

## Recovering Franz Kafka's Asbestos Factory

Arthur Rose

This article recalls Franz Kafka's part ownership of the asbestos factory, Prague Asbestwerke Hermann & Co. to introduce two forms of literary recovery, exemplified by Alan Bennett's 1985 television play, The Insurance Man, and James Kelman's 1994 novel, How late it was, how late. Both works develop divergent politicized styles, based on their respective readings of Kafka's life and work. Rather than simply recuperating Kafka from this biographeme or damning him for it, they find the aesthetic means to represent the asbestos problem in the combination of Kafka's biography and writing, either by addressing the long tail of asbestos exposure or by focussing on the interiority of asbestos victims. Brought together, these approaches turn the recovery of Kafka's asbestos factory into a case for thinking about precarity, activism, compensation and justice.

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On the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 1924, shortly before Franz Kafka left Berlin on his final journey for Prague, a factory worker named Nellie Kershaw passed away in Rochdale in the United Kingdom. Kafka would outlive Kershaw by less than three months: after a few days in Prague, he would go on to Vienna and then to Dr Hoffmann's sanatorium in Kierling, where he died on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June. Superficially, the two "K"s bear little resemblance to each other. Kershaw, a textile worker, had begun work in a cotton mill in 1903 aged 12. Kafka, a law student in 1903, would go on to take his Doctor of Laws and become an insurance officer, responsible for processing and investigating claims made to the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia. It is at this point, however, that we might begin to

sketch an imagined intersection between the worker and the insurance officer. For, some months after she began to work in the cotton mill, Kershaw changed her employment to Garside's asbestos mill. Fourteen years later, in 1917 she took up another job at Turner Brothers Asbestos, where she would spin raw asbestos fibre into yarn. Around the same time, her attendance began to be "intermittent". In 1920, she started treatment for a lung condition that would, in July 1922, see her certified as unfit to work because of "asbestos poisoning" and, in March 1924, find her the first registered death by "pulmonary asbestosis."<sup>1</sup> The immediate parallel between Kershaw and a Kafka, who, as Reiner Stach records it, spent his last day "short of breath and in pain," would seem to be death by respiratory illness.<sup>2</sup> Dr W. E. Cooke, the pathologist at Kershaw's inquest, found traces of tuberculosis, the original cause given for Kershaw's death, and undeniably the pathogen behind Kafka's. But Kershaw's final cause of death provokes us to think about two further conditions that complicate this speculative relation, which, this article will argue, have consequences not just for a particular strand of Kafka reception, but for how we engage with the emerging trend in literary history towards recovery, as a mode that "produces objects of two periods at once—the period of their making and that of their recovery."<sup>3</sup> For Kafka was a part owner in an asbestos concern, Prague Asbestwerke Hermann & Co.

In this essay, I want to recover Kafka's coincidental relationship with asbestos as a conceit with more than mere biographical significance. Such a recovery project invites a reconsideration of Kafka's work as a resource for thinking about asbestos exposure, even if it risks clichéd statements about how Kafka's work confronts bureaucratic logic and the aporias of justice. After all, in his diary entry on "a literature whose development is not in actual fact unusually broad in scope" or, more famously, "minor literature," written soon after the opening of the factory, Kafka offered "the acknowledgement of literary events as objects of political concern" in his enumeration of the benefits offered by literary activity.<sup>4</sup> But, as

Kafka warned in the same entry, a writer's influence may "take the place of their writings": "One speaks of the latter and means the former, indeed, one even reads [their writings] and sees only [their influence]."<sup>5</sup> To address the significance of the writings themselves without simply "clinging to political slogans," it seems, leads us to an impasse between the work, which appears to anticipate the dilemmas facing the asbestos victim, and the history, where no such anticipation seems plausible.<sup>6</sup> Rather than attempt to elide this impasse by reading Kafka allegorically, I propose to foreground it by considering works that have "recovered" Kafka as a literary forebear, with the explicit purpose of representing the crisis of recognition endured by asbestos victims. This recovery of Kafka by two British writers, Alan Bennett and James Kelman, is not, then, simply a matter of filiation or intertextuality, although these concerns are also present; they compensate for Kafka's historical ignorance about asbestos by relying on their own, idiosyncratic appropriations of Kafka's style. Bennett (b. 1934) and Kelman (b. 1946) are themselves perhaps as different as two near contemporary white British writers might be. Bennett, an Oxford-educated playwright, brought to fame by his collaboration with Peter Cooke and Dudley Moore in *Beyond the Fringe*, seems to stand for all those aspects of white-washed Englishness that Kelman, a Glaswegian born in a tenement and an early exponent of Scottish kitchen sink dialecticism, claims to despise. Nevertheless, they share, or shared, a fascination with Kafka that seems to coalesce around what Isak Winkel Holm has recently identified as Kafka's stereoscopic style, "the style with which he emulated the doubled vision of the stereoscope".<sup>7</sup> The stereoscope is a device that provides separate, two dimensional images to the left and right eyes. When looked at together, the perceiver sees a fused, three-dimensional image. Holms argues that, following Kafka's encounter with a stereoscope in Friedland some nine months before the factory was opened, he began to develop a style based on the juxtaposition of "two dissimilar images of the same object."<sup>8</sup> Here, I want to track a similarly stereoscopic style in Bennett and Kelman that,

whether or not it is owed to Kafka, permits us to consider “the dual vision of a legal and political community” as it relates to asbestos victims like Kershaw.<sup>9</sup> In parallel, I want to consider how aligning Bennett and Kelman on the relation between Kafka and asbestos can produce a further stereoscopic image for the critic, whereby we juxtapose Bennett’s use of Kafka the asbestos factory owner as a figure in his play, The Insurance Man (1985), with Kelman’s appropriation of Kafka’s style in his Booker prize-winning novel, How late it was, how late (1994), to write about the travails facing seekers after compensation. This case study models a stereoscopic approach that can influence not just our understanding of style, but theories of recovery, and perhaps even the writing of criticism generally. After all, when Debjani Ganguly recently asked “what happens when we are forced to confront futuristic postapocalyptic scenarios in the present?”, the “mutant literary form” of the contemporary realist novel she offers “weaves strands of the allegorical, the gothic, the speculative and the mythic within a recombinant realist frame.”<sup>10</sup> By looking on these strands stereoscopically, that is, with one eye to their realist elements and another to their extra-realist elements, or, alternatively, with one eye on the present and another on the future, we find works that illustrate what Ganguly calls “planetary realism.” But we also find a mode of critical writing that can address both concerns as dual visions of the same object.

To those familiar with recent theories of recovery, as described by Leif Sorenson and Natalia Cecire, such dual visions will be nothing new, although the recovery method, developed to understand the revival of obscure writers marginalized by structural racism or classism, seems strangely at odds with a writer of Kafka’s stature.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, I would suggest that the plenitude of scholarly material itself demands a recovery project. Even in 1987, Bennett could write of “the perils in writing about Kafka”, imagining there to be “a Fortress Kafka” “garrisoned by armies of critics” whose “admission a certain high seriousness must be deemed essential.”<sup>12</sup> “More secondary works have now been written

about him,” Kelman ends his dissertation on Kafka, “than any other writer aside from Shakespeare and Goethe.”<sup>13</sup> But, for Bennett, “there is something that is English about Kafka,” and, for Kelman, his place “is within the tradition known as ‘the existential.’”<sup>14</sup> Whatever either of these claims might mean, their reconstitution of Kafka in terms of reference that they find usable suggests some kind of recovery process at work. “Although recovery”, according to Sorenson, “sets out to restore a voice to the voiceless and to reunite what has been fragmented, it frequently exacerbates both of these situations [...] the desire that drives recovery fragments the recovered figure and renders the recovered artist and text untimely.”<sup>15</sup> For all their awareness of Kafka scholarship, Bennett and Kelman both commit to creative projects that rely on understanding his work as a unity in order to restore what they feel to be overlooked aspects of Kafka’s voice. These projects don’t just fragment our understanding of Kafka; they render our understanding of the history of his involvement with asbestos untimely, “alter[ing] conventional understandings of causality”. Whereas “timely, linear histories employ periodization to compose a narrative in which the past helps us understand how we arrived in the present”, “untimely, nonlinear histories find moments in the past that disturb the common sense of the present with the hope of producing an alternative future.”<sup>16</sup> Insofar as Bennett and Kelman recover Kafka for the present, they open up the possibility of an untimely reading of his encounter with asbestos as a resource for an alternative future, understood as an “affective projection that retrospectively reconstructs the conditions of its own possibility.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, they permit a critical stereoscope that juxtaposes the conditions of the history of the factory with those of the aesthetic possibilities it opens up.

More broadly, this essay presents literary responses to Kafka’s factory as a case. Insofar as this case is exemplary of anything, it illustrates a method for organising literary responses to topics of material concern: identifying one example that shows how such topics

emerge in surprising configurations for literary debates, another that draws out with its long-term effects from an external perspective, and a third that addresses the interiority of its victims. Sequencing these examples lets us follow a matter of concern through external observation and narrative interiority, without relying on any one work to address all attendant issues, nor dismissing those whose vision remains, necessarily, partial. Proposing a critical synthesis of a case as it appears across three examples is hardly new, but it gains a certain valency when literary studies addresses an object whose biomedical, economic and legal implications tend to obscure its aesthetic framing.

At the same time, “thinking through cases” may offer as much in turning away from a logic of exemplarity as indulging in it. After all, the case gives us, as John Forrester has argued, “a new form of accounting for the self in twentieth-century scientific and popular discourses”.<sup>18</sup> If identifying a case queries “the adequacy of an object to bear the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and taking a lesson from”, as Lauren Berlant once wrote, then, certainly, the asbestos case provides a compelling site where lessons may be drawn from critical disability studies, economic humanities, health humanities, law and literature and world-literature.<sup>19</sup> Still, Berlant goes on, “the case is always normative but also always a perturbation in the normative.”<sup>20</sup> For Berlant, this perturbation is the event from which cases are constructed: the incidental purchase of an asbestos factory, turned into a case by Kafka’s readers. And yet, we might also track these perturbations in what Simon Goldhill has called “the politics, epistemology, and role of desire in the processes of exemplification”: the politics, knowledge (and ignorance) and desires that determine what becomes a case.<sup>21</sup> To track the history of Kafka’s asbestos factory is to focus on a substance that transformed, over the course of the last century, from a “magic mineral” into a “killer dust”.<sup>22</sup> It is to reckon with working class precarity, corporate malfeasance, and medical ignorance.<sup>23</sup> But it is a story also punctuated by successful calls for compensation and justice, on the part of

politically committed activists, writers and scholars.<sup>24</sup> The success of these calls was predicated on new alliances between researchers, activists, legal experts, union officials and policy makers that gave new meaning to existing historical cases. In a situation where an intellectual precariat struggle for jobs in corporate universities, such examples provide reasons to hope and lessons to learn.

### **Prague Asbestwerke Hermann & Co**

The origins of Kafka's asbestos factory lie in the 1910 marriage between a young lieutenant in the reserves, Karl Hermann, and Kafka's sister, Elli. Karl, short of funds, wanted to use Elli's dowry to open the first asbestos factory in Prague, which, he proposed, would provide fireproofing to various industrial concerns. But this direct use of the dowry seemed risky to Hermann Kafka, Franz and Elli's father. The compromise was to pass the funds on to Franz, who would be a silent partner in the enterprise. In November 1911, the company was formed. If the enterprise was ultimately short-lived, its closure in 1917 can be attributed at least as much to the shortage of asbestos caused by the war as any managerial incompetence. During the First World War, asbestos became an important material for the war effort, limiting supplies to civilian enterprises. Consensus holds this closure to have been a relief: Kafka's role, originally envisaged as merely that of silent partner, was significantly expanded, especially after Hermann was sent to the front. When Kafka mentions the factory in his diaries and letters, these references vary from the curtly factual to the hyperbolic. In a diary entry dated 28<sup>th</sup> December 1911, he complains of "the torment that the factory causes me", while any effort to learn the workings of the factory would "rob myself of the use of the few afternoon hours that belong to me, which would of necessity lead to the complete destruction of my existence."<sup>25</sup> In a letter to Max Brod, he clarifies one such interruption,

remarking that, “after writing well Sunday night [...] I had to stop for the following reason: my brother-in-law, the manufacturer, this morning left for a business trip.”<sup>26</sup> Kafka’s impatience with the factory’s demands upon him perhaps explain why he failed to draw parallels between what might have been happening there and his responsibility for the drafting of documents about the risks of industrial injury and their compensation at the Workers Accident Insurance Institute.<sup>27</sup> By 1911, studies of English (1899), French (1906) and Italian (1908) factories signalled problems associated with dust exposure, even if the first German language publication on asbestos-related pneumoconiosis only emerged in 1914.<sup>28</sup> However, I am less interested in developing a tendentious argument around what Kafka could or should have known, than in what Bennett and Kelman recover from his work to respond to a crisis of recognition already beginning to crystallize in the case of Nellie Kershaw.

Following her diagnosis of “asbestos poisoning”, Kershaw found herself in the singularly uncomfortable position of being unable to claim health benefits from either her National Health Insurance fund or her employer (via the Workmen’s Compensation Act). The fund deemed her ineligible for benefits because her condition was occupation-related, and she was denied compensation because, as the board of Turner Brothers Asbestos decided in their minutes: “We repudiate the term ‘Asbestos Poisoning’. Asbestos is not poisonous and no definition or knowledge of such a disease exists.”<sup>29</sup> Falling between the cracks of nonoccupational and occupational disease, Kershaw’s bears all the hallmarks of a differend. In The Differend, Jean-Francois Lyotard observes of the differend that it is “a case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim.”<sup>30</sup> For Lyotard, a double bind occurs when attempting to testify to both damages (a compensable complaint) and a wrong (a miscarriage of justice): “either the damages you complain about never took place and your testimony is false; or else they took place, and since you are able to testify to them, it is not a wrong that has been done to you, but merely damages, and your

testimony is still false.”<sup>31</sup> Kershaw’s case offers a third possibility: the wrong occurs because the damages are not recognized as relevant to the realms of either the factory owner or the insurance fund assessor. Unable to “establish what is not without criticizing what is”, Kershaw was left adrift in a situation that, as Lyotard puts it, “Kafka warned us about [.] It is impossible to establish one’s innocence, in and of itself. It is a nothingness.”<sup>32</sup>

Behind the sympathetic symmetry between the two ailing breathers, then, there is, if not a direct antipathy, at least the intimation of an inverted image: the struggling textile worker, unsuccessfully appealing to her worker insurance fund and her employer, counterposes the writer whose other two functions were to assess worker’s insurance and employ people to work with asbestos. Speculative though this history might be, it does invite us to set Kershaw up as the missing link in Kafka’s thinking, or not-thinking, about the dangers of asbestos. Kafka’s own ignorance repeats those aporias Walter Benjamin would so approvingly quote in both “Critique of Violence” and “Franz Kafka”: “‘it is characteristic of this legal system,’ conjectures K., ‘that one is sentenced not only in innocence but also in ignorance.’”<sup>33</sup> Despite Kafka’s ignorance, the presence of the factory in the writer’s biography “exacts” an interpretation that cannot but fail to pass sentence over Kafka as either innocent or guilty. In all its brute historical facticity, the factory is just what it was, a family venture that Kafka felt compelled to take part in. Set alongside Kafka’s concern with justice in his work, the factory cannot but accrue a significance for us that it failed to have for him. It is this significance that Bennett and Kelman will help us to recover.

Kershaw has a further significance, however, as a historical figure who corresponds, more or less directly, with the female figures who populate Kafka’s most extensive recollection about the factory. Recorded in a diary entry dated February 5<sup>th</sup> 1912, the passage focuses not on himself or his feelings, but, rather, the significantly deformative effect that factory business has on his female employees:

Yesterday in the factory. The girls, in their unbearably dirty and untidy clothes, their hair dishevelled as though they had just got up, the expressions on their faces fixed by the incessant noise of the transmission belts and by the individual machines, automatic ones, of course, but unpredictably breaking down, they aren't people, you don't greet them, you don't apologize when you bump into them, if you call them over to do something they do it but return to their machine at once, with a nod of the head you show them what to do, they stand there in petticoats, they are at the mercy of the pettiest power and haven't enough calm understanding to recognize this power and placate it by a glance, a bow. But when six o'clock comes and they call it out to one another, when they untie the kerchiefs from around their throats and their hair, dust themselves with a brush that passes around and is constantly called for by the impatient, when they pull their skirts on over their heads and clean their hands as well as they can – then at last they are women again, despite pallor and bad teeth they can smile, shake their stiff bodies, you can no longer bump into them, stare at them, or overlook them, you move back against the greasy crates to make room for them, hold your hat in your hand when they say good evening, and do not know how to behave when one of them holds your winter coat for you to put on.<sup>34</sup>

The passage has played an important role in scholarly recognition of the asbestos factory. Kafka's biographers imply a retrospective historicism, if not anachronism, when they comment upon it. "It is not the linear, discrete world of electric motors that Kafka is depicting here," writes Stach, "but the grimy mechanization of the nineteenth century, a greasy and noisy technology that was constantly breaking down."<sup>35</sup> Stach extends this internal anachronism—the factory's datedness—to the problem of the asbestos it produced. Taking "the vantage point of a century later," he declares that "it appears macabre that Kafka of all people, who by profession championed the rights of the working class, exposed 'his' workers

to highly carcinogenic material.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Nicholas Murray takes it to be “a profound irony” that Kafka sponsored an asbestos factory, adding hyperbolically, “by dying so young, Kafka, a man with a deep compassion for the hardships faced by industrial workers, was at least spared the anguish and guilt he would certainly have felt if he had lived to see the facts about asbestos come to the fore.”<sup>37</sup> Both Stach and Murray appeal to Kafka’s sense of justice, either by virtue of his profession or his sensibility. Stach refers to Kafka’s work at the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute, where it was Kafka’s responsibility to establish the cost of insurance for companies by measuring their accident records against their implementation of safety procedures and protocols, while Murray, more sentimentally, appeals to an affective reading of Kafka the man. They coincide in appealing to a situation where Kafka’s treatment of people, in 1911, is placed in opposition to a monstrous sense of his ignorance, in the present.

Holm presents a more nuanced, “stereoscopic” reading of the passage in Kafka’s Stereoscopes.<sup>38</sup> He observes that the passage is split into two clear sections divided by a temporal marker (“six o’clock”): one where the workers are dehumanised, and another, where they are ‘transformed’ back into women. When the sections are fused together, they demonstrate problem less for time, than for judgement over “the social situation in which politeness as such is either relevant or irrelevant.”<sup>39</sup> First, Kafka presents a conventional narrative of human recognition, as following a pattern of social rules, albeit subverted by being cast in the negative: “they aren’t people, you don’t greet them” etc. Then, as the relation between the manager, “you”, and the “women [Frauen]” changes to reflect a new-found recognition of the latter’s civic status, he develops a second, contrasting image of the same community. The consequence is not simply that the stereoscope allows for two disjunctive images of the same person or object; rather, “Kafka’s stereoscopes afford us a dual image of the basic shape of a given community.”<sup>40</sup> In this way, the passage exemplifies

Holm's larger project: to show how Kafka's stereoscopic style "prompts a kind of political thinking endowed with a world-building force" that, following Hannah Arendt, aims to break with "a petrified order of things and recreate the foundation of communal life."<sup>41</sup> For this project, Holm develops three theses about Kafka's literary stereoscopes that we might well translate to Bennett and Kelman. First, the content of these stereoscopic passages is the configuration of a community, based upon a shared "social imaginary," or "a repertoire of figures, metaphors, symbols, narratives, and other forms of imagination with which people represent the order of things."<sup>42</sup> The "unbearably dirty and untidy clothes" of the "girls" may be a description, but it figures them within a shared social understanding. Second, their form "is defined by the juxtaposition of images from the same community," which "triggers a process of comparison."<sup>43</sup> So the "girls" become "women" as they change their clothes, which challenges the reader "to move back and forth between the orderly and disorderly image."<sup>44</sup> Finally, this functions "to bring about a reconfiguration of a community" to "restructure and reshape the image of communal life."<sup>45</sup> While their circumstances change, we note that the women remain denied the means to speak to Kafka (first, through his poor treatment of them, then, through his embarrassment around them): the fateful hour of six does not mark their liberation, but simply their different roles as objects of capitalist exploitation and as subject-targets of commodity fetishism. For Holm, stereoscopic style offers "a technical apparatus" that "makes the reader ready for political thinking"; it is, in his gloss on the diary entry about minor literature, "a Besprechungsmöglichkeit," or an opportunity to negotiate or discuss something.<sup>46</sup> For the immediate purposes of my analysis, it offers a concrete technical device from Kafka that is "recovered" in Bennett and Kelman. More generally, however, it offers a schema for understanding how Bennett's historical Kafka might be juxtaposed with the Kafka figures that populate Kelman's novels.

Holm's analysis of the passage focuses on the configuration of community, through juxtaposition, to restructure our understanding of the relations between the manager and the women, but his interest is less 'asbestos' than the 'factory': for Holm, the deformations of the women resonate more with capitalist exploitation than anticipatory illness. Stach and Murray are more attentive to the changing status of asbestos, but are, if anything, laxer about its consequences for reading Kafka, preferring to diagnose a general 'irony' about the situation. Holm, Murray and Stach insist on Kafka's ignorance about asbestos diseases. Therefore, their more rigorous fidelity to his work makes it necessary to bracket out a historical appreciation of things that would have appeared incidental to him. These timelier approaches to Kafka's relationship with the factory offer a foil to the untimely recovery presented by Bennett and Kelman, to which I now turn.

### **The Insurance Man**

Bennett explicitly responds to Kafka's relationship with the factory in The Insurance Man, a television play where Kafka's biographical involvement in asbestos production becomes the backdrop for a story about a young man in the process of applying for compensation from the Workers Accident Insurance Institute.<sup>47</sup> Bennett's interest in imagining the effects of asbestos is evident from the play's opening. It begins with an establishing shot of an elderly man walking in "a foreign city. A body hangs from a lamp-post" (89). It then cuts to an x-ray image of a pair of lungs. They are, we discover, under examination by a doctor, for the elderly man, Franz. The year is 1945, the place is Prague, and Franz's condition is "a fibrous condition of the lungs" (90). Repeated references to the man's "breath" in the dialogue and the image of his lungs emphasise his illness as lung-related, but, from the opening, it is overshadowed by the hanged man and the context of the Second World War: "In peacetime you might call it pain", remarks Franz, "these days illness is a luxury." (89) "You have to live long enough to be able to die", considers the doctor, "you

could be lucky and live to be hung from a lamp-post.” (90) Even though illness is the core concern of the play, it is always framed by historical context. Indeed, the doctor’s attention to Franz’s occupational history will stimulate the flashback which makes up much of the action. For, although Franz at first remembers only his work for the railway, when pressed by the doctor he recalls he once worked for a dyeworks, in 1910.

In the flashback, young Franz suffers from a dermatitis, or skin condition, apparently caused by the dye. He seeks compensation from the Workers Accident Insurance Institute. In his pursuit of compensation, he is forced to navigate the labyrinthine processes by which the Institute establishes whether he has a case, whether dermatitis may be considered “accidental”. In this navigation, he encounters Dr Franz Kafka, who, unable to award him compensation, suggests that he “may be able to help.” (128) “So what is it you’re producing here?” asks Franz. “Building materials. Mainly asbestos”, answers Kafka. “Thank you. You saved my life”, responds Franz, with due dramatic irony. (130) At this point, the play returns to its historical present, Prague 1945. Bennett uses the juxtaposition to infer that asbestos must be the cause of old Franz’s lung condition. “It’s so long ago. But you think it may have been that factory?” wonders Franz. “It’s possible”, muses the doctor, “Who knows?” Neither the doctor nor Franz might know, but, Bennett implies, the 1985 viewer should. Franz, in 1945, is showing the symptoms of an asbestos-related disease because he inhaled asbestos when he worked in the factory.

The entire narrative arc of the play depends on the significance of this passing reference to asbestos. Without it, the sequence becomes an episodic literary biography: Kafka’s actual Institute rendered as if it were the attic courts of The Trial or the bureaucracy of The Castle, loosely connected by Franz’s dermatitis, and with little or no relation to the play’s 1945 frame. With it, one can retrospectively trace a network of breath- or lung-related allusions and metaphors that integrate this narrative at the level of local aesthetic conceits. It

is the paradox, Bennett says, “at the heart of the play. Kafka does Franz a favour by giving him a job in his factory, but since the factory turns out to make asbestos this good turn leads in the end to Franz’s death.” (78)

It is worth noting that this integration also produces surprisingly uncomfortable effects. Not only does the play anticipate Kafka’s historical death, from tuberculosis, with anachronistic references to his “coughing” (129), but, and perhaps more dangerously, Bennett draws implicit parallels between occupational asbestos exposure and the gas chambers of the Holocaust. Franz recalls, “he worked there too, Doctor Kafka, part-time, so I suppose the same thing could have happened to him” and, later, adds, “I’ve a feeling he died. But he was a Jew, so he would have died anyway” (130; 131). The doctor bridges these two reflections on Kafka’s potential morbidities—Kafka’s possible asbestos related disease, as opposed to his historically more certain death, either by the tuberculosis that actually killed him or the Nazi death camps that might have—by remarking, “You weren’t to know. He wasn’t to know. You breathed, that’s all you did wrong [...] You breathed in the wrong place.” (131) The avoidance of agency is, and should be, troubling. If breathing “in the wrong place” is all that either Franz or Kafka might have done wrong, then, by extension, mere “not knowing” seems to exculpate potential perpetrators, Kafka included. The callousness of this expression arises, I think, from Bennett’s decision to draw parallels between discrete histories of lethal exposure to airborne substances: whether the tuberculum bacillus, asbestos, or Zyklon B. Indeed, Bennett makes these connections more explicit in his introduction to Two Kafka Plays:

Death took no chances with Kafka and laid three traps for his life. Parched and voiceless from TB of the larynx, he was forty, the victim, as he himself said, of a conspiracy by his own body. But had his lungs not ganged up on him there was a second trap, twenty years down the line when the agents of death would have shunted

him, as they did his three sisters, into the gas chambers [...] so where is death now? Waiting for Kafka in some Park Avenue consulting room where goes with what he takes to be a recurrence of his old chest complaint [...] This is just a dream of Kafka's death [...] we know he did not die like this. Others probably did [...] These patients have no names, though Kafka would have known them, those girls (old ladies now) whom he describes brushing the thick asbestos dust from their overalls. (xxv)

But if Bennett's play risk dissembling discrete histories of culpability, particularly by paralleling the asbestos industry and the camps, this dissemblance also affords a solidarity of the breathless, fostered by a clearer sense of potential morbidities as they impact across bodies in general. This is not to excuse the liberties Bennett takes with the Shoah, nor to legitimate Franz's utterance as a matter of historical accuracy: rather, Bennett's play usefully advances the possibility of solidarity for victims of breathlessness across sites of respiratory affliction that struggle to be recognized.

For the concern at the heart of The Insurance Man is how civil procedure might attend to the consequences of accidents, broadly thought of as recognized sites of affliction, when the individual is caught up in conditions larger than themselves and therefore beyond their control, whether occupational, like exposure to dye or asbestos, or biological, like contracting tuberculosis, or national, like state-run genocide. In our Introduction, we considered how asbestos exposure might usefully be thought about through Nixon's "slow violence". It should not surprise us, then, that Bennett's Kafka will refer to Franz's exposure to the dye as "a long slow accident". (127) Just before this comment, Miss Weber cynically remarks that the people applying for compensation would "rather have our health *and* our money." (126) Taking her comment more seriously than it is intended, Kafka responds that it calls for "a justice that doesn't exist in the world." (126) It requires, Kafka suggests, a whole new way of understanding "accidents":

Take this millworker. No beam has fallen on his head. No bottle has exploded in his eye. He has not got his shirt caught in the shaft and been taken round. All that has happened is that he has been inhaling cotton dust for some years. And day by day cotton dust has crept into his lungs, but so slowly, so gradually that it cannot be called an accident. But suppose our lungs were not internal organs. Suppose they were not locked away in the chest. Suppose we carried our lungs outside our bodies, bore them before us, could hold and handle them, cradle them in our arms. And suppose further they were not made of flesh but of glass, or something like glass, not yet invented, something pliable. And thus the effect of each breath could be seen, the deposit of each intake of air, calculated, weighed even. [...]

And if we were able to magnify each inhalation, see under the microscope each breath, capture the breath that killed the cell, register the gasp that caused the cough that broke the vein that atrophied the flesh. Wouldn't that be an accident? A very small accident? This man has no claim because he is suffering from a condition. But isn't a condition the result of many small accidents that we cannot see or record?

(127)

Even though the case at hand is, apparently, the millworker's lungs as a cipher for Franz's dermatitis, Bennett has Kafka use the indeterminacy associated with long term lung damage because it serves his ultimate purpose: to address the insufficiency of "accident" to describe long tail asbestos diseases. The diminishing returns of infinite regression produce the representation of the accident that would otherwise remain inexistent ("Not applicable", interrupts Miss Weber, "Neither of them. Not accidents." [127]). In order to represent this accident, Bennett formulates it through a series of stereoscopic images. First, he proposes a series of recognizable accidents that might have affected the millworker, only to subvert this series by casting them in the negative. He juxtaposes these non-accidents with the image of

cotton dust “creeping” into the millworker’s lungs. Then, he invokes the lungs’ containment within the body, again in the negative, only to contrast it with a notional set of lungs made of clear plastic and cradled in one’s arms. Finally, he considers how the progression of the dust might indeed be the correlative of the falling beam or exploding bottle, were each breath magnified to follow the “small accidents” they cause. Although Bennett’s explicit content is not the community we see in Holms’s Kafka, it relies on a shared social understanding of the accident, which it presents in formally disjunctive images, to restructure that understanding in a more expansive way.

Bennett makes the “slow violence” of the dust narratively comprehensible, and therefore compensable. Compensation, as is demonstrated by the succession of farcical cross-cuts of claimants at the Institute, requires the employer to be responsible for a verifiable accident that causes an observable injury. As such, it requires not just this narrative atomisation, it also requires some sort of evidence. But, in this world devoid of spirometry, there is no means of showing injury sustained through the breath. To evoke an alternate reality, where such damage might be observed, Bennett’s Kafka draws out the image of pliable, transparent lungs, able to be handled or cradled, like trees in the snow that might appear to be simply ‘resting’ on the snow’s surface. The image, designed to produce a response (“what would we say...”) to the injustice of this slow violence, ultimately fails to convince Kafka’s colleagues: Pohlmann responds that it “still wouldn’t be an accident” (127). Indeed, even the paradoxical inertia fails: “So is living”, Pohlmann says, “Or dying. There is no alternative but to breathe.” (127) What both offer, however, is a narrative compensation, which, after all, is what Franz wants: “I don’t want money. I want it to be given a name. How can I ever get rid of it if it doesn’t have a name?” (124) Or, as Bennett frames it in his introduction, “this kind of quest, where what is wanted is the name of the illness as well as compensation for it, has something in common with Joseph K’s quest in The Trial. He wants

his offence identified but no one will give it a name; this is his complaint.” (xvi)

Compensation, yes, but first, recognition.

Bennett’s *Kafka* offers us two alternative ways of understanding accidents: an atomised rendition of the process by which dust destroys the lungs, and a fantastical image of these lungs themselves, made of transparent material and carried outside the body. Both draw on breath conceits, the better to develop an association with the play’s central paradox: the conditions leading to Franz’s asbestos related disease. The ultimate purpose of these techniques for understanding accident is not, as it may seem, to expand the recourse to compensation, but to draw out a “name” for the condition. This might explain why the play treats compensation as a paradox that, much like the hanged man, is most dangerous to those it seems to support: “his refuge turns out to be his doom.” (78) Bennett and Kelman both intimate a basic inadequacy in compensation. “Justice is not money”, Kelman wrote in 1992 of the fight for more ample recognition of asbestos related diseases.<sup>48</sup> But Kelman’s understanding of this phrase differs significantly from Bennett’s. For Kelman, compensation is not simply “where limbs become commodities and to be given a clean bill of health is to be sent away empty-handed”, as Bennett describes it (125). “Obviously for any victim of asbestos abuse, compensation must come into it”, responds Kelman. “There is no choice about that. But it is also about Justice.”<sup>49</sup> In *The Insurance Man*, the scalar deformations associated with asbestos, historically, histologically and epistemologically, are too great for “justice” to be possible. The historical lag between Franz’s exposure and his illness manifesting is too long, the damage to his lungs too gradual and incremental. Bennett’s *Kafka* is no Manichean capitalist. Rather, he is the victim of historical circumstance. Ultimately, in order to maintain *Kafka*’s historical affability, Bennett must ignore his participation, his conscious participation, in exploiting his workers, who, as we have already seen, transition for him at six o’clock from the less than human to the human. Bennett’s play tells the story of

Kafka's biographical connection to asbestos, as a way of recovering (his own reading of) Kafka's work to address asbestos exposure. But his work is ultimately limited by the need to recognize the limits of historical Kafka's knowledge. It is Franz who must bear the shocking consequences of being sentenced "not only in innocence, but also in ignorance." Kelman's prose, with its more direct representation to interior monologue, offers a necessary counterpoint to Bennett's drama.

### **How late it was, how late**

To supplement Bennett's explicit engagement with Kafka within the constraints of his own historical moment, I turn to a more direct engagement with the challenges facing compensation claimants: Kelman's How late it was, how late, a novel in Glaswegian dialect about a small time huckster, Sammy, who is mysteriously struck blind and finds himself at the mercy of the Welfare State. It is easy to read How Late as an account of "a fight with bureaucracy". The novel closely follows Sammy Samuels, its protagonist, through encounters with various authorities: from his prison cell at the police station, through the offices of the Department for Social Services and the rooms of a medical practitioner to his conversations with his "rep", Ally. Nonetheless, it may appear a strange intertext for continuing our argument about Kafka and Bennett, since, unlike Bennett's play, it does not explicitly engage with Kafka or factories, and it has only one passing reference to asbestos. When raising the question of Kelman, Kafka and asbestos, the emphasis necessarily shifts from Kafka's biography to Kelman's. For, if Bennett's focus was the historical Kafka's involvement with the asbestos trade, Kelman's interest in Kafka is largely stylistic. There is no written evidence that he was aware of Kafka's involvement in the asbestos industry. Anyone familiar with Kelman's biography, on the other hand, knows that he was exposed to asbestos when he

worked for the major British asbestos firm, Turner & Newall. For all the links to Kafka that follow, it may be that the most resonance comes in a factory exposure scene. In Kafka's diary, the factory exposure dehumanized the female workers, as seen by the owner. In Bennett's play, again it is Kafka that sees the exposure, but in his capacity as an insurance claims clerk. Here, Kelman tells the story from the perspective of the worker himself.

The best dressed guy on the floor was a Jamaican whose name I think was Danny. He worked directly beneath me on the spreading table. The asbestos and cement came from Lithgow to me. [...] When I was learning I erred and forgot to put in the cement element of the composition. Danny released the chute and out splashed a tidal wave of asbestos paste. I had forgotten to put in the solidifier. I looked over the rail to apologise. He was covered in stuff, wiping it out of his eyes and mouth.<sup>50</sup>

In their comments on this passage, Mitch Miller and Johnny Rodger hypothesize that this incident (both his exposure and his hand in someone else's) may account for Kelman's commitment to the asbestos cause: "Kelman's motives for direct action are grounded in direct experience and sympathetic imagination [...] while causes are important and ideologies can have their value, these constructs exist to redeem, illuminate, enrich and redress the personal history of the individual."<sup>51</sup> Kelman has spent more than thirty years in conversation with the trials and tribulations of asbestos victims, most notably in work for the Clydeside Action on Asbestos.<sup>52</sup> "Those who don't understand the struggle talk about justice," he wrote in his 2015 submission to the Scottish Parliament on the question of compensation for Pleural Plaques related to asbestos exposure. But, he continues, "justice cannot happen. The reality is that people are being compensated because there IS no justice. It is too late. Their health has been taken and cannot be returned. They have to cope with a further horror. Their health, and in far too many cases their very lives, have been taken through criminal negligence and those responsible are not being held to account."<sup>53</sup> Justice, in Kelman's assessment, is

impossible for “victims of asbestos abuse”. No amount of pleading, conniving or strategizing will grant them access to the law, since their sentence (“their health has been taken”) has already been passed (“it is too late”) and they have no recourse to hold “those responsible” to account. There is no process by which justice may happen.

Comparing Kelman’s reading of Kafka with that of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (1973), Miller and Rodger note common features in their interest in “entrapment and the meditation on escape from suffocating social formations [...] Sammy Samuels (in How late it was, how late) blindly groping his way out from the bureaucratic determinations of his existence.”<sup>54</sup> But Miller and Rodger also see a technical interest in Kelman’s Kafka that they do not find in Deleuze and Guattari: “technical aspects of how a ‘reality’ is introduced into Kafka’s fiction; in questions about what is reality on the one hand, and what is the character’s interior reflection on reality on the other [...]”<sup>55</sup> Not only does this turn to technique avoid the political sloganeering in Toward a Minor Literature criticized by Stanley Corngold, it frames Kelman’s engagement as a technical response to “the problem of how to introduce an environmental ‘reality’, context or history, without recourse to an omniscient narrator [...]”<sup>56</sup> For Miller and Rodger, both Kafka and Kelman “go to great pains to avoid posing an external authority between the action and the reader.”<sup>57</sup> It is here that Miller and Rodger resolve the contradiction many see in his work, “between his insistence, in his fiction, on the freedom of the individual, and his stress, in some critical and political writings, on social action,” since his work in both relies on the deconstruction of authority, whether the narrator, the subject or the state.<sup>58</sup> Such deconstruction does not naively imagine an end to authority. Rather, it challenges authority to recognize injustices as they occur. As Kelman himself says, “to win a campaign is simply to have acknowledged by those in authority that a miscarriage of justice has occurred.”<sup>59</sup> Kafka’s legacy to Kelman is, then, a style that permits him to address this lacuna: not, as in Bennett, by creating a visual

effect, but, instead, by developing a particular narrative voice noteworthy for its refusal to assume any kind of authority.

Our challenge, then, is to consider how Kelman draws on this narrative voice in relation to asbestos. While scholarship on Kelman acknowledges the importance of his asbestos activist work, it has remained a footnote in literary analyses, serving as but one example of Kelman's broader interest in social justice. Even Miller and Rodger's The Red Cockatoo, arguably the most thorough engagement with Kelman's activist work to date, do not find links between the work itself and asbestos, though they do link Kelman's personal history with asbestos to his later work for the Clydeside Asbestos Action and his appearance with Alasdair Gray and Tom Leonard at "Live at the Boilermakers", an event to raise funds for Tommy Gorman's Clydeside Asbestos: The Unwanted Legacy (2000). Discussions of How late it was, how late, for instance, have tended to focus on the politics of, variously, dialect, class and the divide between high and lowbrow literature. This oversight is remarkable because Kelman has repeatedly tied the novel to asbestos related issues. In 2015, a feature on Kelman's asbestos work in Glasgow's Evening Times acknowledges that "he has not written explicitly in novels about the plight of asbestos victims" but "while writing his Booker winning novel he was a campaigner and the subject provided inspiration for a scene in the book".<sup>60</sup> It quotes Kelman: "In one section of that novel there is a semi-parody of the horrific situation a victim of asbestos experiences in trying to get an actual diagnosis from a 'medical expert.'"<sup>61</sup> This is by no means the first time Kelman has directly linked the novel to asbestos and compensation. As early as 1995, Kelman would make an explicit connection between Sammy and asbestos activism. Responding to a question by Pat Kane, about the vulnerability of Sammy, "an ex-con, skint, and blind," in a "police-dominated society," Kelman suggests a comparable vulnerability might be experienced by "an ordinary member of the public [...] who's a victim of asbestos".<sup>62</sup> Later in the interview, Kelman ties this

directly to Kafka and compensation. When Kane suggests the novel has some ephemeral relation to the Kafkaesque, Kelman insists on the “reality” of the bureaucracy in Kafka’s world: “he was faced with a situation where these layers and layers of bureaucracy, structured in such a way that you could never get to the person who was actually responsible for doing something.”<sup>63</sup> In 2001, Kelman suggested the furore that arose when the novel won the Booker might explain why the political dimensions of asbestos and compensation had been overlooked:

The way Sammy is treated is the same as the way any asbestosis victim is treated by the British state, which is very convenient for them. The burden of proof is on the victim to prove that you are a victim. You have to prove yourself innocent. But people found a way of not talking about the politics in the book. Questions such as ‘surely this is not something that happens to people in UK society?’ never arose. Instead there was a red-herring debate about language. It was a quasi-political response to what could have been a much more political discourse in relation to welfare. The pseudo political thing to go after was the language, and I can see that might be the case again with the new book.<sup>64</sup>

Instead of addressing the “burden of proof” laid on Sammy, the novel gave rise to a “pseudo political thing” about language. Later, I will return to the “semi-parody” of the encounter with the medical expert, which, alongside conversations with the disability rep, Ally, and the Department for Social Security personnel, constitute the novel’s engagement with compensation. For the moment, however, I want to recall briefly the debate that Kelman refers to, which ensued when members of the panel that decided to award How late the Booker Prize excoriated the novel on public record. In this regard, his defenders were as problematic as his detractors, since the overwhelming urge was to “redeem” Kelman as a highbrow writer, whose works transcended such vulgar concrete realities as class or

compensation. Even before How late won the Booker, Kelman was wrestling with this tendency to deify him as a latter-day modernist. In an interview leading up to the award, Anthony Quinn noted, “in the portrait of Sammy as an ordinary man baffled by bureaucracy one can detect the pale shade of Josef K.”, going on to add that “Kelman admits that a spell doing tribunal work for asbestos victims had a parallel in Kafka’s career as an insurance clerk, but he’s wary of the ‘accepted wisdom’ that sees Kafka as a fantasist.”<sup>65</sup> Kelman’s response was to identify Kafka as a “supreme realist”: “the establishment reading wants to see it as parable or metaphor, divorced from realism, whereas I would regard Kafka as a supreme realist. On a common sense level, his work suggests as much, the idea of him working for a law firm and dealing with workers’ compensation claims. There’s so much in Kafka that derives from that fight against bureaucracy.”<sup>66</sup> “The fight against bureaucracy” that motivates Kelman’s Kafka is perhaps out of keeping with the historical Kafka’s work as a bureaucrat, given in Diaries, Letters and The Office Writings, but it is an image of Kafka perpetuated by both Kelman and Bennett. Bennett, however, must reconcile the anti-bureaucrat Kafka with the historical Kafka because he invokes the biographical method. Kelman’s interest in Kafka’s style, as a realist representation of an individual’s entanglement with bureaucracy, does not suffer the same burden of historical proof. Indeed, Kelman himself will write approvingly of critical work on the writer that does not “extend the story into Kafka’s biography.”<sup>67</sup> Instead, “in the world of Joseph K., Franz Kafka has presented the existence of horror as a fact about [that society], and if we do not ‘see’ horror as a fact then we are ignoring important things that are going on in the novel.”<sup>68</sup>

Kelman’s concern with physical sight and blindness, and bureaucratic knowledge and ignorance, can be linked directly to Kafka’s style, which retains elements of the stereoscopic; elsewhere, he writes that Kafka “refers to a space which then fills with a crowd of things that either don’t exist, or maybe don’t exist. He fills the page with absences and possible

absences, possible realities.”<sup>69</sup> Sammy, similarly, must negotiate a Glasgow that, stripped of visual stimuli, seems constituted mostly of possible realities, ruled by bureaucratic judgements about what is and is not relevant.

This is most obvious in Sammy’s encounters with the various officials of the DSS (86-111), the receptionist and medical expert at Health & Welfare (122-125; 217-225); and Ally (214-216; 226-244; 292-315). Although dense description introduces and navigates these scenes, they mostly rely on dialogue interactions, which consist in pages of clipped refinements of previous statements. So, for instance, the encounter with the medical professional mentioned by Kelman in the 2015 interview:

Aye, sorry for interrupting doctor but see when you say ‘alleged’?

Yes?

Are ye saying you dont really think I’m blind?

Pardon?

Ye saying ye dont think I’m blind?

Of course not.

Well what are ye saying?

I told you a minute ago.

Could ye repeat it please?

In respect of the visual stimuli presented you appeared unable to respond.

So ye’re no saying I’m blind?

It isnt for me to say. (225)

This interaction stages the medical expert’s failure to deliver a judgment that may be translated into legal compensation, whether through “a diagnosis”, “an opinion”, or “a

referral”. (228) Here, Kelman represents medical caution about linking observation to a definitive, compensable diagnosis as a failure to make common sense judgements. Since Kelman ties this failure to the doctor’s obstruction of the claim, it is a moral failing. What, under different circumstances might be termed scientific discretion, here becomes a frustrating intransigence about identifying symptoms (“visual stimuli”) as conditions (“blindness”). It sets up two diverging images of the medical encounter, whose juxtaposition renders their incommensurability all the more absurd. Stereoscopic passages like these demonstrate how difficult it can be for the victim to establish a link between experience and problem, not to mention between cause and compensation.

These encounters with bureaucracy usefully illustrate Kelman’s stereoscopic inheritance, but they risk distracting us from the internalized antipathy Sammy himself feels to the processes of compensation. Like Bennett’s more farcical rendition of the same kinds of bureaucratization, the dialogue highlights an opposition to external authority. And yet, Kelman’s debt to Kafka is most apparent when he projects this anxiety not in an external conflict with authority, but in the character’s internal antagonism with his own interpellated desires and compulsions, or what Aaron Kelly calls “unfree indirect discourse”.<sup>70</sup> Kelly recasts Hugh Kenner’s classic definition of free indirect discourse—“the normally neutral narrative vocabulary pervaded by a little cloud of idioms which a character might use if he were managing the narrative”—as *unfree* indirect discourse to describe the collision in Kelman’s work between “a narrative and a character that are not only heterogeneous and unreconciled to one another but also to themselves. No shared, overarching focalization is possible whereby the discourse may move freely across subject positions. There is only the direct impacting of discourses that are unfree or bounded by their situatedness in hierarchical registers of language and a society stratified by inequality.”<sup>71</sup> This unfree indirect discourse is

evident when we compare Sammy's inconsistent feelings about compensation. When Sammy says goodbye to Ally after they meet at Health & Welfare,

Sammy took out the prescription and the referral and crumpled them up. But he didnay fling them away; he was about to but he stopped and stuck them back in his pocket. Ally might have been watching from along the street. No that it mattered cause he had nay intention of going anywhere the morrow morning. He had nay intention of using a rep either. He had nay intention of doing fuck all except what he felt like. [...] Ye do yer crime ye take yer time. (245)

Scott Hames has glossed at least part of this passage as illustrating how, "in Kelman's fiction, personal integrity can never survive its mediation by representative regimes (such as parliament, political parties, or trade unions)."<sup>72</sup> Sammy's equivocation about, and ultimate rejection of, Ally, the representative, fits into a broader pattern that Hames, and others, identify in Kelman's work: "Not only does his fiction generally eschew moments of collective identification, it goes out of its way to scramble and corrode them, pulling at their internal torsions and modelling a wary detachment from pre-given modes of 'community' and voice."<sup>73</sup> But Sammy's attack is not merely on representation, as such. His expletives direct their violence at both the other and himself. This violence appears in response to an internal contradiction, between the reflexive concern that "Ally might have been watching" and the subsequent defiant claim not to care. The double image seems consistent with Sammy's claims to personal accountability, but the certainty is entirely at odds with the form this accountability takes three pages later:

He was the cause of the sightloss, him himself. That was obvious. If they needed the arguments he would supply them. Hope doesnay spring eternal. Ally tried to give him hope but there was nay hope. So why fucking bother? You wind up the loser; ye get

double-fuckt. Ye just play the game for as long and as much as ye need to. It wins ye breathing space. Breathing space is what he was giving to Charlie. Maybe. Who knows. (248)

By this point, the narrative of personal accountability has been sidelined by a more existential universal guilt. No longer a strict correspondence between action and consequence (the “crime” and the “time”), the outcome is inevitable, and inevitably a loss. The best one can hope for is “breathing space,” between the fiction of hope and the reality of hopelessness. Again, Sammy finds no reason to use a “rep”, but where before he asserted a rugged individualism—doing what he feels like and getting himself out of trouble—now it is because the situation is hopeless.

This recapitulates the sense of “smothering” captured by the accusative “you” that opens the novel:

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; the words filling your head: then the other words; there’s something wrong; there’s something far far wrong; ye’re no a good man, ye’re just no a good man. (1)

Kelman’s “ye [you]” interpellates Sammy, through the accusative, into an ideology of individual responsibility that, as the later passages show, maps inconsistently across the narrative. Since compensation relies on forms of representation, whether the state or private claimant, that Kelman’s fiction adamantly rejects (as Hames has argued), we might hypothesize that applications for compensation violate those conditions for existential responsibility that Kelman’s characters prize most. Given our paratextual material, however, this hypothesis appears odd. Compensation, for Kelman, may not be a sufficient condition for

justice, but it remains necessary. Sammy's indirect discourse is manifestly "unfree" because his refusal to accept the possibility of compensation stems not, as he claims, from his existential guilt or his rugged individualism, but from his inconsistent internalization of both value systems. Sammy's "smothering" thoughts throughout the novel suggests that this imperfect internalization produces anxiety. It is this breathlessness returns us most clearly to asbestos, because the only direct mention of asbestos in the novel happens when Sammy calms himself with a breathing exercise:

A guy once showed him the ropes. It was based on breathing exercises. Especially good if ye were a smoker cause it helped clear yer lungs at the same time: what ye did was ye breathed out as far as ye could go then ye held it for a wee while, then blew out again; then ye breathed in slow, through yer nose [...] and ye carried on til ye forgot all about it. Good for awkward situations. It wasna even a guy in the poky telt him it was somebody he laboured with on a building site. Stoor everywhere. Fucking clouds of it; auld asbestos man everything. Up yer nose and down yer throat. When ye spat up first thing in the morning it came out like a lump of fucking dross. But it was to calm ye down, that was the real reason ye done it, so ye dinnay lose yer temper.

(159)

The "real reason ye done it" is so that Sammy can calm himself in the cell. But, before that real reason, Sammy remembers a more material, if apparently less pressing, reason: to clear the lungs. Like the women in Kafka's factory, or the millworker in Bennett's play, Sammy has been breathing in dust or "stoor" ("clouds of it"). But the consequences are productively different. Dust affords Kafka's women the opportunity to dust themselves off, a process whereby their inhumanity before six may be contrasted with their humanity after. We might describe this process as dialectical. Sufficient to say, however, that it is where the dust sits, or doesn't, that matters for the human/inhuman relation. Bennett extends this social

analysis of dust to its health consequences. In the individual cells damaged by individual particles—dust in its microscopic frame—Bennett finds a phenomenon whose rate of change and visual dimensions can be matched to the narrative development of his extended metaphor. Thus, the dust’s progressive damage becomes easier to visualize, and name. Still, it hardly represents the experience of the millworker. Rather, The Insurance Man draws together the historical Kafka’s interest in modelling the schematics of workplace accidents with his stylistic use of paradoxical tropes.

By contrast, Kelman’s rendition of Sammy’s workplace breath rituals are far more attuned to the ways in which workers respond to dust, as a whole phenomenon (“auld asbestos man everything”) that strikes the worker at once. If Kelman, like Bennett, attends to the dust’s dynamics, he is not concerned with how it comes to sit in the lungs, which embodies an actuarial problem. Rather, he is concerned with expelling, exhaling, the dust, however insufficient or palliative such an intervention might seem. Performing the breath rituals, whether diegetically as a description or non-diegetically in the recitation of that description, become a way of accommodating conditions that exceed the control of Kelman’s narrator, a brief stasis allowed amidst his unfree indirect discourse.

## **Conclusion**

The politics of recovery have tended to operate in cases where an unjustly marginalized writer has been recuperated for the canon. When Sorenson critiques the fragmentation that attends such recovery, he does so to discuss writers about whom we still know too little and to challenge “the chilling realities that prevented [the alternative, counterfactual version of modernity] from emerging in the past.”<sup>74</sup> We should be suspicious of attempts to appropriate his argument for a canonical writer. If anything, however,

Sorenson's argument acts as a warning against the increased risk of fragmentation that accompanies increasing canonicity: a process perhaps exemplified in the scholarly derogation of the "Kafkaesque". Moreover, I would hope that the political ramifications of my appropriation are offset by the opportunity these recovery projects present for thinking about literary approaches to social justice, not just as it relates to asbestos, but to other entanglements between what Edward Said calls the world, the text, and the critic. In this regard, we might think about how two parallel recovery projects might, when brought into conversation, guard against the fragmentation Sorenson warns against, by creating a stereoscopic effect: the juxtaposition of two versions of the Kafkan victim.

While The Insurance Man is ultimately concerned with visualizing the torturous path taken by the claimant, How late burrows into the mind of the claimant himself, who, in an ironic inversion of Bennett's technique, no longer accesses the visual at all. The two are bound together by their suspicion of compensation, a suspicion in part developed through their respective engagement with Kafka's stereoscopic style, as Holms has more recently called it. Bennett juxtaposes contrasting images of accidents, thereby allowing him to visualize the very small and very gradual effects of dust on the lungs. For Kelman, Kafka is a supreme realist who turns horror into fact. Less concerned with trying to visualize actual interactions with asbestos, Kelman considers how the compensation process challenges the asbestos victim's sense of autonomy. What each "reading" of Kafka presents, then, is a different response to the asbestos environment, coproduced in interactions between both response and environment. To understand why it matters that we "see" the gradual deterioration, over time, presented by Bennett, we need to frame these changes against the stark division between institutions and individuals, presented by Kelman. Understood thus, compensation becomes about something more than just paying costs or giving a condition a name: it also involves a catalogue of injustices rendered against working victims that extends

beyond their identity as workers. Nellie Kershaw experienced as an external differend, wherein her identity as a worker actively impeded her rights as a working victim. We realize this when we see Kershaw's situation stereoscopically: that is, as two mutually exclusive images of the same person. This realization threatens to remain schematic, if we don't also understand how internalized assumptions about autonomy, contradictory though they may be, can also obstruct the desire for compensation or other forms of help, as demonstrated by Kelman. Only then may we begin to recover from Kafka a compensation that may be seen and is just.

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Selikoff and Morris Greenberg, "A Landmark Case in Asbestosis", JAMA 265, No. 7 (1991): 898-901.

<sup>2</sup> Reiner Stach, Kafka: The Years of Insight. Translated by Shelley Frisch (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013), 570.

<sup>3</sup> Natalia Cecire, Experimental: American Literature and the Aesthetics of Knowledge (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2019), ix.

<sup>4</sup> Franz Kafka, The Diaries: 1910-1923. Edited by Max Brod. Translated by Joseph Kresh and Martin Greenberg (with the cooperation of Hannah Arendt) (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 131. Translation adapted by Stanley Corngold in "Kafka and the Dialectic of Minor Literature", College Literature 21, No. 1 (1994): 89-101.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 133. Translation adapted by Corngold (1994).

<sup>7</sup> Isak Winkel Holm, Kafka's Stereoscopes: The Political Function of a Literary Style (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Debjani Ganguly, "Catastrophic Form and Planetary Realism," New Literary History, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2020): 419-453, 421; 422.

<sup>11</sup> Leif Sorenson, Ethnic Modernism and the Making of US Literary Multiculturalism (London: Palgrave, 2016); Cecire, Experimental.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Bennett, Two Kafka Plays: Kafka's Dick and The Insurance Man (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), ix.

<sup>13</sup> James Kelman, "And the Judges Said...": Essays (London: Polygon, 2008), 335.

<sup>14</sup> Bennett, Plays, ix; Kelman, Judges, 268.

<sup>15</sup> Sorenson, Modernism, 140.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> John Forrester, Thinking in Cases (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Lauren Berlant, "On the Case", Critical Inquiry 33, no. 4 (2007), 666. On the wider implications, see my forthcoming Asbestos – The Last Modernist Object (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 670.

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<sup>21</sup> Simon Goldhill, "The Limits of the Case Study: Exemplarity and the Reception of Classical Literature", New Literary History 48, No. 3 (2017), 432.

<sup>22</sup> See Geoffrey Tweedale, Magic Mineral to Killer Dust: Turner & Newall and the Asbestos Hazard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> See Jock McCulloch, Asbestos Blues: Labour, Capital, Physicians & the State in South Africa (Melton: James Curry, 2002); Jessica Van Horsen, A Town Called Asbestos: Environmental Contamination, Health, and Resilience in a Resource Community (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> See Agata Mazzeo, Dust Inside: Fighting and Living with Asbestos-Related Disasters in Brazil (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020), .John Trimbur, Grassroots Literacy and the Written Record: A Textual History of Asbestos Activism in South Africa (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2020) and the ongoing work by Laurie Kazan-Allen for the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat. <http://www.ibasecretariat.org>.

<sup>25</sup> Kafka, Diaries, 138.

<sup>26</sup> Franz Kafka, Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors. Edited by Max Brod. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), 126.

<sup>27</sup> See Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg and Benno Wagner, Franz Kafka: The Office Writings. Translated by Eric Patton and Ruth Hein (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Lucy Deane, 'Report on the health of workers in asbestos and other dusty trades'. HM Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops: Annual Report for 1898 (1899): 171–172; Étienne Auribault. 'Sur l'hygiene et la securite des ouvriers dans la filature et tissage d'amiante'. Bulletin de l'inspection du travail (1906): 120-132; L. Scarpa, "Industria dell'amianto e tubercolosi", in L. Lucatello (ed.) XVIIe Congresso della Società italiana di Medicina interna (1908): 358-359; T. Fahr, "Kristallbildung in der Lunge." Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift. 30 (1914): 1548–1549.

<sup>29</sup> David J. Jeremy, "Corporate Responses to the Emergent Recognition of a Health Hazard in the UK Asbestos Industry: The Case of Turner & Newall, 1920-1960." Business and Economic History 24, no. 1 (1995), 254.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, The Differend: Phrases in Dispute (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

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<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death." In Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927- 1934. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1999), 797.

<sup>34</sup> Kafka, Diaries, 179.

<sup>35</sup> Reiner Stach, Kafka: The Decisive Years, Translated by Shelley Frisch (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013), 37.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Murray, Kafka (London: Abacus, 2005), 94.

<sup>38</sup> Holm, Kafka, Chapter Two.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>47</sup> On Bennett's reading of Kafka, see Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> Kelman, Judges, 204.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 209.

<sup>50</sup> James Kelman, An Old Pub Near Angel (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), 168.

<sup>51</sup> Mitch Miller and Johnny Rodger, The Red Cockatoo: James Kelman and the Art of Commitment (Inverness: Sandstone Press, 2011), 107.

<sup>52</sup> For Kelman on asbestos, see Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural & Political (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), "And the Judges said...": Essays (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2008), and "Compensation, Not Justice". *Christie Books*: <https://christiebooks.co.uk/2015/10/compensation-not-justice-a-discussion-paper-on-asbestos-abuse-read-to-the-scottish-parliament-by-james-kelman/>

<sup>53</sup> Kelman, "Compensation, Not Justice".

<sup>54</sup> Miller and Rodger, Cockatoo, 77.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Corngold, "Dialectic"; Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 77-78.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>59</sup> Kelman, Judges, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Steward Paterson, "Asbestos Treatment is a Scandal says James Kelman", Glasgow Evening Times 19 September 2015. [<https://www.eveningtimes.co.uk/news/13770982.asbestos-victims-treatment-is-a-scandal-says-james-kelman/>]. Accessed 2 May 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Pat Kane; James Kelman, "Underclass, under-what? Fictions and realities from Glasgow to Prague: an interview with James Kelman", Regenerating Cities, 7 (1995), 18-20; 18.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>64</sup> Kelman quoted in Nicholas Wroe, "Glasgow Kith", The Guardian, 2 June 2001 [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jun/02/fiction.artsandhumanities>]. Accessed 2 May 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Anthony Quinn, "Category A literature in Glasgow: How does a literary outsider become the Booker favourite? Anthony Quinn meets James Kelman", The Independent, 8 October 1994 [<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/book-review-category-a-literature-in-glasgow-how-does-a-literary-outsider-become-the-booker-1441644.html>]. Accessed 2 May 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Kelman, Judges, 299

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 302.

<sup>69</sup> Kelman, Some Recent Attacks, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Aaron Kelly, "'I just tell the bloody truth, as I see it': James Kelman's *A Disaffection*, the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Melancholy Knowledge", Études écossaises 12 (2009): 79-99.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>72</sup> Scott Hames, "'Maybe singing into yourself': James Kelman, Inner Speech and Vocal Communion." In Community in Modern Scottish Literature. Edited by Scott Lyall (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 196-213, 199.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>74</sup> Sorenson, Modernism, 2.