

THE IMPOSSIBLE IMPOSSIBLE: KAFKA'S

“BESCHREIBUNG EINES KAMPFES”

by

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The Impossible Impossible: Kafka's "Beschreibung eines Kampfes"

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Franz Kafka's "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" employs a uniquely troubling narrative structure in which the story's narrator begins to relate the story of his run-in with an "acquaintance" but fails to maintain a stable, subjective standpoint from which he can narrate sensibly. Despite his attempt to utilize a secondary narrative that makes him both a narrator and a narrated character, this first-person narrator's failed subject perspective gives way to a myriad of other characters' and their own attempts to solidify their individual existence via secondary narratives. Put in context of other similar, yet distinct, narrative structures employed by Hoffmann, Stevenson, Machen, and Chesterton, Kafka's variety of frame (and framed) narrative demonstrates his unique authorial perspective emerging in his earliest remaining short story—"Beschreibung eines Kampfes."

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## **The Impossible Impossible: Kafka's "Beschreibung eines Kampfes"**

### **I. Introduction**

Readers of Franz Kafka's "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" find themselves engaged with a series of strange encounters between the story's initial narrator, his acquaintance, and two other men—the supplicant and the fat man. These bizarre and distressing encounters occur within a labyrinthine set of narratives which, rather than proceeding logically from one episode to the next and the next like most narratives made up of distinct sections might, follow the first diversion from the initial narrative deeper and deeper into subsequent imbedded diversions, which the readers chase past any expected or seemingly logical terminus originating from the primary narrative. Then, suddenly, the narrative returns to the original frame-story level, before ceasing with yet another strange set of actions by the initial narrator and his acquaintance. While the events inside the various sections seem impossible in many cases—shapes and sizes of the men's bodies change, as does the landscape around them, for two examples—the story takes place to a large extent in Kafka's real, contemporary Prague, and much of the narration could be considered stylistically realist.

Generally speaking, to orchestrate a set of unsettling, other-worldly, chance encounters between a narrator and various socially outcast or otherwise marginalized characters in a real-life, or lifelike, fin-de-siècle city would not be unique to Kafka (though, as I will show, Kafka's narrative structure is more complicated than that). There is a tradition in the fictional representation of burgeoning city life, in which authors like Poe, Hawthorne, and Stevenson in London, Baudelaire in Paris, and even Hoffmann in Dresden (though this is clearly not a metropolis along the lines of London or Paris) preceded Kafka. The city emerges in this

tradition as a setting for strange happenings in new kinds of non-traditional narratives for some of Kafka's eminent contemporaries as well, including Arthur Machen and G. K. Chesterton in London. Also, in many cases, these narrated encounters occur within a system of framed narratives, and nearly all of them seem to exemplify what we might call a "re-enchantment" of the modern city that was moving ever more rapidly, employing more and more technology, and housing more and more people in less and less space. While Kafka's Prague was certainly not on par with the first metropolises, London and Paris, in terms of population or geographical size, many of the same new pressures and stimuli of the "modern" city find their respective ways into "Beschreibung eines Kampfes."

Some scholars have written about "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" as merely an experiment in writing a dissociated personality or identity, and others consider it to be simply the result of potential inspiration Kafka took from earlier Doppelgänger tales like those of E.T.A. Hoffmann. Others dismiss it as too early to be important for Kafka's career—"sinnlos...literarisch beurteilen zu wollen"—and simply consider "Das Urteil" as the true beginning of Kafka's career (Rolleston qtd in Neymeyr 9). Given these critical points of view, and the relative comfort with which we can place it within a small but important literary moment focused on the experience of walking and living in fin-de-siècle European cities, why spend more time on this short piece of fiction which Kafka created two versions of and yet never attempted to have published? I contend that Kafka's "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" not only creates a unique, fascinating, multi-faceted study of the body in its fin-de-siècle landscape, but also performs itself, as a narrative, in an importantly distinct way that illustrates the problem of the subject in modern storytelling. This problem of the subject then becomes a central theme for Kafka and many later writers for whom his work is foundational.

The medium of “Beschreibung eines Kampfes” is, obviously, a written narrative, and the relationship of the activity of narrating to the problems of self-knowledge as a central concern plays out within that narrative. Kafka designs this piece of fiction so that the reader’s experience of the narrative is made difficult (as compared to a more traditional, straightforward style of fiction). The reader struggles at various times to understand which character narrates which experiences, where the “real” world begins and ends, how or even if that “real” world relates to the various narratives-within-the-narrative, and why the characters’ stories take place within each other in such a convoluted, seemingly discordant overall structure. The lack of certainty about what constitutes the “real” world is tied to the ephemeral nature of self-knowledge for each character, and that unstable self-knowledge affects those characters’ capability to narrate their lives. When Kafka’s characters attempt to use narration as a way to gain solid ground—and concrete bodies—their inability to fully understand their own world inhibits their ability to narrate a stable world of their own. Their tenuous status as subjects in their understanding of the “real” world—which I will refer to later as the primary diegetic world—is not cured in the embedded narratives they tell. Rather, this tenuous status expresses itself more dramatically, more unbelievably and powerfully—fantastically—as the characters narrate themselves. Furthermore, the reader experiences all this through the various lenses of each of those characters’ points of view, so that the very idea of narrative focalization becomes troublesome.

In setting up such a narrative structure within his actual, contemporary Prague, Kafka creates a completely distinct piece of fiction, even—or especially—when it is considered next to works of the fin-de-siècle authors I have mentioned. Major works by each of these authors—Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and Machen’s *The Three Imposters*—include some combination of fragmentary narrative

structure, framing and framed narrative, episodes in which one character creates a narrative regarding him or herself and another character encountered among the cityscape, and the fantastical or phantasmagorical emerging within the “real” world. As I will show, however, Kafka’s fiction arranges these elements in a way that sets it apart from the rest, because it embraces a multiplicity of subjects as opposed to a unifying narrator and pushes the limits of what is possible as narration when the very existence of a subject is questionable.

## **II. Physical Proof It Is Impossible to Live**

While Occam’s Razor may be the observer’s rule of thumb for explaining the phenomenon he or she believes to have witnessed in the world, it is rarely sufficient for illuminating the individual subject’s experience of living. One might initially conclude that “Beschreibung eines Kampfes” deals in the latter frame of mind. However, as I will show, it is not simply the subject’s multiplicitous and perhaps confused experience of living that is narrated, but a seemingly irreconcilable combination of that varied subject perspective and the distanced observer’s perspective. At the center of this mode is the body—not just the narrator’s, in whose recollection the narrative begins—but those of his acquaintance and the other two central figures, der Beter and der Dicke, whose bodies are seemingly also their names, or vice versa. Also, it would be remiss not to at least mention the roles women’s bodies play in the story, as well as those of the natural “bodies” in nature. Interesting, too, are the affinities we find between those groups of roles, as juxtaposed with the various narrators’ tales.

The inlaying of each narrative piece within the prior narrative piece’s fictional moment—which, though it might be thought to imply a subsequent bit of narrated time, almost always reveals experiences from previous fictional moments—creates a dizzying effect in combination



with the fascinating fluidity and dynamism of the natural and human bodies in the story. For this reason, I resist any analysis that separates the two as if they were not coexistent. However, in order to reasonably and logically analyze both, I will begin with a description and historical analysis of the unstable nature of the characters' bodies and follow that by focusing explicitly on the narrative structure that recounts, contains, and creates them.

To begin an analysis of the changing power relations between bodies in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" we must take into account the relevant socio-historical ideas about bodies in combination with how exactly Kafka constructs his characters' bodies. As surroundings, the characters in "Beschreibung" have not just the natural landscape's mountains, trees, and rivers, but also formal, upper class parties and partygoers, slick, dark city streets and looming city buildings, and their society at large. Understood here both as the company of party acquaintances and as the larger social complex we readily think of when hearing the term, society within "Beschreibung" proves to be important and unbearably massive for the story's characters. Furthermore, the representations of bodies within the piece reflect actual historical prejudices about bodies and society that pervaded during Kafka's lifetime. Gilman's Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient provides a great deal of information about the leading ideas in this vein, which concern physicality and bodies within an "appropriate" social hierarchy and racial identities. Gilman also closely examines Kafka's thoughts about his own society and his place in that society that his body seems to grant him.

According to Gilman, both "European" (or "Christian") and "Jewish" body types and ideals of male physicality pervaded European public and "scientific" discourse during Kafka's youth and young adulthood. Several fundamental differences between the Jewish body and the Christian body were perceived in this kind of popular pseudoscience. First, the standard

representation of Jews was as male, but weakly male. As an example of this perceived weakness of Jews seeping through all aspects of society, Gilman cites an early twentieth-century Russian military study in which military staff measured the chest circumferences of new conscripts, finding Jews to have a consistently lower chest circumference-to-height ratio. This was taken as a definitive sign of the Jew's weakness. In European culture, chest size was a sign of health as much as it was the ideal for a strong, virile, and mentally fit man. It was widely believed that thin, puny chests were, alternately, a symptom of tuberculosis or a sign of predisposition to tuberculosis, the most rampant and socially troubling disease of Kafka's time (61). Kafka himself underwent a medical evaluation to secure a job at the insurance agency in which he subsequently worked for years. During this evaluation, the doctor measured Kafka's chest circumference at the maximum points of inhalation and exhalation, his height, his weight, and the quality of the sound of his breathing and his voice. The doctor described him as thin, delicate, and weak—but healthy (41-42). The doctor's evaluation and report reveal the physical attributes culturally valued as signs of health, but also indicate that this particular physician did subscribe to some legitimate science, ultimately pronouncing Kafka fit.

Thin body type and puny upper body appearance were two indicators of "lower" racial makeup. Beyond this, Gilman tells us that yellow skin and the shape of the head (especially the nose) were commonly credited signs of "Oriental" bloodlines. Further, Jewish males were, as a rule, viewed as emasculated, effeminate, because they carried all of these physical indicators and were said to have weaker, more womanly constitutions. They were thought of as intellectuals, bookworms without the means or desire to exert a physical presence in social or any other settings. At the same time, their thin, weak chests, specifically, were said to be a sign of predisposition for tuberculosis, while on the other hand, "Christian" commentators and

pseudoscientists pined that Jews seemed not to contract tuberculosis with as much regularity as their fellow Christian groups did. It was a double bind for the Jews, who looked in all aspects weak and sickly, but whose ostensible immunity due their social and physical isolation was viewed with ire by the very groups who pushed them together in the ghettos.

At nearly six feet, Kafka was far taller than the average man in the former Czechoslovakia and even taller on top of that than the average Central European Jew, yet he only weighed 133 pounds at the time of this examination. Certainly, Kafka's body fit into the racially motivated mold of the Jew in regard to his thinness, and he wrote in his diaries small fictional pieces about weak, skinny men undergoing physical evaluations. In one, he links physical weakness with a lack of "inner fire," demonstrating the fact that he registers his culture's linkage of health and mentality with bodily appearance, if not that he buys into it (Gilman 43). Kafka also drew upon all these cultural prejudices in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes," highlighting the outcast's life several characters' body constructions lead them to—the same characters we find in the center of physical struggles with other men and with their physical environment.

As mentioned, the setting of "Beschreibung eines Kampfes"—both natural and usually inanimate, manmade surroundings—vitalize this piece because they are not merely latent backdrops. The idea of sentience in natural beings, which we may determine are not flora nor even fauna in this narrative, comes into play not only through the narration of the initial central character (the "I" from whose perspective the piece begins to be told), but in the narration, the personal stories, told by der Beter, der Bekannter, and finally by der Dicke. The wind and the mountains, along with types and parts of trees, are continually named and prove to be important signs of the perceived movements and changes in size. Specifically, they are the sites of revelation for shifts in each character's mood and capability for manipulating the outside world.

These abrupt attitude shifts are keys to unlocking a central theme of the piece, the impossibility of measuring up to a world whose parameters cannot be understood for any length of time. Not only are the natural parameters shifting, the social expectations on the central male characters seem also to be heavy, yet abstractly defined at best.

In Kafka's own life, he was part of an ethnic group simultaneously cast as the example of how to avoid tuberculosis through hygiene and as the picture of the men destined to become tubercular, weak and effeminate while also overly brainy and conniving. All kinds of moral and character judgments were made based on a set of physical characteristics which were exaggerated and over which, obviously, no one had any control. It was impossible to control the grounds on which these characterizations were made. Kafka's characters in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" do not know, either, on what ground they stand, whether or not they are they accepted, whether their bodies allow or disallow them to be accepted or to accept each other, or how they can physically gain control of their acceptance or denial. The crisis of gaining or maintaining an identity is rooted in their bodies, and yet their bodies are wrong regardless of the changes they force upon themselves or on the world defining their bodies. These characters are indeed indicted on account of their bodies and the physical spaces of the scenarios in which they exist—but by whom, and to what punishment?

This social-physical court of judgment steps to the fore immediately in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" with the strained and strange relationship between the initial first-person narrator and his acquaintance, and the importance of the power relationships between bodies will only grow more vital to the various strains of narrative as "Beschreibung" moves forward (if forward is, in fact, the direction it moves). Also, importantly, the impetus for the exchange between the narrator and his acquaintance is not only the latter's physical contact with a young woman but

the combination of that physical contact with the acquaintance's insistence on telling the narrator about it in the midst of a party. The apparently dour mood of the narrator does not prevent him from removing his bubbly counterpart, whom the narrator feels is embarrassing himself by attracting a company of listeners. As an alternative to that embarrassment, the narrator improvises an escape route for them both—pretending to have been invited by the acquaintance for a strenuous walk up the Laurenziberg. As we see in many Kafka works, escape is not what we had expected once it is realized.

The strangeness that pushes the narrator and his acquaintance's relationship beyond what the reader might recognize as the real world begins as soon as they leave the party. Expecting his acquaintance to vent his amorous musings as he had just begun to do inside the party, the narrator instead finds the lover seemingly reserved. On the other hand, the narrator himself is suddenly so happily energized that he leaps and shouts, throwing his hat in the air and catching it "prahlerisch" (boastfully) (919). The acquaintance lowers his head, a familiar gesture in Kafka's weakened, tired, or overmatched characters.

Following the narrator's first attempt, whether or not it is a conscious one, to match the mood of his acquaintance, he tries and fails to match the acquaintance's stride, despite the fact that "man konnte deutlich sehn" ("one could see clearly") (919). Deepening his failure is the fact that onlookers gaze down occasionally from windows above them, a key instance of the narrator noting that his body is being viewed by multiple anonymous others alongside the body of his acquaintance—the body whose gait he cannot match. That matching, or equalizing, their moods and strides seems important for the narrator implies his mistrust of their relationship, which manifests concretely later as he fears that his acquaintance will stab him to death. His

effort to equalize their relationship is done entirely physically and does not stop with the initial attempt to walk with the same gait as his companion.

Only moments after the narrator's failed attempt to match his acquaintance stride for stride, the two become separated by a noticeable distance, one which appears without explanation or expectation. Rather than appearing, one might say the gap between the men simply exists, suddenly. Space is where it was not only moments before, in the face of the narrator's desire to measure up to *der Bekannte*—which was based on their physical proximity. This spatial discrepancy is an initial example of the kind of fluid, inexplicable, yet crucial mutability of physical relationships that lie at the heart of Kafka's narrative. In the moments preceding their brief separation, the narrator wondered why his companion seemed insouciant about their walking together. Just as the narrator notices his lagging acquaintance and that the latter man seems to think the gap is “etwas Natürliches,” the narrator contemplates escaping their walk by darting down an alley (919). Instead, though, he cites his own weakness as a cause for inaction and props himself (“stützte mich”) on a wall to wait for the other man, as if anchoring himself on a more concrete physical object is necessary for him to even stay upright. Here in the early stages of the two men's walk—before they even reach the *Laurenziberg*—the emphasis on their physical, exterior relationship is clear. This relationship does not, however, simply mirror or externalize the characters' interior states. At this point, and as their relationship grows more extreme and stranger in the outer, physical realm, the nature of causality between that realm and the interior grows more and more difficult to judge.

Along these lines, the narrator begins both to fear for and identify with the body and physical well-being of his *Bekannte*. After the *Bekannte* has caught back up to the narrator, the latter considers their association, then concludes, “[s]ein Leben wurde mir teurer als meines. Ich

fand sein Gesicht schön, ich war stolz auf sein Glück bei den Frauenzimmern und ich nahm and den Küssen teil, die er an diesem Abend von den zwei Mädchen bekommen hatte” (921).<sup>1\*</sup> This striking remark demonstrates that the narrator now, however strangely, views his acquaintance as both a kind of protégé and as a part of himself. It also marks the introduction of an idea that recurs prominently later, that one’s physical association with other people, spaces, or objects defines one. The particular wording of the declaration is important, too, because it suggests that the narrator wishes to appropriate in some way the acquaintance’s body and the contact it makes with others—specifically here, preliminary sexual contact. It is almost as if, for the narrator in this moment, the two men are one.

While the reader may rightfully wonder why the narrator ever felt obligated to help his acquaintance in the first place, the fact that their respective moods seem to switch as soon as they leave the party—as if suddenly vaulting across the space between the two characters and living inside the opposite man, respective of moments prior—perhaps encourages a psychological reading of the text’s beginning. From there, especially at the moment that the narrator comments about his acquaintance’s kisses that night, one could certainly feel comfortable pursuing the line of interpretation that Neymeyr and others do: finding that, perhaps, there are not two men in conversation here but one whose identity is breaking down into two competing identities. However, as I will continue to posit, interpreting the story solely along these lines is limiting. It would ignore the complexity of the narrative and deny much of the possible richness it has to offer. This richness truly begins to reveal itself as the physical relationship between the initial narrator and his acquaintance intensifies, then gives way to the myriad of encounters to come.

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<sup>1</sup>“His life became more valuable to me than my own. I found his face beautiful, I was proud of his success with the ladies and I took part in the kisses that he had received from the two young women that night.” (author’s translation)

A primary meeting point of our two main concerns in “Beschreibung eines Kampfes”—the impossible physicality in Kafka’s narrative and the construction of the narrative itself—comes as the initial “I” describes himself in an imagined narrative that would be (or actually is?) told by der Bekannter to that man’s love interest, Anna, the following day. This intriguing moment will provide us the opportunity to delve into the way the larger narrative is put together and, subsequently, how the variations of the narrative approach throughout the story promulgate the array of bizarre physical relationships to be found there.

### **III. The Structure of Impossibility**

When the primary narrator imagines himself in a narrative to be told by der Bekannter to that man’s object of desire, Anna, he narrates his existence there almost strictly in physical terms. While the intricacies of this situation may prove difficult to parse without sounding redundant or overly specific, it is vital to note that it is not simply the narrator describing himself that is at issue in this narrative-within-the-narrative but how he believes his acquaintance would or will describe him to the acquaintance’s love interest. One might say that the narrator’s description of himself through his acquaintance’s eyes is his perception of the latter man’s perception of him. This doubling of perception, or perception of perception, is an inherently uncertain and unreliable basis from which to narrate (if a narrator’s aim is to be accurate or truthful in representation). Furthermore, the pseudo-scientific ideas prevailing in Kafka’s fin-de-siècle society also find expression in his narrative, inserting the weight of moral judgment into any encounter between a body and a gaze and motivating the uncertainty and unreliability with fear and suspicion.

As the initial narrator’s imagined retelling of himself through his perception of der Bekannter shows, this judgment-fearing uncertainty is ingrained into the very foundation of the



story—its language and narrative construction. To begin, the initial narrator (whom I will refer to as “I” when necessary for the sake of clarity) takes up an artificial, first-person position within the imagined being of his acquaintance. From there “I” narrates what is essentially a second-person monologue spoken by the acquaintance to Anna, which is set off with quotation marks but does not actually provide her with any speaking parts of her own. As if his physical insufficiency is the primary aspect of his life, “I” tells what his acquaintance would tell Anna about him—all of the ways his body is wrong:

Er sieht aus, – wie soll ich es beschreiben – wie eine Stange in baumelnder Bewegung, auf die ein gelbhäutiger und schwarzbehaarter Schädel ein wenig ungeschickt aufgespießt ist. Sein Körper ist mit vielen, ziemlich kleinen, grellen, gelblichen Stoffstücken gehängt, die ihn gestern vollständig bedeckten, denn in der Windstille dieser Nacht lagen sie glatt an.<sup>2</sup> (921)

Perhaps the first appropriate question about this intriguing piece of narrative is whom does “I” tell about his body, if anyone? Is he telling himself this description in reality, enabling himself via the narration to acknowledge how his body really betrays him in society? Is he simply imagining the worst-case scenario for how his peers see him? Is it purely a case of paranoia? The range of possible answers to this simple question is staggering, and determinative, for how one may interpret the passage, and even the story as a whole. The multiplicity of possible meaning in this one isolated but important case demonstrates the problem with reading the story along any one basic line of interpretation.

To address the specific content of “I’s” description of his own body via the real or imagined acquaintance, we need first recall the social context of fin-de-siècle Prague. Kafka’s “I” attributes his real or doubly-perceived body with several of the attributes Gilman highlights

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<sup>2</sup> Stern translation: “He looked—how can I describe him to you?—like a stick dangling in the air, he looked, with a black-haired skull on top. His body was clad in a lot of small, dull-yellow patches of cloth which covered him completely because they hung closely about him in the still air of last night.” (14)

as sites for prejudicial judgment in Kafka's real world, demonstrating the relevance of the historical situation to the fictional world of "Beschreibung eines Kampfes"—although in the latter world the same sites are complicated by their lack of adherence to the laws of the natural world. We have already seen that yellow skin was considered an "Oriental" trait, as was dark hair. In "I's" imagined narrative, his body is described in color, clothes, size, and in the garments and/or superficial covering it bears. Each of these elements, however, is presented in a way that seems unnatural, which is where the intriguing nature of Kafka's writing really takes root.

"I's" first words in describing how der Bekannter might, or will, describe him are, "Er sieht—wie soll ich es (meaning "it" and not "him"—which would be "ihn"—as in the Stern translation) beschreiben—wie eine Stange in baumelnder Bewegung" (921, emphasis mine). It is as if he cannot imagine and then describe what existence inside his own body might look like from the outside, or he does not believe his body could be easily perceived and described by even an acquaintance who has spent significant amounts of time in legitimate physical proximity, thus imagining the acquaintance speaking those words just quoted. In either case, "I" is portrayed as a stick—skinny, weightless (in dangling motion), seemingly easily broken and insignificant. After the segment I have quoted, "I's" body takes another knock—that he has a flat chest. As we have seen, each of these descriptors, black hair, slight build, and flat chest, were important pseudoscientific means of identifying Jews—with fully negative connotations—in Kafka's society. One's body had the potential not simply to betray one (though that term perhaps does violence as well) as "Oriental" or "Jew," but to simply be wrong, as evidenced externally, regardless of the person the body contains or where one exists.

Among these “wrong” external traits, yellow skin was one of the most damning. In this case, though, “I” envisions a bizarre kind of covering—not a skin, exactly—which demonstrates how the reality of prejudice comes alive in Kafka’s fictional realm. The dull-yellow patches clinging to and covering “I’s” body do not simply recall a heinous but simple ethnic bias. They constitute a skin that is more superficial than skin, haphazardly segmented, and more loosely connected to the person below, although nothing below them is described. Kafka’s narration, via the initial “I,” in turn via der Bekannte (actual or as perceived by “I”) creates an unreal, unbelievable, yet immediate and affecting (at least for the “I” who tells it) physical being whose fictional nature grotesquely realizes the sense behind the real-world prejudice.

A proverbial bit of folk wisdom holds that when it comes to certain topics, if you have to ask, you’ll never know. In this self-as-second-person-floating-stick anecdote, Kafka’s initial narrator questions the viability of his own physical identity by narrating that questionable identity through the attitudes he perceives or imagines to be lurking in his acquaintance’s consciousness. In what is the first of multiple repetitions of this idea, the initial “I” is not living from within an understanding we might expect to be a given for any human being—that at the least his body is physically in existence, and in an externally comprehensible way. Nietzsche famously called into question this basic (so-conceived) understanding, denouncing as arrogance the idea that we know ourselves even physically<sup>3</sup>. Kafka already works beyond Nietzsche here, however, as “Beschreibung eines Kampfes” demonstrates not simply that one can, in fact, be forced to question one’s physical being, but also that when one does begin to question that physical existence, multiple possibilities enter immediately for how one may not know oneself, as well as various ways that one might attempt to alleviate that personal crisis.

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<sup>3</sup> In “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn.”

In this vein, we should look back at my earlier statement that the “I” questions his physical viability of his own by narrating that questionable identity through the attitudes of his acquaintance, because this is not the sole possibility for describing the narrative construction. It could be that he already recognizes the impossibility of being in accordance with the rules of the society around him and simply projects this recognition onto an imagined dialogue between his acquaintance and Anne. While I think it is an oversimplification, it is also possible that the “I” may be losing control of his thought process and narrating the vision of a paranoid schizophrenic, or a disassociating-I, as Neymeyr and others have written. If this latter option is the case, we must at least add to it that whatever identity breakdown there is is a result of, or is related to, the pressure on the narrator’s body (and to the bodies of the characters who come later). In any case, this piece of narrative resists easy categorization due to the multivalent nature of its content, its placement within the overall story, and the details of its structure.

It is precisely the reader’s inability to pin down what the narrative standpoint is in this initial anecdote between the primary “I” and der Bekannter that conveys the crisis of existence in “Beschreibung eines Kampfes.” In this sense, one might conclude that this anecdote constitutes the form of mise-en-abyme which Dällenbach<sup>4</sup> calls “simple duplication,” because of the unstable nature of the narrating point of view and the strange and distressing forms of pressure on the narrated bodies, all of which continue to be important and illustrated in various ways throughout the story. However, while this anecdote is to some extent a microcosm of the thematic concerns of “Beschreibung” it is not itself a miniaturized or distilled incarnation of the overall statement or image of the story. The story and its constituent pieces do not add up so easily, and neither does this episode contain something of each important thematic, visual, or

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<sup>4</sup> In *The Mirror in the Text*

narrative element that is present in the larger story. Thus, it is not a simple duplication form of mise-en-abyme, but could it perhaps be the first of a series of narrative pieces that produce another of Dällenbach's versions of mise-en-abyme, that of "infinite duplication"?

If one were to take a somewhat liberal interpretation of Dällenbach's concept of infinite duplication—which he conceives as a series of reproductions of an image (which term becomes a placeholder for a whole narrative) leading to the concept that the image is infinitely reproduced within an ever-deepening series of framed images—"Beschreibung eines Kampfes" can be said to utilize this form of mise-en-abyme only if one interprets each segment of the story to be of a similar nature and not as a replication, per se, of the entire story's specific message or image. That is to say that I would disagree with the interpretation of this anecdote as the first of a series of duplications of the larger story which imply infinite duplication, due to vital concerns like the winning of a body through being viewed, as arises specifically and only in the narrative of der Beter, or the exertion of physical dominance over, separately, another's body or natural bodies, which arise in different narrative fragments as well. It is not as if each fragment reproduces the entire narrative within a frame of that narrative, although they are structurally embedded within each other at times (as in the story of der Beter within the story of der Dicke). Before we make a final, important recognition about the self-as-second-person-floating-stick tale, I will simply argue that these other inlaid narrative pieces are not parts of an infinite duplication because of the dramatically different concepts of knowing and gaining certainty of one's existence which are presented in each.

Returning to the first inlaid narrative piece that arises in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes," we find that the exact mode of narration will lead us to what sets it apart from those that will come later. The reader is welcomed into "Beschreibung" by a seemingly standard first-person

narrator who recounts the events of an evening in a standard past tense, and he or she perceives no immediate difference between that initial, homodiegetic, first-person-focalized approach and what happens when “I” and der Bekannter leave the party for the streets of Prague. Even as the initial “I” begins his more distressing contemplation of his relationship with his acquaintance, this same narrative mode ensues up to the point at which the former considers where (one would initially think, nowhere) he fits in in regard the relationship of the acquaintance and Anne. There is certainly a sexual aspect to this anecdote that I have not addressed up to this point, and this aspect has its own independent importance throughout “Beschreibung”—though it also has ties to the other prejudicial, social pressures on bodies in both the relevant historical and diegetic worlds. As “I” sees himself and/or narrates his body through his acquaintance, the sexual aspect of his socially wrong body comes through:

Er ging schüchtern neben mir. Du mein liebes Annerl, die Du so gut küssen kannst, ich weiß, Du hättest ein wenig gelacht und ein wenig Dich gefürchtet, ich aber, dessen Seele ganz zerflogen ist vor Liebe zu Dir, freute mich seiner Gegenwart. (921)

Not only does the woman who would kiss his acquaintance alternately laugh about him and feel disturbed by his presence in “I’s” imagined future, but the ineptitude or otherness of “I’s” body fails to threaten his acquaintance in any way. If it could, that might be some kind of solace for a man in a society whose valorization of the male body contains inherent emphases on its virility and its potential to prevail in physical combat. As is perhaps repetitive but nonetheless pertinent to point out, the simultaneous presence of competing and negative views of the initial “I’s” body also adds uncertainty to the mix. If he knew he were only laughable, or only repulsive, he would at least have a basis from which to work. As it is in his narrative, “I” does not even have that. His body is alternately laughable, repulsive, and amusingly non-threatening.

The initial narrator lacks any certain knowledge about his physical being—knowledge we might expect him to have gained through experience from his life prior to the party—and he fails to gain it by animating his body in a narrative. Partially by dint of his real life (in the diegetic realm) but perhaps largely due to his approach to the self-narrative, “I” does not have the ability to realize himself corporeally within his own narrative. Its structure precludes any possibility of certainty, due to the fact that “I” sets up the narrative as if it were focalized through *der Bekannte*, which could never provide any firm basis for narration. “I” is a Kafka character, and he attempts to do the same thing the writer does; however, while Kafka is free to imagine each aspect of all of his characters, “I” has only apparent feelings of inadequacy, uncertainty, insubstantiality, jealousy, and suspicion toward his acquaintance. Thus, as “I” attempts to do (or at least gestures at doing), re-focalizing the narrative through *der Bekannte* only enables those feelings to find expression. Furthermore, they do so by projecting back onto “I” and his body, producing a narrated body more loosely tethered to the earth, with a more distressing, otherworldly and problematic appearance than “I” already had. There is a connection, therefore, between the ability to understand one’s physical being within its actual, physical surroundings and the ability to recreate them inside a stable narrative. In this case, Kafka’s initial narrator attempts to create his own narrative in which his acquaintance would be the focalizer but, instead, achieves only a deepened sense of insecurity. According to this logic, then, the diegetic reality in which “I” lives not only causes him to question his physical being in that reality but within the diegetic realm he can imagine. When certainty about his body fails him there, too, he immediately becomes afraid of his acquaintance, suspecting that the latter will soon stab him to death. From there ensues the wild and bizarre series (though that word implies more of an intended sequencing than I believe to be appropriate here) of narrative fragments in which the

initial narrator and his acquaintance alternately dominate one another and their environment and in which we meet der Beter and der Dicke with their bodily-existential problems.

Descartes' famous philosophical position—that thinking, even in doubting, proves that the thinker exists—takes on a succession of attacks in the various sections of “Beschreibung eines Kampfes,” including the one I have already discussed. In that case, the attack on self-knowledge is that the ability to envision oneself in a narrative does not prove that one exists in a tangible and definitive way, even when the narrative is envisioned through a counterpart. As the following attacks unfold, Kafka's story presents other characters who question their existence and seek to establish it concretely via different means. Der Beter, whose crisis was brought on by not having his speech answered by his mother, prays profusely and spectacularly in church so that he can acquire as many gazes as possible and thus become convinced that he has a body. If he can succeed in this, he will avoid becoming another one of the people “die...wirklich so sind, wie sie in der Dämmerung scheinen” (949). Gray writes that the aphoristic style Kafka adopted a few years after he stopped working on “Beschreibung” was a direct response to Kafka's belief that the essential, inner impetus for expression (“das innere Gebot”) was, by its nature, ineffable (454). Thus, Gray writes, Kafka's concern in writing was the disparity “between language and internal reality,” a concern that comes through here as a conflict between physical relationships, linguistic communication, and existence (455). The supplicant's story exemplifies this clearly. The backbone of his crisis is his inability to tie his own speech, the spoken responses (or lack thereof) of others, and his bodily spectacle in the church to what he believes is his being.

In addition to narrating oneself through the lens of other people's lives, attracting and receiving the gazes of others, and speaking and being spoken to in return, another method for striving to solidify one's physical existence in “Beschreibung eines Kampfes” is by exerting



physical control over other people and over the landscape. This last category is the most varied, and each major character except der Bekannter strives to practice it in some instance. While none of us would expect to walk outside and successfully command the hill before us to become flat, the often otherwise realistic, secondary diegetic worlds in this piece allow for that kind of possibility. It follows then that the initial narrated world—that realm of life present in section I, from or within which the rest of the narratives come to life—while realistic in many ways, is fundamentally different from Kafka's or our own real world. It is enchanted, one might say, in that its parameters for the individual's existence are unstable, producing an experience of living that is liable to arbitrary, drastic transformation and sudden, distressing inability to communicate. Kafka's "Beschreibung" becomes, in this light, a narrative of narrative, a tale of characters attempting to create sustainable narratives that prove their physical existence in the face of an illogical, unpredictable, polymorphous physical world. If that physical existence can be proven, then their inner beings also must exist, despite the difficulty they have in communicating from within that inner being much of the time.

Earlier, I posited that a reading of "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" should not be limited to considering it an experiment with the Doppelgänger trope, and that position is based on reading carefully in the narrative pieces containing the above-mentioned methods for seeking physical proof of the self's own existence. Of these attempts, most do not follow a pattern of narcissism that lies at the root of unheimlich experience, and that of the Doppelgänger specifically, in Freud's own schema. In "Das Unheimliche" Freud explains that Doppelgänger experience, like all uncanny experiences, stems from a narcissistic drive to subsume the objective world into the subject—as the pre-linguistic child interprets the world as extension of itself and its subject being. A true Doppelgänger experience, then, is uncanny exactly because of

the mix of emotions stemming from socially unacceptable pleasure the subject feels when he or she encounters the appearance of the self in an external object.

If we take the example I analyzed earlier of the initial narrator's future retelling of himself through the eyes of his acquaintance to Anne, it is clear that the subject—"I"—is not trying to subsume his acquaintance (nor Anne) into his own subject being. Instead, "I" envisions himself becoming, and wishes to become, an object in the consideration of der Bekannter. Also, "I" becomes the object of his own narration in so far as he is the object of the imagined acquaintance, whose role as focalizer "I" adopts. Der Bekannter cannot be a Doppelgänger for the initial narrator because, rather than trying to exert a narcissistic drive over the acquaintance, the initial narrator's desire is to be absorbed into a different subject's world as an object.

Similarly, the supplicant's routine of overzealous prayer is not an attempt to take control of others as objects that become part of his subject being; instead, he willfully strives to be made an object. The reader might correctly criticize der Beter's attempt as inherently flawed—in that one can not willfully become an object because exertion of will denotes an active subject—but that does not change the fact that his attempt is to be taken as an object in order to gain his body.

In both cases just mentioned, the subject-object relationship is called into question. Also, in each case, this questioning is directly related to the nature of narrative, because Kafka constructs these episodes so that their focalizers are the subjects whose desire is to become objects. When "I" wants to become "he," the reader follows his narrative as it reflects off two mirrors—each a layer of individual perception, one of which neither the reader nor the initial "I" have any certainty about because it is the acquaintance's. Up to this point, the entire narration has been limited to the initial narrator's focalization, and the acquaintance's thoughts are known to us only to the extent that they might be related to that which he externalizes in speech and

action. As “I” narrates within the *Bekannter-to-Anne* episode, he momentarily glimpses himself in his own narrative. His position as subject becomes that of object, though both still exist by the nature of the act of narration, because a narrative must be told by some active subject.

This kind of dramatic play in subject-object relations recalls Freud’s conception of the dream state in “Über den Gegensinn der Urworte”—that state of consciousness in which the basic binaries that enable us to function in the world break down. Oppositions of male-female, up-down, and so on do not apply to this consciousness, which mirrors the pre-linguistic state in that the schism between subject and object (the binary of self-other) no longer exists. Implicit in Freud’s concept is that the location of the subject-object disconnect during non-dream state consciousness is the body, or more properly, its limits. What is contained in and by the body—including the mind—is “I” and what is outside is object. For “*Beschreibung eines Kampfes*” the dream state links the body to the destabilization of the subject-object binary, but this destabilization lives outside of the dream state through the act of narration. Clearly, dreams and the littoral zones of sleep-consciousness were fruitful material for writing throughout Kafka’s career, and they play an intriguing and specific role in this piece. The act of narrating in “*Beschreibung*” appears as a pathway for its characters to attempt reconfigurations of the subject-object status quo in their lives, or perhaps to accomplish the opposite in some cases—to struggle via narrative to concretely establish the subject-object relationships that are impossible to understand in their real world.

Intriguingly, then, it is worth bringing back Dällenbach’s third version of *mise-en-abyme* as a way of conceptualizing the constellation of issues at hand: the angst surrounding bodies in the piece’s primary diegetic world, the act of narrating (the in/ability to do so), the shifting, unstable dream-state existence found within the secondary diegetic worlds, and active, not only

passive, reception of judgment. Dällenbach's concept of aporetic duplication is sometimes conceived of in the image of the ouroboros. I prefer Dällenbach's own succinct characterization of emblazonment aporétique as "a sequence that is supposed to enclose the work that encloses it" (35). In the context of a given narrative's structure, this would denote an irresolvable problem between what the overall narrative contained and the contents of that narrative also seeming to contain the overall narrative. In the case of "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" the seemingly irresolvable problem of container and contained is the problem of the bodily subject versus the physical/bodily object. I posit, therefore, that on the thematic level, Kafka employs aporetic duplication in "Beschreibung." The world which contains the initial "I"—the primary diegetic world—is also contained within his own diagesis—the realm of his *Bekannter-to-Anne* narration, in which the dream-state-type shifts of judgment, subject, and object are not only contained by his narration but containing the narrated version of him. His body, as with other bodies in the piece, is the site that evidences this problem, as the initial "I"—for example—simultaneously lives within his body and views it inside his own narrative. For this reason—the simultaneity of living within and viewing one's own body—the body of the initial narrator in his self-narrating episode is a problem of aporetic duplication.

By interposing diegetic realms to the extent that he does, Kafka clearly takes up the nature and performance of narrative as primary concerns in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes." On top of that, he combines those concerns with expressions of the historical, social antagonism toward non-normative bodies in his contemporary culture—antagonisms that are founded on their own artificial, cultural narratives. This results in the vast array of narratives imprinted within narratives in "Beschreibung" and the concurrent, almost constant, shifts of physical power that manifest in the dizzying polymorphism of the landscapes, cityscapes, and human characters.

The crisis of self-knowledge at the heart of “Beschreibung” is induced by the impossibility of living under judgment of bodily standards that one has no control over and no way to even attempt to conform to if one does not meet them. Furthermore, in Kafka’s real world, the axis of dissemination for these standards is not located in a place that can be approached, nor located in any one person who can be addressed, nor based in logic despite being justified by a pseudo-scientific community. In his fictional world, these inaccessible and impossible standards invade the attitude of each central character and the way he perceives his world and, most importantly, in choosing the ways in which he puts his body into a position that garners attention or seemingly more concrete existence. All of these attempts, though, are based on or, at the least, placed in narratives as means for recounting them.

When Descartes claimed that he was, because he thought (because he could not doubt that he doubted), he also narrated his line of thinking and conclusion. If he had truly only thought, without setting the thought into a linguistic narrative and assuming someone somewhere would read it, would he have felt as sure that he existed? Even his Archimedean point depends on the concept that he can convey a thought, not just that he can experience it himself. Although it may not be what we expect a “narrative” to be in terms of a piece of fiction, the “cogito” is essentially a narrative recalling a causality and communicating it to an audience. It is precisely this centrality of narrative in attaining certainty of one’s existence on which Kafka’s “Beschreibung eines Kampfes” dwells. However, the extreme difficulty each main character finds in dealing with his real world manifests in his narrative as well, thus resulting in the troubling anecdotes like the one I have examined above. Thus, Kafka seems to have sensed that his fin-de-siècle world denied such a simple and straightforward basis for confirming one’s existence, even if Descartes’ Archimedean point only provides a very limited basis in the first

place. Furthermore, the crisis of uncertainty exists in the level of the narrative and its constituent language in “Beschreibung.” As Trabert writes, “[d]ie Außenwelt (what I have called the primary diegetic world) ist aus der Perspektive der Ichfiguren so konstruiert, daß eigentliche Verständigung in ihr nicht zustandekommt,” meaning that the conditions of the primary diegetic realm preclude successful communication for the narrating characters, as they also preclude narrative which can produce the desired effects (301). Trabert also keenly observes that even der Beter’s attempt to communicate with his surrounding society outside the realm of language—via playing the piano—ends without his ever striking a key (303). To Trabert’s critique I would add that where some basis of communication might be found for each character as they recall their experiences and tell their stories—as opposed to the impossibility of simple, interpersonal communication in the moments of experience themselves—the narrating characters instead find that residing subjectively in a body and narrating it as an object is not a less daunting a task. It is as if Kafka’s plot operates on the principle of the “impossible impossible” instead of Aristotle’s suggested “possible impossible” in that both the diegetic world and the world which it resembles are both unlivable—never mind that the latter world actually exists.

### **III. Context of Kafka’s Impossibility**

After all the Beweis to the contrary in Kafka’s piece, it is worth noting that it actually is not impossible to live. Kafka was living when he wrote the story. Whoever reads the story presumably lives and breathes while he or she does so. His characters are clearly alive in so far as any fictional characters live within their fictional worlds. So what is the aim of providing proof that living is impossible? Hawkins writes in her examination of Kafka’s oeuvre as a “reluctant theology” that “Kafka was well aware of the tension that surfaced from [the]

destabilization of language,” which he experienced as a German-speaking Jew in Prague, where the spectrum of language in his life ran from that which was affiliated with the sacred (Hebrew) to languages associated with marginalization (Yiddish) and normativity (German) (18). Hawkins understands this destabilization of language as vital for the theological ramifications she suggests we take from the overarching themes of Kafka’s work. However, I would argue that her statement that in Kafka’s work, “there is no teleological component to suffering” leaves off from examining the literary value of the same problem (emphasis in original, 32). For Kafka, the language is the narrative because the narrative consists of it, but once language has taken shape as narrative, it also produces something—just as the body in “Beschreibung” is controlled via narrative but cannot be self-constructed via narrative. Thus, the inability to stabilize language in constructing narrative is also the destabilization of individual existence. An absent teleology is fundamentally a narrative problem, as it is the casting in narrative of causalities that provides teleology—as in Descartes’ simple statement.

In “Beschreibung eines Kampfes” teleological thinking seems to have escaped the primary diegetic world before the narration even begins, setting Kafka’s piece apart from much of the fiction with which we might otherwise categorize it. For example, while there are certainly some connections between “Beschreibung” and other fin-de-siècle works that employ frame narratives and phantasmagorical or fantastical content, Kafka’s work retains a distinctive character because its structure is more complex and yet, at the same time, seemingly more complete as a constellation of individual narratives that exist as their own strange reality. This last characteristic is opposed to one of the more common approaches in fin-de-siècle fiction like that of Stevenson, Chesterton, or Machen, or even Hoffmann, which tends to begin in a diegetic world that mirrors historical reality as closely as the author can create it to do so, until some

specific point at which the content takes a turn for the supernatural or phantasmagorical. Then, once the framed narrative comes to a kind of resolution—often a death resulting from a strange, inexplicable set of circumstances for one character—the rest of the characters return to “normal life,” and often a final piece of frame narrative does so along with them.

Take Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as an example of a work that plays with this general formula. As the novel begins, Mr. Utterson and Mr. Enfield walk the streets of London, coming across a door that prompts Enfield: ““Did you ever remark that door?” he asked; and when his companion had replied in the affirmative, ‘It is connected in my mind...with a very odd story’” (9). Here the reader finds a specific, tangible object in the initial diegetic world that denotes a clear turn in the tenor of the narrative. Enfield begins to explain what he knows of the story of Jekyll/Hyde, and then various fragments and testimonies take up the task of revealing the rest of the strange tale. Once the reader is generally aware of Jekyll/Hyde’s demise, a note written by the doctor himself explains the mystery of his transformations and death; however, the end of the doctor’s note is the end of the novel. The note is one of several objects that exist in the primary diegetic world which tell secondary narratives, and the reader is essentially left with these objects and not with a framing narrative focalized by one of the former narrating characters, nor by an omniscient narrator. However, the fabula—in formalist terms—of Jekyll/Hyde’s experimentation and death is contained within these objects, and those objects remain firmly in the primary diegetic world, which is modeled on Stevenson’s historical world. That is to say, the fantastical events of Jekyll/Hyde’s death exist as if in a parallel but different world from the primary diegetic world—the streets walked upon by Utterson and Hyde.



Stevenson's narrative structure also bears some similarities to those of Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* and Machen's *The Three Imposters*, and a brief characterization of these works' narrative structures will help to point out what is most distinct about Kafka's approach in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes." Similarly to the way Stevenson situates his novel, Machen's novel begins with an encounter on the streets of London, while Chesterton's begins at a garden party somewhat reminiscent of the initial setting of "Beschreibung eines Kampfes." In the cases of Machen's and Chesterton's novels, each takes an episodic, tale-within-the-tale approach, in which supernatural and/or fantastical occurrences diverge from the everyday world that exists in the framing narrative. The effect of this separation of the two worlds, with the frame being a more or less "believable" or "realistic" one and the framed world operating with far less certainty and logic—where chemicals can change the shape and constitution of a human body, where wild elephants can be ridden through the streets of London, where "natural order" no longer applies. Both novels leave the reader and the characters in a similar condition in relation to the world of the framed narrative(s)—the inexplicable, fantastical events that take place there provide specific sites of doubt, sites which are isolated from the diegetic world of the framing narratives in a way that allows for compartmentalization of that doubt. Where there is doubt, uncertainty is given, and it will touch the primary diegetic worlds in those sites from which the secondary narratives bloom. Nonetheless, in the narrative structures created by Machen and Chesterton, and also by Stevenson to a lesser extent, the uncertainty of the secondary diegetic worlds—contained within the various episodes and focalized by several different characters—remains limited by that world's difference from the primary diegetic worlds (of the framing narratives).

In the concluding paragraphs of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, an omniscient narrator comments on the experiences of the novel's primary protagonist, Syme: "[his] experience was something much more psychologically strange if there was indeed anything unreal, in the earthly sense, about the things he had gone through. For while he could always remember afterwards that he had swooned before the face of Sunday, he could not remember having ever come to at all" (162). This excerpt demonstrates three vital aspects of the dichotomy between framing and framed narratives. First, the subject of the fabula—Syme—is not the focalizer of the narrative as are the multiple narrators of Kafka's piece. Second, Syme is said to be unsure of his memory of his own experience, which is tied to the third important aspect, that the experiences do not seem "earthly" and may not have in fact occurred on earth, meaning in the world, but were merely "psychological" phenomena.

E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Goldene Topf* is another work whose narrative construction dictates this kind of dualism of mutually exclusive worlds, one which exists in a realist mode and another—framed inside the first—in which fantastical occurrences remain distinct in nature and relation to the first. Contrasted with Stevenson's work, *Der Goldene Topf* does trouble the realistic-versus-unbelievable dichotomy somewhat, in that the magical, fantastical world is not so completely and smoothly contained physically (as in behind the door of Jekyll's quarters in Stevenson) or within the narrative pieces (in the letters and accounts of various secondary characters who are not present in their narratives' telling). In Hoffmann, the narration is clearly heterodiegetic throughout, and the door which opens into Lindhorst's home is not such a firm barrier between two different worlds as Jekyll's is.

Even the very first lines of Hoffmann's work already contain an encounter which the reader may interpret along the lines of what is defined by a "real" world. Either, when Anselmus

crashes into the apple-seller who then curses him, it is an element of the supernatural—the apple-seller is clairvoyant, perhaps thanks to some magical power—or the apple-seller is mad—she simply does not grasp the rules that regulate reality. The latter would be categorized by Freud as an instance of the *unheimlich* rooted in the same pre-linguistic drive as a *Doppelgänger* experience, but the importance of the two-way interpretive possibility here is the doubling of the believable and the unbelievable in the realistic realm of the primary diagesis. More simply put, the apple-seller’s curse asserts the possibility of what is not possible. However, the curse belongs all the while to the same world as Lindhorst’s Atlantis and serpent daughters. The same “I” who is uninvolved in the fabula recounts all these events, and in the end, makes a metaleptic break by addressing the reader. In this moment of metalepsis, the reader finds him or herself in the same position in regard to the entire work as he or she did in the first moments of the piece. Where there were two options for understanding the apple seller—truly supernatural (and therefore warranting a new kind of regard) or insane (and therefore warranting dismissal)—the same now goes for *Der Goldene Topf* as a whole. Either the events that diverge from the realistic, narrated Dresden can be regarded as part of that initial world or can be dismissed as simply fantastical storytelling or psychological fancy on behalf of that world’s inhabitants. In Hoffmann’s work—even though the second-person address alerts the reader to the fact that he or she is reading—the strangeness of the events never translates into the narrative structure itself, as it does in Kafka. Mostly, this is due to the story’s being heterodiegetic, because the narrator does not experience what the characters do, but merely relates it—and attempts with metaleptic addresses to have the reader “imagine” those experiences. *Der Goldene Topf* has much in common with *The Man Who Was Thursday* in this regard, as both works leave their readers in similar positions from which understanding of the text may follow down two distinct,

irreconcilable paths. The measure of success for these works seems to lie, then, in how great a level of ambivalence they can produce in the reader's choice of one over the other, and in the case of Chesterton, perhaps in his own central character thinking back on his own experiences.

Perhaps the most telling conclusion to be drawn from these three works is that while they all skillfully cross realistic styles of narration set in real cities with supernatural encounters and mutable landscapes and beings, none of them do so without isolating the latter material within one of two narrative setups: first-person focalization of the fantastical contained within a more "realistic" frame, or reference to the fantastical experience via various other narrative focalizers (as in Stevenson's use of letters and various first-person accounts). Arthur Machen's *The Three Imposters* assumes an interesting posture toward telling stories within such a dualism and, while doing so, also addresses the problem of knowing in the modernizing London in which his novel takes place. By taking on this problem, Machen's work becomes much more uncertain in nature—as a whole work, as a "unified" story, as arguably too reliant on chance to orchestrate important plot events, and as "impossible" and therefore unbelievable—and an even more interesting foil to Kafka's "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" than Hoffmann's work.

Machen's episodic approach in *The Three Imposters* has much in common with that of Stevenson, and yet *Imposters* is a more neatly closed system, by the nature of its demonstrative beginning and ending frames. Further, the uncertainty about how one truly knows experience in Phillips and Dyson's London is related—much like knowledge and uncertainty are related in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes"—to how one is able to tell it. Though their role in *Imposters* is primarily to be the audience of the various imposters' tales, Machen uses Phillips and Dyson—first in a debate with storytelling as its topic, and then in response to Dyson's literal run-in with the young man with glasses and his pursuer—about the nature of storytelling. Once again,

chance encounters in the city streets come together with the difficulty of understanding, or knowing, experience and retelling that experience.

After observing the two men running in the street and picking up the Gold Tiberius himself, Dyson narrates his story straightforwardly enough, though certainly adding descriptors based on his inferences and feelings at the time, and when he gets to the end of what he saw and did, he imagines possibilities he cannot actually know about or see. Phillips, however, after “musing over the story of violent death fleeing in chase,” wants to know ““what was it, after all, that [Dyson] rescued from the gutter?”” (Machen 11). For Phillips, the only way to proceed from the story of events that his friend observed is by getting a good look at the physical evidence. Though the narrator tells us that Phillips “muses” over the story, it is not clear how much emotional response, if any, Dyson’s story elicits in him. Instead, he has some amount of intellectual curiosity whose potential growth or ultimate satisfaction lies in the object’s physical being. The story is like a hypothetical premise, and the coin—though he does not know that is what the object will be yet—is a means by which the premise might be evaluated.

In his analysis of Machen’s main characters, Paul Fox writes that “[t]heir role as detectives is to arrive at an aesthetic understanding of the pattern of events in which they have been swept up, to compose a deeper meaning behind the apparent surface of things, and to narrate that discovery in their own lives” (61). This brief analysis of Dyson’s acquisition of the Gold Tiberius, however, seems to tell us something subtly but significantly different. For Dyson, the event was not only the elements of the chase, the “eyes gleaming...teeth showing,” the “ugly-looking knife” but also the excitement and other emotion the spectacle called up in him (Machen 11). The physical details of the chasing man that evinced danger are the only ones he recalls, yet he knows at which moments he felt despair, pleasure, or excitement from just before

he saw the first man until after they had both disappeared. In Dyson's way of perceiving the world, the reality of the event is at least as much the emotions it caused as the details of the event that caused those emotions. For Phillips, who, obviously, did not have the opportunity to witness the events or directly respond to them emotionally, the reality of the event is the hard evidence it produced. When Phillips asks to see the thing, Dyson realizes, revealingly, that he has not even taken it out to examine it yet.

In the two men's reactions to the event, the reader sees not their approaches to "detecting" the causal relationship of events, or even the "aesthetic understanding" of them (whatever that may mean), but a dichotomy of two different ways of knowing. To take this one step further, it is a dichotomy of methods for knowing lived experience. Phillips wants to know the object Dyson brought from his run-in with the potential criminal(s), while that same object, the Tiberius, is a souvenir for Dyson that will remind him of the emotions and intrigue the chase created in him. For Phillips, understanding the Tiberius will mean understanding the event, while for Dyson, understanding the event will mean understanding the way he reacted to it. Reflected back onto each man's way of walking through London, these approaches of knowing make sense. Dyson's need to encounter shocks in the crowd, à la Baudelaire's flâneur, stems from his desire to know the world, which he must experience and understand emotionally and sensually. Phillip's mode of walking allows him to focus on one piece of information or evidence, with the crowds and cityscapes functioning like sounding boards for his own thoughts.

As stated, the different approaches to walking the city and to knowing lived experience also relate to the two men's ideas about storytelling, which are important for reading *The Three Imposters* as a whole. Interestingly, the first conversation Dyson and Phillips ever have is a debate based on their different takes on the nature of artistic storytelling. Dyson's point of view

is that the “task of the literary man” is “to invent a wonderful story, and to tell it in a wonderful manner,” while Phillips argues that “in the hands of the true artist in words all stories are marvellous, and every circumstance has its peculiar wonder” (8). This difference of opinion is somewhat more subtle and less clearly a dichotomy than the previous issues; nonetheless, it has bearing on the two men’s ideas of knowledge, which is vital for making sense of the series of frame narratives that follow. In Dyson’s scheme, the material has to be innovative and intriguing, but it also must be told in an equally “wonderful” way, perhaps to capably stimulate his emotional response. In Phillips’ version of well-written art—which is telling for *The Three Imposters* in general—every piece of a story’s material and every word used as a medium for that material should be “marvellous.” The last term is also noteworthy, because at Machen’s time it could mean either extraordinary, astonishing qualities or, in the case of poetry or art, “concerned with the supernatural” (“Marvellous”). Clearly, the two categories are not mutually exclusive, but in Phillips’ view, any mundane word or object that appears over the course of a truly artistic narrative can explode out of the quotidian into the world of astonishment and the supernatural. Interestingly, Dyson is the one who appears to transfer the latter view to the real world, commenting after his Tiberius-finding episode that, “[his and Phillips’] steps will henceforth be dogged with mystery, and the most ordinary incidents will teem with significance,” while Phillips remains skeptical and promises to sleep “peacefully” despite the episode (13, 14).

This point brings up perhaps the most crucial question one must address when investigating what *The Three Imposters* has to say about what is knowable and what is experienced as real: that is, to what extent can life experiences in Machen’s version of fin-de-siècle London fit into what might be called “realistic” or “believable” narrative? The fact that

Phillips generally claims to hold to a skeptical, science-based point of view only complicates this issue further, since he is also the one who looks for the “marvellous” in artistic narrative. This connection in Phillips’ consciousness between the rational, scientific outlook and the one that appreciates a true “artist in words,” whose every building block is a potential site of supernatural astonishment, is also the central theoretical crux of the novel. It follows that the reader, just as the characters in the novel, must ask whether modern life in general, and life in Machen’s London, is Phillips’ ideal kind of author.

I posit that while the interplay of science, certainty, art and modern city experience is indeed the central point of struggle and interest in *The Three Imposters*, in Machen’s world there are no such things as scientific certainties and that science is implicated in various storytellers’ efforts to validate the unbelievable, unlikely, and even impossible. Science’s putative aim of revealing truth about the phenomenological world through rational, quantifiable experimentation sets it up for its central role in *The Three Imposters*. As a conceptual framework for rational knowledge acquisition, science makes the perfect contrast to the kinds of phenomena that take place both in the imposters’ tales and in the real life of Machen’s England. The imposters frequently seize upon their listeners’ understanding of science as such, invoking doctors, scholars, knowledgeable collectors, and other professionals in their tales of horrible transmutations, devolutions, and generally unexplainable occurrences—similarly to the various invocations of science and medicine in Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

By invoking science, Machen and Stevenson both invoke a method of viewing the world that considers itself completely rational and capable of explaining any observable phenomenon. This model of thinking is then juxtaposed with the seemingly inexplicable material of both novels, as if there were any way that a rationalist schema could truly engage that material. There



are many examples of this type of struggle with the practice of rational processes for gaining knowledge in *The Three Imposters*, but the rational model is not merely opposed to a single non-rational one. Rather, each framed narrative—and the framing narrative’s “real world” in which Dyson and Phillips live—seems to impose its own non-rational model. In this regard, most critics agree in general principle that Machen’s London is a capricious place in which some type of demystification seems necessary to understand and explain the people and events that intermingle with the main characters’ lives. In this way, Machen’s several diegetic worlds seem to parallel those of Kafka’s narrative. The central difference here remains that Kafka’s primary diegetic world is equally as troubled by irrational, illogical phenomenon as any embedded world. In fact, for the initial “Ich” of “Beschreibung,” the real world already contains unbearable pressures on the individual that only take on more drastic formation in the subsequent inlaid narratives.

The fundamental question of how Machen’s portrayal of a non-rational experience of London life, Dyson’s flânerie, and Phillips’ dandyism corresponds to the non-linear structure of the novel also parallels the way Kafka’s characters’ inability to know even themselves with certainty corresponds to the narrative approach of “Beschreibung eines Kampfes.” For Machen’s novel, the act of storytelling itself is not as easy an answer as we might wish, but the structure of the novel and its component parts do inform the question. Fox is onto this, writing that “[e]ach story adds another experience to the constitution of the tales’ recipient, making them, the criminal hopes, more amenable to their wishes as narrator” (67). He also says, however, that “detection is one’s narration of one’s own lived experience” (66). This assertion seems to short-circuit the relationship between Phillips and Dyson and the imposter-raconteurs who weave their stories while Dyson and Phillips simply move through the bewildering worlds

of London and of the imposters' tales. Other than Dyson's run-in with the Tiberius, which we have already examined, neither Dyson nor Phillips ever attempts to narrate what happens to them, and in *The Three Imposters*, at least, never really "detect" anything. They simply wander into encounters with the criminal underground, which does not seem to differ all that greatly from the above-ground life of London, since Phillips and Dyson both hear out each imposter until the points at which the stories encroach too closely onto the world they see before them and produce real emotional and intellectual distress.

The fact that the imposters' stories cause such distress for Phillips and Dyson does not mean that they suffer from some kind of psychological proclivity for imagining the fantastical—as Chesterton's narrator suggests his main character, Syme, might. It is the meeting of those stories with the indisputable fact that—in Machen's primary narrated world—there are inexplicable coincidences and encounters in the city that resonate so readily with the stories. The city of London with its heaping millions is always inherently a borderland of the believable and the fantastical, because the experiences of life there are a stream of shocks which have to be dealt with by an engaged but distanced mentality that fixes them in time—like narrative fragments encapsulated and no longer in motion—or avoided by a constantly maintained defensive posture that completely isolates the individual. These two approaches are inherently tied to the ways Dyson and Phillips try to know the world, either through emotional, physical, or intellectual engagement, which relates back to the conflict between rational and irrational approaches to gaining knowledge of that which is experienced.

Machen makes this conflict as intriguing and difficult as it is, however, not simply through vividly portraying a "marvellous" tale of fin-de-siècle London. He does so by the very unorthodox structure that sends red flags flying for many critics. The inexplicable chance

encounters and horror of events like the real murder and physical degeneration of the young man with spectacles is no more believable than that of “Ms. Leicester’s” brother, and the irrationality of the narrated world is no more irrational than that of the real world. In fact, the way that the narrated world is narrated, with an emphasis on “scientific” expertise and far-flung destinations, it might be more believable than Dyson and Phillips’ real world. Via the framing and framed stories’ orchestration, Machen essentially creates a closed system, a kind of experiment in which the frames introduce specific elements—people, human knowledge, supernatural phenomena—that react with each other. However, this seemingly closed system fails to explain itself or the results we observe when the elements do react. The characters, as molecules, appear or disappear, or transform, without adhering to the literary equivalent of the laws of conservation of matter or energy. In Machen’s literary laboratory, the rules that supposedly govern the observed phenomenon do not govern the experience of observing it, and neither can they explain it.

If the uncertainty in Machen’s novel lies in the fact that there is no one, definitive perspective from which the interplay between narrated life and stories set within that life can be interpreted, the uncertainty in Kafka’s “Beschreibung eines Kampfes” might be said to reside in a lack of a position at all—in the real world or otherwise. Similarly, the fact that Stevenson, Chesterton, and Hoffmann all couch the fantastical, supernatural material of their works within some form of framing that preserves the possibility of separating the believable from the unbelievable (or, the knowable from the unknowable) contrasts with Kafka’s construction of “Beschreibung” so that the subject of the most harrowing and confusing experiences is the focalizer of the narration revealing those experiences to the reader. Thus, each narrated experience in Kafka’s story is impossible to view fully from the outside or experience prior to the attempt to narrate it from the inside. Further, there is no question of leaving behind or

compartmentalizing these experiences from the primary world of the initial or final sections in “Beschreibung.” The primary diegetic world is plagued by existential problems already, and these problems merely refract and multiply throughout the various secondary narratives, which eventually give way to the initial “I” and der Bekannter again—though that return ends with yet more distress. The acquaintance, suddenly and seemingly without cause, stabs himself in the arm, leaving the initial narrator to remove the knife and search, in vain, for help. To put it in more general terms, though the initial world of Kafka’s story is mostly realistic, there is no irreducible dichotomy between that “real world” and the “story world” of the embedded narratives. It is not as if the last of the embedded fragments ends and leads us and its characters back to the “real world.” That world is already uncertain and menacing and existence in it troubled. Kafka leaves no opening for certainty in any level of his narrative, even the certainty of being oneself that even Phillips and Dyson enjoy.

For Kafka, each narrating subject’s life is lived on mutable, unreliable, and often threatening grounds. As I have argued, these aspects of their lives cause them to question if and how they know anything—especially their own existence—and narration is the only commonality in their struggles to know with certainty. The performance of a narrative, in the case of the initial narrator, which contains him as an object, results in failure nonetheless. While many critics treat “Beschreibung eines Kampfes” almost as a piece of juvenilia vis-à-vis Kafka’s complete body of work, its skillful concern with narration as performance—as a way of attempting to gain self-knowledge and to produce indisputable proof of one’s existence, which ultimately fails—argue for themselves that the story deserves more credit and closer attention. That Kafka already perceived and wrote keenly enough to tie the historical pressures on the body, the questionable nature of self-knowledge in the modern world, and the subject-object

architecture inherent to narrative to an example of how that narrative would look from the points of view of the very subjects who questioned their own physical existence is an accomplishment worth juxtaposing with his later, more widely read and praised works. The writer who imagined a mostly realist Prague in “Beschreibung”— which, yet, more closely resembles a dream world of upheaval and irrational judgment than a place from which Descartes could have made his rational claim to existence—is the writer on his way to writing, in *Der Prozeß*, “Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben...” or, in *Die Verwandlung*, “Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte...” Though “Beschreibung eines Kampfes” has affinities with some fin-de-siècle fiction, works like those I have mentioned that take up the fantastical or phantasmagorical possibilities springing to life in the modern city, Kafka’s version of the phantasmagorical is the horribly realistic, subject-destabilizing world of this short story, a realm of inescapable, impossible, yet lived-in, uncertainty.

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\*The English translation by Tania and James Stern in the 1971/83 Schocken edition (*Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*. Schocken: New York, 1983): "Let's pray the girls don't spoil him! By all means let them kiss and hug him, that's their duty and his right, but they mustn't carry him off. After all, when they kiss him they also kiss me a little—with the corners of their mouths, so to speak" (13). Oddly, though this edition primarily follows Kafka's first version (Fassung A) of "Beschreibung eines Kampfes", here it translates literally from the second (Fassung B), which provides significantly different material for interpretation—especially while focusing on the bodily relationships in the piece. In interpreting this version, we might read something different about the potential dangers ("Gefahren" [921]) the acquaintance faces. Here, the narrator suddenly believes that his acquaintance suspects him of something nefarious (we do not know what) and thinks that if he continues to appear with him he will be indicted in the world's eyes with whatever it is that he suspects the other man suspects of him. Then, immediately, the narrator becomes frightened for his new prospects by the chance that his acquaintance might wash away in flood of youthful romances, conflating a fear *of* the other man with a fear *for* him. A more literal translation of Fassung A in this instance would read along these lines: "His life became more valuable to me than my own. I found his face beautiful, I was proud of his success with the ladies and I took part in the kisses that he had received from the two young women that night."