in, the masculine order. “Male identity” is a “crucial site of conflict in Kelman’s writing”,

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and *How late it was, how late* is charged with “contradictory political currents.” How *late it was, how late* is, on Jones’ account, “a text that resists visibility;” Kelman is “resisting the repositioning of the white male back at the privileged centre of culture” and is “resisting any stabilising of identity” around that White Male figure. Sammy Samuels, *How late it was, how late*’s hero, is the victim of a blinding beating at the hands of the police and, like the Miltonic Samson to whom he is a literary response, stands in for a kind of anti-masculinity, and his departure at the end of the novel – “that was him, out of sight” – is “an attempt to disappear from the dominant discourse, to become invisible and refute identity.” Sammy, in the novel’s opening lines, is introduced by the narrator: “ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear.” This “hoping”, on Jones’ reading, is both an ethical longing – to erase the body that has for so long dominated social representation – and a way of registering the damage masculinist ideologies have caused: “Kelman’s fictions”, for Jones, “admit the pain and strangeness of embodiment for men and articulate a yearning for a derealisation, a dematerialisation of the male subject.” Sammy’s dreams, then, are a resistance to masculine presence and a longing for its erasure:

Sleep. Fucking amazing so it is. There ye are all wrapped up in yer own body, snug as fuck. Ye lie there like there’s nothing else exists in the world. Ye don’t fucking want anything else to exist. That’s how ye need to get away from it; cause if ye don’t get away from it then ye willnay cope; the only fucking way to cope is by disappearing for six or seven hours out of every twenty-four. That’s how ye survive, nay other fucking way.
Sammy’s view of sleep as a coping mechanism exposes, of course, the contradiction at the heart of the strategy of disappearance: if this is an attempt at invisibility it is also one which sustains and, like sleep, replenishes the very body it aims to move away from. Could these be meditations on the body more generally? Perhaps, but the texture of Kelman’s writing – and the fidelity of his narrators to their male protagonists’ views and outlooks – primes us to read this as a reflection on a specifically masculine disappearance. Kelman’s meditations on the male body, and on his characters’ “inability to escape or transcend the material realm,” manages to be at once the most searching critique of Scottish masculinity we have to hand and yet also, as is so often the case in these situations, itself remains within the logic and imagery of the very ideology being critiqued. Kelman’s representations “produce yet resist identity, produce yet resist the material existence of the male body.”

There is much to admire, and learn from, in Jones’ critical repositioning, and her work represents an imaginative and substantial advance within Kelman scholarship; what follows is intended as an extended appreciation and critique of her contribution. But, if Jones’ attention to the Sammy who “wanted to vanish” and who spends the novel “preparing to vanish” allows her to furnish us with a richly sophisticated account of Kelman’s resistance to hegemonic masculinity, the problem of the male body remains. For one thing, Sammy’s seeking disappearance is by no means voluntary. It is the “sodjers”, symbols here of both state power and hegemonic masculinity, who, early in the novel, demand Sammy’s removal: “ye just fucking vamoose, ye get to fuck, ye do a fucking disappearing trick, alright?” There may be reasons to suspect, as well as celebrate, production and resistance under coercion.

More damagingly, though, Jones’ focus on the disappearing body of masculinity leads her to under-read
those moments where Kelman offers what I want to call a “masculine utopics”, representations of a masculinity that exceeds structures of regulation and, in their promise of a male body somehow beyond or outside the imaginary realm of masculinity, suggest ways that men might be re-figured and re-programmed as subjects in a post-masculine utopian zone. The figure, I want to argue here, through which Kelman channels these energies is that of the masturbator. Masturbation, a sexual practice whose solitary nature makes it fit uneasily in the interpersonally-oriented categories of sexual classification, is often marginalised or ignored in accounts of heterosexuality, but offers, Kelman’s works suggests, a useful set of representations through which to imagine alternate masculinities. The masturbator is a figure connected to both fantasy – and thus ideological – systems of representation and to the materiality of the body itself. In “having traffic with thyself alone”, Shakespeare’s censorious account of the practice in Sonnet Four, the masturbator sets up a process of physical relationship, but this is one with their own body and mind. Representations of masturbation offer, then, a chance for Kelman to write a masculinity in the act of reconstruction. Kelman’s masturbators are of a curious kind: this is the sexual practice they return to and think about and yet, amidst all this thinking, it is reasons for not acting – in this case, for not masturbating – that dominate and structure their consciousness. The label is one to do with orientation as much as active representation. The masturbator may, then, appear as a new masculine subject, one with the occasional force of a utopian demand. This reading could not be advanced, I suspect, before Jones’ intervention; to develop it fully I need to draw on her insights, and offer another way of reading alongside hers.
The body was a bad sign. Poor bastard

One of the curious changes in the language of masculinity in the era of so-called postmodernity has been the shift in perspective by which the masculine, for so long the standard of reason and impartiality against which all others were judged and found wanting, is now so often the sign of damage, of violence, and ‘hysteria.’ Masculinity – the ‘testosterone-fuelled violence’ of many a media report – is often, and with good reason, seen as a symptom and, in the face of feminist critique, even reactionary assertions of masculinity have felt the need to present it as “in crisis”, undermined, anxious, and so on. Masculinity’s traditional signals of strength are now read as symptoms of damage and psychological hurt: to be ‘hysterical’ – excessively embodied, out of control, hormonal – is, in current usage, as likely to be a sign of excessive masculinity as any female quality. Common sense and sovereign reason are not where they were.

Kelman has long been one of the most attentive chroniclers of this shift. For his characters “the body was a bad sign,” a “poor bastard.” Kelman’s men are intensely aware of their bodies, and the failings of these bodies; they cough, stammer, rub their eyes, strain their way through pains, aches, and anxieties. They are at the mercy of the body’s whims; for cigarettes, to urinate, for movement. They are examples of “the rut, the common rut;” the male body is a “sad poor thing” and tale after tale turns in its narrative discourse to “examine the body” and its complications.

These physical constraints and self-awareness are linked, in Kelman’s writing, to a self-consciousness, an existentialist concern with the relationship between self and other, body and subjectivity, the body as a “bad sign” and the character who is “yourself, yourfuckingself.” Kelman’s characters – typically hostile to the open bigotry, misogyny and racism of their social formation – are ambivalent about this selfhood: “men, I think we’re very often mistaken at the
very root of our existence as human beings.” Patrick, the schoolteacher protagonist of *A Disaffection*, is able to entertain thoughts of himself a “queer sort of oddball of a character; maybe even queer in the sense of gayness, of his being homosexual,” and Sammy Samuels is equally relaxed about the narrator of *How late it was, how late* recalling his homosexual erotic – and affectionate, cuddling – encounters in prison. For all this, though, characters’ bodies in Kelman’s writing mark twin alienations: personal, self-alienation (“you get fuckt some of the time; most of the time some people would say”)30, and a separation between biological maleness and its account in hegemonic masculinity. Patrick Doyle, tempted to fuse the two, resists:

What sort of inferences were to be drawn on individual cars owned by individual male parties. The bigger the engine the smaller the dick? Perhaps. Perhaps that was truly the way of it. Especially in Glasgow and surrounding environs where maleness was a function of what? A function of what for fuck sake.30

Elsewhere, in the course of one of his habitual rantings against his unsatisfying and repressive life within his school, he is about to use standard masculinist critique and then stops himself:

But the headmaster. And the second headmaster. These two males – one hesitates to call them men, if we accept the term as one of merited achievement but is it fuck, it’s just a fucking fact. Two men. Things with bollocks and a prick.31

This attempt to dodge the ideological load the term “men” carries within it, and to insist on the mere physicality of the term as “just a fucking fact” (what Kelman has elsewhere
called “facticity, or something like that”)\textsuperscript{32}, is trapped within its own social location, though, where the representation of maleness (“things with bollocks and a prick”) is always already caught up in the machinery reproducing hegemonic masculinity. \textit{Kieron Smith, Boy} renders this machinery in its erasure of the “sweary words” Kelman is supposed to be notorious for using. Kieron, in his childish state, is not yet able to fully integrate the body and its ideological status as semiotic object: “oh my b**ls. Oh my b**ls. I knew what b**ls was. Big boys called it that. But I never said it out loud and neither did boys in my class.”\textsuperscript{33} The novel, Peter Osborne argues, “soon begins to fracture once the lives of individuals become increasingly dependent on the mediations of impersonal social forms, the logics of which remain opaque”\textsuperscript{34}: one of those “impersonal” logics is masculinity itself. Jones calls this the “constant interruption of the body”\textsuperscript{35} that undoes any older, Cartesian certainty of autonomous selfhood; it registers also in characters’ awareness of their construction as men via their interpellation by models of masculinity: “If Patrick had been his own father not only would he be a grandfather he would be an ordinary run-of-the-mill sex-performing male.”\textsuperscript{36}

Representations of sexual relations in this imaginative universe are impossible because they demand objectification. At the level of narrative discourse, Kelman’s solidarity with his own characters – a solidarity that refuses the distance of standard third-person narration – makes the representation of fantasy or contact difficult to render. At the level of story, too, in \textit{A Disaffection}, it is Patrick’s self-conscious awareness of the limits of the patriarchal vocabulary available to him, and the potentially exploitative gender relations behind this, which inhibits his expression of attraction for Alison:
While the truth of the matter what was the truth of the matter was it sex? Is that what it was he was just wanting sex of course, of course he was, but not just that although what else of course he was wanting much else but the sex was just so fucking important because of the way it would make him feel wanted, just wanted by her as an ordinary bloke there in the ring like anybody else, a part of everything. Because he couldn’t even imagine it really, what like it would be the actual insertion and how she would be in the nude and that moment of insertion the tightening it was just so disbelievable, the existence of it, the possibility; what would he be doing would he be holding her breasts. Holding her breasts. 37

This passages’ torturous syntax indicates the difficulty Patrick faces, as his fantasy contains within it both emotional longing and masculinist programming (the promise that a sexual encounter will make him feel “wanted” as “an ordinary bloke there in the ring like anybody else.”) The ideological tension in this desire is resolved, for Patrick at least, only when sexual contact – and its phallocentric genital element – is removed:

No but that would be the way of it. It would be. Her breasts. The texture of the skin so different from his own. Her nipples probably that dark reddish brown you see. Dear dear, the pity of it; Patrick has never really actually ever, never really actually, ever, been, the way that the female and the male are with each other, lying side by side in broad daylight during entire stretches of time such as days, whole days, body to body, just kissing and lying, lying there. He can imagine for example cupping one of her breasts in his hands the way that maybe an artist would, just testing its weight
and substance, its texture; while being watched by her in an amused way, her being kindly and gently amused by him, by how he is so interested, so fascinated – in a sense not even erotically as such but even fuck it’s terrible to say, aesthetically. Aesthetically interested in tits. But tits are wonderful. In the name of chirst. Poor old Patrick.  

For Kelman’s men, the hetersexual social order at once inhibits sexual desire and expression (“masturbation would never be a possibility here in the home of his parents”) and, when rendered self-conscious, aligns it with an ideological view of women unappealing to both characters’ and narrators’ ethical senses.

**Without the sex ye’re nothing**

These self-pitying, lonely reflections from Patrick Doyle seem clear representations of alienation, and this is how criticism has, for the most part, accounted for Kelman. Sexuality and sexual longings are examples of what Carole Jones describes as the “invasion by the body”: the body is the “barrier to unconsciousness … This invasion by the body rather than of the body is an issue for all Kelman’s protagonists.” Neil McMillan, from a perspective less sympathetic, and less insightful, than Jones’, reads Patrick’s masturbatory fantasies as signs of a “crushing sense of sexual repression.”

There is, to be sure, plenty of negativity and loneliness at work in Kelman’s characters’ sense of their own sexuality, and Patrick declares himself both terrified of the social world of the singles’ club (“it could really fuck you the way that worked”) and “sick of wanking”; “it just made him aware of his age all the time.” Jones’ insight identifying the trope of the “invasion by the body” helps us get a sense of Patrick’s
simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from the fact of sexuality:

It would be good just giving her a cuddle. Grabbing of hold her and giving her a big cuddle. Fuck penetration christ he just wanted to be close to her, to be holding her. Never mind her fucking body christ that’s got nothing to do with it.

But.

But what?

But she would probably
Because he’d probably fucking get an erection, if holding her in a cuddle for christ sake her body fitting into his, he would get an erection. And she would feel it, obviously. And it would fucking make things awkward.43

The echo here of one of Kelman’s existentialist ancestors (“but man is still today, at the age of twenty-five, at the mercy of an erection, physically too, from time to time, it’s the common lot”)44 links this reflection to Kelman’s wider philosophical and ethical concerns. But other imaginative energies are at work: McMillan’s “crushing sense” shuts down other lines of enquiry.

“Masturbation,” according to the leading historian of the practice, is “the sexuality of the self par excellence, the first great psychic battlefield”45 for the struggles over individuality, sexual identity and moral order. Kelman is attentive to the social forces shaping sexuality, to be sure, yet it is remarkable how little these external forces seem to play upon the inner lives and feelings of his characters. What shock – and repression – there is find its expression directed outwards:
Oh and then a boy w****d. He just sat at the back of the class. The teacher was out of the room and he just started doing it. He had a look on his face and if ye saw his eyes he did not see back. I knew about w*****g but I did not know about other people except just boys laughing. It was a complete shock but just all of them were talking, nearly talking or else just sitting there jumping about and in low voices saying, oh what is that? What is he doing? Is he doing that? Oh he is not doing that? Is he doing it? Then the word got said, w*****g. People were saying it, oh he is w*****g.

For the most part, though, characters refer to “w*****g” as a personalised source of comfort and reassurance. “A fucking wank would be better but naw, think of yer knees,” Sammy reminds himself in the middle of his exercises. Patrick compares the self-expression of playing the pipes to auto-eroticism: “there was no question that a genuine well-being resulted from it. No question, that it calmed him down; a bit like masturbation could be at its best, as a retrospective appreciation.” Sammy – in a noticeably object-less celebration – associates sexuality with a sense of feeling alive:

Sex is a help. Cause it means ye’re fucking alive. Know what I’m talking about, like it or no man ye’re alive, ye’re still in there kicking. A fucking hardon man it can get ye out of trouble: ye go, Fuck sake, well well well, here I am. Jesus christ! Cause without the sex ye wouldnay know it. It’s true but. That was something Sammy noticed a lot. Without the sex ye’re nothing, ye’re just fucking – who knows man just ye’re fuckt.
“The sex” here seems almost to be the penis itself: Sammy’s reflections, unlike Patrick’s pained fantasies over Alison, are without an object for his desires: it is the fact of the “fucking hardon” that gives him his sense of life. His celebration begins and ends within his own body, offering a unruly detail that disrupts Jones’ account of his “seeking disappearance.”

What to make of these asides? Simon Kövesi sees “a measured delicacy typical of Kelman with regard to sexual activity” that constrains these representations: “the door is shut on any masturbatory scenes in this novel” even if “masturbation still merits frequent contemplation.”50 The frequency with which masturbation is represented in Kelman’s work demands a more sustained engagement.

The auld bollocks
Recall Jones’ remark that How Late is a text that “resists visibility.” When masturbation is the narrator’s focus, however, a complex dialectic of visibility and invisibility, of bodily presence and fantasy escape, comes into play. One scene in A Disaffection starts with bodily visibility: “[t]he penis floats on the sudsy surface of the water.”51 Patrick’s growing agitation – his linking, in other words, of his physical sensations to ideology and patriarchal order – resist this visibility: “[h]is feet moved in the water; he waggled his toes, disturbing the surface, causing ripples.”52 Elsewhere in the novel Patrick interprets his dreams to fit ‘normal’ sexuality: “masturbatory. The ‘ordinary scientific’ must be the ordinary act of sexual intercourse and so on. Although it hadn’t been a wet dream. Nowhere near it in fact. More like a dry nightmare if anything. Best not to analyse such things – especially if it sounded a bit sado-masochistic.”53

A “wet dream” is the result of ejaculation, and reroutes scenes of masturbation to ‘normal’ sexual activity and phallocentrism via the centrality of the penis. The utopian potential in both A Disaffection and How late it was, how late
lies, I want to argue, in the ways these texts imagine alternative representations of male embodiment and sexuality, offering us accounts of sexual feeling that by-pass the machinery of standard patriarchal masculinity. At times, linked to Jones’ account, this is a project relying on negativity:

It was sex, male sexuality, and he was sick to death of such things trying to take over your life, trying to dictate the terms of life to you, as if you had no say in the matter and were there just at the beck and call of your erections.54

The idea of being “at the beck and call of your erections” channels both patriarchal fantasy (in which men are in no control of their hormonally-driven urges) and a more ambivalent sense of passivity and aimlessness. Patrick, who goes to the bath, and his masturbatory fantasy, in order to avoid depressing contact with ‘normal’ masculinity (“and of course Patrick, going in for a bath to avoid being alone with his Da”)55, feels the stirrings of the kind of alternative, utopian sexuality that might prevent such things “trying to take over your life,” and yet he lacks the confidence fully to elaborate it:

He kept having to avoid cuddling Alison. It was almost asexual. Or maybe it was sexual. Maybe it was just that his brand of sexuality had become different from the norm. Maybe he was now thinking in terms of cuddles rather than penetration. For fuck sake. It was probably a direct effect of the total lack of practice. He would just have to do it more often.56

For Sammy, though, with a regular sexual partner and more sexual experience than Patrick, it is the difficulty in
“cuddling,” and not genital contact, which poses problems. Remembering, with affection, a sexual encounter from his time in prison, Sammy observes the difficulty of “fucking rough chins and these parts of yer body knocking the gether, yer knees as well man ye were aware of it, how ye didnay seem to merge right, maybe for the other thing but no cuddling […] Fucking hell man, life, difficult.”

By the time of the narrative present of *How late it was, how late*, Sammy has developed what we could take as a theory of somatic knowledge, presented via reflections on masturbation:

Even the bollocks; lying in bed, he thought about having a wank; but he couldnay. At one point he clutched them and they slipped out of his fucking hand; they felt funny; soft and kind of tender, like they had been sore and were getting better, like he had been sick for a long time, like he was maybe lying in a hospital bed, as if he had been there for a while and was now on the road to recovery. But still no ready to go home yet, he still wasnay ready for that; although he felt good mentally, he wasnay right, his body, it wasnay right. And that was the bollocks telling him, the auld bollocks man that telling him; fuck you and yer wanks, that was what they were telling him.

This is not, with Jones, “seeking disappearance” so much as it a finding a grounding of knowledge and safety within the body itself: if Sammy’s relationship with “the whole of the body” is tortured and marked by the fact that he “wanted to vanish,” his sexual self is in relationship with the “auld bollocks,” an image of male sexuality divorced from both the phallocentrism representations of the penis remain trapped by and from the refusal of the body Patrick Doyle’s self-disgust and alienation insists upon. Indeed, Patrick’s one positive
sexual memory refuses phallic associations: “there was that occasion she let her hand rest on his bollocks and it drove him daft although she seemed unmoved unless of course it was a pretence.”

This sequence, with its communicative testicles “telling” Sammy something, does not negate Jones’ analysis; it will be followed by scenes of panic and bodily discomfort as Sammy “is unable to escape this anxious moment, trapped in a hysterical incantation of his predicament, incapable of controlling his actions.” What it offers, instead, is the complement of the utopian demand, a displacement of masculinity alongside its disappearance elsewhere. Sammy’s trust in “the auld bollocks” offers an image of male sexuality connected to the physically and mentally exposed, the gentle and the passive without, crucially, associating this with loss or damage. The “auld bollocks” are at once vulnerable (“soft and kind of tender”) and a source of insight (“that was the bollocks telling him”); they are both a celebratory sign of sex and sexuality (“a fucking wank would be better but”) and a relinquishing of control, a variation on Romantic “wise passiveness” or “negative capability” (“fuck you and yer wanks”).

The combination of passivity and sexuality without aggrieved victimology – without, in other words, what a reactionary rhetoric would like to figure as emasculation – is a crucial element of Sammy’s self-presentation. Ben Knights sees a “perverse” claim to centrality in the typically “feminine” positions and “appeals to sympathy” of Kelman’s characters, but this is to miss the point of how Sammy as a man is re-positioned. Sammy’s sexual self-presentation here involves a re-thinking of what masculinity involves within itself: crucially, where his general sense of well-being relies on the “body getting itself back into working order” and needs “this kind of control over yer body,” his sexual sense – the message of the “auld bollocks” – involves abandoning
thoughts of “controlling it, controlling it.” This is in direct contrast to the dominant models of masculinity, where dominance and control – “dominating the bodies of others” in Jane Gallop’s phrase – are essential components of heterosexual male identity construction. Reflecting on Gallop’s definition of masculinity (“men have their masculine identity to gain by being estranged from their bodies and dominating the bodies of others”), Calvin Thomas observes that, if this is true, then “the entire process of this constitutive estrangement needs to be read and relentlessly rewritten.” Kelman’s testicular masculinity – his representations of masturbation as a sexual practice of self-examination, self-consciousness, an erotic re-programming of male subjectivity – is a contribution to this rewriting. Masturbation is still so often an under-examined and under-written practice in fiction, a by-word for loneliness and disconnected fantasy compensation (Ali Smith: “Google…is a whole new way of feeling lonely … men and women from all over the world tied up and wanked over in site after site, a great sea of hidden shallows”). Kelman invests descriptive and narrative detail in its representation and, in the process, suggests new ways of “relentlessly rewriting” the codes of a dominant – and dominating – masculinity.

Yerself and others
This is, of course, a utopian masculinity in the common, and negative, sense: it is currently nowhere, and offers little in the way of accurate representations: for all that the masturbating subject in Kelman re-thinks the logic of masculinity, and whatever the plurality of actual sexual practices, the type of phallic masculinity Gallop describes is still very much our social dominant. It would be a mistake, albeit a common one, though, to read Kelman as a naturalist, and Jones’ critical insights help again in figuring the power of these moments through their expressions of desire and, alongside it, the
utopian demand. Michael Gardiner, following Deleuze, calls Kelman “a minor writer” who prose “is a literature of affect and becoming, rather than a majoritarian one of representing something assumed to be already there”\(^68\). It is in this spirit that Kelman’s “masculine utopics” need to be understood. Far from being records in the tradition of realism, as some of his supporters and detractors have tried to present them, Kelman’s prose is better understood as a series of explorations and inventions in language, late modernist meditations offering images of a masculinity-to-be, a masculinity of ‘affect and becoming’ beyond our current social world.

The complexity of Kelman’s narrative approach – its sustained free indirect discourse linked to a pact between character and narrator – produces situations where an isolation at the level of story is always accompanied by companionship at the level of narrative discourse. For Cairns Craig:

The isolation of Kelman’s characters, in other words, replicates the isolation of the Cartesian/Kantian ego, but the linguistic structure and invocation of ‘you’ implies an entirely different conception of the self as always in relation with the Other.\(^69\)

This “entirely different conception of self” is complicated further when the narrator offers for us characters’ reflections on the masturbating life: masturbation, the “solitary vice” of traditional moralities, is here a socialised practice, one whose representation invites us to reflect upon our own fantasy location and embodiment. The association of the solitary with the autonomous ego is resisted in Kelman’s texts. Patrick tells Alison it is one of the reasons he stopped writing:
Everywhere you looked this fucking I. I I I. I got really fucking sick of it I mean it was depressing, horrible. I mean that’s exactly what you’re trying to get rid of in the first damn bloody fucking place I mean christ sake, you know what I’m talking about.70

Do we? The challenge here, as with the challenge of learning to listen to Sammy’s “auld bollocks”, links the line of “disappearing men” Jones traces through Kelman’s work with the mute and passive presence of the non-phallic, testicular masturbating man I have sought to identify in this essay. Both images are examples of a kind of masculine utopics, sites outside, nowhere, “disappeared”, and also in excess of, beyond current models of masculinity. How late it was, how late offers one view of contemporary masculinity: “ye wonder what they see in ye as well I mean being honest; men – christ almighty, a bunch of dirty bastards, literally, know what I’m talking about, sweaty socks and all that, smelly underpants.”71 Against this the man in masturbatory communication offers an alternative masculinity: passive without feeling emasculated (“lying in bed”), embodied instead of “estranged from their bodies” (“that was the bollocks telling him”), in communication instead of self-reliant (“all ye hear is yer own body”)72; How late it was, how late offers a masculinity which at once longs for its own disappearance and, at the same time, throws off models of its own reconstruction.

These utopic dimensions take on a political importance when we consider them as a part of Kelman’s wider socialist project. An earlier moment in the scholarship of autoeroticism traced its suppressed and oblique presence in literary works, and the great scandal of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s reading of Marianne Dashwood’s “agitation and sobs” grew out of the material that, for conservative criticism, she was seen as forcing into view.73 If earlier treatments of masturbation came at their practice aslant and allusively,
Kelman’s much more direct and explicit representations fit a neoliberal era in which, as David Bennett argues, sexual ‘spending’, like its financial equivalents, relies on images of circulation and credit. Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario speak of “masturbation’s continuing contradictory status among today’s cultural discourses relating to sexuality”\(^74\): earlier slang and sexual innuendo feared excess; the neoliberal consumer worries at not getting enough. Kelman’s unemployed and listless men’s meditations, then, connect their sexual imaginations to a wider materialist criticism as much as they do to any queer readings. The first-person narrator of the early “Not not while the giro” links his sexual sense with a wider feeling of waste as an unemployed worker: “Though at 30 years of age one’s hand is insufficient and to be honest again my hand is more or less unused in regard to sexual relief.”\(^75\) ‘Sexual relief’, when taken *out of* circulation, fails to connect sexual fantasy, drive and consumption. If talking about money is always already a way of talking about sex (and vice versa), talking about work and unemployment become, in these stories, ways of also reflecting on masturbation and fantasy:

One of the chief characteristics of my early, mid and late adolescence was the catastrophic form of the erotic content. Catastrophic in the sense that that which I did have was totally, well not quite, fantasy. And is the lack by implication of an unnatural variety. Whether it is something to do with me or not – I mean whether or not it is catastrophic is nothing to do with me I mean, not at all. No.\(^76\)

David Harvey describes “the labouring body” as “a site of resistance that achieves a political dimension through the political capacity of individuals to act as moral agents.”\(^77\) The challenge sexuality poses for materialist criticism revolves
around the status of the labouring body as a reproducing body, of the intersection of labour and sexuality constructing selves. Kelman’s narratives of masturbatory scenes offer a way to think about masculinity in reconstruction; they are meditations on the possibilities of the “political capacity of individuals to act as moral agents” in sexual encounter. The fantasy element of that encounter involves, first of all, a reconstituted sense of self, at once the object and the subject of masturbatory sexual practice.

The male may, after all, need at once de-centred and re-imagining at the same time. We may long for his disappearance from the centre of culture – a longing, in other words, for the end of hegemonic masculinities – whilst, in our own bodies and lives, needing to re-construct models through which to live as desiring and desired subjects. If Carole Jones is right, and Kelman’s “literary riffing on the unstable boundaries of masculinity exposes, sustains and affirms” the “riifting” of categories of identity, his careful examinations within this riffing of the masturbatory situation, when masculinity is in touch with itself (pun, and associations, intended) and produces its own eroticism, may, in their re-centring and re-thinking of this encounter of self with self, offer a further resource (Deleuze and Guattari: “requirements for liberation: the force of the unconscious itself, the investment of desire by desire of the social field.” )78 Within this project, then, damaging, dominant masculinities may be rendered “out of sight”79 as the new, masculine utopics works from itself out to new relationships, new relations: “where what ye are, that it’s part of another type of whole.”80
Notes

8 Jones, “Kelman and Masculinity,” 112.
12 Jones, “Playing the Part,” 283.
29 Kelman, *The Burn*, 75.
40 Jones, *Disappearing Men*, 46.
46 Kelman, *Kieron Smith, boy*, 137.


Jones, *Disappearing Men*, 46.


Kelman, *How late*, 64.


“Introduction” to *Solitary Pleasures*, 1 – 2.

“Not not while the giro” in James Kelman, *Not not while the giro and other stories* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1983), 184.


80 Ibid., 2.