



# **Monologue Overgrown: Revising the world with speech in Franz Kafka, Robert Walser and Thomas Bernhard**

by Paul Joseph Buchholz

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MONOLOGUE OVERGROWN:  
REVISING THE WORLD WITH SPEECH  
IN FRANZ KAFKA, ROBERT WALSER AND THOMAS BERNHARD

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
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by

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MONOLOGUE OVERGROWN:  
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My dissertation focuses on unstable, chronically unpublished prose texts by three key 20<sup>th</sup> century prose writers, quasi-novelistic texts whose material instability indicates a deep discomfort with the establishment of narrative authority *qua* narrative violence. I argue that Franz Kafka, Robert Walser and Thomas Bernhard, radically refunctionalized the device of interpolated “character monologue,” turning characters' speech from a narrative *function*, into a site where a text can be rewritten from within.

In the Bildungsroman tradition, extended oral interpolations serve as an engine for the expansion and exposition of the plotted work, deepening the epic narrative world and exhaustively presenting a perspective that will be incorporated into biographical trajectory. I locate an estrangement of this practice: moments when oral monologues of fictional interlocutors “overgrow,” becoming an interventionary force that doubles, disrupts and re-frames the narrative discourse out of which it first sprouted. In showing how the labor of ‘world-making’ is split and spread across different competing layers of these texts, my dissertation contributes to the study of the narrative phenomenon of metalepsis.

Chapter One examines the determinations and contestations of social ties occurring across the many mutually embedded monologues in Kafka's early novella

*Beschreibung eines Kampfes*. Chapter Two examines Walser's *Räuber-Roman*, focusing on the translation of affects into social hierarchies, a process brought to light in protagonist's monologic declarations of sovereignty. Chapter Three examines the parasitic takeover and revision of a young proletarian protagonist's biography by an elderly paternal "mad genius" figure, in an early, unpublished novel by Thomas Bernhard.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Paul Buchholz received a BA in German Literature from the University of Wisconsin in 2005, having also studied at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg, Germany, and at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. From 2005 to 2010, Paul studied German literature at Cornell University, receiving his MA in 2008 and his PhD in 2010. In September 2010, Paul began teaching in the German department at New York University as an Assistant Professor / Faculty Fellow.

for Adriana

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## PREFACE

If the object of study in this dissertation is extended, or excessively *over-*extended monologues of fictional characters, then an initial question that arises is: what norm is appealed to in the designation of excess? To what extent is my analysis a subjectively inflected study about the “intolerable length” or “impatience-causing” moments in novels and novellas? One could reformulate such questions by pointing out that *intolerance* or *impatience* with the *interminability* of certain passages are not necessarily exclusively the external, emotional side-effects of a reader’s individualized experience of reading. Such feelings can be anticipated, acknowledged, and thus also engendered, by the practices of narrative discourse. An example: a curious act of self-justification, possibly even a muted apology, suddenly punctuates the narrative of Christoph Martin Wieland’s *Geschichte des Agathon*, the exemplary, inaugural German *Bildungsroman* of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> The narrator of *Agathon*, before proceeding into the unabridged transcription of a lengthy “strange speech,” indirectly addresses his readers and implies that gratitude is owed to him for his exhaustive labor of quotation:

Sobald also das Frühstück genommen, und die beschämte Cyane abgetreten war, fing er nach einem kleinen Vorbereitungs-Gespräch, *den merkwürdigen Diskurs an, durch dessen vollständige Mitteilung wir desto mehr Dank zu verdienen hoffen, da wir von Kennern versichert worden, daß der geheime Verstand desselben den buchstäblichen an Wichtigkeit noch weit übertreffe, und der wahre und unfehlbare Proceß, den Stein der Weisen zu finden, darin verborgen liege.*

As soon as they’d had breakfast and the ashamed Cyane had gone, he began after a short preparatory conversation *the strange discourse, for whose complete impartation we hope to earn that much more gratitude, since we have been assured by those in the know that the secret sense of it still far exceeds in importance the literal sense, and that the true and unerring process of finding*

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<sup>1</sup> Editions of Wieland’s novel appeared between 1766 and 1794.

*the philosopher's stone lies hidden therein.* (72; emphasis PJB).

In initiating an unusually—strangely—long interpolation by the sophist Hippias, the apologia of Wieland's narrator cogently defines—in a quietly disciplinary manner—the categories that provide cohesion for the novelistic narrative. The forward movement of the novel is part of a partnership between the narrative *wir* (the dignified, plural title for the narrator-function) and the unnamed reader, who is a function of this passage insofar as they are the *ones who would give thanks*. These readers are gently *indebted* to the transcribing *we* for mediating special knowledge of both (a) the transcribed discourse in its literal form and (b) the hidden, unidentified experts who know the hidden meaning of this transcription. The reader should recognize and show gratitude for the labor of transcription, and the expertise in hidden things, without which this novel would be impossible. A circulation of assurances and debts apparently holds together the crowded web of ties between the reader, the narrator(s), the characters, and the invisible experts. Ceremoniously acknowledging these bonds, the narrator can now move into the strange discourse of Hippias, who will try to tempt the young protagonist Agathon away from his Platonic idealism, toward an indulgence in sheer material and bodily delights.

What is especially intriguing in this rhetorical punctuation of narration is the insight that the *cohesion* of this novel—which traces the trajectory of disillusionment and enlightenment of an exemplary protagonist—is not transparently self-evident, but must be reaffirmed at crucial junctures. The narrator staves off a miniature crisis by assuring that the *very long* monologue that Hippias will now pour forth is, in fact, a function of a larger framework, which is admittedly not visible, but in which *you* (the reader) are also embedded. In the case of *Agathon* a metonymy of this framework is “the philosopher's stone,” the wisdom that this novel should have a hand in

uncovering. But why should a narrative set in ancient Greece, with a philosophically educated protagonist, have to justify the full quotation of a monologue exhaustively advancing a particular worldview, when an antique text such as Plato's *Symposium* could quote full monologues without ever providing a justification? The narrator's apparent insecurity seems to stem from awareness that he is (or they are) laboring on the invention of a new form of writing that will need to be based upon categories of readership and readability that did not exist in antiquity. Wieland's novel has to reflect upon and regulate its length, and anticipate arguments against it, so that it is legible, measured (however long), consumable and edifying all at once.<sup>2</sup>

Such an explicit rhetoric of justification, however, did not become a hallmark of the German-language *Bildungsroman*. As Mikhail Bakhtin has shown, the novel becomes "modern" through the gradual retreat and abdication of a strong author-function; there should no longer be a primary voice that determines the meaning and order by which the heterogeneity of voices on the page are to be fused.<sup>3</sup> One notices that Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-96) has already ceased to justify the length of key interpolated discourses, such as the famous *Bekenntnisse einer schönen*

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<sup>2</sup> Wieland's horror at Wilhelm Heinse's *Bildungsroman, Ardinghello und die glückseligen Inseln* (1787), could well have been related to the latter's apparent lack of any self-justification with regard to its acts of framing. The epistolary sections of *Ardinghello* dilate far beyond the interpolations in Wieland's and Goethe's texts, including the sprawling, unabridged letters of the titular protagonist to his friend, often on the topic of art history, whose content is never recuperated and explained by a framing act of the narrator. Heinse presents, in a sense, the mirror-image of Wieland, since his protagonist embraces the dionysian materialism whose citation (in Hippias' speech) Wieland's narrator would have to justify, and *against* which Agathon himself strives. Heinse's work embraces sophism on the formal level, as well, by unapologetically embracing sheer masses of written *material* without ascribing a clear function to it (although it should be pointed out that in the end, Heinse's novel is arguably far more normative and conservative than Wieland's, a discussion that cannot be entered into here).

<sup>3</sup> See Bakhtin 1984, where Dostoevsky's work is presented as the arrival of a new form of novelistic construction, in which it is no longer an author's definitive discourse, aiming to the articulation of a plot, around which a novel is centered. The novel is, rather, a universe of discourse in which the individual defines himself against the discourse of others about him. Thus, the novel is not about an author's push to "hold together a story," it is a fragment of an infinite universe of dynamic, interacting yet perpetually distinct spheres of discourse, each of which is an "individual." The author is simply the unseen hand that allows this to happen, and is not manifest as an author-function or self-foregrounding narrator.

*Seele*. A character-focused, specular mode of narration, fully lacking in explicit digressions,<sup>4</sup> assures that the full transcription of this confession does not appear as a destabilizing break away from the novel's thematic concerns. Rather, the confessions, as an embedded text, appear as a manuscript that is read aloud by Wilhelm to his dying lover Aurelie, and the emotional urgency of this act of reading already helps to engender curiosity and justify the "complete impartation" of the manuscript as the sixth book of Goethe's novel. The formal heterogeneity of *Wilhelm Meister's* construction does not need to be defended. This heterogeneity, which manifests itself as a layering of simultaneous forms of representation, is at work from the very first pages of the novel: it is *narrated* how Wilhelm *speaks* about his first experiences with the *theater*, while (unbeknownst to him) his lover takes great pains attempting to *make a show* of absolute fidelity and enthusiasm while listening to Wilhelm. The narrator remains strategically silent while Wilhelm speaks of his childhood, and naturalizes this embedded act of storytelling as an element of a fictional world—and not, as in *Agathon*, as part of a shared quest by reader and narrator for the hidden wisdom of the philosopher's stone. Goethe's narrator does not step out of the illusionistic mode to reassure the reader. No hesitation or exegesis precedes the interpolation that will deepen and expand the fictional world.

Goethe and Wieland present distinct practices of narrative synthesis, each of which corresponds to a particular means of modeling a fictional world. Wieland's narrator insists that the cohesion of the fictional world is provided by a transcendental authority extending into the reader's own sphere of existence, while Goethe's narrator obscures the voice of authority in order to let the fictional world appear (virtually) by

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<sup>4</sup> Temporal jumps within Goethe's novel occur mostly through scene shifts, in transitions from one chapter to another. Past occurrences are narrated not by way of digressions, but through interpolated stories told on particular occasions, which are dramatized through a visual and scenic form of narration that one could call "illusionistic," especially when compared to the strongly authorial style of *Agathon*.

itself; the labor of world-writing is not loudly emphasized, as in Wieland's work. The threading-together of Goethe's fictional world does not require that the narrator *step out* of this fictional world into that of the reader (as is the case in Wieland's novel).

Is "world" a useful category for analysis of narrative? A lengthy tradition of formalist-inspired literary thought has fruitfully drawn on this term to develop an expanded understanding of narrative texts that would go beyond the analysis of plot. Literary theorists from Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman to Lubomir Dolezel and Mieke Bal have argued that the purpose of the emergent genre of the novel in modernity is the creation of a world out of a heterogeneity of voices. For each of these theorists, the category of *world* emerges as a counterpoint to the traditional expectation of a plotted story. Bakhtin, Dolezel and Bal would all be able to account for the interpolation of an extended monologue—such as Wilhelm's story of his childhood, and Hippias' "strange discourse" in *Agathon*—as an integrated element of a wider activity of world-making. However, even though all three theorists develop their theories of fiction drawing on the tradition of Russian formalism, they provide very different accounts of the world-creation performed by literary texts. For Bakhtin, the term *world*, when used with regard to the superlatively polyphonic novels of Dostoevsky, never means merely "setting." Rather, it contains two distinct meanings. First, each hero or character, as a function of the novel, inhabits their *own* world, which is fully determined by their discursive habits, and most importantly, their position with regard to other individuals (each of whom has their own *world*). The second definition of *world* arises with reference to a notion of authorship: according to Bakhtin, the author of the polyphonic novel does not root these dynamic individuals, as they eternally redefine themselves against one another, on a firmly defined stage. The "objective world" of the novel *is* the field of myriad (seemingly limitless) individuals with "equal rights," each with their own incompatible world. The novel—

according to Bakhtin's theorization of Dostoevsky's writings, which he treats as a paradigmatic case of the novelistic art—is a heterogeneous world *of* worlds that gains totality as a material artifact.

Yuri Lotman's theorization of the "world" and "reality" does not contradict Bakhtin's suggested world of the polyphonic novel, but integrates and explains this model with reference to the idea that each individual author conveys "a specific model of the world" (1977: 134). Dostoevsky's would offer one possible picture of the world, not one that would necessarily be ideal or sovereign. For Lotman, each literary text is, first and foremost, a specific *image of the world*. As a "finite text," then, a novel could in various ways model an "infinite object (reality)" (211). An author could make use of pre-existing sign systems *from* the world, to create a particular delimited world-image. However, there is a subtle and telling difference between Bakhtin's and Lotman's uses of the word "infinite." Bakhtin sees Dostoevsky's heroes as "infinite functions" that are *never* given a determinate identity, and, likewise, Dostoevsky's world (and likely Bakhtin's, since the former seems often to have been a mask for the latter) can only ever be a *world of worlds* with no set determinations. Lotman critiques the notion of infinity, arguing that, without structure, a text is merely "an amorphous entropic mass" (297). Condemning "the art of the preceding period for its limited possibilities" and proposing "a new art of *unlimited possibilities*," Lotman argues, is either a rhetorical indulgence or a mistake, because "unlimited possibilities, the absence of all rules, total freedom from limitation imposed by a system are not the ideal for communication, but a death blow" (298). Dostoevsky-Bakhtin's world, one might note, is deceptively rich with structure, insisting as it does on a continually reconstituted hero, a continual push against entropy and dissolution into an "amorphous mass"; in other words, Bakhtin's idea of an ideal novelistic world is based around a modified idea of humanism that has been translated into a flexible



conception of textual interface. I use the word “interface” here in describing Bakhtin’s model to capture Lotman’s distinctly cybernetic approach to literary writing. Lotman might describe Bakhtin’s idea of literature as “interface” insofar as Bakhtin insists that the polyphonic novel could be entered anywhere, and one’s reading from any point would yield an equally valid perspective on the heterogeneous world of worlds in the text. Lotman provides a reminder that heterogeneity must take on specific forms when creating a world-model. The world of the artwork is never infinite, while outside reality is. Accepting Lotman’s theory, then, requires acceptance not only of a particular relationship between artistic texts and their worlds; Lotman also provides a compelling and ambitious idea about the way that *our* universe is structured.

Even though Lotman’s description of “artistic texts” can shed light on individual theoretical descriptions of the novel, it does not specifically address prose fiction. More narrowly focused than Lotman in his general theory of art, Lubomir Dolezel (1998) and Mieke Bal (2007) provide accounts of the world-creation performed by fictional prose texts in particular. For Dolezel, the fictional text posits a possible world that is heterogeneous, eternally incomplete, but ultimately unified in its heterogeneity by a set of axioms, structures and contiguous, incomplete topographies, which are subsequently made manifest in textual texture. Such a world is (somewhat in line with Lotman’s thought) created from an *authorial* position, and subsequently envisioned through (but not created by) individual “I-texts,” subjective perspectives that open onto that universe.<sup>5</sup> Dolezel’s complex model of world-creation and world-

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<sup>5</sup> The structure of the world, for Dolezel, precedes its manifestation as seen from individual viewpoints: “we can speculate that the authors conceive of the fictional world first as an extensional structure, individuating the acting persons in their properties and relationships, setting them in landscapes and cityscapes; then, by writing a text of a particular texture, they give an intensional shape to the world. Conversely, readers are presented first with the intensional structuring, since they access the fictional world through the text’s texture; by information or formalized paraphrasing they translate the texture into extensional representations and thus reconstruct the extensional world structure and its parts—story, character portraits, landscapes, cityscapes” (143). This approach requires that the fictional world be regarded as an *incomplete given* that precedes the moment of writing, and thus confers an uncertain status onto an activity such as authorial improvisation.

envisioning cannot be criticized for resorting to a simple idea of mimesis (that the fictional world is the perfect reflection of the author's imaginative design), yet he does depend on categories such as "author" and "reader" in order to make his model work. A more open-ended approach to the issue of fictional literature's creation of worlds would be Mieke Bal's concise argument: "fiction makes worlds, hence, undoes (the self-evidence of) that form of world-making we think we know" (2007: 608). The openness of Bal's argument is, for the purpose of my dissertation, helpful, since the ideas that "fiction makes worlds" does not fix transcendental criteria for *how* worlds are made through fiction, let alone *how many* worlds are made (a fictional text may not exhaust itself in the creation of *one* great, incomplete possible world, as for Dolezel). Fictional world-making, for Bal, is a self-reflexive engagement with the normal means of world-reproduction that suffuse and condition everyday life.

Thus, turning to that interstitial moment of narrative discourse in *Agathon* that transitioned into the "strange discourse" of Hippias, one could say that the narrator is putting on display—and casting as a social tie to his interpellated reader—a labor of world-making that risks to decay into multiple incompatible worlds, quests, truths. The forthcoming monologue must be demarcated as an embedded text that is of a different status from the primary narrative discourse—Hippias' "strange" monologue will have a hidden non-literal content, and is to be taken as a vessel of silence, rather than as a description of a fictional state of affairs that could compete with the narrator's descriptions. In sharp contrast, Goethe's *Bildungsroman* artfully hides the labor of world-creation, letting the various speeches and descriptions assert their own importance in a (much more so than with *Agathon*) vividly pictured world rich in simultaneous chronologies.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that literary history is a technological salvation history, in which ever new formal innovations are engineered to create ever

more vivid and complex worlds. A guiding concern of my dissertation is that, once within the field of 20<sup>th</sup> century prose writing, the word “world” fixes in advance a decision about what a literary text, starkly alienated from the genre of its origination, can or should do. The prose writers I examine in this study depart not only from tenets of bourgeois realism, but diverge also from the mythologies of aestheticism, engaging in an idiosyncratic form of experimentation that lingers at moments when narrative facts are fragmented, doubled, contested and contradicted.

In this dissertation, I am interested in looking at moments in 20<sup>th</sup> century German-language prose-writing that are akin to the apologia of Wieland’s narrator, but where the threading-together of narrative discourse and “strange” (to quote Wieland) interpolated character monologue becomes a problem for the material integrity of the text. In certain chronically unpublished and materially unstable works by Franz Kafka, Robert Walser and Thomas Bernhard, the labor of world-making and world-envisioning becomes visibly strained during the shift between embedded and embedding layers, so that the dissonance between these layers and their claims to authority serve to fracture the fabric of the text itself, in the manner of “late style,”<sup>6</sup> but not attributable in all cases to a kind of “lateness” (for I am looking at early texts by Kafka and Bernhard).

In my readings of Franz Kafka’s novella *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, Robert Walser’s *Räuber-Roman* and Thomas Bernhard’s unpublished *Leichtlebig* novel, I am interested in looking at how the practice of fictional world-creation, inaugurated by an initial narrator, is problematized by the oral discourses that are ostensibly a function of that narrator’s discourse. In short, the focal points of this study are “heavy talkers”: garrulous fictional characters whose speeches begin to appear as sites where the axioms of the surrounding world are being revised and improvised. The monologues

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<sup>6</sup> See Adorno 2002.

cited here cannot be, and are not, fully justified by the narrative voices that cite and transcribe them. They are, rather, unscripted arguments between different potential nodes of authority that would dictate the dimensions of the fictional space and the series of social relations that structure and predicate this fictional reality. Character monologue, in the fragmented works of Kafka, Walser and Bernhard, does not introduce an “I-text” (Dolezel) that provides one subjective perspective on an already-defined world. Rather, the interpolation of the monologue as an embedded text, calls into question the categories, relations and hierarchies that have permitted the assumption of any “world” beyond the sheer textured material of the written text. In this sense, the monologues I examine here do not only revise, but also erase their putative surroundings, and occasion a reflection on the means through which a fictional world could be imagined and imaged. Thus, an expanded version of the narratological concept of *metalepsis*, first developed by Gérard Genette, is crucial to the development of my readings. *Metalepsis*, being a crossing between the ontological layers that guarantee the stability of a narrative text, designates those moments where the locus of narrative authority shifts. In the case of my analysis, authority is jarringly displaced from the primary narrator located at the outermost horizon of the text, onto the voice of a fictional character arising *in situ* within the imagined world. In other words, I am interested in examining a sudden and transitory flash of agency—a ‘sign of life’—that crosses the interior of a fictional text, before being folded back into the determining web of structural relations that permit the text’s legibility.

In the first chapter of this study, I will examine the poetics of interpolation in Franz Kafka’s first broadly realized novella *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, versions of which were recovered from the author’s early *Oktavhefte* (oktavo notebooks), and which have been dated from between 1903 and 1907. My reading considers the work as an intervention in the German tradition of the novella as a genre of the “shock

event,” and considers how this early work by Kafka presents a unique, and not yet fully formalized figuration of the trope of “ubiquitous authority” that characterizes Kafka’s writings after 1913. I show how the persistent breaking-in of extended, mutually embedded character monologues into the text of the novella enacts a transformation of the novella’s thematization of youthful freedom alongside an inhibited, self-policing mode of social being. In its many repetitions and doublings of key motifs, Kafka’s novella is involved in a process of thinking through the ways that social relations are figured in literary language, without directly representing these. Rather, by endowing character monologue with the potential to fully and radically transfigure the fictional world—empty it out, fill it up, break it apart—*Beschreibung eines Kampfes* probes different ways in which language serves to configure and violently reconfigure the boundaries between isolated selves. With this poetic reading, I aim to show how the infamous “unreadability” of this novella has in part to do with how Kafka attempts to stage, within the diegesis of his fiction, the very acts of world-creation that would have preceded the text. The central shock-moment of this story, in my reading, involves the *externalization* of the theme of sociality in language, where the text literally screams out to passers-by to provide form and measure to the shapes inside of it.

In the second chapter of this study, I examine Robert Walser’s posthumously published *Räuber*-novel (written 1925), which was decoded from the vast “pencil region” of Walser’s late writings in the 1970s, from the large collection of uncollated sheets densely filled with a diminutive version of the Sütterlin shorthand script. In my reading, I show how the *Vorträge* (*lectures*) delivered by the elusive “robber” protagonist, towards the end of this highly digressive prose work, introduce a new node of narrative authority that radically re-frames the legitimacy of the audacious, trickster-like narrator who has envisioned the robber thus far. In the robber’s public

and private “lectures,” he gives an account of how his movement through the world is guided by an itinerant affect—*Liebsein* or *love-being*—which he claims is a generative, foundational *cause* for the social structures in which he is embedded. His monologues, or lectures, suddenly lay the robber’s own signature upon a variegated fictional world. Thus, his monologues serve to invert the hierarchy to which he has been subject. Whereas previously, the world of the “city” has ubiquitously and panoptically judged, indebted, inculpated and pursued him, now *he* claims to be the creator, and the essential precondition for the mechanisms of surveillance and judgment above him. Thus, I argue, Walser uses his *Räuber-roman* to reconfigure the romantic tradition of ‘Good-for-nothing’ literature, most strongly formalized by Eichendorff, in which a hapless clown finally stumbles into riches and an aristocrat-sanctified marriage. Walser’s good-for-nothing, in his chronic liminality *qua* plasticity, is not simply a romantic wanderer; his itinerant existence highlights a mutability and temporariness at the core of the social relations of his environment. And, while there are subsequent moments that discredit the model of world-making presented by the robber, his exegetic monologues nevertheless serve to introduce a means of reality-construction that highlights the contingency of reality-construction through novelistic prose narrative.

In my final chapter, I examine the sprawling monologue that comes to dominate an early, unpublished novel by Thomas Bernhard, which served as the precursor and source material for his 1963 novel *Frost*. In my reading of this work, which I call the *Leichtlebig* novel after its ephemeral protagonist, Bernhard juxtaposes two models of linguistic authority. Initially beginning as a third-person *Bildungsroman* about the intellectual awakening of a railroad worker in Upper Austria in the early 1960s, and following a scenically driven mode of narrative that is based around the personal experiences and memories of this one protagonist, the *Leichtlebig*

novel soon transforms into something entirely different. As Leichtlebig encounters an elderly, ill “Doctor” who, besides claiming a law degree, extensive experience in politics and war, and a panoramic knowledge of natural history, also displays the ability to narrate and determine the details of Leichtlebig’s biography. Once the relationship between these two men has been established, the novel transforms from a *Bildungsroman* into a nearly uninterrupted protocol of the Doctor’s monologues, which as an expansive “site” within the text, allow the revision—and erasure—of the narrative details laid down in the first part of the novel. Thus, I argue, Bernhard’s early work evinces a skeptical, even fearful, bearing towards the novel as a genre that could engender a multi-perspectival rendering of an intersubjective world. Bernhard’s novel, instead, focuses on a drawn-out moment of *violation* in which the initial practice of world-creating established by the primary narrator, are systematically undermined and overtaken. To pursue this reading, I trace the development of the dual metaphor of *Gestriipp* (undergrowth) and *Urwald* (primeval forest), to show how the Doctor’s voice borrows motifs from Leichtlebig’s personal story, and deploys them to redefine the work and its world as a mass of impenetrable density.

In each of my extended close readings, I pay careful attention to the generic affinities of the works being analyzed—both with regard to broader theorizations of these genres (such as the novella, the romantic picaresque, the realist novel, the *Bildungsroman*) and the concrete manifestations of these genres to which Kafka, Walser and Bernhard have been connected. In studying the embedded structure of the “overgrown” monologue, I hope to show the active role that texts play in re-defining, over time, the categories of literary analysis, as well as how these texts reflexively engage with the ideas of agency, sociality and authority dictated by their generic traditions.

## CHAPTER 1

### FENCED IN:

#### MONOLOGUE AND METALEPSIS

#### IN FRANZ KAFKA'S *DESCRIPTION OF A STRUGGLE*

### *Pairs*

In this chapter, I examine the role of monologue in transforming and redefining an incessantly recurrent motif in Franz Kafka's *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* (*Description of a Struggle*): the converging and diverging *pair*, whose constitution as a pair is continually troubled by the structural constraints of language, narrative, prescribed sociality, and material circumstance. The prevalence of the "pair" in this novella has frequently been identified as an indication of a complex *Doppelgänger* scenario; James Rolleston convincingly notes that *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* does not only "exploit" the literary tradition of the *Doppelgänger*, but "pursues it *ad absurdum*," to the point that it is no longer possible to tell whether or not Kafka's work is in fact about (as the *Doppelgänger* hypothesis would dictate) "a menacing force that undermines the existence of an *I*" (184). In this novella, the exhaustively dramatized *trouble* of constituting a pair, of creating a certain social tie between an *I* and another *I*, exhausts the hypothesis of a single "split self." The limitation of the idea of a "split ego" is that it assumes first the *given* relation of a single subject to itself as the necessary focus of the prose work, and assumes next that this given relation has decayed due to narcissism, the entropy of modernity, schizophrenia, or another identity crisis.<sup>1</sup> In my own reading, I assume that the motif of the pair does not

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensively developed thesis on the decay of the self in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, see



simply address the decay of the organically unified self, but is instead related to the labor of establishing ties in the first place: between selves, words, parts of the world. Individual subjectivity is not simply what is *lost* in this novella; in many cases, subjectivity is rendered as a barrier to the formation of sociality, as a horizon to be transcended.

My reading of Kafka's novella will, thus, attempt to respect the presumed participation of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* in a tradition of writing "the double" (in particular, of Dostoevsky's second extant prose work *The Double*), while at the same time exploring Kafka's specific transformation of this tradition. If, as Rolleston writes, Kafka has pursued the *Doppelgänger*-motif *ad absurdum*, what might lie beyond this *absurdity* (184)? Toward what end does Kafka disfigure and revise the "double"?

Before I embark on my study of this novella, I will provide a very cursory summary of the text, the simplicity of which I will work to undermine with my extended reading. *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is told in the first-person voice by a young man who, in the first pages, departs around midnight from a society party in Prague in the company of another young man, the adventurous "acquaintance" who is entangled in several romantic trysts with various women, one of whom is present at the party, and another who is absent, acknowledged only by the acquaintance's talk. Walking through the nocturnal streets, the two young men struggle to establish the nature of their relationship to one another: at times it is an intimate, erotic bond, at other times, a dangerous enmity. They resolve to take a walk up to a city park, the *Laurenziberg*. In the novella's second section, the narrator jumps onto his acquaintance's back and rides him into an undefined, surreal, mountainous landscape. The narrator wounds his acquaintance, and as he cuts a path away from the injured

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Neymeyr 2004.

interlocutor, he both modifies and explores the shifting landscape around him. Soon he encounters a new interlocutor floating in a massive river, the “fat man,” whose lengthy monologue fills up a significant portion of the novella. Within this monologue, several new pairs of interlocutors are introduced, involving characters such as “the worshiper” and “the drunk man.” After the fat man stops speaking, the landscape around them dissolves and the narrator is returned to the initial situation of the novella: he is now walking through the park with his acquaintance. The two seat themselves on a bench, and the narrator makes a fateful confession about his upcoming marriage, prompting his acquaintance to stab himself in the arm. The novella ends, then, in a suspended moment of indecision, sustaining an impasse that has persisted for much of the text. In my analysis, I am interested in looking at moments where this impasse is broken open, or radically redefined.

### *Preface on Punctuation*

A central textual artifact of this chapter is a wrecked mark of punctuation: a close-quotation mark that was crossed out, and thus ignored in all subsequent published versions of the text. The ruined mark corresponds to no previous open-quotation mark anywhere in the text, and thus when taken seriously (taken without the line striking through and nullifying it), it counts the *entire* text before it as part of a singular, unified field: a solid block of monologue, where there had been the impression of a radical cut-up text that did not fit together. The quotation mark appears to have been inserted as a corrective, and yet this corrective must have appeared too radical to the author (who was now playing the role of editor). Radical, because this diacritic would have definitively denoted the limit of a region of text, marking this text as having originated from a common source, and suggesting that its

appearance here in the text has been contingent on an observer who later relayed this monologue. Readers are assured that whatever was said is not addressed directly to them, but comes by way of a mediating, intervening observer, who beyond the boundary of the quotation mark will insert their own framing discourse.

This ‘safe distance’ is eliminated when one sees that the quotation mark has been broken and voided: the *static* nature of this region of text as a fixed fact of the past—its status as a *functional element* of a framing discourse—is no longer assured. It could come through the broken fence of punctuation and address a reader directly.

“Help me!” Since these words are in quotation marks, you can assume that I am quoting these words from someplace; they do not concern you directly, but were uttered at some point in the past.

Help me! I really need help! I mean it!

I am talking to you!

Such is the manner of the confusion and distress that, over the course of the next chapter, Kafka’s first novella is in a position to throw its readers into.

### *Fences*

In the labyrinthine middle section of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*,<sup>2</sup> Kafka’s “earliest extant novella” (Ryan 64), one may feel tempted to conclude that, finally, the work has yielded a fictional character whose speech functions as a meta-discourse that could offer an exegesis of the surrounding work in all its apparent impenetrability: “Es liegt nur an Dir daß ein eingezäuntes Gespräch entsteht,” says the worshiper, in the novella’s second section, to his interlocutor, the “fat man” (“It is only because of you that a fenced-in conversation arises”; BEK 88). *Fenced-in conversation* could serve as

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter deals exclusively with the first version of Kafka’s novella, known as *Fassung A*.

a proper name for the repeatedly varied and recycled theme of this novella; through the course of this chapter I will refer to such conversations as “impasses”, frustrating interlocutions that have no foreseeable outcome, as they are bounded in by discursive constrictions that the speaking subjects cannot transcend. The “worshiper,” in his statement on the matter, insists that it is the speaker who is to blame for the constraints on conversation; he has not recognized his freedom to improvise, to synthesize utterances that will break through the virtual boundaries imposed on speech. And yet the “worshiper’s” statement is itself relativized, and thus negated, as part of an ongoing conversation that affirms that there is, in fact, no room for individual agency. The worshiper’s interlocutor, the “fat man” (who is also the first-person narrator) re-enters the fray of the fenced-in conversation:

Meine Lippen waren trocken und ungehorsam, als ich sagte:  
»Sollte man nicht anders leben können?«  
»Nein«, sagte er fragend, lächelnd.

My lips were dry and disobedient as I said:  
“Should one not be able to live otherwise?”  
“No,” he said asking, smiling (88).

Details accumulate that seem to nullify the worshiper’s insistence on the free agency of his conversation partner. In preparing his response, the fat man’s lips are “disobedient,” as if the bodily organs that facilitate speech conspire against his intentions. Moreover, the response of the worshiper seems to patently contradict his previous assertion: it is *not* possible to live otherwise, and thus it is not possible to speak otherwise. The tone and facial expressions accompanying this response of *nein* provoke, moreover, an interpretive paranoia on two accounts: a smile that suggests furtive irony, and the mysterious adverb *fragend* (questioning) that accompanies and unsettles the answer. The impasse of conversation—of *fenced-in conversation*—that

characterizes so much of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is vividly reiterated here, as if to confirm that it is impossible to have a conversation in which one's own utterances could transform the discursive framework in which they arise. And yet, although there is a striking repetitiveness, or monotone of dialogue, in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, it would be premature, for my purposes, to ascribe a radical homogeneity to the narrative unfolding of Kafka's text. In my study, I would like to take up the challenge of the worshiper's statement—that a "fenced-in conversation" only occurs "because of you," because of individual error, not inevitably—and search the novella for moments when the fence might break.

While I have suggested that the worshiper's metaphor of the fence, as a possible metacommunicative frame for the novella's thematic content, represents a special moment of self-reflexivity, in fact the text is permeated by metaphors of the constraining boundaries and horizons within which human discourse and intercourse must occur. The novella's poetic epigraph presents an image of human existence as a course of action that is bound within a determined (if seemingly infinite) horizon:

Und die Menschen gehn in Kleidern  
schwankend auf dem Kies spazieren  
unter diesem großen Himmel  
der von Hügeln in der Ferne  
sich zu fernen Hügeln breitet

And the people go in clothes  
shakily walking on the gravel  
under this great sky  
that from hills in the distance  
spreads to distant hills (47)

While ostensibly the poem expresses a feeling of expanse, openness and limitless possibility, each line is concerned with establishing the horizons of possible

motion and action: people walk “in clothes,” and “on the gravel,” and in a space that is demarcated by the “distant hills” on one side and the “distant hills” on the other side. Human movement is here unstable (i.e. unbound) to the extent that it is “shaky” (“*schwankend*”), yet this ostensible instability is counteracted by several layers of constraining boundaries that would prevent a swing or a shake from throwing a person onto a different course. The epigraph defines, before the commencement of the novella’s narrative, the ostensibly non-transcendable horizons of existence. Ostensibly non-transcendable, because one does not know what the *und* that initiates the poem follows from. The entire poem of the epigraph is framed as a juxtaposition *to something else* that is unwritten and unknown: what would precede such a meditation on the *determined* and *determining* horizons of human life? Is there some other way of being that this current fenced-in life would have followed from, or could be compared to, or is simultaneous to? Are these horizons (or “fences”) temporarily and contingently erected, or are they absolutely non-transcendable? Does the *und* that begins the poem only chain the stanza to an identical stanza about people walking in clothes between hills? And, finally: what will happen to these horizons in the course of the novella? Will they be reinforced, redefined, or broken open?

### ***Free Speech***

Judging purely from its atmospherics—its nocturnal setting, its thematization of precarious young men thrown into a potentially carnivalesque situation—*Beschreibung eines Kampfes* seems to sketch out a yearning for social and linguistic *escape*. And indeed, throughout the novella, and not only in the worshipper’s utterance about the “fenced-in conversation,” there are occasional and fleeting hints at the possibility of a form of direct speech that, while contained in quotation marks,

could overflow and escape the boundaries of punctuation that contain it, and thus transcend a constitutive horizon of the text. The novella’s frustrating repetition of the same situation—“in which two men encounter one another and a balance between aggression and intimacy does not set in” (Siegel 2009: 226)—is occasionally interrupted and illuminated by a glimmer of hope that there might be some *other* way of speaking and socializing: a kind of language that would nullify the discursive distinctions that alienate the characters from their surroundings and from one another, and attain an elevated *directness*.<sup>3</sup> While much of the “direct” (in the conventional sense of the term) speech of Kafka’s novella seems to be determined by polite social convention, ruthless self-preservation and paranoid self-observation, this “other” direct speech (as a possibly “explosive form of communication”<sup>4</sup>), indexed at key sites in the text, would appear to open up an escape from the determinations of narrative time and space (or a “line of escape,” to quote Deleuze and Guattari 35).<sup>5</sup> Redefining

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<sup>3</sup> Lukas Trabert, setting *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* into parallel with Nietzsche’s “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne” (which will be discussed later in this chapter), describes the problematic of communication in the novella as a parallel movement of (a) frustrated miscommunications that are spoken aloud, and (b) an “underground” understanding that nevertheless inheres between the characters: “Die Ichfiguren verstehen sich immer. Es ist ein Verstehen im Nichtverstehen. Genauer: Nach konventionellen Kriterien mißlingende Kommunikation ist begleitet von einem untergründigen Verstehen” (300). Whether the narrative is so consistent, and whether the characters “always” understand each other through an underground mode of communication, is debatable, but Trabert points to a notable tension in the text between a failed chain of everyday communications, and a profound bond that inheres on some “other” level (where this level is, is far from certain; the metaphor of the “underground” provides a suitable starting point, but possibly oversimplifies the confusing metaphysics of language posited by this novella.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase originates in an essay by the French writer Serge Rezvani, who designates Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Thomas Bernhard as three “madmen of orality” who, in the face of technological modernity, advance their own form of modernity that is built entirely around the “human word” in all its “violence” and “savagery.” Rezvani’s thesis will remain important for this discussion as it considers whether there exists a distinct body of literature—of the “dark bourgeois” variety, to quote Andreas Gailus—that aims at “freeing” orality from the strictures of tempered *narrative* prose (where orality is necessarily deployed as a function, even if it is as a “pure function” for a thinker such as Bakhtin).

<sup>5</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, whose thought on Kafka encompasses his entire corpus as a “rhizome” (3) and thus can be entered at any point, it is the “animal essence” that provides escape (35). Although I feel that “line of escape” concisely captures an emergent intrigue and pathos of this work, precisely because of the emergence of apparently inescapable structures, I am not sure that the route of escape in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is to be identified with “the animal.”

the textual fabric from which the narrative is fashioned, such direct-direct speech would suspend the endless dramatic impasses of the novella that are dictated by its past-tense, first-person, ironically<sup>6</sup> intonated, scenically oriented mode of narration, which insists on particular rigid criteria for a satisfying and legible outcome.

What are these criteria? They are recorded with striking clarity in the concluding section of Kafka's novella, where the most destabilizing absurdities of the preceding swaths of text—for instance, a narrator with immeasurably long legs, and a seagull that flies straight through a man's stomach—are forgotten, and a stage is set for a conventionally dramatic conclusion involving the interpersonal drama of two discontented young men. The novella's final paragraph presents a static description of a scene that is neatly separated into a foreground and background. Apparently, there must be a stable ground, and suitable lighting, for the bourgeois intrigue to reach its culmination:

Eine Laterne nahe an der Mauer oben brannte und legte den Schatten der Stämme über Weg und weißen Schnee, während der Schatten des vielfältigen Astwerks umgebogen wie zerbrochen auf dem Abhang lag.

A lantern close to the wall above burned and laid the shadow of the branches on the path and the white snow, while the shadow of the variegated branches, bent as if broken, lay on the slope. (BEK 97)

The existence of shadows suggests a neatly layered reality: the light source (lantern), the obstructing object (tree), and projection surface (wall) are each distinct and distanced from one another, and a shadow can be thrown. And, moreover, from this neat physical order of things, a conventional simile can be created as a counterfactual: the tree's shadow looks *like* it is shattered, but it is not *really*. In this

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<sup>6</sup> Irony appears to play a primary role in recreating the impasse; dialogues are continually driven forward by the operative assumption of each interlocutor that neither interlocutor's statements are to be apprehended or answered directly. This will be discussed in depth in later sections on the Impasse and on Politeness.



last paragraph, Kafka's story rests in the static scenery of an unexpectedly restored realism.<sup>7</sup> And what has happened here, under the glow of the lamp and above the shadows on the path? The two young acquaintances that are the focus of the story's first section are circling around the bench, conversing. Within this scenic configuration, a series of events ensue that would appear to provide culmination and closure. First, the narrator "reveals" (as if this fact had been secretly established from the start and would help to explain the ruptures written into the text's middle section) that he is engaged to be married. Whatever de-realizations of narrative perspective have preceded this confession, whatever textual boundaries have been shattered and whatever new models of sociality have been explored, all destabilizing moments of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* are now retroactively folded back into the strictures of a bourgeois social drama built around heterosexual social reproduction. The narrator will be married, and *therefore* he has pursued his fascination with the acquaintance to the most radical limits of possibility.

Ich stand da auf mit matt verzogenem Munde, trat in den Rasen hinter der Bank, zerbrach auch einige beschneite Ästchen und sagte dann meinem Bekannten ins Ohr: »Ich bin verlobt, ich gestehe es.«

I then stood up with a contorted mouth, stepped into the grass behind the bench, also broke a few snowed-over branches and then said into my acquaintance's ear: "I am engaged, I confess." (95)

The confession throws the acquaintance into exasperation; moments later, he will stab himself in the arm, prompting the narrator to tear off his shirt and suck the blood from the wound, nursing and consoling the debased acquaintance. The high

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<sup>7</sup> Arne Höcker writes that "the story constantly (*ständig*) strains to find its way back to the order of the theater that determines and makes possible narration" (239). The story's endpoint would seem to suggest that the text has been, indeed, *always* or *constantly* exerting itself to return to such a neatly stratified order of stage-space, where observation can happen. But in this chapter, I want to suggest that this is not *always* the case, and that at a certain point another goal (though quickly abandoned) is projected by the text.

drama of this concluding scene, with its moment of palpable, visible wounding, is nevertheless explicitly colored by the suspicion that the narrator's revelation of engagement was cynically improvised. One paragraph later, he remarks: "Ich freute mich, dass ich ihm so klug geantwortet hatte" ("I was happy that I had answered him so smartly"; 96). The novella finishes—as it began<sup>8</sup>—with a feinted utterance strategically deployed to uphold the fences, as it were, that separate one self from another in an indecisive struggle.

Like many "surreal" moments of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, the flashes of an idea of a direct-direct speech (a non-fenced-in speech, speech not subject to structure or code) should likely earn (and frequently have earned) the suspicion of a pervasive solipsism. This solipsism must (critics frequently insist<sup>9</sup>) at some point be avenged by the facts of inter-subjective reality. Because: is it possible, in a literary text, for an utterance to de-functionalize itself, to dislodge itself from the frame to which its existence is indebted? Kafka's story seems haunted by this question. Would it be possible for a character to say something that would alter the conditions of his or her own framing and suspend the "and so forth" structure of this narrative, this endless inconclusive volleying between the poles of aggression and intimacy (Wagner 238)? Could an utterance free itself from its debt to its frame, attain a social life of its own and set up a new order for discourse?

What would this kind of *freed* direct speech look like, and where can it arise?

A potential example appears early on in the story, albeit one that is fleeting, frustrating

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<sup>8</sup> The narrator's initial announcement that the two men will go on a walk together to the Laurenziberg was, initially, only a feigned utterances intended to distract the other partygoers from eavesdropping on his conversation with the acquaintance. This feint is eventually, however, treated as if it were a real mutual agreement, and the entire story unfolds from the premise of the 'planned walk to the Laurenziberg.'

<sup>9</sup> The readings of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* by Walter Sokel, Jost Schillemeit and Arne Höcker, which are cited elsewhere in this chapter, depart from the hypothesis that the extravagances of the novella's middle section, being radically surreal or unreal, must be punished and avenged in some way.

and elusive, and thus as “wobbly” in its exemplarity as the narrator’s own sense of world and self (Ryan 64). When the first-person narrator is walking in frustration beside his nocturnal companion, two words that stand in for his fleeting erotic fantasy jump out from the quotation marks that bracket them and become an atmospheric element of the space that the narrator inhabits, observes, and describes:

Es erhob sich in mir ein großer und so begründender Zorn gegen mein Gedächtnis und Angst, ich könnte das Mädchen verlieren. Und so wiederholte ich angestrengt und unaufhörlich »weißes Kleid, weißes Kleid« um wenigstens durch dieses eine Zeichen mir das Mädchen zu erhalten. Aber das hat nichts geholfen. Mein Bekannter drängte sich mit seinen Reden immer näher zu mir und in dem Augenblick, als ich anfing seine Worte zu verstehn, hüpfte ein weißer Schimmer zierlich am Brückengeländer entlang, strich durch den Brückenthurm und sprang in die dunkle Gasse.

There arose in me a great and thus causative anger against my memory, and fear that I could lose the girl. And so I repeated, strained and ceaselessly, ‘white dress, white dress,’ in order to, with this, at least hold onto a sign of the girl. But that did not help. My acquaintance pressed with his discourse always closer to me and in the moment that I began to understand his words, a white shimmer bounced daintily along the bridge railing, streaked through the bridge tower and jumped into the dark alleyway (BEK 60).

The words “white dress” cease to be a “sign” preserved in direct speech, and flow out from their delimited position to become a white shimmer over the bridge where the narrator is walking.<sup>10</sup> A new, as-yet unexplained physics might emerge here:

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<sup>10</sup> Two critics explain how the “white dress” becomes a “white shimmer” due to the text’s refusal to maintain boundaries. Sophie von Glinski describes the “escape” of this word thus: “Despairingly he attempts to hold onto the one detail that is left to him: the white dress. But this pledge (*Unterpfand*) of the dream-experience escapes him, reified as a white shimmer” (39). This occurs, for von Glinski, because of the text’s continual self-reflexivity, where it re-reads its own metaphors and literalizes them. Here, the metaphor is taken seriously and the word “dress” is *reified* (made into a thing) on its path from dream to reality. For Wolf Kittler, this sort of movement is not due to a blurring of the boundary between dreams and reality; rather, Kittler suggests that the corporeal impact of the words on the world actually results from an *error* on Kafka’s part. In other words, Kafka’s early novella *failed* because it neglects “to separate what is written from the body” (57). Conducting an extended source history, Kittler shows that much of the story told by the fat man was directly cut and pasted from Kafka’s letters; the fat man is not really speaking, but is simply a vehicle for an interpolation of foreign written material that does not belong to the narrative. Thus, the voice resonating from his body is only emitting a story that was written *by someone else*. The

the acquaintance's spoken discourses, pressing into the narrator, appear to have *dislodged* the white dress and set it free in the streets, where it eagerly runs away from the speaker. This overstepping of quotation, it would seem, presents an exceptional moment of metalepsis,<sup>11</sup> where a character's direct speech transforms into an object of perception in the narrated world. And yet, other than placing in doubt the narrator's credibility (and sobriety), the insertion of the words "white dress" into the physical urban environment does not bring about an exceptional state or a opening-up of the claustrophobic "affect economy" that has arisen between the two young men (Wagner 230). In the end, this passage is not important because it changes the narrative world, but because it, through a brief moment of de-realization or hallucination, removes the distracting heterosexual object of desire (the girl in the white dress) from the increasingly closed affect-economy circulating between the two young men.

Yet this passage, with its anomalous flow of direct speech *directly* (without mediation) into the object-world, does encourage a certain interpretive paranoia: will this happen again, is it part of a poetic program or a systematically designed reality-model? Is the white dress ever going to come back?

The narrator provides hints as to what the mechanisms are that drive the discursive construction of fictional reality. The narrator's nocturnal wanderings appear to be driven forward by *Einfälle* (whims, ideas that fall into the mind). These spurn him to insert spontaneously generated (and possibly fictive) facts into his field of experience:

So redete ich und suchte kramphaft hinder den Worten Liebesgeschichten mit merkwürdigen Lagen zu erfinden; auch ein wenig Roheit und feste Nothzucht brauchte nicht zu fehlen.

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possibility remains, however, that *refusal* or *failure* might be read as a meaningful attempt to redefine the genre of the novella and its accompanying models of framing.

<sup>11</sup> An extended account of the phenomenon of metalepsis, introduced by Gérard Genette and expanded by Monika Fludernik, is provided in the next section.

Thus I spoke and convulsively tried to invent, behind the words, love stories with strange circumstances; additionally, a little bit of brutality and violation was needed as well (BEK 52).

The mechanism of narrative construction is, here, a literary imagination that deliberately and consciously constructs the things that it describes, generating intrigue not from pre-existing experiences but by means of a cultivated improvisational impulse. The *Einfall* would, in this case, not be something that “falls into one’s head” from an *outside*, but essentially another name for the poetic image that literary language creates from itself, for itself. If one accepts this reading, the free flight of the “white dress” becomes explicable: as a motif, it bears the same degree of reality as any other element of the story, which systematically generates itself *out of itself* (much in the way that Samuel Beckett’s late prose is said to be a language that responds only to its own linguistic operations).<sup>12</sup>

These particular moments appear to corroborate Sophie von Glinski’s argument that *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is a thoroughly Modernist text that thematizes and enacts the “Eigenmacht der Sprache” (“Autonomous power of language; 82). The narrative is not based on a preexisting reality or on something that *falls into* it, but is contingent on “the word” and “the act of text-constitution” (83). The text of the novella is an autonomous, enclosed system that develops only according to its own linguistic movements. Such a thesis convincingly argues the position of this novella in a wider contemporary discourse on language skepticism (where literary language escapes the crisis of language by positing its own constructed reality). Moreover, von Glinski’s thesis effectively takes account of the sheer *uneventfulness* of this story: as a novella, it is not to be read (as a traditional novella) as a record of a violent shock-event, and instead gives an account of how literary

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<sup>12</sup> See Casanova 2007.

language emerges as an autonomous self-propelled force. I accept, as the point of departure for my own reading, this hypothesis of the autonomy and insularity of Kafka's language with relation to external reality. And yet, while I agree that there is a strong and permeating tendency toward a virtual auto-generation of writing in Kafka's early text, I am interested in those moments of the text where this autonomy seems to collapse, and the text reflects upon its own embedding within an unseen outside. Accordingly, in my own argument, I will be looking at the ways in which Kafka's text (however hopelessly, questionably or quasi-mystically) attempts to escape its hermetic self-reference, and sets up (as mentioned earlier) a kind of radically communicative act, a *direct* speech that is not autonomous in the sense of being "insular" or "hermetically sealed off," but is in fact capable of social "living" *outside* the text. In other words, I want to explore the ways in which *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* feels out the possibility of a pure *sociality* of language (and thus not a modernist autonomy as traditionally conceived of). I pursue this vector of analysis not to *disprove* the hypothesis of autonomy or self-reference (which I regard as valid), but to show the ways in which Kafka's text appears to resist its own self-reference and autonomy, even if these attempts are ultimately ironized (embarrassed through correction), and folded back into the text as an autonomous, self-referential object.

The notion of a self-generating narrative that only responds to its own textual construction is, to be sure, written directly into Kafka's text. Yet, at times, this very autonomy or auto-generation of the narrator's discourse is specifically rendered as a violent act that pulls its motifs *from somewhere* and, with a sinister capriciousness, violently excludes others. In a passage from the first section of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* that was elided from the published versions (as it was crossed out in the notebook), the narrator makes visible the frightening entropy involved in the pursuit and progression of narrative. When he has decided that he desires to fantasize only

about “his girl,” the narrator discards all of his other *Einfälle*:

Ich packte alle anderen Einfälle, oben am Genick packte ich sie, wie kleine Hunde und warf sie über das steinerne Brückengeländer in das für die Mühle abgetheilte Wasser. Sie ertranken ohne Lärm.

I grabbed all my other ideas (*Einfälle*), up on the napes of their necks I grabbed them, like small dogs, and threw them over the stone bridge railing into the water that was being routed to the mill. They drowned without noise.

(HKA 56)

These ideas, whims, motifs, take on a corporeal existence in the very moment that they are excluded from the subsequent development of the narrative. The narrative *pollutes*, it is murderous and wasteful as it drowns certain ideas and discards them in a manner that ensures their invisibility (and their eventual decomposition) as they flow towards the intake of the mill. Here, it seems that the *Eigenmacht* of language establishes itself through the production and exclusion of excess material. For this reason, the play-room inside the text, the closed-off site where the characters find themselves locked in an ongoing dramatic impasse, would appear to be continually at risk of breaking open. At this early juncture in the narrative, however, the passing-in and passing-out of single *Einfälle* does not appear to disturb the development of the repetitive narrative in the least. The river carries them out of sight.

What eventually *does* emerge as a threat to the integrity of this imaginatively self-producing narrative, I will argue in this chapter, is a tendency of the primary narrator’s voice to yield to the sustained influence (in-flow) of interpolated monologues of other, incidentally encountered characters. Several interminable monologues arise in the middle section of the novella as interpolations that eclipse the primary narrator’s discourse, pointing to the arbitrariness and reversibility, as it were, of the method by which the narrator has structured the flow of time and experience.

And yet the emergent dominance of monologue over Kafka's text—of numerous simultaneous, parallel and hierarchically embedded monologues—does more than introduce the possibility of an unreliable narration on the part of an *Ich-Erzähler*. Rather, through the incessant embedding of monologue (one inside of the other) in Kafka's novella, an ethos of the literary voice—of narrative prose in particular—begins to emerge: namely, that the condition of possibility for any apparently autonomous stream of prose that would profess to narrate *one* chain of lived experiences achieves its integrity and substance not by virtue of its *own* content, (which remains insufficiently grounded and defined) but rather by virtue of its embedding *in* and framing *by* another such stream of the prosaic. An anticipatory and illuminating metaphor for this ethos of embedding, introduced in the text's middle section, is that of the man who only has a body so long as he prays and is *seen* by others. Thus, as one progresses into the novella's middle section, the most crucial events are not *occurrences* constatively described by a narrator, but rather the *transitions* between one interpolated, spoken discourse and another.

Although I at times use the terms “embedding” and “interpolation” interchangeably, I use the term *interpolation* with a certain amount of attention to its original meaning, namely, that of correcting or glossing an original text through the insertion of additional (or apocryphal) material. The monologue, as an uninterrupted self-revelation delivered to a bystander, inserts itself as a *corrective* in the indecisive drama unfolding from the narrator's myopic discourse. Monologue reframes the frustrated sociality that fills so much of the text, in that it replaces the circumstantial bond to the other (to the acquaintance encountered in polite society) with an existential bond to this other. Thus, when a character's monologue is allowed to flow out and expand uninterrupted, friendship forms—sometimes in spite of, or regardless of the actual *content* of this monologue, which often very exactly repeats and recycles the



novella's familiar repertoire of motifs. A significant node of my analysis, then, will be the *aftermath* of a monologue: what difference has one character's self-revelation made in the physical and social world around him? What impact does his confessional speech have?

### *Parallel Theories and Methods*

In advance of a closer reading of Kafka's work and its intervention in the particular genre of the novella, it would be desirable to first make explicit some of the methodological perspectives and theoretical traditions with which this textual anomaly of "metamorphic monologue" could resonate. In the next section, I will consider how my own analysis could relate to (1) Nietzschean readings of the novella, (2) Walter Benjamin's theorization of the modern novel, (3) early structuralist poetics, (4) contemporary narratology, (5) a genealogical study of Kafka's links to 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. None of these perspectives will be unambiguously chosen or prioritized, and they are offered as the articulation of an open question regarding the wider relevance of Kafka's prose.

Numerous critics have noted an affinity of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* with the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, whether it is to the texts that one knows Kafka had read around the presumed time of the novella's composition (*Also sprach Zarathustra* and *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, which Kafka had read by 1910), or to ones that appear to share a fascination with Kafka's text (*Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne*).<sup>13</sup> In reading the middle section of Kafka's novella, where the narrator-protagonist is seen to flee into a mountainous wilderness, Benno Wagner illuminates what he sees as thinly veiled references to *Also sprach Zarathustra*, as a

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<sup>13</sup> See Trabert 1987 and Wagner 2005

correlate to the prophet's ten-year escape into the mountains at the age of thirty. If Kafka is indeed integrating motifs and tropes from Nietzsche's allegorical *Zarathustra* narrative, the question remains as to how the phenomenon that I am interested in here—of transformative or transgressive monologue—might relate to, or at least depart from, an engagement with Nietzsche's thought.

The closest correlate of such a radical speech act, in Nietzsche's thought, would perhaps be the description of the *Freigeist* in the text "On Truth and Lying in the Extra-Moral Sense," in which a liberated subject is able to directly effect a rupture and reorganization of the framework in which he is embedded.

That immense framework and planking of concepts to which the needy man clings his whole life long in order to preserve himself is nothing but a scaffolding and toy for the most audacious feats of the liberated intellect. And when it smashes this framework to pieces, throws it into confusion, and puts it back together in an ironic fashion, pairing the most alien things and separating the closest, it is demonstrating that it has no need of these makeshifts of indigence and that it will now be guided by intuitions rather than by concepts (2006: 122).

If there were something like a literary representation of what Nietzsche describes here, it might be present in Kafka's novella, which is several times "thrown into confusion" by the re-visionary acts of its characters. Yet I would be reluctant to adduce Nietzsche's notion of the *Freigeist* as a model that fully takes account of the confusing movements of Kafka's novella, and in particular of the strange role of monologue, which (as I will argue) does not tend to the form of heroic individualism in Nietzsche's account of the *Freigeist*. The portion of the story that most clearly posits such "audacious feats" is placed at the beginning of the story's "surreal" second section, where the narrator pushes (riding on the back of his acquaintance) into "the interior of a great, but still unfinished area where it was evening" (61):

Die Landstraße, auf der ich ritt, war steinig und stieg bedeutend, aber gerade das gefiel mir und ich ließ sie noch steiniger und steiler werden.

The country road on which I rode was rocky and steepened significantly, but precisely that pleased me and I let it become even rockier and steeper (BEK 61).

After he has abandoned his acquaintance, the narrator continues:

Weil ich aber als Fußgänger die Anstrengung der bergigen Straße fürchtete, ließ ich den Weg immer flacher werden und sich in der Entfernung endlich zu einem Thale senken.

Because as a pedestrian I feared the strenuousness of the mountainous street, I let the path become ever flatter and sink finally in the distance into a valley (62).

Drawing parallels to Nietzsche's thought, at such moments, becomes irresistible, with the narrator suddenly showcasing an audacious will to power over his surroundings. And yet one can still stress fundamental differences between these moments and (a) Nietzsche's thought and (b) my model of a hypothetical "metamorphic monologue" in Kafka. A compelling reason to *not* read these passages as a moment of Nietzschean intellectual liberation is that, despite their generally fantastic and virtually Promethean poise, they are only a modification of *physical environment* and do not enact a fundamental break away from the basic discursive conditions of first-person narrative. The lines quoted above portray a performative redefinition of the fictional environment in accordance with the authority of the narrator (and to the detriment of the acquaintance, who must suffer this modified landscape). Such moments, where the headstrong narrator redefines the world around him, faithfully correspond to the logic of a narrative prose that allows a single narrator the power to performatively posit details that suit his purposes. The seemingly radical

escape into the mountains, which is frequently read as *the* departure of this novella away from realism, could in fact be seen as an indulgent continuation of the “realist” first section: namely, that this narrative’s construction consists in weaving a web of seemingly concrete details posited from a single quasi-authorial subject-position. This configuration would anyways guarantee a uni-directional and ineluctable functionalization of *every* narrative detail to fulfill the purposes of that single narrator (as happens explicitly in this “ride” section). And thus, for this very same reason, these passages do not correspond to the notion of a radically transformative direct speech introduced at the start of this chapter. The beginning of the second section, as it were, does not redefine the guiding principles of the practice of “realist” first-person narrative established in the first section.

What I have discussed above does not discredit Wagner’s discovery of intertextual links between Nietzsche and Kafka. Rather, it should only highlight that pointing to the epistemic embedding of Kafka’s text cannot fully rationalize or explain the interconnection of narrative devices in this novella. For, while there is a Nietzschean flavor to the narrator’s flight into the mountains, the web of social relations that this flight occurs within surpasses, in its complexity and emotional tenor, the duality of the *Übermensch* and the last man, the great man and the masses, that Zarathustra preaches.<sup>14</sup>

Moving away from Wagner’s biographically substantiated glosses on the novella, toward a more general question about the relationship of Kafka’s text to the question of narration in modernity, I hope to strike upon more durable guiding

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<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the figuration of the animal (the beast of burden into which the acquaintance is transformed during this flight) is notably different from the allegorical typologies of the animal deployed by Zarathustra. While Zarathustra conveys the unconveyable by presenting allegorical fragments of the man-to-come through a crypto-zoological vocabulary, Kafka’s text is about a violent moment of reverse anthropomorphism, where a man is subdued into the role of a horse, and not only in the service of an extended metaphor (i.e. to characterize him) but as a violent part of the struggle between the narrator and the acquaintance.

concepts. In my introduction, I suggested that the goal of this chapter was to locate a drive in Kafka's novella for a kind of direct speech that could flow out of the quotation marks that contain it, and break the boundaries that separate voices within a text. This idea implies a sudden disfiguration and rearrangement of the boundaries of the literary character, and by extension, of the self. At stake here would be the literary representation of a kind of speech that, while spoken by someone, would have the effect of shattering the preconditions for the designation of an individual in prose narrative. The disruptive role of character monologue in the narrative economy of Kafka's novella could, then, be considered in the light of Walter Benjamin's reflections on orality and the novel in his 1936 essay "Der Erzähler" ("The Storyteller"). Here, Benjamin writes that "Die Geburtskammer des Romans ist das Individuum in seiner Einsamkeit" ("The birth-chamber of the novel is the individual in his solitude"; (107). The novel, as the increasingly dominant vessel for the articulation of narrative, dictates that the individual be cut off from oral impartability by the distancing technology of the printed book:

Was den Roman von der Erzählung (und vom Epischen im engeren Sinne) trennt, ist sein wesentliches Angewiesensein auf das Buch. Die Ausbreitung des Romans wird erst mit Erfindung der Buchdruckerkunst möglich. Das mündlich Tradierbare, das Gut der Epik, ist von anderer Beschaffenheit als das, was den Bestand des Romans ausmacht. Es hebt den Roman gegen alle übrigen Formen der Prosadichtung – Märchen, Sage, ja selbst Novelle – ab, daß er aus mündlicher Tradition weder kommt noch in sie eingeht. Vor allem aber gegen das Erzählen. Der Erzähler nimmt, was er erzählt, aus der Erfahrung; aus der eigenen oder berichteten (2007: 107).

What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—

his own or that reported by others (*trans.*1968: 87)

The bounded, collated novel, for Benjamin, has been instrumental in sealing off the individual in a private sphere. This isolation, moreover, makes up one part of an ongoing transformation of social structures in accordance with the development of capitalist forces of production. The *novella*, intriguingly, is counted as one of the prose genres that would not have fully broken away from oral storytelling. One can speculate as to why Benjamin excepts this genre: the novella frequently *stages* oral storytelling, tending to focus, through a written prose narrative, on a shocking or surprising experience that is relayed orally. The novella attempts to *save* the moment of oral transmission where experiences are given and received through the act of telling, even if this *saving* only occurs through a process of formalization and fictionalization. It is worth considering what the role of a transformative orality arising in Kafka's novella might mean in relation to Benjamin's argument. Kafka's novella does not only represent the oral imparting of experience; a special power is imputed to the actual act of telling (the monologue). A speculative (but not yet defensible) hypothesis that one could derive from Benjamin's dialectical history of genre, is that *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* avenges the putatively foundational significance of orality as a medium for narrative by imputing it the power to rearrange the barriers set *in* narrative form *by* print media. This is a questionable proposition, yet it sheds an interesting light on the opposition of print and oral cultures posited by Benjamin. A novella that 'sheds' or 'throws off' the vestiges of traditional realist narrative in hopes of releasing an unmediated direct speech would be interesting insofar as such a work would itself reformulate or transform the print-oral dichotomy. This line of thinking will be pursued, again, toward the end of this chapter, where I will show how Kafka's novella, through its internal proliferation of monologue, redefines the interrelation of

written prose and oral “outpouring,” as it were.

Benjamin’s dialectical approach will remain on the horizon of my close reading of Kafka’s novella, since textual “disruption” (as irreversible change) is difficult to account for in purely formal terms. Nevertheless, I will now closely consider the possibilities and problems of a structuralist approach. The “breaking-open” of a quotation mark, which will be closely analyzed closely in this chapter, leads to the question of whether this novella can be taken account of in structural terms, if its structure appears to be on the threshold of turning inside-out.

Jan Mukařovsky, an early structuralist thinker, provides a flexible vocabulary for articulating the role of monologue in Kafka’s *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*. However, in adopting this vocabulary I will begin to merge the thematic of “escape” manifest on the dramatic level of the text, and the issue of a structural break. How to clarify the relation between the textual structure of the text, and the social thematic “of” the text? Following the insights of the semiotician Yuri Lotman, one can speculate that syntactical questions and thematic questions are at bottom inseparable, as every utterance or text would generate a “world” whose nature (i.e. internal and external boundaries) would be determined by the structural arrangement of signs. Thus, when I say I am interested in how Kafka’s text seems to beckon towards a desire to *live differently*, toward a manner of *socializing* or *directly speaking* that is for the characters entirely *other* to the available set of possibilities, I am not only looking for a *thematic* anomaly. These fictional characters, whose subjectivity within the fictional world is fully a function of the textual configurations that also make their world, are *at bottom, straining to exist in some other text, or in no text at all*. Structuralist vocabulary can help to think through this paradox of a function that dreams *of not being a function*.

Mukařovsky considered a text “a semantic stream” that functions through the

sustenance of a productive tension between static units (individual parts of speech) and the dynamic units that are composed of them. A reductive explanation of this model would equate “static unit” with “word” and “dynamic unit” with “sentence,” but Mukařovsky allows for a greater flexibility in discerning the static from the dynamic. “Static” and “dynamic” are characteristics that are contingent upon one’s location within a text; in proceeding through a text (while reading or writing), individual textual memes of formerly incomplete predicates, become “fixed” as the static premises out of which the subsequent predicates will unfold. “After all, the very sentence that has been completed appears as a static unit in opposition to the semantic dynamicity of the following sentence, just begun” (50). Narrative, as a dynamic “semantic stream,” proceeds from and is embodied in static semantic units laid down earlier in the text. Thus, the relationship between static and dynamic semantic units “is, as is obvious, reciprocal” (51). The narrative stream of a text would be a dynamic unit which “occurs as a gradually realized *context*,” giving its constituent static units (motifs, actions, quoted utterances), their meaning (51). Just as the dynamic unit “reshapes” the static units, the static unit “does not act passively toward context but resists it by exerting pressure through its semantic associations on the *direction* of its semantic intention” (50; my emphasis). In other words, there is a productive tension between static units and the dynamic units to which they are linked. Words locked into completed sentences will continue to suggest and assert themselves as one moves through subsequent sentences. An extended block of quoted dialogue will guide the interpretation of the ongoing stream of narration that embeds this block within itself.

In this sense, one would expect any particle of quoted speech to exert a pressure on the “gradually realized context” of its appearance. It would be impossible for a portion of dialogue embedded in a narrative text to *not* productively contribute to the general meaning of the text. However, what I am interested in looking for in this



chapter is a semantic unit that, through the course of a single delimited utterance—a monologue—could detach itself and cease to participate as a *component* of the semantic stream, instead univocally determining (rejecting, revising) the dynamic context around it. In structural terms, this is impossible: an internally embedded and bounded monologue could not *escape* or *replace* the context of its appearance. Structure is always present to itself, it never goes *away*, so at most it can be *redefined* internally. Thus, what the structuralist model would allow, at most, is a radical and sudden *inversion* in a text, where the textual fabric that appeared to be an unfolding context—the narrative discourse that appears to be an unfolding, dynamic stream—is itself retroactively turned into a static element. In other words, one would look for a moment when a character’s *concluded* monologue, finished and bounded, would fold the dynamic context surrounding it *into itself* as a static element. I am looking, as it were, for an animal that can swallow the world.

This search is motivated by an observation that many of Kafka’s works, the late as well as the early, display a tendency to revise, or forget, narrative memes that have been laid down as fact. It is often as if the text is not available to itself as a record of itself. By suggesting this, I am pushing against a thesis laid down by Malcolm Pasley (the critic who also oversaw the publication of transcribed handwritten editions of Kafka’s writing). Pasley argues, convincingly, that Kafka’s texts are “in ganz besonderem Maße von ihren konkreten Schreibbedingungen abhängig” (“to a very high degree dependent on their concrete conditions of composition”; 106). The creator began without a plan: “ohne jegliche Vorentscheidung über den Handlungsverlauf oder gar über die Figurenausstattung” (“without any pre-decision about the course of the plot or even about the configuration of characters”; 106). Kafka simply marked something arbitrarily onto the page and proceeded by responding only to that mark, using it as a basis and substrate for all

subsequent moments. For Pasley, the procession of Kafka's texts from their first words is a “tastende[r] Vorwärtsgang” (“a feeling-around forward gait”) in which “das Erfundene sich unmittelbar in Schriftzüge verwandelt, welche die Vorstellung laufend fixieren und ihr als konkret Vorhandenes die weitere Richtung weisen” (“that which is created is immediately transformed into lines of writing that fix the imaginary, and direct its further direction as a concretely available material”; 116). The act of writing demands that the first tentative markings become fixed, concretized into the premises of what will follow.

Pasley's thesis is intriguing, but it seems to me that he insists too strongly on the *unidirectionality* of Kafka's narratives. Even though he suggests that the direction of the story is continually (*laufend*) determined, he also insists on a determined endpoint which is unavoidable, and which is revealed through the course of writing, as a “fortschreitend verdeutlichende Richtung” (“progressively clarified direction”). The text is “auf den unausweichlichen Endpunkt hingetrieben” (“driven toward the unavoidable endpoint”; 116). Such an eschatological conception of Kafka's writing glosses over one of the strangest traits of Kafka's prose: frequent shifting of the premises of situation which makes subsequent situations seem entirely separate, merely contiguous with what came before, but linked thematically through the repetition of motifs: the *aber nein* moments where the narrative fact that is “concretely available” on a previous page seems to be fully forgotten or uprooted. What I mean by this is that the improvisational practice of writing that Kafka follows would seem to be more radical, even, than what Pasley describes, in the sense that at each moment there is the possibility not only that a new *future* is being pointed out, but also a new *past* and a new *context* that is incompatible with what came before. Kafka's modernism—his fascination with the *new*—seems to be linked to a continual revision and forgetting of a past, and the positing of a new past.

A notable “Aber nein” moment in Kafka’s late prose initiates in the first pages of *Das Schloß*, where one discovers that K. has begrudgingly left his wife and children to take up temporary employment as a land-surveyor for the castle: “Wenn man wie ich so weit von Frau und Kind reist, dann will man auch etwas heimbringen” (14). But in the subsequent turns of the novel, there is no hint that K. has a home to bring anything back to. Once K. has begun to involve himself in local affairs, and becomes involved with the barmaid Frieda, it appears that this wife and child *have never existed*, and that the biographical past from which K.’s present life unfolds is fundamentally different from the one on the first page of the novel. Such a shifting of narrative premises can be observed, even, in the metamorphic nature of the setting of the same novel, as K. navigates the land between the village and the castle:

So ging er wieder vorwärts, aber es war ein langer Weg. Die Straße nämlich, diese Hauptstraße des Dorfes führte nicht zum Schloßberg, sie führte nur nahe heran, dann aber wie absichtlich bog sie ab und wenn sie sich auch vom Schloß nicht entfernte, so kam sie ihm doch auch nicht näher.

So he went further onward, but it was a long path. The street, namely, this main street of the village, led not to the castle mountain, it lead only closely toward it, but then it turned off and even if it did not distance itself from the castle, it still did not come closer to the castle. (S 19)

In *Das Schloß*, it should be noted, this tendency of the text to revise itself works quite subtly: because of the apparent forward-progression of narrative time, a sense of continuity is constantly effected, even where this continuity is radically subverted. One barely notices, while reading *Das Schloß*, that the road under one’s feet is being rearranged. In the early Kafka, this revisionary impulse is more clearly located in a particular identifiable mode, namely, character monologue, which displays a capacity to invert and rearrange not just individual narrative memes, but to reverse the positions of the structural layers of the narrative.

The term developed for such an inversion, in the field of narratology, is *metalepsis*, conventionally applied to individual moments of transgression, “exceptions” in the construction of a text, and not full and durative redefinitions of textual layers. Originally designating a reversal of cause and effect, the narratological term “metalepsis” was developed by Gérard Genette to describe the transgression of layers in a narrative text: the “intrusion” of a narrator into the course of narrated events, or the passing of a narrated subject into the level of narrative discourse.<sup>15</sup> Monika Fludernik enumerates and summarizes the nature of these transgressions: they involve the “existential crossing of the boundaries between the extradiegetic and the diegetic levels of a narrative or the (intra)diegetic and metadiegetic levels; or, in short, as the move of existants or actants from any hierarchically ordered level into one above or below” (383). Such moments of “crossing,” depending on the rhetoric through which they are articulated, can either *contribute* to the construction of the illusionistic effect of a narrator’s discourse, or *disrupt* this illusionistic effect and foreground the artificiality or fictionality of the narrative. The discipline of narratology, Fludernik points out, rests on the assumption (by the reader and critic) that these layers (the plane of existence where characters dwell, and the one where the author dwells) are distinct, and that their transgression is a momentary lapse that occurs for a particular reason (to either deepen or ironize the immersive effect of storytelling).

These models of *metalepsis* assume, at bottom, that narrative is a practice that is pursued intentionally, by an author, to the end of delivering a particular “effect” to a

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<sup>15</sup> For Genette on *metalepsis*, see *Narrative Discourse* (1983, Cornell University Press), where he writes that the transition between narrative layers is “if not always impossible, at any rate always transgressive” (234). Monika Fludernik’s 2003 speculations (see fn. 16) on *metalepsis* as a broader phenomenon at work in narrative texts, aims to consider whether *metalepsis* might be a *foundational* rather than a *transgressive* moment of a text. This interrelation of the transgressive and the foundational will be dealt with at length in my next chapter on Robert Walser’s *Räuber-roman*.

reader, and that individual moments of metalepsis are deliberately implemented as a supplement to the main body of the narrative. However, after considering recent critical expansions<sup>16</sup> of the term *metalepsis* to cover such phenomena as a narrator's arbitrary decision to "shift" scenes in the middle of narrative action, Fludernik embarks on what she calls a "playful indulgence" (396) where she considers whether metalepsis might not be "a master trope of the narratological imaginary" (392). For instance, Fludernik considers whether free indirect discourse, which appears to blend the voice of a narrator with that of a character, would not, when read consequently, suggest the possibility of an "ontological crossing," where beings on different ontological planes (the fictional and the authorial) can co-exist. And, coming closer to the interests of my study of Kafka, Fludernik raises the question of whether the act of reading itself is not founded upon an affective engagement of the reader (extra-textual agent) with a fictional agent, and is thus made possible *by* blending the fictional and the non-fictional, so that metalepsis in the last analysis would become the precondition for *any* reading of narrative.

If this were true, then the glaring, isolated instances of metalepsis, which one finds in later 20<sup>th</sup> century metafiction, would in fact be a boldface iteration of the relationship that facilitates reading in the first place. Fludernik does not, however, commit to this perspective, since its admission would radically destabilize the practical vocabulary of narratology (i.e. it would make narrative layers technically indistinguishable from one another). Fludernik's speculation, in the end, is to serve as

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<sup>16</sup> Fludernik draws on the work of Brian McHale, "which suggest an extension of the device to a more macrostructural technique affecting entire texts. McHale extends metalepsis in two related directions, in the direction of the reading process and in the direction of overall involvement of the addressee/reader on the story level" (392). Certain involved forms of reading and interpreting, then, would constitute a form of metalepsis, a transgression of layers. Fludernik also considers that metalepsis could be expanded to refer to free indirect discourse, where a narrator's position as the subject of enunciation is mixed with and made indiscernable from the subject whose discourse is being presented (this aligns metalepsis, then, with the "dual voice" theory of free indirect discourse) (395). Each of these speculative propositions of metalepsis begin to recast it as a phenomenon that is responsible for constituting most of the relations—and thus, the sociality—of a text.

a reminder “that the ontology of narratological levels exists only in the mind of readers and critics” (396). These layers, Fludernik argues, “have been erected by recourse to commonsensical realistic scenarios,” and so have been (Fludernik suggests) reinforced by the dimensions of common lived experience (396).

It would be worth asking, however, to what extent such layers are *only* generated by readers and critics, and not by texts themselves. Kafka’s *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* follows a “mock academic arrangement of sections” (Ryan 65) that implies a hierarchical arrangement of the narrative sections, supplementing the punctuation that hierarchically distinguishes the fictional characters’ direct speech from the commentary and constative positings of the narrator. The main sections of interest in this study are, for instance, section “II.3.d” and section “II.4,” each of which has an ostensibly different ontological status: one is a story-within-a-story, and one is the discourse of the primary (the initial and the final) narrator of the entire text. The moments of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* that count as metalepsis would not only violate assumptions imposed from without, by readers and critics, but would call into question the text’s *own* quasi-legal separation of sections and sub-sections. The material integrity of the text (its partitioned structure) would depend on the assurance that metalepsis is a transitory illusion and fundamentally an impossibility. And yet, as I will show in the following study, it is a moment of radical metalepsis that comes to retroactively define the aesthetic ambitions of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*. In other words, Kafka’s text would appear to confer full validity on Fludernik’s playful speculations about metalepsis as *the* precondition of narrative legibility, while at the same time straining to agree with a pragmatic insistence on the necessity of distinguishing layers. For narratology, as well as for Kafka’s novella in its final moments, the idea of a permeating or foundational metalepsis is an embarrassment that would have to be bracketed or covered up. The same goes for the maddening idea

of a monologue that could, as direct speech, literally break through the quotation marks that designate it as direct speech. The quotation mark works as constitutive boundary that participates in the creation of a fictional world. Its severance would bring about a moment where an otherwise unreachable Outside could break into the text, reconfiguring the means by which a fictional “world” is posited.

Because my reading argues the centrality of a collapse of ontological layers in fiction, the question should arise as to *why* I have chosen to use certain traditional literary topoi as criteria for my study (such as narrator, character, dialogue, monologue, desire). For instance, critics such as Deleuze and Guattari (1975) and Joseph Vogl (1992) have conducted panoramic studies of Kafka’s works by assembling typologies and tendencies of this author’s works, without insisting on the separation of each individual text, and (for the most part) without relying on a vocabulary of the individual subject, prioritizing instead recurrent images, practices of seeing, and configurations of the body. The only plausible reason I can adopt for my own delimited study of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is that such readings as Deleuze and Guattari’s and Vogl’s rely on a panoptic survey of Kafka’s work *after it has all been published and read*. Thus, the changes and swerves in literary tradition that set in at the beginning of Kafka’s writing, are lost in a comprehensive retrospective exhibit of *all* Kafka. But *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is intriguing because of its unfolding in time: its initiation of Kafka’s writing practices, the erratic chronological<sup>17</sup> linearity of plotting, and its jarring entry into certain literary traditions. If this one text made any sort of difference in the wider array of Kafka’s writing, however, it would have been through the appropriation of a partly, if also negatively, recognizable code of literary language, and a corresponding set of narrative practices, that preceded Kafka. The critical deterritorialization of Kafka’s corpus, which allows its

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<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari often speak of speed and vectors, but less about irreversible time.

communication and fungibility with non-literary discourses (pre-critical philosophy, subject philosophy, political economy, statistical and legal epistemologies), can occur after *all* Kafka has been read and rearranged into “Kafka’s world,” in which questions of plotting, embedding, beginning and ending cease to be relevant. The retroactive creation of Kafka “museums” must occur in the luxurious plenitude of reading *after* and *above everything*. The wishful premise of my own study is that Kafka’s first extant text still remains to be read.

If *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is an intervention in literary tradition, and not only the first fragment of an expansive discursive “world” shared with subsequent Kafka texts, then it can be speculated what kind of difference this text makes in adopting recognizable tropes from 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. Two significant moments of this story can be reflected backward into the prose of Fyodor Dostoevsky: the *ongoing, frustrated repetition of competition and misunderstanding* and the *monumental, metamorphic monologue*.<sup>18</sup> In order to highlight the particular literary kinships of Kafka’s prose with Dostoevsky’s, one might, quite reductively, draw a distinction between the “early” Dostoevsky (exemplified by the proto-slapstick work *The Double*) and the late Dostoevsky (exemplified by, for instance, *The Brothers Karamazov*). Suspicion of such an intertextual linking would not be entirely a spontaneous figment of the imagination: as the critic Patrick Bridgwater has pointed

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<sup>18</sup> In the only book-length parallel study of Kafka and Dostoevsky (*Kafka and Dostoyevsky. The Shaping of Influence*), W.J. Dodd writes that “the narrative situation in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* has certain fundamental features in common with Dostoyevsky’s use of first-person narrators, and there is also a certain thematic resonance with the early stories on the theme of the ‘Petersburg dreamer’” (198). Dodd moves further to suggest a specific parallel between *Beschreibung* and the story *White Nights*, both of which involve the extended sequences detailing the imaginative projections defensively made by the narrator onto his urban surroundings, “making the city’s topography a fantasy world of his own design, constructed as a defence against a harsh and indifferent reality” (198). Imagination, then, has a role in regulating a distance between the interior of the self and the exterior world. In my own reading of Kafka, I am interested in those moments that do not simply conserve this boundary and distance, but fully and shockingly cut through it: those moments that appear to cite Dostoevsky, but also go beyond the “principles of mimetic realism” that Dodd argues that Dostoevsky “remains true to” (135).



out, the encounter between Kafka's two new acquaintances along the Vltava river in Prague seems to parallel (in *The Double*) "Mr. Golyadkin, Senior's, discovery of his shadow in the guise of Mr. Golyadkin, Junior, as he is leaning against the parapet of the wall beside the river Fontanka in St. Petersburg" (9).

The story of Mr. Golyadkin's bumbling competition with his own *Doppelgänger* is rife with "banana-skin humor" (Dodd 66), following a plot that is fueled by the continual embarrassment of the Senior Mr. Golyadkin at the hands of his charming and socially successful double. The work, as "a repetitive novel" that *doubles* its theme of doubling through formal "repetitiousness" (60) relies not so much on a dramatic tension that builds toward release or revelation, as it does on the "black farce" (66) of witnessing two indistinguishable bodies bicker and bounce against one another in a dynamic urban space, until one of them loses the competition in a moment of radical humiliation and incarceration. And although *The Double* probes the condition of an internally split individual whose insecurities are externalized in a superior version of himself, this inner conflict serves primarily as an occasion for a lengthy satire of social expectations and private desires across the variegated institutional and private spaces of modern Petersburg. In other words, the story *wanders* toward a tragicomic conclusion, but does not aim to stage an intense moment of self-revelation. Its protagonist—recalling the acquaintances in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*—is a "failed orator" and a "scrutinized" object (64). The portions of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* that most closely mirror *The Double* are the ones where nothing happens, or where repeated embarrassment happens.

Intense self-revelation, however, became a hallmark of the later Dostoevsky, where crucial events often take the form of uninterrupted, confessional monologues dealing exhaustively with questions of faith, religious belief and individual freedom. The most famous example of such a monologue would be Ivan Karamazov's story of

*The Grand Inquisitor* and his preceding discourse on *Rebellion*, both of which reflect Ivan's long-incubating move toward a radical agnosticism (or proto-atheism). Ivan delivers these lengthy orations to his brother Alyosha at night, at a secluded restaurant table, under suitably conspiratorial circumstances. Alyosha, as a direct result of having *heard* these lengthy orations, is suddenly compelled to inhabit and recreate the dramatics that occurred *within* them: hearing of how Jesus had kissed the grand inquisitor on the forehead, Alyosha kisses his brother Ivan in the same way (63). As much as Alyosha might attempt to resist the demystifying revelations of his brother's monologue, in its wake he can only respond by *stepping inside* the discourse, and in this sense, he has been fundamentally redefined as an individual by the speech. Dostoevsky's dramatics of monologue often involve an abrupt transformation or conversion experience that is performatively brought about by the oration of a superlatively gifted, or possessed, speaker.

In his early and experimental novella Kafka fashions a story that follows *both* of these ideas of narrative construction: on the one hand, the irritating and partly humorous interpersonal drama that is built around brief punch-lines and ironic turns, and, on the other hand, a kind of writing that stages scenes of intense oration that shake the characters to their core and rearrange the cosmology of their universe. Monologue, in decisive moments of Kafka's novella, breaks into the field of the narrative as metamorphic speech that could immediately color and reshape the surrounding environment.

Kafka's imagined intrusion of monologue (going beyond Dostoevsky's "higher order" realism) occurs, moreover, with a violence that calls into question the basic structuring principles of the narrative, as well as the mechanisms through which speech is contained—bounded, marked off—within the larger semantic stream of the literary work. Indeed, in this chapter I will argue that one of the subtle

accomplishments of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is to push (however haltingly or reluctantly) for a reconceptualization of the way in which textual boundaries are created through punctuation and partitioning.

### *The Cutting Novella*

In what follows, I would like to link back to the question of genre introduced in my brief discussion of Benjamin, and now consider how the problem of textual boundaries in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is linked specifically to Kafka's engagement with a traditional genre, and its associated models of everyday and historical experience.

Some months after reading it aloud for the first time to his friend Max Brod, Kafka writes in his diary two enigmatic sentences in which he declares his intention to fully commit to the work.

Ich werde mich nicht müde werden lassen. Ich werde in meine Novelle hineinspringen und wenn es mir das Gesicht zerschneiden sollte

I will not let myself tire. I will jump into my novella even if it should cut my face apart. (FKH 10)

Kafka's defiant declaration at first offers itself to be read autobiographically, reflecting a concrete personal struggle with fatigue and frustration that is countered by a tireless enthusiasm for the prospect of literary creation. Such a reading would render these sentences basically irrelevant to the study pursued in this chapter. On the other hand, Kafka's statement can be read as the fragment of a nascent poetics. But what would be the poetological significance of a novella that cuts apart the face when jumped into?

Commitment to this traditional literary genre, Kafka suggests, requires that one ignore physiological limitations (tiredness) and enter a space where the basic bodily marker of individuality (my face) may be violently and painfully cut apart. Crossing the boundary into the novella could, Kafka suggests, bring about a traumatic rearrangement of the boundaries of the very writing subject that engendered the novella. Such a self-imposed ultimatum might reflect a stance to literary writing akin to that of Maurice Blanchot (who derives the greater part of his notion of “the work’s space” from Kafka’s own diaries). The cutting-apart of the face that is threatened by entry into the novella would, in this case, mean an entry into that “essential solitude” or interminable space of literature that is entirely other to the world of the everyday, and where things lose their imposed names.

If to write is to surrender to the interminable, the writer who consents to sustain writing’s essence loses the power to say “I.” And so he loses the power to make others say “I.” Thus he can by no means give life to characters whose liberty would be guaranteed by his creative power. The notion of characters, as the traditional form of the novel, is only one of the compromises by which the writer, drawn out of himself by literature in search of its essence, tries to salvage his relations with the world and himself (27).

Kafka’s statement “I will jump into my novella,” as a sentence, would mark the halfway point between one’s conventional power to say “I” and that condition that inheres inside of the novella, where properly speaking no such “I” could be uttered. *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* undeniably stages the regress away from an “I” to a multiplicity of other grammatical positions—as the narrating “I” chronically listens to the monologues of other male interlocutors and cedes his own voice to that of the other, and at a culminating point of the novella, the “I” of the narrator cedes authority to an unspecified “you.” The movement of this regress, understood in tandem with Kafka’s own statement about *jumping in*, would define *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*

(vis-à-vis Blanchot's notion of the work's space) as a threshold work, a work where the face (the recognizable and durable outward topography of the self) will begin to be disfigured. Kafka's poetological statement is, moreover, more specific than Blanchot's as it calls up a specific traditional literary practice, which his *jump* will in some way reiterate and redirect.

What practice specifically? Kafka specifically names the genre of his work, and so his declaration can also be read as an announcement of a project to reproduce and radicalize the mid-length genre of the novella. Kafka conceives of the novella as a genre that consists in a delimited space that can be jumped into—and so, is contiguous with an outside in which the “I” lives. The novella, apparently, is a site of potential violence located directly next door to the everyday, as a portal leading out of it. Kafka tirelessly and boldly jumps into this, his space, raising by association the disturbing question of whether anyone else might accidentally stumble into the novella and suffer a similar fate. This possibility remains palpable insofar as Kafka suggests that he is not going to enter an imaginary space inside the mind, but a site of a transfiguration and literal *de-facement* that will not be strictly speaking “imaginary” (in the sense of being a dream that can be woken up from without leaving a durable trace), but painful and permanent.

The novella, as Kafka imagines it, would appear to actively *generate* violence, and it would do this even to the one who would have professed to demarcate, create and lay claim to it (its author). With this macabre idea, Kafka intervenes in an extended tradition of defining the novella as a genre of threshold, crisis, breach and violence—even if Kafka's own writings necessarily transform the genre into an as yet unheard-of prose form. The novella, Andreas Gailus argues, has since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and in Germany in particular, been principally concerned with the “breach of system” by a sheer force of contingency that intrudes from without (748). Unlike the

*Bildungsroman*, which would seek to integrate moments of the “new” and the contingent into a teleological narrative of self-development, the novella is for Gailus “that literary form that thematizes the problem of symbolically integrating the new and the irregular” (749). The notion of trauma is of central importance to Gailus’ reading of the novella, and he derives much of the vocabulary for his theory from Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; the rupture-event that defines novelistic narrative functions as a correlate to the trauma that pierces the protective shell of the subject and foregrounds the violent contingency out of which that subject would have first originated. As such, the novella is a literary form that imagines a subject that is beyond the pleasure principle, and which is at a basic level moving toward its own dissolution. The novella, as the polar opposite of the *Bildungsroman*, does not provide a personal history of meaningfully interlinked events; here, the event “crashes down on the subject with shocklike violence” (751).

Most importantly for my purposes, Gailus points to a formal correlate of the novella’s thematic pathos: the novella’s narration of shock-events that are “plucked out of history” (751) “finds its structural precipitate in the narrative framing so typical for novellas, which has the function of indicating the context—everyday life, progress, *grand histoire*—to which the story can be contrasted as a crisislike interruption” (752). The paradigmatic novella will not associate the shocking past to the present time through a cleanly chronological progression. Rather, the event, in the novella, must appear as disjoined from the flow of time that has brought about the present. This event can be *indexed* and *recalled* in the present moment, but not in a way that allows it to appear as the logical and linear predecessor of this present moment. For this reason, Gailus suggests, the proper structure of the novella is one that does not historically link occurrences, but juxtaposes them, setting foreign narrative elements against a familiar experiential backdrop.

With Gailus' observation about form, the specific formal characteristic that binds *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* to the tradition of the novella becomes clearer. The tripartite structure of Kafka's novella does mimic, in some respects, the process of traumatic intrusion outlined by Gailus: Section I introduces two young bourgeois characters as they leave a society party in Prague around midnight, placing them on the verge of a continuation of the everyday (as midnight passes into the next day in the perpetual cycle of the everyday). Section II effects a radical rupture in the interpersonal impasse that arises between the two young men, as the narrator darts out on an escape into a spectral space that is contiguous with but radically different from the space of urban life; in this section, numerous tales are told, somewhat in the manner of a traditional novella. Section III returns to the two young characters on their walk through Prague. But does *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* deal with a traumatic intrusion of a shock-event that brings the subject to an experience of its own contingency? It would be possible to say yes, with some layers of qualification.

The middle section of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is repeatedly and habitually interested in the question of whether existence is possible at all; it is subtitled "Beweis dessen, daß es unmöglich ist zu leben" ("Proof that it is impossible to live"; BEK 61). The word "proof," like the tabular structuring of the novella, exudes a certain irony, as it would be a mistake to expect a systematic process of deduction or induction that would lead the reader to an evident truth. Nevertheless, the subtitle promises that the middle section will confront the subject (it could be the reader, the protagonist, the generalized human) with proof of its own impossibility; this would be a radicalized version of what Gailus proposes to be the core impulse of the novella: the subject is traumatized by direct knowledge of the *preconditions* of its existence. Kafka's subtitle takes this impulse a step further, and insists on total negation: life is not simply *contingent* (as the tradition of the novella might dictate) or

even *unlikely*, but rather it is *impossible*. This, at least, is what is promised by the subtitle. And yet the chain of experiences that make up this middle section are most shocking in that they make no lasting difference. Once the narrative of the third section resumes, it would appear that none of the middle section has actually happened, nor is it accessible to the narrator or protagonist as a memory. Reading this final section, then, one is left (potentially paranoically) to search for remaining traces of the shock-experiences of the middle section. In my own reading, I will argue that in this third and final section, the effect of the middle section can be felt through an additional semantic weight that has been added, by these shocking visions, to quotidian utterances and gestures; such spectral “weight” will be the focus of the concluding portion of this chapter. For now, the question remains: how does Kafka’s own set of practices of embedding correspond to his poetological declaration of a genre that does not only *represent*, but *creates* violence?

My effort to outline Kafka’s specific reconfiguration of the novella may be advanced if I move beyond the bounds of Gailus’ compelling definition of the genre, engage briefly in the work of direct comparison. The novellas of Heinrich von Kleist have long been considered to bear a subterranean relationship to Kafka’s own prose, not least because Kleist’s works are also frequently occupied with the enigma of where, if at all, the locus of authority in the narrative universe might lie.<sup>19</sup> In parallel with the reading of Kafka’s *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, I will pay attention to the specific narrative means by which the experience of shock becomes inscribed in a larger framework of historical or everyday time.

Kleist’s novellas utilize gestures of framing, but forgo a straightforward embedding of an interpolated tale within a frame narrative. There is no storyteller

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<sup>19</sup> Kleist also figures heavily in the trajectory and genealogy of the novella introduced by Gailus, which ends with the writings of Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann.



who arrives to relay a series of shocking events to a corporeally present, listening audience (as would be the case in a later realist novella such as Storm's *Schimmelreiter*, where the entire story of the protagonist *is* in fact told orally through the course of one night). Kleist consistently provides "frames" for the violent occurrences by gesturing, often in the final paragraph of the work, to a physical index of this violence within the *space* of a present moment. Novellas such as *Michael Kohlhaas*, *Das Erdbeben in Chili* and *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo* end with a putatively factual orientation of the stream of narrated events within historical time. The final sentence of the revenge-story *Michael Kohlhaas*—several lines after the execution of the eponymous protagonist is narrated—reads:

Der Kurfürst von Sachsen kam bald darauf, zerrissen an Leib und Seele, nach Dresden zurück, wo man das Weitere in der Geschichte nachlesen muß. Vom Kohlhaas aber haben noch im vergangenen Jahrhundert, im Mecklenburgischen, einige frohe und rüstige Nachkommen gelebt.

The elector of Saxony returned soon thereafter, torn in body and soul, to Dresden, where one must read the further events in history. Of Kohlhaas, however, there lived still in the past century, in the Mecklenburg lands, some happy and lusty descendents. (103)

The narrator locates two possible threads of continuation for the story of Kohlhaas: (1) chronicled "history," broadly and vaguely defined so that the continuation of Kohlhaas' story post-mortem would potentially encompass all subsequent recorded events; (2) a somewhat less vague promise that, as recently as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some living persons were indebted to Kohlhaas for their "happy and lusty" existence in Mecklenburg. This conclusion irritates (in the German sense of *irritieren*) in that the indexes it provides result a diffusion of Kohlhaas' story into the present; it is both *everywhere*, and perhaps hardly anywhere at all. This embedding gesture, while relying in its delivery on the assumption of historical fact, nevertheless

behaves as a spectral question mark, added as a coda onto the end of the novella.

The record of loss in *The Earthquake in Chile* functions less in accordance with the logic of the factual chronicle, extending the effects of the narrated violence into the ongoing and uncertain development of an individual family (and its constitutive members). The novella concludes by focusing the narrative gaze on the face of the child of the slaughtered protagonists, who has since been adopted by their surviving friends, possibly serving as a resitutation or replacement for their own murdered child. The concluding lines of the story suggest a wavering between a persistent trauma and a return to domestic normality:

Don Fernando und Donna Elvire nahmen hierauf den kleinen Fremdling zum Pflegesohn an; und wenn Don Fernando Philippen mit Juan verglich, und wie er beide erworben hatte, so war es ihm fast, als müßt er sich freuen.

Don Fernando and Donna Elvire thereupon took on the little stranger on as a foster son; and when Don Fernando compared Philippe with Juan, and how he had acquired both of them, it was almost as if he would have to be happy (159)

The ending is suspended between a vanished traumatic past and an unrealized future. Focusing on the continuation of social reproduction in the wake of extreme violence, Kleist's ending to *Das Erdbeben in Chili* considers how past violence is, or is not, preserved in the markings of the face—but does not draw any definitive conclusions about this possibility, focusing instead on the discontinuity of emotional experience: comparing the face of his foster son to that of his dead son, it is *as if* he would have to be happy. The novella's closing glimpse of the foster son's face remains, in accordance with Gailus' theory, a persistent trauma or "unresolved experience" (Baer 21). The reckoning with this unresolved stream of experiences is localized in the face, as a site of memory. Evading narrative closure, Kleist instead allows the past story to continue as an index located spatially *somewhere*. Such a

strategy of conclusion is more exhaustively developed in the final sentence of the novella *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*, which ends with the ominous assurance that, four years after the death of the white, Swiss figure of identification Gustav Strömli during the Haitian revolution, a small memorial to Gustav could still be found under the bushes of the garden on his cousin's estate. The events that have transpired have, in the end, been trans-substantiated into a material trace that can be found, barely hidden away, in "our" present world:

Herr Strömli kaufte sich daselbst mit dem Rest seines kleinen Vermögens, in der Gegend des Rigi, an; und noch im Jahr 1807 war unter den Büschen seines Gartens das Denkmal zu sehen, das er Gustav, seinem Vetter, und der Verlobten desselben, der treuen Toni, hatte setzen lassen.

Herr Strömli acquired it with the rest of his small wealth, in the region of the Rigi; and still in the year 1807 there was to be seen, under the small bushes of his garden, the memorial that he had put there to commemorate Gustav, his cousin, and his fiancé Toni (195).

As Gailus writes, "the novelistic narrative presents itself explicitly as an isolated and limited interruption" (751). The rhetorical construction of an "isolated event," in Kleist, involves the localization of the trace of violence to a particular site: to the unnamed inhabitants of a specific geographical region, to the face of a silent character, or to a memorial hidden at ground level under the bushes of a garden. The unheard-of events that have transpired are shown to belong to the same ontological layer as the everyday, but they persist only as faint traces. In Kleist, the violent event haunts, but is still (insofar as this is possible) confined to the realm of an irretrievable past. As Gailus argues, the novella's central event is not (as in the *Bildungsroman*) functionalized and recuperated within a redeeming narrative; it is, however, drowned under the cumulative facts of the present. Overgrown with bushes (as in *St. Domingo*), it is interbred into the general population (as in *Kohlhaas*). While Kleist

does not attempt to provide closure on these events, his rhetoric of conclusion habitually reframes the experience of violence within another, ongoing realm of historical experience (chronicle, family history, history of inherited private property). These attempts at re-framing remain, as I have written, irritating, yet they also serve to insulate from a direct involvement with the events depicted; it is possible, but unlikely, that these faint traces will come to directly affect the reader. Each concluding gesture of Kleist's novellas *promise* this, insofar as they aim to provide a broader frame in which to consider these isolated occurrences.

Kafka's novella, in contrast to Kleist's, is written on the other side of a formalization, through realism, of the articulation of time in narrative. In other words, Kafka's prose emerges after an exhaustive labor to establish the movement of the *everyday* in narrative prose. The narrative of Kafka's novella models itself as an insertion into a firmly regimented everyday. The narrator describes his life thus: "Eine in ihrer Natürlichkeit grenzenlose Lebensweise. Den Tag über im Amt, Abends in Gesellschaft, in der Nacht auf den Gassen und nichts übers Maß" ("A way of life boundless in its naturalness. The day through in the administrative office, evenings in society, in the night in the streets and nothing above measure"; 50). Kafka's novella does not, as might be expected, interrupt this "natural" way of life and its cycle of time by staging an event of shocking physical violence in the context of the protagonist's everyday life (though the novella contains, to be sure, moments of physical violence), such as the breaking-in of an earthquake or a revolutionary uprising. Rather, Kafka's novella thinks through ways in which familiar communicative acts and interlocutions could potentially serve as sites of radical transformation and cataclysmic disruption. Even tropes such as "the polite question" and the "formal address" are recast, by the end of the novella, as an *impulse* or *cause* of a jarring rupture of the fabric of a naturalized reality.

In Kafka's poetological statement on the "cutting" novella, he anxiously suggests that the novella, as a demarcated region of language, has the potential to cause transformative violence. Already with this statement, Kafka turns the novella inside out: rather than representing shocking events, it causes them. The inner thematic content and formal tensions of the novella are externalized, insofar as they *draw in* and *lacerate* the subject that would open onto them. It is telling, then that in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, a primary marker for the isolation of language from a surrounding environment—the quotation mark—has ceased to function. The work aims to transfigure the very means by which framing can occur.

In order to stage this transfiguration, Kafka's narrative first establishes a flow of time that mirrors the ceaseless forward movement of the "natural" everyday: a tightly regimented past tense, that creates and sustains the impasse that inheres between the pairs of protagonist(s) and acquaintance(s) in the story.

### ***Construction of an Impasse***

*Fleeting, frustrating, uneventful*: the preface to this analysis, in describing Kafka's novella, heavily relied on a vocabulary of disappointment and unfulfilled agitation. Can this idea of the text's intolerability be substantiated through analysis? What are the structural features that assure the continuation of a deadlock?

In *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, each instance of address and response blatantly fails to respond to whatever utterances and gestures came before it. When the acquaintance attempts to embrace the narrator, the narrator devises a response that avoids answering the affections of the other:

Da umarmte er mich, küßte meine Kleider und stieß mit seinem Kopf gegen meinen Leib.

Ich sagte: »Ja, ja. Ich glaube das. Ich zweifle nicht« und dabei zwickte ich ihn mit meinen Fingern soweit er sie freiließ in seine Waden. Aber er spürte es nicht.

Then he embraced me, kissed my clothes and thrust his head against my body. I said, “Yes, yes. I believe that. I don’t doubt it” and with that I pinched him with my fingers into his calves, insofar as he let them free. But he did not feel it (BEK 60).

The scene is continually driven forward through tightly orchestrated sequences of “responses taken out of context” (Theisen 2006: 548). Earlier on the walk, the narrator’s decision to go home is “agreed with” through refutation:

»Ja, Sie haben recht, wir werden nachhause gehn, es ist spät und morgen früh habe ich Amt [...].« [...] Er aber gieng lächelnd auf meine Redeweise ein: »Ja, Sie haben Recht, eine solche Nacht will nicht im Bette verschlafen sein [...].«

“Yes, you’re right, we will go home, it is late and tomorrow morning I have work [...]” [...] He however responded, smiling, to my manner of speaking: “Yes, you are right, such a night doesn’t want to be slept through in bed [...]” (BEK 52)

The inconclusiveness of each interaction guides the onward movement of the pair, which is locked in a recycling of the same, continually self-ironizing, communicative structure.

In later Kafka, a feeling of *inescapability* is evoked through the claustrophobic images of a bureaucratic, institutional authority in *Der Proceß* and *Das Schloß* that is “always next door” (Campe 2004: 206). But *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* creates its *inescapable situation* by other means: through the regimentation, by the narrative voice, of a ceaseless and unidirectional flow of quotidian time. The story is not told in years, days or even hours, but in through the highly detailed and apparently fluid progression of time that is not punctuated by any ellipses, but which moves without transition from one moment to the next. Kafka’s characters are always, as it were,

“clocked in,” never given a moment of privacy.

Kafka employs an approach to narrative time reminiscent of the one developed by Dostoevsky, where the experience of an entire night is exhaustively recorded as a chain of events not linked causally, but by their side-by-side existence within a single delimited night: one thinks, for instance, of Dmitri Karamazov’s delirious night of gambling that is recorded, as it were, without pause, up until the break of morning when he is arrested for the murder of his father. Or there are the moments in *The Possessed* that read thus:

However, the whole scene did not last more than about ten seconds.  
Still, a great deal happened in those ten seconds (211)

Dostoevsky exploits such minute time frames to stage abrupt transformations, seizures, deep realizations, and scandalous uproar. Kafka, on the other hand, allows the first section of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* to fill an unbroken span of time with an inconclusive back-and-forth of walking, argument, bodily collision and diversion. For Gailus, the novella earns its generic designation when it stages an *interruption* of the regular flow of time with a shock-event. Kafka’s narrative style, for the first portion of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, labors to establish the impression that *no* event could interrupt this densely filled-out time. Isolating a passage from the first section of the novella, one sees how causal and temporal connectors bind together utterances and gestures into a series of near-simultaneous occurrences.

Er hielt sich zuerst die Ohren zu, dann schüttelte er freundlich dankend meine rechte Hand. Die muß sich kalt angefühlt haben, denn er ließ sie gleich los und sagte: »Ihre Hand ist sehr kalt, die Lippen des Stubenmädchens waren wärmer, o ja.« Ich nickte verständig. Während ich aber den lieben Gott bat, mit Standhaftigkeit zu geben, sagte ich: [...].

He at first held shut his ears, then he shook, thanking me in a friendly manner,

my hand. It must have felt cold, for he let it go right away and said: “Your hand is very cold, the lips of the parlor maid were warmer, o yes.” I nodded understandingly. While I however begged dear god to give me steadfastness, I said: [...] (BEK 51).

The positions of ears, hands, lips and necks are tied together as if with strings. Gestures of attraction are answered with gestures of repulsion, so that, to quote Schopenhauer’s theory of politeness (which will be discussed later in greater detail), a “middle distance” is continually restored, where hands do not remain clasped together and neither character effectively and lastingly fixes the attention of his interlocutor. In other words, the implicit thematic that is being handled in this section is that of an inhibition *qua* captivity of the self that is produced through a particular model of time. The fascination with *inescapability*, formalized in Kafka’s extant “institution” novels (Campe 2005) of “the court” and “the castle,” is here explored in a depiction of the minutiae of inhibited social interaction. The “hopelessness” of Kafka’s “creatures” is subtly inscribed in a nascent form: the hopelessness of the social creature that cannot escape from the strictures of the narrated bourgeois everyday or everynight (Benjamin 413).

In a recent study of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, Arne Höcker has applied the notion of *Verfahren* to take account of the forward development of Kafka’s narrative. The text continually attempts, Höcker argues, to establish a “theatrical order” that would allow the distanced observation of a dramatic scene from afar, and thus the proper narrative of an individual life-story. The impasse that inheres between the narrator and the acquaintance, for Höcker, is related to a habitual inability, on the part of the narrator, to establish a proper distance from his object of observation. The tight and repetitive exchange of gazes and gestures that inheres between the acquaintances is, in fact, related to the problematic of establishing a vantage point from which to narrate occurrences: “Der Spaziergang mit dem Bekannten inszeniert sich als ein Spiel



von Blicken und ihren Deutungen, als ein unaufhörliches sich ins Verhältnis setzen” (“The walk with the acquaintance is staged as a play of gazes and their interpretations, as an unending setting-oneself-into-relation”; 238). Höcker’s arguments about the text’s unceasing procedural striving toward a particular model narrative observation is, in any case, motivated by the assumption of a generic paradigm different from the one assumed in this analysis; namely, Höcker considers how *Beschreibung* works as an unsuccessful attempt at a *novel*; Kafka’s first novella tries but fails to establish the conditions from which a biographical narrative of an individual human subject could emerge. As a consequence of this approach, Höcker sees the novella’s middle section as a total capitulation of the narrative perspective to an indulgent and surreal fantasy.

I, however, am interested in how the “unaufhörliches sich ins Verhältnis setzen” (“an unending setting-oneself-into-relation”), which Höcker so concisely describes, is not simply *symptomatic* of a failed attempt at establishing a literary procedure. Rather, the habitual recycling of a perpetual non-relationality between male characters could be seen as a careful fabrication, by Kafka’s novella, of a pseudo-natural experience of the everyday as a realm of unbridgeable distance between selves, and of a non-transcendable alienation of the individual subject. This fabricated image of urban existence is rendered with such tightness and homogeneity as to produce a claustrophobia of narrative pacing that is comparable to the inescapable geographies of time and space drawn by Kafka in his more characteristically “Kafkaesque” prose, where the “gates” and “fences” imposed by strict narrative structuring are literalized as images within a vivid specular narrative of pursuit, entrapment, and incarceration.

### *Time and Captivity in “The Knock on the Palace Door”*

Elsewhere in the *Oktavhefte*, the early-career notebooks in which *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is inscribed, Kafka develops a narrative pacing that chains occurrences together in such tight and fast succession that there emerges an impression of *simultaneity* that troubles the possibility of linear time. In the fragment known as *Der Schlag ans Hoftor* this compression of time is (unlike *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* with its persistent indecision) used to figure a narrative that moves toward a *decision*, of an incomprehensibly fast process of crime, judgment, and punishment that fills up time to such a degree as to qualify as “sublime,” exceeding the subject’s powers of comprehension of time. “Acceleration” barely captures the leaping movement of the fragment’s first paragraph, which begins with a pair of brother and sister walking along a country road, and coming upon a palace door. At first, it is not even clear whether the sister has knocked at the door or not: “Ich weiß nicht, schlug sie aus Mutwillen ans Tor, oder in Zerstretheit oder drohte nur mit der Faust und schlug gar nicht” (“I don’t know, did she knock out on the door out of mischief, or in distraction or did she only threaten with her fist and not knock at all”; CM 83). Three potential actions are compressed into a single moment, and from here onward, the repercussions of the (possibly only hypothetical) knock arrive with such speed that each new event appears to reconfigure the back-story out of which it unfolded, since a chronological succession of events in this manner is almost unthinkable).

Hundert Schritte weiter an der nach links sich wendenden Landstraße begann ein Dorf. Wir kannten es nicht, aber *gleich* aus dem ersten Haus kamen Leute hervor und winkten uns, freundschaftlich, aber warnend, selber erschrocken, gebückt vor Schrecken.

A hundred steps further on the country road, which bent to the left, began a village. We did know know it, but *already* out of the first house people came and waved at us, friendly but warning, themselves frightened, stooping from fear. (84)

Their arrival is abrupt; the inhabitants emerge immediately (*gleich*) and within one sentence are transformed from friendly bearers of a waved warning into figures hunched and deformed with horror. The inquisitors arrive from far away in the landscape immediately, more rapidly than the knowledge of the knock traveled from the palace to the village:

Die Hofbesitzer werden uns klagen, *gleich* werde die Untersuchung beginnen. [...] Alle blickten wir zum Hof zurück, so wie man eine ferne Rauchwolke beobachtet und auf die Flamme wartet. Und wirklich, bald sahen wir Reiter ins weit offene Hoftor einreiten, Staub erhob sich, verhüllte alles, nur die Spitzen der hohen Lanzen blitzten. Und *kaum* war die Truppe im Hof verschwunden schien sie *gleich* die Pferde gewendet zu haben und war auf dem Weg zu uns

The owner of the estate will accuse us, the investigation will begin *immediately*. [...] All of us looked back to the palace, as one observes a distant cloud of smoke and awaits the flame. And really, soon we saw riders riding into the palace door. Dust lifted, enshrouded everything, only the points of the high lances glinted. And *hardly* had the troop disappeared into the estate than they seemed *already* to have turned their horses and were on their way to us (84; my emphasis).

The usage of *gleich* in this passage shifts; first it expresses immanence, finally it acts as a fracture of time, which allows actions to occur before they should be able to. The *gleich* at the beginning of this passage seems to mean “very soon” because the discourse is in the future tense and is in indirect speech, making it a rhetorical device of the voice speaking to the *ich*. The two actions (the accusation by the *Hofbesitzer*, and the beginning of the investigation) are paratactically linked by a comma: either one could happen equally soon. The *gleich* here could just be a form of expression;

the investigation has presumably not begun yet, nor has the *Hofbesitzer* accused yet. But the *gleich* in the last sentence marks a movement so fast as to be impossible. Immediately at the moment of the troop's disappearance, the *ich* can see the riders turning towards the village. This is no longer an acceleration of movement, with moments arriving in quick succession. Now, moments which would need to happen one after the other (disappearance and reappearance) appear to happen at exactly the same time, or even in reverse order; one could say paradoxically that the troop reappears before it disappears.

Whereas the later Kafka's density of time produce an effect of horror, the earliest Kafka, instead, frustrates perpetually with its repeated establishment and abolishment of inter-character relationships that is, if not "intentional," then nevertheless productive of a particular effect. *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, as it moves into its second section, becomes increasingly marked by the frustrations of a unidirectional narrative: the past-tense voice of an unhappy consciousness who continually attempts to set up a durable bond with something or someone beyond itself. One could say that the narrative mechanics of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* are fueled by an eternally disappointed erotic drive, or more generally, a drive toward communing and fusion.

### ***Encounter and Alienation***

Most readings of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* emphasize the relative irreality of the story's middle section, where the narrator attempts an escape from the claustrophobic story of his nocturnal walk with the "acquaintance". The section is seen, cumulatively, as an internal fantasy that is self-evidently of another ontological status than the scenes of the first section: in short, it *is not*, whereas the first and third

parts of the story *are*.<sup>20</sup> As I intimated in an earlier portion of this chapter (when explicating a possible link to Nietzsche), I am interested in considering this middle section—or at least, large swaths of it—as a logical (according to the text) continuation of the putatively realist first section. In doing this I am not simply attempting to secure a defiant or contrarian reading of an endlessly difficult text, but rather, emphasizing the way in which a certain thematic—and a certain model of consciousness—is carried across the partition from the first to the second section. Each of the next sections will examine changing patterns of address, recognition, and response that, across Kafka’s novella, seek and fail to generate and maintain a

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<sup>20</sup> There have been numerous critical attempts to “assemble” *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* into a sensible whole, most of which proceed from the assumption that that middle section of the story is a *dream* that takes place *inside the protagonist’s mind*. In 1962 J.A. Asher attempted a “structural analysis” of Kafka’s stories which located “three clearly defined parts” in every work: “(1) 'normal' beginning, (2) turning-point, and (3) dreamlike ending” (47). The virtue of this model is that it points out that the ending of the story does not proceed from the terms of the beginning, but rather from a point of breakage somewhere in the story. Asher claims that this turning-point “consists of a brief and unobtrusive indication, on the author’s part, that the hero has become mentally distracted, or has fallen asleep, or—less commonly—has become physically exhausted” (48). In the *Strafkolonie*, for instance, the protagonist is overcome by intense heat, making the last thirty pages “completely dreamlike” (48). *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* recedes into fantasy because the protagonist has suffered a concussion. More recently, Jost Schillemeit has made the disclaimer that one should not expect to grasp the text as “allzu »einheitlich«,” because *Fassung A* of *Beschreibung* is composed of several texts which were not originally intended to be forced together (108). But he sees that Kafka resolves this problem—retroactively—by making some events take place externally, some internally. Section I takes place in the outer, real world; while section II takes place “within” the protagonist as dream-sequences distinct from the “external” narrative which runs constantly through the story, but is temporarily covered up by the inner narrative. “Die Geschichte vom Spaziergang auf den Laurenziberg wird nicht etwa abgebrochen oder in eine andere verwandelt (wie man gemeint hat); sie geht vielmehr weiter, aber gleichsam hinter der Szene oder, unbildlich gesprochen, jenseits des Horizonts der Erzählung, weil jenseits des Horizonts der Hauptfigur, die sich nämlich, im Augenblick des Übergangs vom ersten zum zweiten Kapitel, sozusagen in zwei Teile spaltet: einen äußeren, der weiter mit dem »Bekanntem« auf den Laurenziberg geht, und einen inneren, der sich in seine Innenwelt zurückzieht und hier seinen eigenen Vergnügungen, seinen Gedanken und Phantasien, nachgeht und sich auf diese Weise »belustigt«, nachdem er schon einige Zeit vorher angefangen hatte” (110). At another moment, Schillemeit, suggests that all the texts which make up this “inner play” are all linked by the theme *von der Unmöglichkeit, zu leben*. Another resolution of the fragmentary nature of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is found in Barbara Neymeyr’s 2004 book *Konstruktion des Phantastischen*, the text is interpreted as an attempt to negotiate problems of identity and fragmentation common to philosophical discourse of Kafka’s time. In this case, “inner” processes are projected onto the outer world.□ The morphing landscapes are actually the projected inner psychological state of the protagonist. Again, everything revolves around a coherent individual, whose identity is fragmented but who is nonetheless said to take part in the same extended psychological process.

particular sociality or relationality. Uninterrupted interpolated monologue is one such mode that is central to my analysis, but first I will consider the other sites of linguistic and affective exchange that apparently perpetuate the impasses (the *frustrated and perpetually asymmetrical pairings*) of the novella.

I will venture, now, into the middle section of the novella. The two acquaintances, having decided to undertake a walk together to the Laurenziberg, have several times converged and diverged as they have approached the river and crossed the Charles Bridge, falling together in an embrace on the bridge railing after the narrator briefly collapsed in a dizzy spell. As the novella transitions into its second section, the narrator appears to be searching for possible escape routes from the deadlock with the acquaintance, toward a more definitive establishment of a relationship—a transition from mere *acquaintance* to a total involvement with, or severance from the interlocutor.

### *Muteness and Abuse*

The first sentence of “ride,” the first part of the novella’s middle section, where the narrator escapes into the mountains:

Schon sprang ich mit ungewohnter Geschicklichkeit meinem Bekannten auf die Schultern und brachte ihn dadurch, daß ich meine Fäuste in seinen Rücken stieß in einen leichten Trab.

Already I jumped with unfamiliar dexterity onto my acquaintance’s shoulders and brought him into an easy trot by digging my fists into his back. (BEK 61)

Besides the jarring, rapid change of scene that occurs when the narrator jumps onto the back of his acquaintance and brutally rides him into an “unfinished” mountainous landscape, a slightly less noticeable shift from the first to the second is

the vocal silence that fills this new, unfinished land of mountains. From the beginning of the ride, neither character speaks: actions are not provoked by an exchange of speech, of understanding, reflection and response, but as an automatic reflex: “Sobald mein Bekannter stolperte, riß ich ihn an seinen Haaren in die Höhe und sobald der seufzte, boxte ich ihn in den Kopf” (“As soon as my acquaintance stumbled, I ripped upward him by his hair and as soon as he sighed, I boxed him on the head”; 61). The marionette-like guidance of the body in the previous section (where each spoken phrase and gesture instantly provoked another) is here intensified as actual violent coercion. Rather than being filtered through speech, impulses are actualized in physical force without mediation.

Such a configuration, as much as it sets him in an apparently dominant position, hardly “frees” the narrator from the claustrophobia and constraint of the first section; now, more than ever before, he appears as a function of a deterministic web of causes and effects with no intervening consciousness: *as soon* the acquaintance acts, he acts. This mode of interaction proves to be sustainable, as it quickly results in the wounding and abandonment of the acquaintance, who is left to lie at the side of the trail. This transformation of the bourgeois social pairing of *acquaintanceship* into the debasement of physical domination and slavery quickly leaves the narrator alone in an unpopulated world. The narrator’s unhappy consciousness<sup>21</sup> persists, culminating,

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<sup>21</sup> I borrow, somewhat riskily, the term “unhappy consciousness” from Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, where it is used as descriptive term for a perpetually split consciousness, in which two separate modes of consciousness continually wish and attempt to “have” the other without achieving synthesis and unity. “Unhappy consciousness,” for me, takes purchase on the repeated troubled attempts of the primary narrative perspective to bond with, imbibe, enjoin with the consciousness of the interlocutor (1998: 134). It is not my intent to suggest, however, that the particular drives to sociality in Kafka’s novella are part of broader process of spirit’s progress toward self-consciousness, though it could be speculated that a particular fascination (or obsession) with doubling in German literature literature has to do with the dissemination and assimilation, over time, of ideas of the dialectic into the literary idiom. Nietzsche’s various models of “types” in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben in Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (1874)—while the philosopher is not in the least interested in developing a dialectical system—do present a variety of modes of “unhappy consciousness,” of the subject who attempts to assimilate history into its worldview without succeeding.

after a few pages of playful wandering, in the admission: “Mich schmerzte mein Herz, denn jetzt schien es unmöglich aus meinem Leiden hinauszukommen. Schon wollte ich umkehren, um diese Gegend zu verlassen und in meine frühere Lebensart zurückzukehren” (“My heart hurt, for now it seemed impossible to escape my suffering. I already wanted to turn round to leave this area and return to my earlier way of life”; 65). The escape has failed, and another attempt at interlocution follows.

### *Diatribes and Praise*

Literally in the next sentence, the anguish of the unhappy consciousness that cannot return to its earlier state is interrupted by the appearance of the fat man whose sprawling monologue will in time play a crucial role in redirecting the thematic thrust and structural organization of the novella as a text. The narrator does not speak to the fat man, but closely watches him as he is born across a river on a large stretcher (sitting “in orientalischer Haltung”) by four slaves (“in an oriental bearing”; BEK 65). After an extended silence that began with the break into the second section of the novella, speech now returns to the narrator’s environment, with the fat man reciting an address to the landscape around him, which appears to be part of a repetitious and exhausting ritual: “Nachdem er diese Lobpreise zehnmal laut ausgerufen hatte unter einigem demüthigen Rücken seines Körpers, ließ er seinen Kopf sinken” (“After he had called out this declaration of praise loudly ten times, he let his head sink”; 67). The individual portions of this address, which alternate between praise and blame, are directed at different natural entities: the mountain, the flower, the grass, the river. The fat man initiates his speech by declaring that the landscape bothers him in his thoughts: “sie ist schön und will deshalb betrachtet sein” (“it is beautiful and therefore wants to be observed”; 66). The fat man emphasizes that each of these entities exerts



a palpable influence on the mind and body: the mountain must be praised, since it has a fondness for the “Brei unserer Gehirne” (“mash of our brains”) and the pink of the flower makes his soul happy (67).

Witnessing this ritualized engagement with the object world, the narrator is presented with a mode of linguistic authority that seems to function differently from his own utterances. The fat man’s language appears as a vehicle for the direct interaction of thought with the world of things—the fat man posits the existence of things not by describing them or performatively asserting their existence; rather, the fat man *interpellates* these things as linguistic subjects who become observable by being spoken to. Here, as in the previous scene, Kafka’s text is dreaming up alternate ways of interrelating subjectivity and language: first, the narrator reported on how he mutely brutalized his acquaintance, and now he witnesses how the fat man holds the world in place by speaking directly to it. The orientalist, exoticist tincture of the scene, however, suggests that the fat man’s ability to relate to the landscape consists in an acquired, privileged practice or wisdom that would be inaccessible to the narrator; it is a way of speaking that he would have to learn. His curiosity about the fat man’s bearing toward the world is, however, what initially leads to the formation of a bond between the two men, who have not yet exchanged words—in fact, the narrator will never utter a word *to* the fat man, who speaks only in monologue. The narrator describes the setup of the scene in which he will bear witness to the fat man’s monologue:

Ich kroch rasch die Böschung wieder hinauf, um auf dem Weg den Dicken begleiten zu können, denn wahrhaftig ich liebte ihn. Und vielleicht konnte ich etwas erfahren über die Gefährlichkeit dieses scheinbar sichern Landes.

I quickly crawled up the the bank in order to be able to accompany the fat man on the path, for truly I loved him. And perhaps I could find out something about the dangerousness of this ostensibly firm land (69).

This situation is then paused, as the fat man begins his monologue; it is endowed with meaning retroactively, as I will explain in a further section. For now, one notices an emergent structure of repetition: the unhappy consciousness that is a function of the past-tense narration continually dreams different modes of relating to an other entity outside itself.

### *Public Prayer*

The fat man, speaking as he floats down the river whose praises he has just finished singing, begins telling the story of his encounter, in a past time of his life, with a praying man (in the German it is *der Beter* but I will refer to him here, following Rolf Goebel, as the *worshiper*) with whom he became acquainted. This story (titled as a *Gespräch*, conversation), which clearly takes place in a setting of urban modernity not unlike the one the narrator had emerged into the mountains from, initiates by describing a circulation of gazes and observations.<sup>22</sup> “Es gab eine Zeit, in der ich Tag um Tag in eine Kirche gieng, denn ein Mädchen in das ich mich verliebt hatte betete dort kniend eine halbe Stunde am Abend, unterdessen ich sie in Ruhe

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<sup>22</sup> In *Ort der Gewalt* (1992) Joseph Vogl pursues a Foucault-inspired reading of Kafka's cumulative works, and sees the overarching tendency of all *seeing* and *reflection* in Kafka as a “pseudo-mimesis,” whereby each act of seeing, every instantiation of a gaze, leads to a doubling of reality which is never identical to itself. Through regimented self-observation, every subject finds itself repeatedly split and scattered into a myriad of irreconcilable reflections: everything act of seeing in Kafka contributes to the expansion and reproduction of a panoptic governmentality or a governmental panopticon. When I speak of a “circulation of gazes,” I do not intend to make a general statement about how seeing functions in Kafka in general, since I am not convinced that Kafka's works are of such a homogeneity that one could create a comprehensive, panoramic catalog of what seeing means cross-textually in Kafka's writing (moreover, it seems that Vogl's idea of a continually split, continually non-self-identical but eternally self-observing grammatical subject, could actually be seen as a generalizable structural fact of any novelistic discourse, and could be found in any piece of modern prose fiction: in narrative *she* and *she* are never identical as they are spread across a syntactic plain and a virtual temporal axis). In Kafka's early novella, in any case, I am interested in the circulation of gazes as it participates in a gradually metamorphosing problematic of social affinity and linguistic address.

betrachten konnte” (“There was a time when I went into a church day after day, for a girl in whom I had fallen in love prayed there kneeling for a half hour in the evening, during which time I could observe her in peace”; BEK 70). The fat man furtively spies on the girl, who herself remains a silent non-subject; this periodic non-relation of the gazing man and the praying girl continues uninterrupted until one day the girl does not come, and instead the fat man finds himself looking “unwillingly” at a young man, “der sich mit seiner ganzen magern Gestalt auf den Boden geworfen hatte. Von Zeit zu Zeit packte er mit der ganzen Kraft seines Körpers seinen Schädel und schmetterte ihn seufzend in seine Handflächen, die auf den Steinen auflagen” (“who had thrown himself with his very thin figure onto the floor. From time to time he grabbed, with all the force of his body, his skull and smashed it, sighing, into the palms of his hands, which lay upon the stones”; 70). Here, as in the frame narrative, a bystander witnesses a puzzling ritual whose full internal logic eludes (and in this case, irritates) him. It appears, however, that the worshipper’s ritual is in fact intentionally directed to external viewers:

In der Kirche waren nur einige alte Weiber, die oft ihr eingewickelter Köpfehen mit seitlicher Neigung drehten, um nach dem Betenden hinzusehen. Diese Aufmerksamkeit schien ihn glücklich zu machen, denn vor jedem seiner Ausbrüche ließ er seine Augen umdrehn, ob die zuschauenden Leute zahlreich waren.

In the church there were only a few old women, who often turned their little wrapped-up heads with a sideways nod, in order to look at the praying man. This attention seemed to make him happy, for after each of his outbreaks he let his eyes turn around, to see whether the people looking on were many (70).

Irritated and on the verge of aggression, the fat man (who does not appear to be immobilizingly fat at this time) decides to approach the worshipper to ask him why he prays in this manner, but several times the worshipper eludes him and disappears into

the crowded alleyway outside. It is not until later, when the fat man openly accosts the worshiper and successfully isolates him in the front hallway of an apartment building, that the two engage in their own desperate conversation; the worshiper later suggests that he does indeed pray in order to be looked at. Beyond this, he suggests (uncertainly, and as a hypothetical possibility) that his own corporeal integrity depends precisely on the condition of being watched:

Man fürchtet manches. Daß vielleicht die Körperlichkeit entschwindet, daß die Menschen wirklich so sind wie sie in der Dämmerung scheinen, daß man ohne Stock nicht gehen dürfe, daß es vielleicht gut wäre in die Kirche zu gehn und schreiend zu beten um angeschaut zu werden und Körper zu bekommen

One fears some things. That perhaps one's corporeality would disappear and that the people really are as they appear in the twilight, that one should perhaps not go without a cane, that it would perhaps be good to go into the church and to pray screaming in order to be looked at and to acquire a body (89).

Here, alienation—the relation between the unhappy consciousness and its outside—is explicitly located in the context of the crowds of a modern metropolis. The anguish of the subject is framed as a problem of social being in the context of urban modernity, rather than being, as in previous sections, a struggle between male bodies in an amorphous landscape, or the struggle of a floating fat man with the landscape around him. The worshiper's fear is that he would not have a bodily existence in absence of the gaze of anonymous others. These others must, however, be reached indirectly through the spectacle of prayer, that public agony of screaming in the church. The network of urban relations would not involve a mutual constitution of selves through direct contact, but would rather require the putting-on-display of one's own bond to an invisible and absent other (prayer). Relations would be constituted through non-relation, and through an avoidance of a direct engagement

with the crowd on whom one's existence, according to the worshiper's fears, depends. And yet: this entire idea of sociality, of mutual constitution through *praying* and *being seen* is bracketed as a counterfactual, as something that *might be* true but that hovers on the level of emotion, rather than establishing itself as a certainty. Prayer is one stage in an erratically escalating plot,<sup>23</sup> which explores one dead end of sociality after another.

### *Accosting the Anonymous*

Within the worshiper's own story, another encounter between unacquainted city-dwellers is staged, this one adopting a feverish pace that pushes against the limits of physical and mental exhaustion. The worshiper tells of how, after a long night of revelry, he found a drunken man leaning on the railing around a fountain. Immediately the worshiper accosts the drunken man with an extended, exasperating discourse on Paris, the putative capital of modernity; the drunken man, who was likely just thrown out of a wine tavern and is unable or unwilling to speak, is habitually asked to confirm the details of his existence as a nobleman in Paris, as laid down in the second person by the worshiper:

Da er sich rülpste, sagte ich fast erschrocken: »Wirklich, ist es wahr, Sie kommen Herr aus unserem Paris, aus dem stürmischen Paris, ach, aus diesem schwärmerischen Hagelwetter?«

Because he burped, I said almost terrified: "Really, is it true, you Sir come from our Paris, from stormy Paris, *ach*, from this enthused hailstorm?" (BEK

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<sup>23</sup> I use "plot" here in a sense derived from Viktor Shklovky, who saw plot as a process of the doubling, estrangement and inversion of an initially singular motif. I have chosen this particular word over and against other possible words such as *procedure* or *experiment*, the bureaucratic and scientific vocabulary that has recently been brought to bear on Kafka's works by analysts (such as in Wagner 2008 and Höcker 2007) interested in exploring the relationship between Kafka's works and institutional knowledge production.

Rolf J. Goebel has argued that the speech, with which the worshiper accosts the drunken man, represents a central contact point of Kafka's early writings with a larger constellation of interests encompassed by literary Modernism in its fascination with the metropolis. In particular, Goebel sees a parallel between this passage and the core concerns of Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*:

Kafka's depiction of fin-de-siècle Paris and Benjamin's encyclopedic collection of citations and reflections on the French city as the capital of the nineteenth century show surprisingly direct correspondences: the phantasmagoric inscription of history in the present; fashion; the imitation of nature within urban space; the reign of the façade and the surface signifier; the disorientation of the human subject in the crowds and traffic-filled streets; and the disappearing figure of the *flâneur*. (446)

And yet, as Goebel points out, these many classic images of the “disorientation, instability, and unpredictability of modern urban existence” are not directly relayed by Kafka's text, but rather framed as the palpably ironic rant of the worshiper to an uninvolved man on the street, so that these aspects of city life cannot be “grasped as simple facts of social reality but need to be understood and contested—as products of alienated human subjectivity and the unreliable signs of discursive mediation” (Goebel 453). The hyperbolic and fantastic descriptions of Paris are constituted as a function of an alienated attempt at interlocution. The worshiper's images of “Menschen, die nur aus verzierten Kleidern bestehn” (“people who only consist of ornate clothing”) serve as an attack on an anonymous passer-by, upon whom the worshiper attempts to exhaustively impose an identity (insisting that the drunken man has had certain experiences, is of noble birth etc.) (BEK 85). Interlocution here is not dialogue, but the forceful projection of a repertoire of clichéd

images onto an unknown, unspeaking subject. The passer-by becomes, here, the canvas for ironic and playful fantasies about a spectral urban world. Kafka, then, has here redefined the way in which a literary imagination would relate to the experience of mass society in modernity. Rather than creating a text that attempts to describe or index the uncertainties of urban existence, Kafka imagines in his novella how the literary imagination (the lyrical images of Paris) might circulate as a *means* of constituting sociality within the context of urban life. The worshiper's monologue is a failed (and likely insincere) attempt to gain control of a man in the crowd by force-feeding him images of himself (at a time when this man, excessively drunk, can literally not remember his own name). The drunk man and the worshiper, then, as a constellation of characters, become the latest pair of subjects whose interlocution fails to establish a durable social bond, and despite an exhaustive stretching of the limits of conversational discourse, only serves to reassert an unbridgeable gap between the self and the neighbor.

Pointing to these parallel patterns of sociality and attempted transcendence, one can see an interesting structural fact of the novella emerge. Numerous critics have pointed to the *Verspaltung* and *Verdoppelung* (splitting and doubling) that marks this novella, with its recurring assembly of pairs of interlocutors whose bearing toward one another swings erratically between aggression and intimacy. What is especially confusing for a reader trying to assemble a consistent thematic is that Kafka's novella is not only about *pairing*, but about the *pairing of pairing*, which has been taken as an indication that this is a schizophrenic work that stages an ongoing and deepening identity crisis.<sup>24</sup> But the novella's *doubling of pairs* persists to such an extent that the pathology of identity crisis is quickly exhausted as an explanatory model. What seems

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<sup>24</sup> For a reading of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* that examines the work as a commentary on the split self (and with regard to contemporary discourses on subjectivity or identity) see Neymeyr 2004.

to be happening in this “surreal” middle section of the story is, in fact, a kind of intensive labor of comparison. Whereas the first section follows a pair of recent acquaintances minute by minute and gesture by gesture through their walk around Prague, the second section chains together, through progressive embedding, numerous comparable but differing models of pairing, as if to confirm that, across times and across the boundaries that isolate the self in its subjective sphere, a similar principle is at work. In a sense, Kafka’s novella is (like the worshipper) bashing its head against the floor again and again, convincing itself of a certain consistency of experience (of the impasse of the pair). The transformation of (or escape from) the impasse, then, will not be found in any *one* of these stories; it could only emerge from the relationship between them. The mutual embedding of one voice within another—of one monologue within another—is retroactively endowed with a special (and one could say, “existential”) significance.

### *My Friend*

Through the repetitious recycling of a common thematic complex within progressively embedded frames, Kafka’s text institutes a claustrophobic regime of experience, which dictates that an imaginative attempt to escape the deadlocks of social life will inevitably replay the failures of recognition occurring elsewhere. Once the repetition has been played through to the point of physical (and aesthetic-formal) exhaustion, the text begins to lay out a potential “line of escape” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986) whereby the sets of (non)relations posited by the novella could be reframed and retroactively transformed.

In this section, I will analyze two anomalous moments of *naming*, between which there occur several jarring transitions between narrative perspectives, and



between grammatical subject positions. In all, this chain of jumps and dissolves (or “cuts”, to quote Bianca Theisen 2006) spans four pages in Kafka’s original notebook draft. My choice of these four pages is not entirely arbitrary, as they contain the interstices between at least three hierarchically stratified layers of the text. Reading through these pages, one proceeds from the direct speech of the *worshiper*, to the direct speech of the *fat man*, to the narration of the unnamed *primary* narrator, whose discourse (as I will demonstrate) is then jarringly transposed into a virtual space outside the text. These four pages illustrate the aftermath, as it were, of several extended character monologues, and thus provide a potential site for reconstructing an idea of what effect or impact monologue could have in this text.

The two moments of naming I have spoken of are: first, the fat man’s titling of his interlocutor (the worshiper) as a *friend*, and finally, the narrator’s naming of an aggregate of observers that apparently share an open space with him, the *passers-by* (“vorübergehende Leute”; BEK 91). How is a path cut from the friend to the passers-by? What borders are crossed, and what is gained or lost in this movement?

Before I analyze these four pages, I will first survey their immediate surroundings. The unexpected locution *friend* appears several pages after the conclusion of the conversation between the worshiper and the fat man, which has culminated with the latter’s delivery of two concise orations—which appear as autonomous texts in the series entitled *Betrachtung*—that address the topic of an “us”. They are not anecdotes expressing a particular event or the experience of an individual, but rather miniature and tentative treatises on a shared condition, the condition of being *we*. Being *we*, for the duration of these two paragraphs, is a condition of being ephemeral and fragile: *we* float in the air and *we* are not firmly rooted in the ground as it might appear. “Und erhalten uns in Schweben, wir fallen nicht, wir flattern, wenn wir auch häßlicher sind als Fledermäuse” (89). Shortly

thereafter, the words are heard:

»Wir sind nämlich so wie Baumstämme im Schnee. Sie liegen doch scheinbar nur glatt auf und man sollte sie mit kleinem Anstoß wegschieben können. Aber nein, das kann man nicht, denn sie sind fest mit dem Boden verbunden: Aber sieh, sogar das ist bloß scheinbar«

We are, namely, like tree trunks in the snow. They lie apparently only smoothly and one should be able to put them away with a small nudge. But no, one can't do that, for they are tightly bound to the ground. But see, even that is only apparent (89).

This short oration (which would also be an autonomous text) posits, then retracts and revises its thesis on *our* existence. This is not a law-like treatise on the nature of human experience, but rather a continually incomplete and self-revising image of the human *position* (its potential grounding, not its durative condition), although it is not even certain that the *we* here is to be equated with the human; it is a *we* with no identity-securing predicate. As a monadic kernel embedded several layers into the text, this meditation on the trees addresses the difficulty of assigning a durative predicate to the *we*, whose actual grounding in any particular image is continually in question (and subject to the revision of an *aber nein*). As Eric Baker writes, the “‘Tree Trunks’ makes a statement about nothing other than its own failure to mean anything other than itself” (2003: 188). The only remnant is an insufficiently defined *we*, as a multiplicity or collectivity of subjects.

While the words of the miniature text resound, in all their ambiguity, resonate in the space of an entrance hall, the listener (the fat man) weeps. The failed attempt to define the *we* is accompanied by a non-linguistic articulation of emotion, until this weeping (immediately after the conclusion of the tree-meditation) is replaced by reflection: “Nachdenken hinderte mich am Weinen” (“Reflection hindered me in my weeping”; BEK 89). The unspoken, yet bodily-physically released emotion is

supplanted by reflection, which then drives the fat man to speak. What the fat man says here—what his reflection has led him to speak of—deals only with the possibility of how the two men might continue speaking, since they seem to have reached a pinnacle of pleasure in their exchange of speech. The fat man requests that his interlocutor tell, a second time, the story that he told earlier. Here, as in the novella's first section (its "frame narrative"), a remarkably tight "affect economy" circulates between two men (Wagner 2005).

And yet here, there is a quasi-utopian circulation of a desire to speak more (and thus a desire to speak about a desire to speak), to repeat and retread what has already been said. This is the portion of the text that most strongly asserts the possibility of a *we* or *they*, an indivisible grouping or pairing of subjects as a single subject: a sociality of *pure interlocution* that does not appropriate or functionalize a thematic content external to itself, but collapses the means and ends of conversing into one another. And here, too, the distance between the two men's bodies momentarily vanishes, interrupting a learned routine of a quasi-instinctual protective privacy: "Er sah zufrieden aus. Trotzdem mir die Berührung mit einem menschlichen Körper immer peinlich ist, mußte ich ihn umarmen" ("He looked at peace. Although contact with a human body is always embarrassing for me, I had to embrace him"; BEK 90). It is in the wake of these two sentences, where the intimacy of speaking and listening has compelled an actual embrace, that the word *friend* appears, twice. A threshold is crossed: "Dann traten wir aus dem Gang unter den Himmel" ("Then we stepped out of the doorway, under the sky"; 90). The open, public space is re-entered upon the consummation of a new kinship tie: the two men step back into an altered world, one that they appear to share a benevolent power in (and over): "Einige zerstoßene Wölkchen blies mein Freund weg, so daß sich jetzt die ununterbrochene Fläche der Sterne uns darbot" ("My friend blew a few crushed clouds away, so that the

uninterrupted surface of the stars offered itself to us”; 91). What will happen after the doorway has been crossed, and the sky has been cleared, remains undetermined. The final sentence of this story—which is also the final sentence of the fat man’s monologue—reads: “Mein Freund ging mühsam” (“My friend walked arduously”; 90). The praying man, now transformed into a friend, walks with great effort. What does this detail suggest about the kinship that has been established between the two men? They proceed now through an environment that offers friction and resistance—not effortlessly. But they walk, in spite of this, in parallel, as a pair under the stars. Nothing further happens, no new conflicts loom on the horizon, and the two walk together without a goal. It is here where the story breaks off. With this conclusion, the bond of the newly born friends remains intact, as the entire discourse that has lodged and framed their friendship—the monologue of the fat man—now breaks off, and the primary narrator resumes his discourse. The utopian moment has passed, lodged within the fat man’s finished speech.

The following section, entitled “Untergang des dicken” (“Sinking of the fat man”) begins to advance an ambitious idea about what monologue, as extended direct speech can (and must) do in the putative universe of the novella. In the total collapse of the fictional world that occurs in the aftermath of the fat man’s monologue, a metaphysics of language emerges: metaphysics, because monologue is shown to have a constitutive role in the threading-together of the physical world, gaining a special status in the formation of material and social bonds.

Switching back to the frame narrative, certain enigmatic facts of the text return to the fore. It has been nearly forgotten, but its now recalled, after the long and uninterrupted eclipsing of the narrator’s voice by the fat man, what the circumstances of the fat man’s extended oration have been: this entire time that one has been reading the fat man’s story (and its internally embedded stories), the fat man has been floating

down a river in a volatile and hostile wilderness setting, which consists of “things” (elements of the landscape) that are eager to avenge themselves on the embodied speakers who coexist with them, and which will soon make it impossible to breathe.

The moment that the fat man finishes speaking his story, the contents of the world are sucked away into the distance:

Da wurde alles von Schnelligkeit ergriffen und fiel in die Ferne. Das Wasser des Flusses wurde an einem Absturz hinabgezogen, wollte sich zurückhalten, schwankte auch noch an der zerbröckelten Kante, aber dann fiel es in Klumpen und Rauch.

Der Dicke konnte nicht weiterreden, sondern er mußte sich drehn und in dem lauten raschen Wasserfall verschwinden

Then everything was seized by speed and fell into the distance. The water the river was pulled onto a precipice, wanted to hold itself back, and faltered still on the crumbling edge, but then fell in clumps and smoke.

The fat man could not speak more, rather he had to turn around and disappear into the rapid waterfall (90).

The things do not simply scatter, but subvert the terms on which they would be described, taking on foreign properties: water falls not with steam or spray, but smoke, and falls in hard clumps rather than in a continuous stream. One begins to suspect—and I will return to this point, for it edges toward the thesis of this study—that the fat man’s speech was not, in fact, a function of a frame narrative (a speech staged within a fictional setting) but the necessary precondition for that frame. Anguished and exasperated by the loss of the fat friend who held the world together, the narrator attempts to restore a collectivity by screaming in the first person plural to no-one:

»Was sollen unsere Lungen thun,« schrie ich, schrie, »athmen sie rasch, ersticken sie an sich, an inneren Giften; athmen sie langsam ersticken sie an nicht athembarer Luft, an den empörten Dingen. Wenn sie aber ihr Tempo suchen wollen, gehn sie schon am Suchen zugrunde.«

“What should our lungs do,” I screamed, screamed, “If they breath quickly,

they will suffocate from internal poisons; if they breathe slowly they will suffocate from unbreathable air, on the rebelling things. But if they want to seek their tempo, they will go under from their own searching” (91).

Mirroring the content of the fat man’s monologue, the narrator here attempts to conjure a *we* by lamenting the impossibility of this *we*’s existence. Emphasis is placed on the vocal stress with which this trio of impossibilities is enumerated (“I screamed, screamed”), as if even this verb needs to be shouted out twice in order to register in the text. This *scream*, as I will show, introduces a new and revisionary linguistic register into the text.

The fat man has somehow been speaking, all this time, in an environment that is hostile to speech acts and the speakers who exhale them. And yet, under these conditions, it has been possible to establish a tenuous level of stability through the dual movement of the fat man’s *speaking* and the narrator’s *listening*. The narrator has followed a parallel path to his interlocutor’s, walking on the shore of the river that carries this interlocutor. The source of the integrity of the narrative world, in other words, has been the endurance of a particular relationship, which has persisted with each recorded word of the fat man’s monologue. It has, in other words, been the fat man’s breathless monologue on friendship, which has held the physical world in place. This relation represents the precise opposite of the one that initiated this section of the story, with the “ride” sequence. In that sequence, the narrator could mutely make decisions about what sorts of strenuous and oppressive details he would violently subject his interlocutor to (who had been reduced to the status of a beast of burden). The narrator laid claim to the setting (frame) to which the other would be subjected. Now, towards the end of this section, the narrator cannot posit details by himself, but depends on the inflow of the monologue of the other in order for his own discourse to retain its stability. When the fat man stops speaking, he is himself swept away by the

water, and the surrounding world rapidly drains away, leaving the narrator literally without any dimensions, and threatening him with suffocation.

In the previous two paragraphs I have insisted on a certain model of causality: the world is sucked away *because* the fat man has stopped speaking. The text does not explicitly assert such a causal structure, but certain details of timing suggest this is the case. The fat man's monologue is not, after all, *broken off* mid-sentence by the eruption of the landscape. Rather, the fat man stops speaking, as explained above, at the moment when the friendship of the two characters in his story has reached a fragile and intimate stasis, and the two have effectively melded together as a pair; the story has reached a satisfying resolution (one could call it a balance, rather than an impasse). A reader would reasonably expect, upon hearing the conclusion of the fat man's story (with the embrace of the friends and the crossing through the doorway) that he was ready to stop speaking of his own accord, having delivered the essential content of his speech. Yet, on the other side of the textual partition, one discovers that an external force has begun to tear the fat man away from his listener. But: why now, at this exact moment? One could infer that Kafka's text is advancing the following idea: that *the moment one ceases to bespeak the friendship to the friend, the world will fall apart*. The world would be threaded together by the simultaneous, parallel and mutually embedded voices of friends who cannot exist (literally) without one another.

The space inhabited by the narrator quickly loses all dimensions, and his discourse now only consists in an erratic shifting between surprised assertions of his own size, now diminutive, now gigantic:

Ich war doch klein, fast kleiner als gewöhnlich und ein Strauch mit weißen Hagebutten, der sich ganz schnell schüttelte überragte mich. [...] Aber trotzdem hatte ich mich geirrt, denn meine Arme waren so groß, wie die Wolken eines Landregens, nur waren sie hastiger.

But I was small, almost smaller than normal and a bush with white rose hips, which shook very quickly, towered over me. [...] But in spite of that I had been mistaken, for my arms were as big as the clouds of country rain, only faster (91).

The individual body parts, losing their dimensions, also begin to follow movements antithetical to the conscious intentions of the narrator, and indeed seem aimed at destroying his consciousness. Speaking of his enormous arms, he writes “Ich weiß nicht, warum sie meinen armen Kopf zerdrücken wollten” (“I don’t know why they wanted to crush my poor head”; 91). The text is now caught in an irreversible cyclone of negation.

With this tearing-away of the world in the wake of the fat man’s monologue (and so, the loss of the friend), Kafka’s novella has moves far beyond Freud’s model of mourning and melancholia, which asserts: “Bei der Trauer ist die Welt arm und leer geworden. bei der Melancholie ist es das Ich selbst” (“In mourning the world has become impoverished and empty, in melancholia it is the ego itself”; 260). This is a world that has not only been impoverished and emptied out; it is a dimensionless vacuum that makes impossible the demarcation of the self as anything but a rapidly expanding, contracting and vanishing streak of movement. In the narrator’s words, it is a “Raum der keine Landschaft mehr besaß” in which there is nothing left to impoverish (“Space that no longer possessed a landscape”; 91). The idea that the termination of the friend’s monologue would bring about the end of any substantial existence (or even, the end of consciousness) might earn the accusation of a radical solipsism. But it is not quite so: the idea that this juncture of Kafka’s text advances is not that there is nothing outside the subject (the narrator’s mind). Rather, it is a fundamentally *relational* idea of the construction of reality: that there will only be a ground to stand on as long as the discourse of the *other* flows into one’s ear. This is a radical anti-materialism, but it insists on the necessity of more than one consciousness.



What happens now, where the subject of enunciation (the narrator's "I") is on the verge of disappearance? Whatever happens beyond this point, one can hypothesize in advance, would have to be a reframing, a revisionary moment that would stabilize the swirl of apparent insanity that fills these few pages. And, indeed, it is frequently suggested that this is the moment where the *narrator wakes up from his dream* and goes back to the real world, resuming the the story that went on "outside" of his head.

But before the text gives any indication of a "wakeup" moment, before the text breaks off and shift into to section III (where one finds the narrator and his acquaintance in the park in Prague), there is an event that I would like to designate as a crucial turning point of the story, one that fully reframes and retroactively *takes account of* what has happened, without bracketing it (yet) as a mere dream. This event coincides with the second instance of *naming* previously promised: the naming of the passers-by, or *vorübergehende Leute*, whom the narrator calls to as a new possible interlocutor, and thereby fully redefines the boundaries of the entire text that has come before.

### ***A Helpless Monster?***

As the narrator's dimensions swing erratically from gigantic to miniscule and back again, a sudden shift occurs. The past-tense voice of the first-person narrator, which has remained consistent since the first page of the novella, suddenly transforms into a second-person demand:

Aber nein, das ist es nicht – ich bin doch klein, vorläufig klein – ich rolle – ich rolle – ich bin eine Lawine im Gebirge! *Bitte, vorübergehende Leute, seid so gut, sagt mir wie groß ich bin, messet mir diese Arme, diese Beine*

But no, that isn't it – I am small, small for now – I roll – I roll – I am an avalanche in the mountains! *Please, passing-by people, be so good, tell me how big I am, measure these arms for me, these legs* (BEK 91; my emphasis).

Suddenly the narrator “reveals” his present position, calling upon bystanders who, one can assume, must coexist with him in this *present* space and time. It would appear now that the narrator is standing on a city street, within an earshot of pedestrians who could answer him and fulfill his request. His claim that he is “an avalanche in the mountains” is recast, then, as an embellished metaphor, and the status of his entire discourse thus far is suddenly called into question: has this not been a *written* report on an experience that occurred sometime in the past? A lone writer sitting at a desk in his room cannot call upon passers-by; he would have to be standing outdoors on the street, with his voice resonating and echoing across a shared public space occupied by an observer—an idea that is supported by a quotation mark written in at the end of his cry: citation of this speech would only be possible if someone were listening. Moreover, this close-quotation mark, which corresponds to no open-quotation mark anywhere else in the text, places a definitive dividing line and identifies the narrative discourse that one has been reading as a long block of uninterrupted, *direct speech*: a monologue that had already begun at some point before the first words of the first section found their way onto the page.

Suddenly, nonsensically, it appears that the entire story has been the unbroken speech of someone or something standing in the street, who suddenly cries out directly to the crowd (and *names* this crowd) when he reaches an impassable point in his storytelling. In other words, with this deictic moment of tense-shift and direct address, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* edges toward becoming *Schrei eines Kampfes*. Suddenly enacting a mimesis of its internal thematization of monologue, the text is recast as an extended interpolated oral discourse that resonated *out there somewhere with people*

*watching and listening*. Such a shocking moment of “recasting” or “reframing” would agree with Bianca Theisen’s reading of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, which argues that the novella provides a “shock for the audience” by showing them “the reality of their own seeing framed by fiction” (2006: 550). In other words, the “audience” (in this case, readers) will have assumed that the narrator’s discourse has been safely confined within a structured, written text, and suddenly this narration has re-framed itself (even its initial “realist” moments) as a delirious monologue delivered *in a setting* and *at some particular present moment*. In this way, direct speech breaks through all the variegated narrative layers and textual partitions set up by the novella in its written form, and forcefully attempts to access an *outside*. Kafka innovates a mode here that, while ostensibly corresponding to a paradigmatic modernist practice—inner monologue—is in fact a fully *externalized* monologue that is consciously directed toward an undefined audience.

With this act of reframing, Kafka tentatively carves out a counter-tendency to the putatively paradigmatic Modernist device of the *inner monologue*, as recognized in the fiction of Schnitzler, Joyce and Faulkner. Drawing on Dorrit Cohn’s work on inner monologue in the book *Transparent Minds*, Günter Butzer sets the modern “inner monologue” apart from previous models of literary soliloquy, which since Rousseau had shown the dual tendency of “self-observation” on the one hand, and “autonomous expression” on the other hand (447). The soliloquy, after this model, would have been the intentional, solitary taking-account of a self. The inner monologue of Modernism, on the other hand, unfolds without intention, as it were: “Dessen Paradoxie besteht ja darin, das hier jemand spricht, ohne sich dessen bewusst zu sein und damit in gewisser, wohl nicht mehr romantischem Verständnis entsprechender Weise Poesie produziert” (“Its paradox consists, after all, in that someone speaks here without being aware of it and therefore in a certain manner

produces poetry, but certainly no longer according to the romantic understanding”;

545). A reader is given a glimpse “into” the head of a character who does not realize s/he is being observed. Inner monologue, then, gives an elevated (or sovereign) reader access to an unfiltered process of consciousness that can be inspected as an object for analysis. Kafka’s retroactively constituted, *outwardly directed monologue* of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* moves precisely in the opposite direction: here, a discourse that was apparently locked in solipsistic cycles of self-observation, has apparently *all along* been an intentionally directed address to an outside observer, and has from the start been a socially embedded and constituted discourse that is *dependent* on a potential interlocutor to answer and complete it.

While the narrator’s outward scream is certainly suggestive of a radical, irreconcilable insanity, the significance of this moment is not exhausted by its reframing of the novella as an uninterrupted street rant. For the narrator’s cry to the pedestrians is not simply a transparent and unambiguous display of madness: one does violence to the scream if one assumes that it lacks any form of logic.

The scream marks the text’s total turning-away from a narrative mode that posits, through constative statements in the past tense, a world of figures and details. The voice inscribed here no longer posits or *gives*, but *asks*. In this sense, the scream enacts what was not possible for any other utterance hypotactically embedded in the layered structure of the narrative: it *directly addresses an other* lying supposedly outside the web of literary devices within the text. The scream is an instance of speech directed *outward*. Thus, it doubles and modifies the logic of speech previously established in the story. The fat man’s monologue, as I have shown, stimulated a dream of a stream of language that could hold a world of discrete selves together within a vacuum. And *inside* of this monologue there emerged an associated erotic conception of speech that could sever the distance between selves, shed itself of

content and act as a medium of social cohesion.<sup>25</sup> Suddenly, correspondences flash between one mirrored surface of the text and another. Both the *content* of the fat man's monologue, and its *situation* within the unstable narrative of the novella, have defined an excessive and unbroken monologic manner of speech as *the* medium for the establishment of intimate social bonds (and thus, as the only precondition for dialogue, paradoxically).

Thus, when the narrator cries out to the passers-by, he—and not *he*, but *it*—has not simply lost hold of the thematic pathos of the novella: rather, he is attempting to forcefully externalize this pathos and insert it into a shared space, impossible and futile as this would appear to be. The *reader* is interpellated here, for the first time, as one who could provide the substance and dimensions of the novella. Here the habit of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* to embed ever more monologues within monologues and stories within stories is reversed: the novella attempts to *embed itself* as sound in some field of experience outside of it, so that its plasticity could be given form and size.

The quotation mark placed at the end of the cry, however, does not exhaust itself as a reframing of *narrative prose as talking aloud*. As hinted at the start of this chapter, Kafka subsequently crossed out this close-quotation mark, apparently canceling its re-framing action. Thus, the diacritic that turned the *Beschreibung* into *Schrei* did not appear in any printed version of the novella until the recent facsimile

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<sup>25</sup> This erotics of language participates in a general homoerotic pathos of the story, an elusive but undeniable thematic strand which will be explained later in the chapter. For now, one might ask whether the male bonding that occurs between the fat man and the narrator does, or does not, resonate with the dichotomy drawn by Mark M. Anderson in describing the figuration of hetero- and homosexuality in Kafka's work; writing of Kafka's journal entries, Anderson argues: "This same discrepancy between 'disgusting', 'animal-like' heterosexual intercourse on the one hand, and seductive, eroticised fantasies about powerful men on the other, informs much of Kafka's literary work" (89). The problem with applying this notion of 'a fantasy of powerful men' to the eroticized scenes of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is that we would too quickly draw conclusions about the location of power in this story, which (as I have argued) in some (or many) cases does not arise from the *exercise of power and dominance by an individual*, but rather from the intimate interrelation and interlocution of two individuals. In other words, it is not so much powerful *men* that are thematized in this novella, but rather powerful *relationships* between men.

editions were printed. And yet the enigma of this crossed-out quotation mark raises an interpretive problem as imposing as the retroactive transformation of the “I” in Kafka’s final novel *Das Schloß* into a “he.” The insertion of a quotation mark accomplishes, practically speaking, the same thing as the replacement of “I” by “he”: the quotation mark, as an internal boundary of the text, consigns to a past moment of utterance the discourse—or monologue—on the page: it would not have been composed simultaneous to the actual time of the manuscript’s writing. In other words, like the replacement of a first-person by a third-person pronoun, the mark introduces a distance between witness and source.

But I have, through the course of my analysis, suggested that this moment of the text is marked by an elevated *directness*, a step out into the open from out of the constricting structures of narrative. One would not be able to insist this if, in the end, the quotation mark *had not been* crossed out. For the diacritic (the quotation mark), with this extra diacritic (the scratching-out) emits a different meaning than either the simple presence of the mark (which makes the narrative into direct speech) *or* its absence (where the begging cry would not as strongly alter the positioning and framing of the narrative). The *wrecked* quotation mark crosses through both of these possibilities, but endlessly wavering between them, it achieves a different meaning: namely, that the cry that concludes the second section of the novella exceeds the logic of the quotation mark. It *distances* itself from a reader by appearing as direct speech resonating within a fictional space, but *then* it abolishes this distance by suggesting that no boundary can be maintained: once the mark has been crossed out, the address of the *vorübergehende Leute* on the spectral street (or more exactly, in this *passage-space* where people go by) retains the tone of a direct scream but now is no longer separated from an reader *qua* observer by the distancing gesture of the quotation mark. It is as if the cry has broken through the quotation mark, and is coming directly for

us.<sup>26</sup> Kafka's novella delivers, at this moment, the inverse of a traditional novella: rather than embedding the story of a shocking event within a narration of everyday life, and thus rather than embedding a shocking discourse within the narrative present, the discourse, as monologue, appears to *jump out* of the text.

The question of distance, handled toward the conclusion of this chapter, will be crucial in understanding the semantic stress exerted by this quotation mark and its reframing of the text of monologic direct speech. But before moving forward in the text to explore the figuration of *distance* in the novella, I will turn to the work of a contemporary critic who adopts a different method to understand this enigmatic passage (without taking into account or assuming the significance of the wrecked diacritic).

In Benno Wagner's words the narrator has now become, "ein hilfloses Monstrum" ("a helpless monster"; 237). This is a compelling name for the dimensionless being that cries out to the crowd, and it is worth considering how Wagner arrives at this title. For Wagner, this passage represents the intersection of two primary, and diametrically opposed, intertexts of Kafka's novella: Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* (the text containing the prophecy of the Overman), and the thought of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century statistician Adolphe Quetelet, who introduced the idea of the "average man," who is, in the words of Paul Fleming, "the modern numerical 'everyman,' who is at once no one, since no one person will meet the measure of the average" (148). Wagner reads Kafka's text as a site where Nietzsche's vision of a

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<sup>26</sup> As much as this reading may seem to diverge from previous scholarship on *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, it brings us back to Bianca Theisen's concise essay on the novella, which begins with an account of the famous film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare à La Ciotat* by the brothers Lumière, which Kafka had commented on in a 1910 journal entry: "The audience freezes as the train passes by" (Theisen 2006: 543). As Theisen writes, "Kafka's comment presents itself as the image on an instance, which oscillates between stasis and motion, audience and screen, reality and fiction" (544). The train rushing into the foreground calls attention to the very problem of drawing a stable distinction between the *inside* and *outside* of the film. The wrecked quotation mark, as the text's wrecked boundary, has the potential to effect a similar shock. My own reading has attempted to pinpoint a moment of "freezing," akin to the "freeze" of the spectators Kafka describes.

man-to-come is juxtaposed with the statistical phantom of the average man. For Wagner, the narrator's loss of dimensions signals that moment where the narrator throws off Nietzschean ambitions (as well as the dispersals of a postmetaphysical subject á la Ernst Mach) and cries out to Quetelet:

da heißt der Meister, den Kafkas Zauberlehrling herbeiruft, nicht Nietzsche oder Mach, sondern Quetelet, und wird das Subjekt E\* [*Wagner's name for the narrator –PJB*] schließlich doch noch zum sozialen Objekt eines Meßverfahrens: „Bitte, vorübergehende Leute, seid so gut, sagt mir wie groß ich bin, messet mir diese Arme, diese Beine.“ Und auch Nietzsches 'großer Mensch' – „Im Gebirge ist der nächste Weg von Gipfel zu Gipfel: aber dazu musst du lange Beine haben – ist hier adressiert. Weit davon entfernt, „Gesetzgeber für Maass Münze und Gewicht der Dinge zu sein, ist E\* am Ende der dritten Phase nur noch ein hilfloses Monstrum.

here the master that Kafka's sorcerer's apprentice calls upon is not Nietzsche or Mach, but Quetelet, and the subject E\* finally does indeed become the social object of a measuring procedure: „Please, passing-by people, be so good, tell me how big I am, measure these arms for me, these legs.“ And also Nietzsche's 'great man' – „In the mountains is the next path from peak to peak – but for that you must have long legs – is addressed here. Far from „being law-giver for size, coin and weight of things,“ E\* is at the end of the third phase only a helpless monster (2005: 237).

This intertextual reading appears unassailable in its erudite identification of the discursive sources of Kafka's novella. It appears to make visible the underlying conflict that has driven the text as an “experiment,” making legible what would otherwise verge on the illegible. And yet this insistence on discursive identity leads Wagner to ignore (or at least, rationalize) the formal deviation of the passage from the rest of the work. While illuminating the discursive embedding of this passage, Wagner passes over in silence the tense shift that so disrupts the fabric of the novella, and identifies the *vorübergehende Leute* with the social stock who would feed into Quetelet's statistical hypostasis (and earn Nietzsche's scorn as the “herd”). Such an interpretive procedure is, in any case, fully in line with Wagner's approach as



announced at the start of his study: he critiques previous analyses for having read the novella independent of its epistemic embedding, which has caused them to see it as an unreadable, youthful failure. In order to not dismiss the novella as a “mess,” Wagner argues, one must look behind the curtains to see what discourses fueled Kafka’s literary experimentations: Wagner announces that he wishes “[den Text] gerade wegen – seine offenbaren formal-ästhetischen Unzulänglichkeiten dazu verwenden, die besondere diskursive Existenzweise der literarischen Welt Kafkas, ihre protokollarische Dimension, ansatzweise sichtbar zu machen” (“to use the text, precisely because of its apparent formal-aesthetic insufficiencies, in order to initially make visible the special discursive mode of existence of Kafka’s literary world, its protocolary dimension”; 225). In other words, readings of this text with regard to form are doomed to miss something, since the text functions mostly as a programmatic statement on the constitutive elements of Kafka’s emergent literary discourse (which would grow stronger and more coherent later).

And yet I would like to insist on the importance of the specifically literary practices encountered in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*—on those aspects that make it something *other* than a “protocol” (with parodic intents) of Nietzsche and Quetelet—even if the text’s form tends to strongly resist a systematic explanation of its thematic content. There are still details that escape Wagner’s gaze, as he aims for a revelatory gesture of bringing to light the epistemological groundings of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*. Questions that remain, in the wake of Wagner’s intertextual reading, are: *Why does this disintegration of the mountain landscape occur precisely after the fat man’s monologue? Why does this moment of destabilization lead to a moment of radical metalepsis, where the narrator directly addresses a set of invisible passers-by? Why does the shift tense? And why does he ask so politely?* When Wagner asserts, with an eye to the novella’s intertexts, that the narrator “finally does indeed

[*schließlich doch*] become the object of a social measuring procedure,” he eagerly provides an answer to a question that the text leaves unsettlingly open: namely, what it is that happens *finally*, and *how* the call or scream of the “helpless monster” is to be answered.

Returning to my analysis, I would like to reiterate what, in particular, about this passage, as a harrowing passage between two textual passages, seems to merit additional consideration: This sentence where the narrator cries out to the passers-by, followed by a (scratched-out) quotation mark, seems to enact a re-visioning or a re-framing of the narrative voice as a *monstrous* oral monologue by an undefined creature who dwells on a city street. For part of one brief paragraph, Kafka’s text forcefully attempts to join the a noisy sphere of sociality from which it would have had to extricate itself in order to become a closed, bounded object *qua* artwork. The authority that will give the text integrity lies *outside* its boundaries. And if the authority or hypostasis of the text (its legs) is rooted outside of the text, then the entire polyphonic stream of text in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* becomes, retroactively, a petition to an outside authority. The passers-by would hold up the text, and provide definitions, dimensions and names for the narrator and his sprawling phantasmagoria. The novella has been an oral monologue, and this monologue will conclude, achieve meaning and substance in the moment that the addressees—the *vorübergehende Leute*—are drawn into the fold of the text and give a response.

Wagner’s reading (certain as it is that Kafka’s universe is ruled over by the warring gods of Nietzsche and Quetelet) passes over in silence, as it were, the possibility (which is written directly into the text) that the authority ruling over the helpless monster might, for Kafka, remain undetermined and yet-to-be named. The proper names of Nietzsche and Quetelet are meant to dispel the boundless confusion engendered by this text, and reveal its debt to a particular episteme. And yet Kafka’s

novella (like many of his later works) engenders a persistent anxiety as to the location of authority: who would have to be addressed in order to request an illumination of the many layers and structures of the world? Following this line of inquiry, I bring *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* into dialogue with another recent trend of Kafka scholarship, which has passed over the questions of contemporary epistemological paradigms in favor of the questions of political theology. For this Walter Benjamin-inspired trend of Kafka criticism, Wagner's name for the narrator—"helpless monster"—would acquire additional significance with regard to the figuration of the "creaturely" in Kafka's prose.

The monologic "monster" who emerges from the fabric of the text beside the crossed-out quotation mark, exceeds, through his inconceivable dimensions, the limits of his own power of cognition: "längst schon reichte [die Länge meiner Beine] aus der Sehschärfe meiner Augen" ("the [length of my legs] had already long surpassed the acuity of my eyes"; BEK 91). Constantly correcting himself, he will be a fundamentally incomplete and undefined creature until another voice answers his polite call: "Bitte, vorübergehende Leute, seid so gut" ("Please, passing-by people, be so good"; 91). The passers-by (*qua* audience, *qua* readers) would here stop, bear witness to and provide their own interpolation. This "monster" is perhaps one of the oddest "creatures" to populate a Kafka text, and *it* compels us to a reconsideration of how the idea of the "creaturely" is inscribed in Kafka's early works, and how *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* relates to what Eric Santner has called "Kafka's universe":

In Kafka's universe, the "natural historical" dimension of law that gives rise to the allegorical sensibility comes to be registered as a chronic agitation and disorientation, a perpetual state of exception/emergency in which the boundaries of the law become undecidable. There the dimension of creaturely life is an index of an ongoing and passionate subjection not to a Creator God or

even to a sovereign whose legitimacy is figured on the model of the Creator, but to an agency, a master's discourse, that has been attenuated and dispersed across a field of relays and points of contact that no longer cohere, even in fantasy, as a consistent "other" of possible address and redress. In Kafka, the law is everywhere and nowhere (Santner 22).

This program for the reading of Kafka draws heavily on Walter Benjamin's idea that the primordial rule achieves ruthless omnipotence in Kafka because its concrete articulation in language is hidden, secret: "Hier steht das geschriebene Recht in Gesetzbüchern, jedoch geheim, und auf sie gestützt, übt die Vorwelt ihre Herrschaft nur schrankenloser" ("Here the written right stands in law books, however secretly, and supported by them the previous world exercises its dominance even more boundlessly" (Benjamin 1974: 412). Santner has expanded this condition of the lawless law into a general definition of creaturely life, which means that one is subject to an Other who could not be addressed, and who would be too diffuse to be embodied into an otherworldly God or a worldly ruler.

It is intriguing, then, that the *other* whom Kafka's monster calls upon is precisely someone who dwells on a different ontological level, outside the text. It is into *this* absent addressee's hands (the hands of the reader as passer-by) that the responsibility for this creature is delivered. The law is not written within the pages of notebook-bound novella, rather, it is projected onto the reader, who is interpellated at the farthest outer boundary of the text.

In this shock-moment, Kafka's first novella is utterly dependent, given over to, a moment of radical metalepsis. But metalepsis is here not only an "effect" designed to immerse or de-immerses a reader from a narrative. This model corresponds much more closely to Monika Fludernik's speculative idea of metalepsis as a "master trope" of the narrative imaginary. The monster's cry to the crowd functions as a revelation about the imagined hypostasis of the entire text. *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* is, at

this moment, a singular “sich ins Verhältnis setzen” with an outside voice *qua* authority (“setting-oneself-into-relation”; Höcker 238). The uncomfortable implication of this insight is that the readership interpellated by the text (as a function of its discourse) would occupy the position of authorial decision-making. That is, the *Vorwelt* that rules over the world where the plastic, helpless and hopeless creature lives, is in fact the *Nachwelt* of readers and witnesses who are in a position to hear the cry out of this text.

Kafka’s novella is utterly innovative in its attachment to a foundational trope of Modernism, that of the disoriented subject thrown into a sea of anonymous passer-by. Already in the worshiper’s accosting of the drunken man with clichés of metropolitan life in Paris, Kafka’s novella had announced a self-reflexive link to discourses on the disorientations and volatility of life in the urban streets. At the threshold between the second and third sections of the novella, Kafka attempts something altogether different. Marshall Berman’s particular (quite subjectively colored) paraphrase of Baudelaire may, through stark contrast, provide purchase onto the peculiarity of Kafka’s figuration: “The archetypal modern man, as we see [in Baudelaire], is a pedestrian thrown into the maelstrom of modern city traffic, a man alone contending against an agglomeration of mass and energy that is heavy, fast and lethal” (159). Kafka’s dimensionless creature, by contrast, is not a man at all but a streak of disembodied energy that does not *contend* against the lethal mass on the streets, but aims to gain mass *for itself* by attaching itself to these same passers-by (a creature in search of substance: here one sees an escalation of the idea, introduced by the worshiper, of prayer as a means of “being seen” and “achieving corporeality”; 89). But the most peculiar aspect of Kafka’s invocation of the crowd of passers-by is, as I have intimated earlier, its attempted reframing of the act of *reading* in aural terms, as a *listening* to an enduring scream from the crowd. The implied distance involved in the

act of reading a past-tense narrative is suddenly severed.

This cutting-away of distance, too, links Kafka's prose, through an eccentric conduit, to a broader Modernist tradition: "Baudelaire's poetry," writes Michael Jennings as he reads the poet through the lens of Benjamin, "in its fixing of the shock effect of movement through the urban crowd, breaks through 'the magic of distance' as it 'steps too close'" (23). Jennings (paraphrasing Benjamin) is referring to the distance that inheres in the "social situation, conditioned by technology," of passengers sitting together on a streetcar or passing in a public space. His explanation retains relevance to Kafka's attempted shattering of the distance of reading, however, insofar as reading itself is a *social situation conditioned by technology* that dictates particular habits of identification, projection and distanciation. The question that then arises is: what are the ripples of this implication of the act of reading (a) in the remainder of the novella, and (b) in the remainder of Kafka's literary output up until the termination of work on *Das Schloß*? In this study, I engage primarily with the first part of this question.

### ***Embarrassment and Conclusion***

As might be expected from prior descriptions of the novella's construction, the "revisionary" or "revelatory moment" at the end of the second section passes away and is absented by the next section of the text, appearing to have been a mistake or delusion. Beyond the next partition of the text, the "open wound" of the novella (the scream and broken diacritic) is sewn shut by a "return" to the "world" of the first section. The only indication, now, of any departure from the original narrative thread of the novella is a short orienting summary (a "catching-up" moment) provided by the narrator:

»Wie ist das doch«, sagte mein Bekannter, der mit mir aus der Gesellschaft gekommen war und ruhig neben mir auf einem Wege des Laurenziberges gieng.

“But how is it,” said my acquaintance, who had come with me from the party and walked calmly beside me on a path of the Laurenziberg (BEK 92).

The commencement of this scene, with its backward look to the opening scenes of the novella, indicates a certain embarrassment at the structural (or anti-structural) extravagances of the previous section. This resumption of the narrative of the everyday is not a Kleistian re-framing of a shock-event within quotidian space. The shock-event (the narrator’s outward cry) is fully stricken from the record, and the novella revises itself, linking back to an earlier moment that precedes the de-realizations of the narrative voice. Typically this transition is read as the text’s return to reality:

Unmittelbar danach beginnt dann, nach der römischen Ziffer, das dritte Kapitel, mit dem man sich nun, wiederum durch einen Sprung, in die normale Welt, die zugleich die gemeinsame Welt, die Welt der ‘geteilten,’ gemeinsam erfahrenen Wirklichkeit

Immediately thereafter begins, then, after the roman numeral, the third chapter, with which one is once again, through a jump, back in the normal world, which at the same time is the common world, the ‘shared,’ communally experienced reality (Schillemeit 194).

Schillemeit’s description of this new beginning clearly articulates a sense of relief and return at having moved beyond the putative dream world of the middle section. And yet, passing beyond the Roman numeral, it is precisely the radicalized notion of a “shared world” that has now been left behind, repressed and (as if editorially) omitted. The vacuum that, moments ago, broke into existence—between

the conclusion of the fat man's monologue and the narrator's cry into the crowd— would seem to be the clearest articulation anywhere in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* of something like a “shared world,” a world that cannot be posited through constative narration, but first exists through a sustained interlocution. The fat man's bond with the narrator, and the narrator's unrealized bond with a passer-by: these *would* have been fragments of an idea of a shared world, a world that would not be set out by a disembodied stream of text on a page, but in the transfer of a voice from mouth to ear. The “shared world” that returns in the third section is, then, a shared world where there is again a dominant narrative voice that quotes and embeds the speech of the other as a function of its own discourse.

Once again in this, strictly speaking, *narrative* mode structured according to the impasse, the text undertakes an explicit thematization of the problem of love. The acquaintance speaks of his social habits, somewhat haltingly and cryptically, in a short monologue:

»Ja, jetzt will ich dieses sagen. Wissen Sie, ich lebe regelmäßig, es ist nichts auszusetzen, alles was nothwendig und anerkannt ist, geschieht. Das Unglück, an das man in der Gesellschaft, in der ich verkehre, gewöhnt ist, hat mich nicht verschont, wie meine Umgebung und ich befriedigt sahen, und auch dieses allgemeine Glück hielt sich nicht zurück und ich selbst durfte in kleinem Kreise von ihm reden. Gut, ich war noch niemals wirklich verliebt gewesen. Ich bedauerte das bisweilen, aber benutzte jene Redensart, wenn ich sie nöthig hatte. Jetzt nun muß ich sagen: Ja ich bin verliebt und wohl aufgeregt vor Verliebtheit. Ich bin ein Liebhaber von Glut, wie ihn die Mädchen sich wünschen. Aber hätte ich nicht bedenken sollen, daß gerade dieser frühere Mangel eine ausnahmsweise und lustige, besonders lustige Drehung meinen Verhältnissen gab?«

“Yes, I want to say this. Do you know, I live regularly, there is nothing to criticize, everything that is necessary and approved happens. The unhappiness to which one is used to in the society that I dwell amongst has not spared me, as my surroundings and I myself saw with satisfaction, and also this general happiness did not withhold itself and I myself could speak of it in a small circle. Good, I had never really been in love. I regretted that sometimes, but I used that



way of talking when I needed to. Now I must say: Yes I am in love and certainly excited with amorousness. I am a lover of fervor, as girls wish it. But shouldn't I have thought that precisely this earlier lack gave my circumstances an exceptional and cheerful, especially cheerful turn?" (BEK 92-93)

The acquaintance describes two stages of his social life: a stage before the experience of love, which was marked by a balance between an atmospherically determined unhappiness and a "general" happiness; then, a second stage, after this experience of love, where he begins to feel that the liminal social state *before* the experience of love was marked by a potentially exciting lack. At bottom, the acquaintance seems to express a self-conscious nostalgia for the lost instability of a life that preceded the formation of intense erotic bonds. Out of this speech, delivered as a confession to the narrator, one might expect an intrigue or chemistry to emerge between the two young men, who again find themselves in a private and potentially liminal situation. But the narrator, it becomes clear, is not listening at all to his acquaintance's monologue. The impasse of the character drama, so firmly established in the story's second section, continues without relent:

»Nur Ruhe, Ruhe«, sagte ich theilnamlos und nur an mich denkend, »Ihre Geliebte ist doch schön, wie ich hören mußte«.

"Calm now, calm," I said uninvolved and thinking only of myself, "your lover is definitely pretty, as I have heard" (93).

Following this, the narrator delivers a short speech<sup>27</sup> about the fragile beauty of clothing laid over the contours of the body (clothing being the innermost constraining horizon of human life, as the smallest-level covering or barrier mentioned in the epigraph poem). Impatiently, the acquaintance calls attention now to the narrator's

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<sup>27</sup> This speech was also published separately, as an autonomous text, in *Betrachtung*.

continuing strategic avoidance of conversation, and insists that the narrator reveal any underlying intention:

»Doch habe ich Sie öfters während des Weges danach gefragt, ob Sie das Mädchen schön finden, aber Sie haben immer nach der andern Seite sich gedreht, ohne mir zu antworten. Sagen Sie, haben Sie etwas Böses vor? Warum trösten Sie mich nicht?«

“But I asked you multiple times on the way whether you find the girl pretty, but you always turned away to the other side without answering. Tell me, are you planning something malicious?”

The acquaintance’s question as to the narrator’s *plan* resonates with my own reading of the repeated impasses of the text. Is this non-dialogue, in fact, going anywhere? Is there an underlying plot structure that is furtively escalating toward an actual event, or will any event that is deserving of the name (such as the radical reframing of the narrative voice in the previous section) eventually be folded back into an eternally recurring alternation of convergence and divergence of the two characters? Moments later the narrator “reveals” (as an *Ersatz*-event) that he is engaged to be married. This putative but possibly improvised revelation, which throws the acquaintance into desperate confusion, “confirms” now retroactively that the more destabilizing experiences in the novella have merely been an intermittent distraction from an ongoing cycle of social reproduction, the temporary straying of a young man away from his reentry into the bourgeois family, where he will accede to a secured position within a social hierarchy. Here, the novella’s unending impasse is explained with reference to a pre-established endpoint of the protagonist’s biographical trajectory—an endpoint that would lead him past that second “experienced” stage, described above in the acquaintance’s monologue, of being “beyond love,” where an experiential “lack” in the self has been eliminated, and this self has been completed and stabilized. From the start, *nothing* was predestined to

occur, for the narrator-protagonist was always already complete.

Having witnessed this gesture of self-completion—the revelation of that narrator’s engagement—the acquaintance commits an entirely unexpected act that breaks open his own bodily boundaries, and violently re-asserts the lack that, he insists, has been lacking. Already having bared himself by partly undressing earlier, the acquaintance now attempts to increase the bodily proximity of the narrator, politely asking him to lay a hand on his forehead. Then, fully unexpectedly, he draws a knife from his pocket and stabs himself in the arm. From here, an unforeseen erotic scene unfolds: the narrator eagerly tears open the acquaintance’s shirt and sucks the blood from the wound:

Da zog mein Bekannter ohne Umstände aus seiner Tasche ein Messer, öffnete es nachdenklich und stieß es dann wie im Spiele in seinen linken Oberarm und entfernte es nicht. Gleich rann Blut. Seine runden Wangen waren blaß. Ich zog das Messer heraus, zerschnitt den Ärmel des Winterrocks und des Fracks, riß den Hemdärmel auf. [...] Dann saugte ich ein wenig an der tiefen Wunde.

Then my acquaintance unceremoniously pulled a knife out of his pocket, opened it contemplatively and stabbed it then as in a game into his left overarm and did not remove it. Immediately blood ran out. His round cheeks were pale. I pulled the knife out, cut the sleeve of the winter coat and the dress coat, ripped the shirt sleeve off [...] Then I sucked a little on the deep wound (96)

Whereas the central “event” of the novella’s middle section was a jarring “opening up” of the text to the authority of a bystander, and the full forfeiture of its capacity to narrate, the “event” of this final section is a literal opening-up of the flesh to the mouth of the other, accompanied by a stripping-off (by both parties) of the remaining layers of textiles that would separate them. What could not be accomplished through conversation happens finally through a literal laying-bare and exchange of bodily fluids. The narrator has gone from being a “helpless monster” who cries out to an unseen other, to a recognizably vampiric monster who incorporates

alterity by physically sucking its substance into himself. A parallelism inheres: In the scene wounding and sucking, Kafka's text reiterates in literal, material terms the act of "opening" that occurred in the previous section. What does *not* happen, however, is a definitive act of erotic or sexual fulfillment.<sup>28</sup> Following this moment, where the boundaries between the two are temporarily blurred, is a resumption of the ongoing conversation between the two men, peppered with many of the same dubiously polite phrases that have made up so much of the novella's dialogue. Certain images from previous sections, moreover, are repeated here: the words of the epigraph poem, for instance, return almost verbatim (this time in second-person) as the narrator attempts to console his acquaintance:

Du bist so schön gestellt, von Freundlichen umgeben, am hellen Tag kannst Du spazieren gehn, wenn viele Menschen sorgfältig gekleidet weit und nah zwischen Tischen oder auf Hügelwegen zu sehen sind.  
You are so nicely placed, surrounded by friendly ones, and on a bright day you can go strolling, when many people are to be seen going, neatly clothed, far and near between tables or on the paths of the hills. (97)

The narrator, in poetic language, reiterates the placement of the horizons that constrain movement. Here, on the final page of the story, the same limits on the freedom of the subject (limits presented *as* freedoms) become reinstated. The cyclical return of the beginning notes of the novella contribute to a general estrangement-effect: it is as if the most shocking moments of "opening" in this text (the outward-screaming monologue and the open wound) were part of an ongoing and

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<sup>28</sup> The ultimate non-consummation of the erotic bond between the two characters could be read as a rigorous instantiation of queerness, in that it does not push toward a mutual, coital fulfillment, but remains suspended in a dual, parallel movement of an entwining, but never fully "coupled" pair. This queer aspect of Kafka's prose would merit comparison with Katrin Pahl's recent work on Kleist's *Penthesilea*, which argues that language and feeling in that drama are mutually involved in a relation of "homo-reference" that never allows their permanent convergence, but rather in an ongoing dance of mutual mimicing, blending and separation.

fully naturalized cycle of social life.

*Polite Monstrosity or PLEASE, FORGIVE ME*

One startling difference that the novella has made, by its closure, is the disturbing discoloration and disfiguring of a familiar mode of social intercourse: the polite interlocution composed of such automatic modes of address and exchange: “Lieber,” “Verzeihen Sie.” A mendacious weight is now, at the novella’s end, associated with the rhetoric of politeness. Rather than hiding a monument in the bushes of a garden (like Kleist), Kafka buries stabs and screams in automatically uttered, polite mannerisms.

Politeness, as a guiding trope in Kafka’s works, has been cursorily addressed but not yet exhaustively studied. In their distinctly non-argumentative work on Kafka, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari list off a number of characteristics of Kafka’s emergent literary voice: “a new sobriety, a new and unexpected modification, a pitiless rectification, a straightening of the head. *Schizo politeness*, a drunkenness caused by water” (26; my emphasis). Each of these enigmatic capsules of thought would require a great measure of unpacking, and these readers only briefly return to this intriguing notion of a “schizo politeness” in Kafka’s work, which, they assert, is part of a pervasive “mannerism” in Kafka’s work that contributes to the constitution of his “Schizo-buffoonery”: “the mannerism of politeness tends to separate that which is contiguous (Stay back! A bow, a too studied salute, an overly insistent submission—this can be a way of saying “Shit” to the authorities)” (80). Politeness, as described here, introduces a distance or barrier between interlocutors, between social agents.

It remains to be explained how this definition of politeness would articulate with the mannerisms of the interlocutors in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, especially

with regard to the subversive potential ascribed to it by Deleuze and Guattari. Kafka's novella is permeated with ritualized politeness: characters continually beg one another for forgiveness, and the first piece of dialogue to be uttered is "Verzeihen Sie" ("Forgive me"). Perhaps the most frequent phrase used for direct address is, in varied forms, the "mein Lieber" ("my dear man"; BEK 58). Even amongst the exoticist, orientalist imagery surrounding the fat man in his desperate plight in the river, this manner of address persists: »Lieber Herr am Ufer, versuchen Sie es nicht, mich zu retten« ("Dear Sir on the shore, do not try to save me"; 70). Elsewhere, characters ceremoniously kiss each other's hands: "Da küßte er weinend abwechselnd meine beiden Hände" ("There, crying, he kissed both of my hands, alternating between them"; 73). Amidst these ritualized mannerism, it is virtually senseless to try discerning which expressions of affection announce an enduring desire for the other, and which ones arise from habit. The worshiper seems to suggest that irony of polite compliments could only be overcome by doubly ironizing it:

Als ich das gesagt hatte schien er sehr beglückt. Er sagte, daß ich hübsch gekleidet sei, und daß ihm meine Halsbinde sehr gefalle. Und was für eine feine Haut ich hätte. Und Geständnisse würden am klarsten, wenn man sie widerriefe.

As I said that he seemed very happy. He said that I was nicely clothed, and that he very much liked my neckband. And what a fine skin I had. And that confessions were clearest when one took them back. (78)

Politeness deigns that utterances are always already immunized with a deactivated affective tenor, and therefore a modified version of indirect speech (confessions that are retracted) must take the place of a directly confessional speech that has been made impossible. The infusion of a block of direct speech with politeness has the effect of bracketing its very *directness*.

With the idea of politeness as *distance* and *indirectness*, Deleuze and Guattari have convincingly pointed to an aspect of polite discourse that is central to Kafka's voices, which work on a conception of politeness (Höflichkeit) with a long history in the western intellectual tradition. Paraphrasing Schleiermacher's theory of politeness, the cultural historian Eckart Machwirth writes that "everything direct (alles Direkte) attests [for Schleiermacher] to a lack of sociability (Geselligkeit) and therefore to a lack of politeness" (107). But while Schleiermacher saw this distance (indirectness of thought and action) as the condition of possibility of sociality, the pessimist Schopenhauer would see politeness as a mechanism for producing actual bodily distance: whereas pigs will huddle together in the cold, reforming as a collective even after they have dispersed in a brawl, we (humans, who are still pigs) have learned to produce a middle ground between absolute proximity and dispersal: "The middle distance, which [the pigs] finally discover and through which a being-together can be sustained, is politeness and refined custom (feine Sitte)" (109). The practice of politeness has produced the human social individual out of its, as it were, animal sociality. Kafka appears curious, in his writing, to see how politeness might be deployed, in radicalized and estranged forms, to indicate the semantic *directness* and social-bodily *closeness* to which politeness would be genealogically (and negatively) linked.

The interlocutions of Kafka's characters in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* are suffused with an automatic politeness with a strong distancing effect: it is accordingly difficult, in reading the text, to distinguish between formal convention and destabilizing (and so, de-formalizing) affection. This ambiguity carries into the general uncertainty of the novella's plot development: when the male protagonists confide in one another, their discourse is shot through with a distancing, unrelentingly respectful form of address that is employed with such frequency that it becomes a

rhythmic interjection that introduces no new content. A kind of automatized affection is assumed (and at the same time nullified) at the outset of each interaction.

The question of what the content, or meaning, of politeness could be, emerges already in the first node of social contact in the novella. The first actions witnessed in the novella are bows and handshakes; the first words of the “acquaintance” to the narrator are likewise *nice*: “Verzeihen Sie, dass ich zu Ihnen komme” (“Please forgive me for coming to you”; BEK 47). In total, the acquaintance asks for forgiveness three times, for (a) coming, (b) speaking and (c) slyly revealing his erotic feelings (48). Each social gesture produces a debt to the addressee, a guilt that must be pardoned. But this tone of indebtedness or modesty is cynically glossed over as the narrator prepares his response: “So redete er” (“So he spoke”; 48). The request for forgiveness, since it is received by the narrator as nothing more than a rhythmic formality, is ignored, and the narrator instead prepares a response that does not answer the acquaintance’s confessions, but instead presumes to answer to something else, something underneath it. Politeness generates an interpretive paranoia, whereby each response responds to something that has not been said, since the words in the polite utterance are assumed to have no meaning. What would happen if the narrator *were* to forgive the acquaintance? This question is made irrelevant by the plotting habit of the novella: Kafka’s narrator has learned that the imperative “forgive me” is without weight, concentrating instead on the erotic details of the young man’s story.

A more pointed, but still implicit critique of politeness can be found in one of the embedded stories later in the story, where the city shopkeepers’ talk is reproduced as a series of mechanical linguistic gestures that hint at an underlying violence: “Guten Tag – Der Himmel ist blaß – Ich verkaufe viele Kopftücher – Ja, der Krieg” (“Good day – The sky is pale – I sell many headscarves – Yes, the war”; 77). Here, the affirmation of “good day” is set directly into parallel with a quietist attitude to the



threat of war. Lines later, the same juxtaposition is repeated: “‘Lieber Mann,’ sage ich freundlich, ‘es wurde ein toter Mensch zu Ihnen gebracht. Zeigen Sie mir ihn, ich bitte Sie’” (“‘Dear sir,’ I say in a friendly manner, ‘a dead man was brought to you. Show him to me, I beg you’”; 77). It is as if the politeness of tone calls forth death out of itself.

The two culminating shock-moments of Kafka’s novella are both couched in superlative politeness. The screaming-out of the narrator to the passers-by, as I have mentioned, is rendered in perfectly polite language: “Bitte, vorübergehende Leute, seid Sie so gut”. A superlatively jarring moment that abruptly and shocking cuts apart the distance between fictional character and the implied reader, and fully redefines the text from within, is still rendered in a polite and distanced tone, so that one can still puzzle over the meaning of “good” in the monstrous narrator’s cry. The very same movement of language that appears to rush outward in a frenzied monologue remains compatible with the mannerisms of polite society. A similar juxtaposition occurs in the wake of the acquaintance’s desparate self-wounding: he repeats the same words that initiated his relationship with the narrator (“Verzeihen Sie”), and is in turn called “Lieber” by the narrator, with the subtle introduction of the “Du” form. A polite switch from formal to the informal address has been occasioned by nothing less than an exchange of real blood, and (underneath the surface, carried over from the last section) the experience of a total collapse of the structures of the narrator’s reality.

The final estrangement effected by Kafka’s novella is a cutting-apart of the vocabulary of politeness, so that its practices of distancing are juxtaposed with experiences of existential and lethal proximity. What do words like *Bitte* and *Lieber* mean at the end of Kafka’s novella? They could be automatic interjections, or they could be indices of an intimacy that would tear the fabric of reality. In its last pages, Kafka’s novella succeeds in charging apparently banal and uneventful situations with

a strong, yet spectral, latent content. In the final scene—when the narrative has ostensibly returned to a realist mode that is free of hallucinations and ghosts—a strange, invisible intimacy hangs in the air around the two men:

Als ob unsere Sorge alles verdunkelt hätte, saßen wir oben auf dem Berg, wie in einem kleinen Zimmer, trotzdem wir doch schon früher Licht und Wind des Morgens bemerkt hatten. Wir waren nahe beisammen, trotzdem wir einander gar nicht gerne hatten, aber wir konnten uns nicht weit von einander entfernen, denn die Wände waren förmlich und fest gezogen.

As if our worries had darkened everything, we saw up on the mountain as in a small room, though we had indeed already noticed earlier the light and wind of the morning. We were close together, though we did not like each other at all, but we could not distance ourselves very far from one another, for the walls were drawn properly and tightly. (96)

This is a barrier that was not previously present in the text: a spectral wall that presses the two figures together, despite their dislike of one another. The narrator's cautious and cynical *polite* engagement with his interlocutor has brought about an inescapable intimacy that is at once invisible-spectral and palpable-corporeal. In the end, the smallest and most banal phrases of social intercourse appear to harbor in them a muted scream that could reach out and break apart the shaky configuration of bodies rooted on the bench. Kafka's novella, then, has managed to "cut apart the face," insofar as the *face*, like the polite gesture, is a naturalized technology of social interaction, a way of entering-into-relation that, at the end of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, is endowed with a potentially monstrous valence.<sup>29</sup> For each word of affection now carries with it the shadow of a formative power to establish durative,

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<sup>29</sup> The *Gesicht*, if we are to adopt the universalizing, but Europe-derived sociological definition of the term, is a metaphor for personal worth, or "das in Termini sozial anerkannter Eigenschaften umschriebene Selbstbild, das ein Gruppenmitglied für sich in Anspruch nimmt" ("the self-image, circumscribed by socially recognized characteristics, that a group-member claims for itself"; Lange 4)

tight, fateful bonds.

### *Literary History of the Scream*

The idea of the *artwork as scream* introduced when Kafka's novella transforms into a cried-out monologue, is admittedly not exclusive to this particular text by Kafka, nor is it unique within German-language traditions of writing. The early Nietzsche, in his lectures on the origins of language, would see the scream (or cry, *Schrei*), in the words of Andreas Anglet, as "höchster Punkt der ursprünglichen ästhetischen Ausdrucksform" ("the high point of the originary aesthetic form of expression"; 501). The early Nietzsche—as opposed to the later Nietzsche, who would mostly use the term *Schrei* as a disparaging term for dilettantish art—defines the scream as the beginning of the insertion of the will into a symbolic structure, terming it the "Rausch des Gefühls" ("sound of feeling"), in which the "Symbolik des Tons" can first emerge ("symbolics of tone"; quoted after Anglet 501). The scream is not strictly speaking a regressive or *animal* moment; in Nietzsche's anthropology, it marks the threshold of artistic creation, which is in its inception bound to the body. How much does Kafka's scream in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* share with the Nietzschean foundational scream?

To answer this question, I will attempt to triangulate the position of the monologic scream in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* with reference both to the early Nietzsche, and to a near-contemporary literary text that ostensibly falls within a contiguous artistic movement, namely, expressionism. For, although I have not yet called Kafka's novella "expressionist," its monstrous shapes, swirling mountain landscapes, streets and screams would, bundled together, suggest an affinity with other visual art and literature from the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular,

the outward scream of Kafka's narrator suggests a strong relation to expressionist prose, such as the work of the Polish writer Stanislaw Przybyszewski, who wrote in both Polish and German, and who published a novel entitled *Der Schrei (The Scream)* in 1918 in German, having finished composing it by 1914/15.<sup>30</sup>

As in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, Przybyszewski's novel, which was inspired by Gustav Klimt's eponymous painting, associates the motifs of the *street* and the *scream* with an experience of profound un-knowing. The protagonist, the world-weary painter Gasztowt, feels he has been unable to capture the essence of the street, and looks in horror at his banal paintings, and their mere indexing of the "Marktgeschrei" ("market cry"; 234). Here his artistic regrets: "Er hatte eine gewaltige Synthese der Straße schaffen wollen, ihre Ewigkeitssymbole, ihre schauerliche Geheimnisse offenbaren: sie in ihrem grausigen Umfang erschöpfen" ("He had wanted to created a mighty synthesis of the street, its eternal symbols, to reveal its horrifying secrets: exhaust it in its ghastly breadth"; 234). It is not until Gasztowt witnesses the scream of a woman attempting to drown herself (whom he then rescues) that he suddenly experiences these "secrets." In the moment of the woman's jump from the bridge, Gasztowt edges toward a revelatory aesthetic experience:

Und plötzlich hörte er einen gräßlichen Schrei – nein, er *hörte* nichts, er *sah* nur einen lautlosen Schrei – *sah* ihn deutlich, – *sah*, wie die Atmosphäre barst, als ob ein Feuerpflug eine flammende Furche in ihr aufgerissen hätte

And suddenly he heard a dreadful scream – no, he *heard* nothing, he only *saw*

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<sup>30</sup> The book was published in Polish in 1917, and until a critical edition in 1992 appeared through the Igel Verlag, only two other editions of the novel were printed in German, in 1986 in West Berlin, and in 1987 in the GDR (Przybyszewski 1992). Przybyszewski wrote primarily in German, yet has received little attention in German-language literary studies, with most scholarly interest focusing on his dramas. Przybyszewski's prose is marked by a dark tone of decadence and morbidity that is, superficially, more reminiscent of certain later Kafka stories such as *Der Geier* (1921) than of the self-reflexive hall-of-mirrors that is *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*.

a soundless cream – *saw* it clearly, – *saw* how the atmosphere burst, as if a plow of fire had ripped a flaming furrow into it (238; author’s emphasis).<sup>31</sup>

Recoiling from this experience, the same phrase is continually repeated nearly verbatim: “[der] Schrei, in dem sich ihm zuerst das tiefste Geheimnis der Straße offenbart hatte” (“[the] scream, in which the deepest secret of the street had opened itself to him for the first time”; 241). From this experience, then, the painter can parasitically engineer an artwork that is *true* to the horrors of the outside.

While the early Nietzsche saw the scream as an originary moment in human creation of art as such, for Gasztowt the scream is the vessel of the “deep secret of the street,” the inner truth of the primal life that is imagined to be engendered first in thicket of the modern metropolis. Both ideas of the scream posit as a given an originary moment, on the threshold of a primordial nature, whose content is either (for Nietzsche) lost in the depths of time, or (for Gasztowt) lost in space and hidden as a subterranean secret. How does Kafka compare? When the narrator of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* reframes his novelistic discourse as a begging cry out to passers-by, Kafka’s text avoids both the primitivism of the early Nietzsche, as well as the esotericism of Gasztowt. For Kafka’s scream is a *request*, and its answer does not lie *in* the street (for there is *as yet* no street providing ground), nor does it lie in the founding moments of the human history (for the *ich* or that is narrating lacks a human form, lacks any bodily dimensions). The answer to the monologue lies in an as-yet absent respondent upon whom the narrating *ich* is existentially dependent. Despite certain gestures towards a primitivist aesthetic (the wilderness scenes in the middle

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<sup>31</sup> The images of a flaming sky, here, figure alongside a wide array of “expressionistic” images of cataclysmic landscapes, such as a wave of water towering, threatening, over the city. The function of the swirling, volatile atmosphere is, however, different than in Kafka’s text. In *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, the “swirl” of the landscape is let loose at the moment when interlocution breaks off, it is a reaction to a shift in the interrelation of discourses. In Przybyszewski’s novel, these images seem be part of a horrible, eternal nature that lies beneath the urban façade.

section), Kafka's text avoids resting on a spectral substrate of hidden secrets and past origins. It is, generally and thus very flexibly, about the problem—and ineluctability—of rendering sociality in language that is also socially constituted (for, as Bakhtin shows, language is always already part of a social dialogue). The *hidden* and the *latent* (as in the latent content of the polite gesture) appear in Kafka's text not as the indication of a secret, but as an emergent effect of this same problem of representation.

Kafka's novella problematizes, through a thick chain of estrangements, the quotation and interpolation of speech within prose narrative. In *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, the slightest interpolation of the words "he said" into the narrative are endowed with the potential to rupture or remake the imagined world. Every sound could unleash an earthquake, a vortex, or cause the melding of two individuals. As such, Kafka's early work demands an enduring sensitivity to the role of each utterance in the threading-together of a fictional world.

## CHAPTER 2

### DISLODGED FROM DEBT:

#### MONOLOGUE AND AUTHORITY IN ROBERT WALSER'S *ROBBER*-NOVEL

In this chapter, I will echo the last chapter by examining the re-visionary role of character monologue in Robert Walser's *Robber*-novel, another purportedly narrative work that enacts breaks from and in its announced genre. Walser's final novel, like Kafka's *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, has no definitive printed edition, and its fragmentation remains a material fact for any editor or reader. But whereas the publication of Kafka's novella is troubled by such decisions as *which* edition to consult (*Fassung A* or *Fassung B*), and which corrections and modifications to respect (crossed-out sections and punctuation marks), the pages of Walser's *Robber*-novel challenge from the very outset the entire enterprise of bookmaking and collation. In my own analysis, I have made extensive use of the standardized paperback edition of the novel provided by the Suhrkamp publishing house.<sup>32</sup> While the immense labor that went into the creation of this volume should always again be remembered and praised, an analysis of Walser's *Robber*-novel must unfold alongside knowledge that the collation of the source manuscripts into a novel-as-book remains, now as before, an experimental and speculative undertaking, for the *Robber*-novel belongs to the aggregate of Walser's late works known as the "Bleistiftgebiet" ("Pencil-region"), written by Walser in a diminutive script on separate scraps of paper, and not "decoded" until the second half of the twentieth century. In this chapter, I often resort to terms such as "beginning" and "end," and while there appear to be good reasons to

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<sup>32</sup> A number of scholars have to be thanked for this edition. Those involved in the novel's "decryption" were Jochen Greven first, then later Martin Jürgens and Annegret Jürgens-Kirchhoff, who worked through Greven's transcription.

assume that certain parts of this work belong in certain places, the fact that Walser left this work as *separate sheets* must trouble ideas of a cover-to-cover novel, and already forestalls assertions that its narrator continually *goes astray*. The word “novel” is, above all, a fiction written into Walser’s pencil-written micrograms, it is an idea *thematized* by the trickster-like narrator, but when I as a literary critic adopt the name “novel,” I am always entering a risk.

That said, Walser’s project of writing, in pencil, in a miniaturized version of Sütterlin-script, has received much careful attention from literary theorists; the “pencil-regions” have been considered as a systematic labor of an author’s self-erasure (Schwarz 1996), as a paradoxical project of learning to read anew through writing (Siegel 2001), and as an endeavor to establish an ethics of the self through “matriculation” in the matrix of script (Roussel 2009). My own reading, admittedly, will keep these questions of material and materiality on the periphery, and will attempt to read the posthumous transcription of the *Robber*-novel with regard to its narrative form, its rhetoric, imagery and structural *breaks*, which, I will argue, mirror the factual material divisions of the work without being identical to them. My own hypotheses about the legibility of this work as a novel are derived from the observation that the *robber*-figure represents a revision and rewriting of Walser’s earlier novelistic protagonists, and introduces against the backdrop of his wanderer-novels such as *Geschwister Tanner* and *Der Gehülfe* an estranged notion of *who* or *what* constitutes the center of a “good-for-nothing” novel. The episodic adventures of the early novels are replaced, in an estrangement that has contributed to an image of Walser as a high modernist, with a highly self-reflexive and labyrinthine prose that continually appears to wander away from whatever thematic focus had been adopted.

In order to hone in on my object of analysis—revisionary monologue—and its implications within Walser’s works, I will begin by repainting, in very broad strokes,



the literary-theoretical yield of the last chapter, and how it will remain distinct from the yield of this chapter. In these works by Kafka and Walser,<sup>33</sup> a high degree of material fragmentation prevents anything like a “definitive” unity of the text from being established, not even, perhaps, a “unity of the second order” that Bakhtin saw as the hallmark of the polyphonic novel, which despite housing “utterly incompatible elements” would still allow the formation of a multi-voiced whole (1984: 16). In Kafka’s early and Walser’s late writings, even the construction of such a unity is hampered by the problems of editions, additions and exclusions: which elements should be considered a part of this work, and which should not? Bakhtin’s admirable theory of dissonant unity, which allows one to think beyond conventional notions of “authorship” and “character,” nevertheless assumes as a basis the material collation of the book. He did not presume that the struggle between distinct and heterogeneous elements could actually provide a chronic hindrance to publication—which, in the case of Walser and Kafka, it certainly did.

Both Walser’s and Kafka’s texts, one could hypothesize, are the sites of a struggle between competing models of linguistic authority. In *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* and the *Robber-novel*, the authority to assert unity remains chronically in crisis, because of very specific disagreements and forceful juxtapositions. There would be multiple ways to describe this struggle, but I will speculate on a mode of description that allows one to put the struggles of Walser’s and Kafka’s texts into parallel: Kafka’s jarring novella *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, as I showed, juxtaposes two ideas about how a narrative voice is provided with content, substance and integrity. On the one hand, the novella mostly pursues a recognizable form of

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<sup>33</sup> The paths that critics have cut between Walser and Kafka are various: Roberto Calasso (2002) has discussed Walser’s “parentage” of Kafka, Hans Dieter Zimmermann (1985) has discussed their shared use of “parabolic” storytelling, and Nicole Pelletier (1985) has examined the common theme of existential disorientation, as well as institutional subordination, in both authors. My own putting-into-parallel of these authors is mostly motivated by an observation of the disruptive, generative-destructive role of oral monologue in their most materially unstable works.

descriptive narration, marked by the practice of gathering and recording details as apprehended from a single perspective: the narrative voice, claiming first-hand knowledge of the events described, creates a stream of words that replicates a lived experience. On the other hand, and on the other side of this narrative discourse or *Rede*, the novella articulates the idea of a resonating voice—manifested by the fat man’s monologue and reflected in the other figures’ monologic voices—that would not posit or describe a particular reality, but would instead function as a string that, bound to another interlocutor, holds its listener and the surrounding world in place. The fat man’s monologue, as a cord that attaches him to the first-person narrator, *must not* be cut off, otherwise the two are sent off into a dimensionless oblivion.

This second, existential notion of discourse as monologue, strongly recalls an idea of narrative embedding described by Tsetvan Todorov in his essay “Narrative Men,” built around the example of the *Arabian Nights*, where “characters” each exist as a discrete possible life-story, which would have to be told ceaselessly in order to postpone death and disappearance. Todorov’s model of embedding announces itself as a reading of Scheherazade’s string of mutually embedded tales, yet it slyly suggests itself as a broader solution to the problem of defining “character,” which has long remained a difficulty for structuralist poetics.<sup>34</sup> The universe, as imagined by Todorov

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<sup>34</sup> The idea of “character” persistently presents a problem for structuralism because its assumption in reading typically involves the projection of an individual psychology *onto* a text and makes assumptions about the text’s origin; in other words, to adopt the vocabulary of Jacques Derrida, designation of *character* edges towards an assumption of a *force* that would exist prior to, and linger within, the total simultaneous visible structure of the text (see Derrida 1978). Todorov attempts to solve this problem elsewhere, for instance in his article “Reading as Construction”, where he works to define character as something more than a “cipher” for “a paradigm of traits” (as structuralism might otherwise dictate), and yet decides that character can only appear when a code of *psychological determinism* is generated by a text: “[While] not every character has a character, so to speak, [...] as soon as psychological determinism appears in the text, the fictional character becomes endowed with character: he acts in a certain way, *because* he is shy, weak, courageous, etc. There is no such thing as character without determinism of this type” (quoted after Cohan 1984: 6). The intervention Todorov makes in “Narrative Men” is to identify character as an *outside* that is nevertheless written *into* a text: the *embedded narrative*, as a separate ontological layer introduced into the primary world of the text, comes to stand for that *other* reality that is the character (who is always somebody else’s other, somebody else’s listener and interlocutor). Any given text is always already a character, but this reality can only be seen once it has been reframed through its

in “Narrative Men,” is an infinite set of mutually embedded stories, each of which represents an individual life. Delirious as such a universe-image may seem, Todorov was certainly not the only one tempted to think through its possibility; at least one-third of Kafka’s *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* approaches this idea, as when it shows the fat man’s life to be dependent on the I-narrator’s attention, and this I-narrator himself begins to fade away as he screams out for a listener and interlocutor who could allow his own story to continue. Kafka’s novella does not let this idea stand, instead letting it seep into the darkness of a muted subtext, as a set of circumstances that both have and have not existed. As in a Kleistian novella, the ultimately traumatizing notion—traumatizing because it breaks apart the established narrative structure—of a monologue that holds the world around it in place, and *needs* another monologue embedded within it, is buried underneath the last patch of the novella’s text, where worldly things are ostensibly and uneasily put back in their proper place. The middle section of the novella persists as a false or bad memory of a moment when the surface of the novella was torn away, and an underlying or competing constituting principle was revealed. The rip, or wound in the text, remains unhealed insofar as this puzzling text continually requests intense rationalization and interpretive speculation on the part of a reader: projections of the *dream*, the *hallucination*, the authorial *mistake* and so on.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider how Robert Walser, an author who earned intense praise from Kafka, also undertook distortions and ruptures of literary form that could potentially reveal (or invent) an interrelation of world and voice alternate to the one established at the outset of the novella. Through varied acts of

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embedding *in or of* another text that is *somebody else*, another character. Thus, psychological determinism has been replaced by a much more grandiose idea of character: character is *every bit as complicated and dynamic* as a written text, and is not simply a deterministic moment within one text. Note that Cohan (1983) opts for an extra-textual idea of character, as a projection that is made by readerly intelligence that changes in an ongoing dialectic with what is inscribed into the text: to save the idea of character, Cohan *escapes* structuralism, whereas Todorov re-inscribes and multiplies it *ad infinitum*.

reduction and circumlocution, Walser imagines in his late work how the core tenets of novelistic narrative—the imparting of detail through a synthetic stream that posits events, biographical trajectories, settings, social and cosmological structures—could be stripped away from a text in order to probe at the possibility of an inherent sociality within language that inheres prior to, or behind, the literary artifice. The name for this sociality in Walser’s *Robber*-novel is, at at least at one crucial juncture, “Liebsein” (*R* 143).

In imagining a monologue that “breaks through” the established structure of his *Robber*-novel, however, Walser enacts an idea different from that of the early Kafka novella. In *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* language-as-sociality is a sustained *interlocution*: the existentially imperative synchronization of speaking and listening. Sustenance of monologue, in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, attempts to interrupt the literary text’s illusory *represented* narrative to underscore the participation of the text in an *interlocution* that is the precondition for writing (hence the *screaming outward* for a listener who would introduce *measure* to the text). In Walser’s work, the embedding of radically dilatory and interminable monologue serves a different purpose: interrupting the primary narrative discourse, the irruption of monologue introduces the idea of an affective substrate that precedes and makes possible any practice of storytelling. The narrator of Walser’s *Robber*-novel, by allowing the irruption of another’s monologue into his own discourse, allows the breaking-in of a kind of speech that is not simply raw material that would become an element of a story, but instead an expression of the foundational affect that is the precondition of his storytelling.

In this chapter I shall explore the way that affect is figured and indexed in Robert Walser’s final novel (or pseudo-novel). My interest in affect stems from the appearance of a paradox within Walser’s work: readers of this author have long noted

that the enthusiastic and joyful tone of his prose seems to hint at an inner sorrow. Walter Benjamin, in his short and influential essay, wrote that Walser's figures have a "Festglanz im Auge, [sind] aber verstört und zum Weinen traurig" ("festive shine in their eye, but [are] perturbed and sad to the point of tears"; 351). How does this distinction of manifest and latent content arise, and break down, in Walser's prose? How is this revelation of hidden affect involved in the flow of narrative time? Why is affect in Walser so frequently apprehended by way of an assumed irony (a happy gesture that betrays fear)? In my own reading, I hypothesize that this double vision of joy and sorrow, of hope and hopelessness, is imprinted in part by the overlaying and juxtaposition of embedded forms, and arises in the *Robber*-novel from a strong dissonance between the narrator's rambling, monologic discourse, and the protagonist's own itinerant speeches. Melancholy in Walser's late narrative is, to quote the title of a novel by the Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai, a "melancholy of resistance," which arises in part from the tension between a controlling, ruthless and reckless narrator, and the character who purports to free himself from functionalization in this narrator's discourse. Thus, I will examine how character monologue, in Walser's text, provides a site for the total repositioning of the material—filtered through a playful and self-contradicting narrator—that has constituted the novel thus far. These revisionary sites are staged as *lectures* (*Vorträge*), public rituals within the fictional world, which constitute a carrying-forth or a breaking-forth of an integral theory that retroactively takes account of the novel. As such, these lectures or *Vorträge* provoke a question about the stability and permanence of the world that has been envisioned through narrative. Lubomir Dolezel asserts that "the fictional world cannot be altered or canceled once its creator has fixed the constructing text" (26). Walser does not *disprove* Dolezel's assertion, which is after all bound to the idea that writing becomes *fixed* through the creation of a text.

However, Walser's novel exploits the ambiguity and authority of the idea of a "creator," a notion that undergoes numerous transformations at different points in the "pencil region" of this novel; to read the *Räuber* novel is to perpetually search for, and define, its creator.

Walser's visions of revisionary speech, because they are still bound to an aggregate of fictions, need not be taken as "bad faith" in an idea of the metamorphic powers of the robber-figure's charismatic oral improvisations. Rather, the *metaleptic* dimension of the robber's monologues—their upward contamination of the narrative layers above and around them—can instead be seen as Walser's attempt to rejoin his own idea of the "novel" with another genre he so frequently experimented with: the fairy tale. For, in his own peculiar revisions of the fairy tale, as I will show, Walser comes closest to exploring ways of writing about human life as a radically plastic, ever-improvised set of relations.

### *The Written and the Oral*

It may appear counterintuitive to speak of monologue *in* the works of Robert Walser: monologue, as a textual epiphenomenon, is apparently *everywhere* and potentially makes up *everything* in this writer's famously "talkative" prose. Jochen Greven, in the first-ever dissertation on Walser's works from 1960, spoke of the "predominance of 'monologic' forms of presentation," with which he meant to emphasize what he saw as the structural and thematic core of Walser's works: "a world of the (in the positive sense) free-standing and an (in the negative sense) isolated individual (Greven 23). Since Greven's foundational dissertation, which is driven by a particular vocabulary of postwar existentialism, critics have continued to

note the importance of fictions of the singular and monumental voice in Walser's prose. Peter Utz developed the term "Ohralität" (an untranslatable fusion of "ear" and "orality," i.e. *ear-ality*) to designate the dynamic relation between speaking and listening that is constitutive of Walser's self-conscious writing of the self, in particular in the late works. For Utz, monologue would be the ongoing *Selbstgespräch* (conversation with oneself) that, as simultaneous listening and speaking, generates ever more writing. Writing, in Utz's version of Walser, is pure auto-affection.

Another critic has perceived a palpable hostility between speaking and writing in Walser: in an inquiry into Walser's own insecure bearing towards reading his works aloud in public, Reto Sorg notes that a "fundamental conflict" at work in Walser's writing is the opposition of the "appealing 'speaking' of the ancients" to the "lifeless 'writing' of the moderns" (62). From this perspective, "monologue" would not necessarily stand in for an existential plight of "the individual," but rather would represent one side of a tension between the fact of a text's textuality and its dreams of a lost voice—a tension that, Sorg argues, is of "existential importance" in Walser's works (62).

From these critical perspectives, one gathers that monologue cannot simply be a delimited "part" of a particular novel by Walser; it would be, on some level, both a general *means* as well as a virtual projected *endpoint* of the works, a dream of voice that the texts ambivalently strive for but do not achieve.

In this chapter, being aware of the potential *ubiquity* of my object of study, I will be interested in looking at the interrelation of *character monologue* (the extended orations of fictional characters) and the pursuit of narrative. I will tentatively define monologue as the special duration of time, inscribed into the fiction of a work, when *only one uninterrupted voice of a fictional character is quoted at length*. By concentrating on how such monologues arise *in situ*, I hope to attain purchase on the

role of oration in generating and redirecting narrative and, most importantly, in projecting or dispersing an emotional subtext into the rest of the narrative.

“Geschwätzigkeit” (“chattiness”) is, for Walser’s reader Walter Benjamin, not simply pursued for its own sake as play; rather, it is the index of an inner sorrow: “das Schluchzen ist die Melodie von Walsers Geschwätzigkeit” (“weeping is the melody of Walser’s chattiness”; 351). In the *Robber*-novel, more precisely, this chattiness appears as the belabored attempt to inject a new kind of truth into a novelistic narrative that circles continually around ever-deepening *trouble*.

### *Natural Speech*

The novels from Walser’s Berlin<sup>35</sup> period already feature long, impassioned speeches whose duration and enthused intonation seems to exceed the formulation of a particular content. And yet such speeches, unlike those in the *Robber*-novel, seem directed by a utopian impulse to return to an undifferentiated state of nature.

A memorable episode in Robert Walser’s novel *Geschwister Tanner* (1906), as it bridges the distance between two stations of a continuing journey, and between two itinerant brothers, develops into *a romance of the spoken word contra the written word*: the episode begins with a written letter, and culminates with a directly delivered, impassioned monologue. Simon Tanner receives a letter from his brother Kaspar, a painter, extending a genial, longing invitation for the brother to visit him, and at the same time expressing an acute impatience with the letter as medium of communication that would be given over to mere “chatter”:

Aber ich will schaffen, schaffen und nicht darüber schwatzen. Aber komme bald, ich habe Sehnsucht darnach, Deine Stimme zu hören, deinen Kopf zu sehen und Deinen Hut auf Deinem Kopf.

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<sup>35</sup> See footnote 40.



But I want to create, create and not chatter. But come soon, I long to hear your voice, to see your head and your hat on your head (KWA IV 55).

Simon, in keeping with his portrayal as a spontaneous and habitually unbound character who, in the words of Jochen Greven, “steps through this world entirely freely and without losing himself to it,” immediately departs on the journey (Greven 24). Simon’s chosen mode of transportation is particularly striking: he chooses to walk the full route to the small town in the countryside where his brother is working, straight through for one full night without sleeping: “Warum sollte er nicht eine ganze Nacht lang wandern können” (“Why should he not be able to walk for a whole night”; GT 95). The narrator, through free indirect speech, continually insists that Simon’s resolution was freely chosen (not imposed through material necessity), and that he is convinced that taking the train would be a submission to cowardice. “Some anxieties” strike Simon as he departs, “Aber jetzt noch feige zurückzukehren und die Eisenbahn benutzen, das mochte er doch nicht” (“But now still to turn around in cowardice and use the train, he certainly didn’t want that”; GT 95). Simon’s resoluteness, as it is rhetorically couched, indicates a desire for fully unmediated experience; unlike with the letter, Simon wants to bring his voice to his brother with his own body. It is precisely such moments that would fuel the suspicions of a reader such as Elias Canetti, who argues that Walser is “the most camouflaged of all writers,” because “fear” is “something he denies all his life,” and “his work is an unflagging attempt at hushing his fear (151). Simon, then, denies fear and makes his insomniac journey on foot, punctuated again by such enthusiastic free indirect utterances such as: “Weiter ging es!” (“Onward it went!”; 95).

Simon’s departure occurs, additionally, under the sign of a near-ubiquitous trope of Walser’s works: the generous, solitary woman who reaches out to the itinerant outsider protagonist. Before his night walk, Simon visits his past girlfriend (she is

referred to as “Freundin”) Rosa, who gives him a glass of red wine and roasts a sausage for him over the stove. Rosa’s words, like the narrator’s, are marked by a dual-movement of affect:

Sie war sehr erfreut, ihn nach so langer Zeit wieder einmal zu sehen, nannte ihn einen bösen, treulosen Menschen, daß er sie so habe im Stich lassen können, sagte das aber mehr in einem schmollenden als in einem gereizten Ton

She was very happy to see him after such a long time, called him a bad, faithless person, that he could abandon her in such a way, said this however more in a pouty than in an irritated tone (95)

Rosa, bitterly mentioning that Simon “müsse ja sehr gut mit Frauen versehen sein” (“must be very well provided with women”) and noting that Simon does not deserve the sausage she’s given him, finally sends Simon off on his journey. Rosa’s partially quoted spoken discourse, filtered through the interpretations of the narrator, provide fragmented hints of what sort of larger narrative arc Simon is moving through. It is here, on this brief stopover with an old girlfriend, in a marginal moment of eating and drinking, that the traces of an “underlying” pain might intrude. Simon, in any case, does not acknowledge a conflict; he sets off promising that he will visit her more often.

The journey itself, then, is a chain of understatements: when Simon, walking through a dark pine forest, continually trips over stones, the narrator claims: “und das langweilte ihn doch ein wenig” (“and that did bore him a little bit”; 96). He concludes, as he passes out of the forest, that walking entirely alone in dark forests “ist nicht immer ungefährlich” (“is not always harmless”; 96). The structures of understatement are also manifested in the diffusing of moments of danger: when a large dog pounces on Simon, he simply stares at it and it thus does not bite him (96). Pains of exhaustion, thorns and detours eventually do drive him close to madness, but

the darkest stretch, punctuated by the hostile screams of a shadowy man along the way, is then balanced out by a sunrise over a utopian image of friendly peasants greeting him: “welches Bild der Behaglichkeit!” (“what an image of comfort!”; 99). Such are the auspices under which Simon arrives at his brother’s door to deliver an extended speech on the beauty of the brother’s renderings of nature in painting—an embodied *answer* to the disembodied *letter* sent by Kaspar.

The full block of text making up Simon’s “cried-out” monologue (it is punctuated only by the phrase “rief er aus”; 100) is explicitly cast as a *moment of truth*. The brother, having uttered no words since Simon’s arrival, follows the monologue with the words “Da hast du recht” (“There you are right”; 102). The oral outpouring (unlike the impatiently written letter that called upon the brother to visit) appears as an island of unfiltered truth that is delivered, unmediated, vocally from brother to brother. And what is the content of this speech? Simon speaks in a driven, enthused tone about the brother’s paintings, which he sees as a pure expression of a love for nature’s beauty: “Ich möchte ein Stück Natur sein und mich lieben lassen, so wie du jedes Stück Natur liebst” (“I would like to be a piece of nature and to let myself be loved, as you love every piece of nature”; 101). This song of praise transitions into a demand that the brother stop reproaching himself for his work, “weil es einen unruhig macht und weil die Unruhe ein häßlicher, des Menschen unwürdiger Zustand ist” (“because it makes one uneasy and because the unease is a hideous condition, unworthy for humans”; 102). Simon’s account of nature, here, comes close to resembling the “reines Sein” (“pure being”) that Jochen Greven identified as the spectral goal of Walser’s writing. Within the bounds of his speech, Simon can advance the idea “daß es nie ein Ende gibt in der Kunst” (“that there is never an ending in art”; 101). The bond of art and nature, *through* love, is projected as inexhaustible. Kaspar’s corroborating gesture, at the end (“there you are right”)

pinpoints the speech as an enclosed mass of truth.

Simon's speech, from the inside, appears to be located nowhere in the narrative time that has been plotted out: his presumed physical exhaustion is forgotten in the energy of his monologue. Rather than hindering Simon's ability to talk, he seems to have gathered up a positively charged impression of nature from his long journey, which he now releases directly, in space, to the interlocutor to whom he is bound as kin. During the special time of the monologue's delivery, the relations and circumstances that constitute the fictional space of the novel are gathered together and recast in a utopian light; thus, as an embedded or hypo-text within the larger semantic stream of *Geschwister Tanner*'s narrative, Simon's oration labors to craft an image of reality that would not be undercut, interrupted by ironizing details (as was the risk with the narrator's free indirect speech, where Simon's determination to cut a straight path through the night was confronted with hints of insurmountable pain). Simon's monologue must not cede to dialogue, lest he lose control over the semantic direction of his speech. For Simon, and for this version of Walser, orality temporarily fills up space with one determined meaning, suspending or retarding the dynamic flow of narrative, which, rendered in free indirect speech, juxtaposes the protagonist's thoughts and sentiments with atmospheric and biographical-historical details. Direct speech is imagined as a way of evading the strictures of a dialogic writing that *keeps track*: Benjamin noted that a defining characteristic of Walser's writing is that each sentence attempts to make the previous one be forgotten (1977: 350). Here, monologue steps in to aid the labor of forgetting of context.

The episode I am investigating belongs, one should remember, to the "early" Walser, where the effervescence and internal coherence of the protagonist's monologue depends on a triad of concepts that will become utterly problematic in the later Walser: namely, a pure notion of nature, a rarified idea of art, and the possibility

of preexisting and stable kinship relations. Simon is a brother, a lover of nature, and a lover of art. Every stage of his existence is, as Greven states, “provisional,” yet he can draw on transcendental categories to as the underlying pathos of his trajectory as a protagonist (55). By the time one arrives at Walser’s final novel, the posthumously titled *Robber-novel*, one finds not only a protagonist with a provisional existence, but a protagonist who no longer seems guided by any defined *pathos* of art or nature, and whose existence on the page is fleeting and ghostlike in its continual re-definition. Comparing the thematization of (un)employment in *Geschwister Tanner* to that in *Robber-novel*, one can see that Simon Tanner’s continual fleeing of any stable position or settled life is driven forward by an internal fidelity to a certain idea of beauty. Simon makes a living through temporary employment with a bookseller, a lawyer, and at a bank, a factory and as a houseboy: through all of this drifting, however, Simon remains a *sibling* with stable affinities to his scattered family, and to a nature that he always again returns to (the final page of the novel sees Simon ready to head into the mysteries of a winter forest).

For the “robber,” as “hero” of Walser’s final “novel,”<sup>36</sup> talking and wandering are (at the outset of the work) no longer, as for Simon, an exercise in an ineffable freedom, and there is no brother or sister waiting to hear the robber carry forth on natural beauty. Instead, the chatty robber—even when he purports fidelity to the beautiful—everywhere falls into a pervasive system of indebting. As a “Nichtsnutz” (“Good-for-nothing”), he is able to tentatively survive by publicly spewing out the triad of the “Wichtiges, Schönes, Nutzbringendes” (“True, Beautiful, and the Useful”)

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<sup>36</sup> The generous use of quotation marks in this first sentence is due to the suspicion or conviction that the identity of *any* aspect of Walser’s novel cannot be taken for granted; Oliver Steinhoff asserts this much when, linking Walser’s text to the opening of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, he writes: “Analog zum ersten Satz der *Ästhetischen Theorie* läßt sich über den Gehalt des Räuber-Textes sagen, daß in ihm nichts mehr selbstverständlich ist.” This uncertainty would encompass genre distinction and its accompanying conventions (such as novel, hero). However, because Walser seems to be playing with preexisting conventions, I still feel it is valid to use these terms (novel, hero) in order to make explicit what interventions *in* the phenomenon and institution of genre Walser’s work might make.

in monologue.<sup>37</sup> Around the commencement<sup>38</sup> of the novel's labyrinthine narrative, the Robber recounts a turning point in his life, a moment when he heard words that constituted "eine Möglichkeit der Weiterexistenz" ("a possibility of further existence"; R 10). These life-giving words, delivered by a housewife of his sponsor abroad, were:

Wenn du mich jeden Abend mit einem schönen Vortrag erfreust, will ich dich in meiner Küche kostenlos die saftigsten Koteletts braten lassen.

If you regale me every night with a beautiful lecture, I will roast for you in my kitchen the juiciest cutlets. (10)

She offers these reassuring words directly after the Robber's sponsor has noticed that, instead of actively pursuing "Kultur, Geist, usw." ("Culture, Intellect, etc."), the Robber has only been on a "Jagd auf Zerstreungen" ("hunting for distractions"; 9). But as the sponsor threatens to withdraw, the housewife moves in to compensate, since she (like the many sympathetic women who populate Walser's novels) appreciates the value of the Robber's uselessness: "Nicht alle Menschen sind von der Natur bestimmt, sich nützlich zu machen. Du bildest eine Ausnahme" ("Not all people are determined by nature to make themselves useful. You are an exception"; 10). The robber, appearing as a fully innocent and unaccountable outsider, will receive food and board for his distracted and distracting sessions of sheer talk. This possibility of a purely oral and non-instrumental occupation stands in stark contrast to the Robber's predecessor Simon Tanner, who is accused of switching jobs "mit einer unheimlichen Schnelligkeit" ("with an uncanny speed"; GT 17) and who refuses the call of his brother to "accomplish" something (13).<sup>39</sup> The Robber's

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<sup>37</sup> The extended passage reads: "Nur ein Nichtsnutz wie er kann so viel Wichtiges, Schönes, Nutzbringendes in einem fort aus dem Kopf fortlaufen lassen" ("Only a good-for-nothing like him can, all at once, let so much that is true, beautiful and useful run out of his head"; 8).

<sup>38</sup> "Commences," according to the convincing page sequence given it by Jochen Greven, who also collaborated on its transcription from the "encoded" *Mikrogramme*.

<sup>39</sup> Towards the beginning of *Geschwister Tanner*, Simon receives a letter from his brother Klaus admonishing him for his wandering life: "Mein Rat ist nun der: Harre aus, füge Dich drei oder vier

own fragile livelihood as a *talker*, more strongly than the picaresque wanderings of Simon, sets up a strong parallel between the form and the content of the *Robber-novel*.

The robber appears to be locked within an economy wherein his own production of language, which facilitates his further life as a protagonist, also fuels the ongoing creation of the novel. This link between the Robber's orations and the creation of literature is even, at times, made fully explicit: "Solchergestalt lauteten seine literarischen Ausführungen. Er sprach da gleichsam einen geistvollen Essay und hatte natürlich seine Freude daran" ("So sounded his literary discourses. He spoke, in a similar manner, a brilliant essay and naturally derived joy from that"; R 22). The mischievous narrator, a self-stylized author-figure, is himself candid about the economic necessity of writing for *his* existence as an author: "Diese Umschweife, die ich da mache, haben den Zweck, Zeit auszufüllen, denn ich muß zu einem Buch von einigem Umfang kommen" ("These digressions that I make have the purpose of filling out time, for I must arrive at a book of a certain breadth"; 103). The incompleteness, or even incomprehensibility, of the novel's protagonist appears rooted in a set of economic relations, whereby the *end* of creating a novel is instated before the *means* of plotting and narrating this novel have been established. The narrator refers to "mein Romanheld, oder der, der es noch werden soll" ("my novel-hero, or the one who should yet become it"; 11). The intimate parallel between the novel's writing and the character's distracted and loquacious intercourse is rendered in even sharper terms towards the end of the novel, where the Robber explicitly claims himself as a co-author, when he tells a suitor of Edith, his former romantic interest, that "er helfe einem Schriftsteller an einem Roman, dieser Roman sei klein, doch strotze er vor

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kurze Jahre unter eine strenge Arbeit, folge Deinen Vorgesetzten, zeige, daß Du etwas leisten kannst, aber auch, daß Du Charakter besitzt, dann wird sich Dir eine Bahn eröffnen" ("My advice is as follows: be patient, devote yourself for three or four years to hard work, follow your superiors, show that you can accomplish something, but also that you have character, then a path will open for you"; GT 13).

Kultur und Inhalt” (“he is helping an author with a novel, this novel is small, yet it abounds with culture and content”; 169). This line, in particular, provokes the suspicion of an ultimate interchangeability, perhaps even a *blending* or *identity* of the Robber and his author.

When juxtaposing these various moments of intense self-reflexivity—emitting both from the narrator, and from the robber himself—it seems the novel is presenting a fairly clear pattern of equivalences, which is bound up with what Stephan Kammer sees in Walser as an “Ökonomisierung des Literarischen, die zugleich eine Literarisierung des Ökonomischen mit sich bringt” (“Economization of the literary, which brings with it a literarization of the economic”; 200). The various layers of the text have become, if not interchangeable, then *exchangeable*—for interpretive purposes, they achieve a high degree of fungibility, so that one can say that everything that the Robber says is exchangeable and *is* exchanged to the end of generating more substance for the novel, and every interlocution and social interaction that the Robber engages in to further his own existence, *is* in the end cashed in as a means of expanding the breadth of the novel’s fabric. This is, to be sure, how it *seems* during the infamously exhausting experience of reading this “novel”: “Die fiktive Existenz des Räubers scheint nur einen Sinn zu haben: Das Vorankommen des Textes zu sichern” (“The fictive existence of the Robber seems to only have one reason: to secure the progression of the text”; Leistenschneider 65). The result of such an exchangeability of all textual layers is an infinite *mise-en-abyme*, which can be read either as a subversion of the economically dictated activity of producing the novel as a commodity, or as an obsessive drive to *answer* the call to create a novel at all costs and in the absence of any other motivation.<sup>40</sup> The Robber’s *Geschwätzigkeit* is

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Utz writes: “In der selbstreflexiven Spiegelung des Romans im Roman, die sich in seinem Zentrum öffnet wie eine Falltür, findet der Text diese Form des Auswegs als permanenten Umweg. Sie tritt an die Stelle der Identität der Hauptfigur, die der Roman nicht einfängt. Um diesen leeren Drehpunkt kreist der Text. So unterwerfen sich der Erzähler und sein Räuber, die ja beide



existentially bound to the *Geschwätzigkeit* of the narrator, who loudly represents the author-function of the work. Walser's texts gives strong indications that this connection should be made. The ever-digressive narrator states once, as an aside: "Bei Schriftstellern bedeutet Reden eine Arbeit, aber bei Handarbeitern ist Reden eine Schwatzhafigkeit" ("For writers speaking is work, but for handworkers it is a loquacity"; R 85). Here the narrator clearly links his own writerly activity to an extended labor of ongoing *talk*, thus bringing his self-image very close to that of the Robber. And, barely a page later, as if to furtively confirm the viability of identifying him with his protagonist, the narrator makes a sobering note to himself: "Ich muß immer achtgeben, daß ich mich nicht mit ihm verwechsle. Ich will doch keine Gemeinschaft mit einem Räuber haben" ("I must always be careful that I don't mix him up with myself. I certainly don't want to have anything in common with a Robber"; 87). The palpable irony of this passage is that, indeed, such a mix-up is inevitable.

Still, attempts to identify the meta-fictional devices of the *Robber-novel* with a total interchangeability of writing/authoring on the one hand and living/talking on the other hand would pass over the complexity involved in the traffic between the various unstable layers of the novel. When returning to the Robber's statement about discovering the possibility of "further existence" through the delivery of lectures, one might *linger* a while to examine the thematic bearing of these lines, before asserting a perfect parallel between the Robber's attempt to make a living, and the narrator's attempt to write a novel. For, while the *Robber-novel* appears to have *no theme* other than that of novel-writing itself, this theme is articulated in a peculiar and *finite* vocabulary, a limited repertoire of stylistic maneuvers and character-names. The

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gleichermaßen an der Herstellung des Romans beteiligt sind, dem gesellschaftlichen Anspruch des Romans und entziehen sich ihm gleichzeitig in die unendliche Progression" (419).

“labyrinth,” apparently infinite (to use a term from Utz), is nevertheless comprised of a particular tangle of hermeneutic inquiries, which are frustratingly repetitive in their diffusion, multiplication and reuse.

### *Debt, Guilt, Pursuit*

During the peak of his productivity as a novelist—during his time in Berlin<sup>41</sup>—Robert Walser never developed a plot structure around the unfolding of a hermeneutic mystery, no death or crime anywhere in his works is ever to be solved through a sequence of transgression, investigation and inculcation. The strongly episodic nature of his novels was never based around the discovery of a specific hidden fact, but rather around the gradual inherence of a particular feeling or bearing towards an uprooted, provisional life: the slow revelation of despair, hope and aesthetic bliss (*Geschwister Tanner*) or love and autonomy (*Der Gehülfe*). However, the scattered development of the plots in the *Robber*-novel aggregate around a superlatively vague mystery of guilt and debt, of moral transgressions and financial liabilities that are already written into the protagonist’s name, and assert themselves in the earliest scenes of the novel.

When the Robber claims that he found, in the words of the *Hausfrau*, a possibility of further existence, two peculiarities assert themselves: (1) a particular category of the feminine that the robber is “guilty” of seeking out, and (2) a rhetoric of the precious, the rarified and culinary. These tropes, in fact, are anticipated with relative clarity in Simon’s encounter in *Geschwister Tanner*, with his ex-girlfriend Rosa. Rosa, one will remember, offered a glass of red wine and a sausage (along with

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<sup>41</sup> Walser’s time in Berlin constituted a pinnacle of Walser’s public profile: “In Berlin fand Walser dann aber während einiger Jahre eine vielversprechende Aufnahme” (“In Berlin Walser found, however, for a few years, a promising reception”; Greven 7). Besides writing for prominent periodicals such as *Neue Rundschau*, *Die Schaubühne* and others, Walser published the novels *Geschwister Tanner* and *Der Gehülfe*, which sold enough copies to quickly merit a reprint (8).

words of admonishment) to Simon before setting off on his nocturnal journey. The *Hausfrau*, like Rosa, is associated with a general feminine generosity that continually funds and propels the provisional existence of the outsider protagonist, who politely promises something in return for the generous offering of sausage in the one case, and “juicy cutlets” in the other.

Whatever anxiety might accompany this process of indebteding is, as frequently in Walser, couched in a reassuring vocabulary of sweetening modifiers and affectionate intonation. The further existence of the protagonist is not free-floating, but rather is predicated on the formation of a particular form of social relation, which one could call *the affectionate debt*, with the entire semantic weight that accompanies that phrase: on the one hand, what is owed is owed *affectionately* and what is owed *is* affection. A comparison to Simon Tanner would be instrumental here: whereas Simon wanders the world of city/country as a free agent, setting up ties and leaving them behind as discrete and shifting stations on a journey, the robber, insofar as he is a character at all, exists as a function of rumors about various debts and fleeting affective bonds: he is “known” by the gravitational pull that he exerts at various nodes within a labyrinthine and unclearly (because often unreliably) envisioned world. The robber appears reflected in a question awkwardly posed by the narrator toward the novel’s start:

Ich weiß nicht, bin ich berechtigt oder nicht, wie jener Fürst Wronsky aus dem Buch «Erniedrigte und Beleidigte» des Russen Dostojewsky zu sagen, ich brauche Geld und Beziehungen.

I don’t know, am I justified or not in saying, like that Prince Vronsky from the book ‘Humiliated and Insulted’ by the Russian Dostoevsky, I need money and relations. (R 12)

The phrase “I need money and relations,” capturing in a single flash the problem of the robber’s figuration as a character, is placed at several removes away

from the protagonist: it is borrowed from another novel, attached to a misquoted name (the prince's name in Dostoevsky's book is *Valkovsky*, while *Vronsky* is from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*), of an aristocratic character who, within the social fields imagined by Dostoevsky, is clearly *not* justified in saying that he needs 'money and relations', and who is himself guilty of *insulting* and *humiliating* a number of other, deeply impoverished characters. The narrator's question ("I don't know, am I justified or not") ironically takes as its point of departure the hypocritical utterance of a demonic, predatory character who uttered this phrase "I need money and relations" as a final insult to the titular insulted and humiliated, after depriving the impoverished, banished and thus *kinless* Natalya of her fiancé (his son), instead marrying him off to a rich aristocrat.

*Within* this confusing chain of comparisons, the robber only registers by way of very shaky analogy: after discussing Valkovsky/Vronsky's cry for money and relations, the narrator reflects on his own situation and compares it to an experience of the robber's, in another situation of *indebting* and *inculpation*, where the robber is seen rudely throwing tip money (*Trinkgeld*) at Edith, who is working as a waitress at an expensive restaurant. The scene is presented as a suspended fragment; the robber appears in the blink of an eye as a hand that cruelly throws a coin to a woman whom (one finds out later) he is "feeding off." The fractured development of this thematic line of "money and relations," which is itself *indebted* to a phrase from Dostoevsky, foregrounds the primacy of discourse *about* money and relations, and the exchangeability of the parts of such a discourse, and backgrounds the psychological or biographical account of character. The idea that this manner of narration through prose could be indebted to Dostoevsky is, nonetheless, intriguing, since it apparently strays so far from the "verisimilitude of character" in Dostoevsky's works, which is achieved by exhibiting a hero's "own internal discourse about himself in all its purity"

(Bakhtin 1984: 54). I will return to this question when I examine the robber's *external* discourse about himself.

As for Walser's novel: the discursive intertwining of themes of *Schuld* (guilt/debt) and *love* both opens, and awkwardly closes, the novel. On the very first page, the narrator introduces a fragment of information about a debt of a "hundred francs" that parallel assertions about the robber's diffuse romantic involvement: "Er hat überall so seine Freundinnen, aber es ist nichts mit ihnen, und vor allen Dingen ist wieder nichts mit diesen sozugen berühmten hundert Franken" ("He had everywhere his female friends, but there is nothing with them, and above all there is again nothing with this famous, so to speak, hundred francs"; R 7). The novel finishes with a certain Frau von Hochberg bringing this debt (which is revealed to have been incurred by the robber with Edith, the lover) into discussion again, and offering two contradictory assessments of the status of the debt:

Was jene berühmten hundert Franken betrifft, die er Ihnen längst hätte aus nichts als Galanterie aushändigen sollen, so halte ich ihn für dieser Schuld vollständig entbunden, denn Sie haben ihn nun eben um der Versäumnis dieser Pflicht willen bestraft. Doch läßt sich ja hierüber noch zu jeder Zeit reden. Dieses Geld ist also für Sie keineswegs eingebüßt, und wenn Sie's durchaus wünschen, so sollen Sie auch fernerhin ein Recht darauf haben.

Concerning those famous hundred francs that he should have given to you long ago out of sheer gallantry, I consider him to be fully absolved of this debt, for you have now punished him for the neglect of this duty. But this can be discussed again at any time. The money is thus in no way lost to you, and when you thoroughly wish to have it, you should furthermore have a right to it. (185)

In this speech, as one of many possible "last words" offered in the novel, the speaker wavers between ascribing a financial debt and an emotional debt, and avoids providing a definite answer to the question of whether these issues of *debt* and *guilt* have actually been solved. So long as one searches the discourses of those who speak

about the robber, the novel remains a *mystery about a mystery*: a continual searching for a way of formulating the actual objective of a hermeneutic quest.

Appropriately, then, one can note that the critical debate over *what* and *whether* the protagonist steals, or *whom*<sup>42</sup> he robs has never been resolved, and is indeed only resolved to *any* degree of satisfaction within the robber's own discourse about himself. Early on in the novel, the narrator takes up two questions, which gain centrality through their use of frequently deployed terms: "War denn der Räuber nicht ein durchaus Unschuldiger?" ("But was the robber not thoroughly an innocent?; 49). A second question that could be interpreted as having the same meaning as the first, yet evokes a different set of associations, such as punishment and paranoia, is: "Verdiente er, daß man ihn verfolgte?" ("Did he deserve to be pursued?; 50). The German verb *verfolgen* does not translate perfectly as *pursue*, but I will adopt *pursue* as a practical stand-in to retain the meaning of "following" that is built into *verfolgen*.

The question of the Robber's innocence is linked, on the one hand, to his presumed lack of sexual interest in the young women with whom he comes into fleeting contact. He is innocent, moreover, due to the apparently childish "play" in which he publicly engages: for instance, spontaneously asking a stranger at a shop to marry him. But the question of "innocence" stands in tension with other occurrences narrated early on in the novel, such as the Robber's ethically questionable applauding of a public notice of the death of Walter Rathenau, for which the robber is, in one of the novel's final scenes, ostensibly explicitly punished. The narrator does not base his discourse on knowledge *that* the robber has robbed or gotten into a particular trouble; rather, he throws up questions, rumors and hints that *could* inculpate the robber. One is left, for the greater part of the novel, to sort through the details to see how ironic or

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<sup>42</sup> Here an attempt to define the robber *as* a robber, from Thomas Bürgi-Michaud: "So raubt der Räuber etwa die Seelenruhe eine Mädchens und verunsichert die der Mittelmässigkeit verpflichteten Mitbürger, indem er sie mit in seinen Roman hineinzunehmen verspricht. Er stiehlt Geschichten, als solche, die andere Autoren ersonnen haben, und formt sie in ureigene um" (260).

urgent the idea of “guilt” is—or to what extent it can ultimately be folded into a notion of *debt* (*Schuld*) to society, as the robber *owes* his continual existence to the generosity of (mostly female) acquaintances.

The question of *Verfolgung* is built into this problematic and scattered ascription of guilt or innocence. Has the robber earned this *Verfolgung*, and moreover, *is* he being pursued? No answer to these questions can be taken for granted, especially when one considers a statement, buried in the narrator’s digressive labyrinth of rumors and anecdotes, about the potential chronological and biographical “starting point” of the novel’s narrative domain. Probing possible reasons for the *Verfolgung* of the robber, the narrator draws attention to a putative premise on which the robber’s meandering and flirtatious life in this “city” began:

Wurde er wegen seiner Kindlichkeit verfolgt? Gönnte man sie ihm etwa nicht? Das ist wohl möglich. Und dann ist folgendes im Auge zu behalten: Er kam um ‘jene Zeit’ sicher krank in unsere Stadt, voll seltsamer Unausgeglichenheit, Unruhe. Es plagten ihn da sozusagen gewisse innere Stimmen. Kam er zu uns, um zu gesunden, um sich in einen heiteren und zufriedenen Mitbürger umzuwandeln? Jedenfalls litt er dazumal an Anfällen, die darin bestanden, daß ihm ‘alles’ verleiden wollte. Er war ziemlich lang nachher noch ungemein mißtrauisch. Glaubte sich verfolgt. Nun, das wurde er ja in der Tat, aber noch und noch lernte er – wieder lachen.

Was he pursued because of his childishness? Did one perhaps not grant him that? That is certainly possible. And then this is to be kept in mind: he came around ‘that time’ surely sick into our city, full of strange imbalance, unease. He was plagued, so to speak, by certain inner voices. Did he come to us to convalesce, to transform himself into a cheerful and satisfied citizen? In any case he suffered at that time from attacks that consisted in ‘everything’ making him suffer. He was for a fairly long time thereafter pretty mistrustful. Believed himself to be pursued. Now, this he was in fact, but little by little he learned – to laugh again. (61)

The many stops and turns of this short passage need to be slowly filtered through. Notable about this segment of discourse is how it makes explicit, through deixis, a number of interpretive horizons, within which the narrator’s project of

describing (or pursuing) the robber occurs. First, the narrator is not now simply an eccentric, meandering raconteur whose eccentricity matches that of the “chatty” robber; here, he speaks in the collective voice of an imagined “we” of the city, solidifying the subject of enunciation of the narrative as the public eye. This “we” reframes the digressive patterning of the narrator’s discourse as a compressed, heterogeneous but nonetheless monumental collective consciousness of a singular community. The robber as robber is *first* constituted through the eyes of this *we*, as he arrives sick in “our city.”

Beyond the assertion of a collective voice, this passage sets a determined temporal horizon onto the novel—it all began with the robber’s arrival at ‘jene Zeit,’ a moment in time which is rumored or fabled by this collective voice. For this voice, the robber has no established history. The “I” and “we” of the narrator, on the whole, do not claim a knowledge of this protagonist that extends past this moment of arrival, and the robber himself repeatedly refused to tell his own story until he conceded to hold a “Vortragsabend” (“lecture evening”) where he woke up “etwas Schlafendes” (“something slumbering”) inside of him (57). The robber arrived, then, in a state of partial or total amnesia, which ended with the commencement of his surveillance *in* and *by* the city; the narrator can claim: “Er war, kann man sagen, lange Zeit tot gewesen” (“He had been, one can say, dead for a long time”; 57). With the escalation of this rhetoric of amnesia, and even temporary death, the novel sets up a structure of conscious/unconscious and latent/manifest, and makes explicit that the novel is not licensed to pass into the realm of the unseen and unknown.

The passage quoted above, finally, explicitly introduces the possibility of pathology into the so-called “childishness” of the robber. He arrived in the city—and thus, in the novel’s realm of awareness—under the auspices of what is identified as an undebatable (“sicher”) insanity, indicated by a plague of inner voices.



The paradox, or at the very least, puzzle, that arises out of this origin-story is the double-pronged statement that the robber with his inner voices (a) *believed* he was being pursued, and that he (b) *was* in fact being pursued. That is, he was, at the beginning of his story, both paranoid-insane, and justifiably paranoid. The novel introduces an ethical problem: how to reconcile or combine these two ideas, and whether or not to pathologize the robber's marginalization. This conundrum returns me to the question of innocence: the robber is, on the one hand, in a condition to be seen as *guilty* by a public consciousness (he is pursued by the public eye), and on the other hand he is in a condition where a concern with guilt and innocence could be based wholly on a schizophrenic delusion. To ask whether the robber is innocent is, in some sense, to lend a legitimacy and substance to the inner voices that plagued him, to *become* one of those inner voices.

This passage is inconclusive—it is presented as a series of observations, speculations and memories linked together in a stream of consciousness. Rather than narrating, the novel is sorting through and listing out the different premises and prejudices on which narration would be predicated. But the narrator, ever a trickster, attempts to move beyond this self-reflexivity by providing a quasi-redemptive conclusion to the disturbing story of the robber's arrival, namely, with the claim that the robber has learned to “laugh” again, as if his inner voices and visions of persecution were only due to a lack of a sense of humor. Does the robber continue to be plagued by inner voices? To what extent is the robber's recent *Verfolgung* an effect of these plaguing voices? Each of these questions is carried along furtively each time the character's title “robber” is named, for his status as a thief or criminal might be imposed disciplinarily from without, or it might be his own torturous dream.

Keeping this web of contradictory associations in mind, one can expect that confusion and complexity will thicken whenever the narrator provides additional

explanations of this *Verfolgung*. The narrator continually introduces new perspectives on what constitutes the robber's guilt and pursuit, and thus on his 'outsider' status. Here, a new rationalization is provided for *Verfolgung* by endowing it with a pedagogical worth, thus tilting the novel toward the pathos of a *Bildungsroman*:

Im allgemeinen, so wird man glauben dürfen, wurde er verfolgt, weil sich das fast von selbst ergab, weil's leicht war. Man sah ihn nämlich immer so ohne jede Gesellschaft, so mütterchenseelen allein. Man verfolgte ihn damit er leben lerne

In general, one may be permitted to believe that he was pursued because it almost followed by itself, because it was easy. One saw him, namely, always without any companionship, so terribly alone. One pursued him so that he would learn to live (58).

Here, the mystery of the robber's pursuit turns into a *Bildungsroman*, as the narrator explains that the robber's pursuit from all sides—from with, without and also from the narratorial position—has the end goal of teaching the robber how to live. The word *leben* remains torturously undefined, the mystery of what this life would be is unsolved. Interestingly, the novel elsewhere contains a humorous dialogue between *das Leben* and *die Schule* where life literally pleads to be kept separate from schooling, and thus the entire generic project of the *Bildungsroman* is undercut by a baroque, allegorical dialogue: “Das Leben sagt: «Ich brauche eure eilfertige Hilfe nicht, sorget für euch selber», [...] Die Schule hat nicht die Aufgabe, das Leben zu verstehen und mit in die Ausbildung einzubeziehen. Für Lebensausbildung sorgt ja dann das Leben schon und jeweilen früh genug” (“Life says: ‘I don’t need your hasty help, worry about yourself,’ [...] The school does not have the task of understanding life and of pulling it into education. Life already takes care of life-education and that in any case early enough”; 110). If these concerns are in fact a guiding principle of the narrator's worldview, it is unclear why the robber would need to be pursued or placed “under watch,” as is so often claimed.

The conclusion one could easily reach from the juxtaposition of one passage to another is that this work is, in fact, only to be read in “snippets,” in single sittings, myopically, without worrying about the connection to earlier or subsequent passages. W.G. Sebald commented that Walser’s prose “hat die Eigenheit, sich aufzulösen beim Lesen, so daß man sich bereits ein paar Stunden nach der Lektüre kaum mehr erinnern kann an die ephemeren Figuren, Vorkommnisse und Dinge, von denen da die Rede gewesen ist” (“has the peculiarity of dissolving itself during reading, so that one already a few hours after reading can hardly remember the ephemeral characters, events and things of which was being spoken”; 133). This experience of the periodic, fragmented, non-totalizing and amnesiac reading of Walser’s prose has elicited a comparison of the prose to savory liquor. Matthias Zschokke writes: “Ich lese [Walser] nur sporadisch und nehme ihn dann eher zu mir wie Schnapps, in kleinen Schlucken. Und wenn ich dann benebelt bin, lasse ich wieder die Finger von ihm” (“I read [Walser] only sporadically and take him in more like schnapps, in small sips. And when I am clouded-over, I take my fingers away from him”; 25). Such appraisals of Walser’s prose should not be dismissed as “mere” anecdotes that miss a conceptual concern or aesthetic program built into Walser’s prose: they are provoked by its internal structure, and only contested by occasional moments of clarity, which appear all the more shocking for their explanatory potential.

Returning to the *Robber*-novel, one can say that the cacophony and self-dissolution of the narrator’s discourse, then, which wavers between the ascription of one genre and another, contributes to the impression of an unsolvable hermeneutic puzzle and a stubbornly un-interpretable work, in which the narrator continually changes his position with regard to the robber. One could collect an enormous list of contradictory statements, but I will end this section with one where the narrator blames others for pursuing and inculpating the robber with regard to his relationship

with Edith:

so muß es mir schwerfallen, mich glauben zu machen, der Räuber habe ihr irgend etwas zu leid getan und müsse wegen seines Vergehens vor sie hinknien. Es gibt Leute, die das nämlich absolut von ihm verlangen.

so it must be difficult for me to make myself believe that the robber did anything to hurt her and would have to kneel down before her because of his deeds. There are people who, namely, absolutely demand that from him (R 131).

The ethically troubling circumstance that a reader cannot know, from this narrator, whether the robber has inflicted any harm on any others, encourages a form of paranoid reading that would always need to look back and check if anything had been missed.

### *Public Exegesis*

Now, halfway through this chapter, I will turn my attention to moments of monologue that arise toward the close of Walser's work, and arguably expedite this closure. If there can be something like a "reversal" in a work whose prose is a weave of reversals and reflections, then it is the robber's closing speeches, where he effectively *indebts* an environment to *himself*, to which he himself appeared to be infinitely *indebted*.

As Peter Utz has asserted, the *Robber*-novel is something of a labyrinth that radically evades almost any kind of narrative ordering. Despite the work's near-total lack of organization, however, notable scenes of exegesis arise towards the end of the work, which are marked as institutional and public rituals that have as their goal the clearing-up of the Robber's mystery, as well as the clearing of his debts and the clarification of his guilt. Utz convincingly asserts that one of these closing scenes of

“reflection” parodies the *Bildungsroman* convention of the protagonist’s re-incorporation into the social order (in the manner, for instance, of Wilhelm Meister’s initiation into *Turmgesellschaft*). The robber might appear to rise above the labyrinth and provide a map of it, and thus a totalizing reflection of what has come before, but he *does not*. The robber, Utz argues, “remains a big child, not to be integrated into the claims of the grownup world,” and thus his revelatory speech, broken off in the middle, serves an exegetic-reflective end only through a thick veil of irony (417). Utz’ argument relies, however, on the notion that the Robber has *some* kind of ineffable identity (namely, that of a man-child) and that one has established, by the novel’s close, some manner of biographical fact.

To me, this reading falls short of identifying a compelling, and perhaps also disturbing, moment of re-framing that occurs in the Robber’s monologues at the novel’s end. What the robber says to his audiences is not nonsense, even if it does not successfully cement a biographical milestone in the protagonist’s story. One can read these monologues as moments of reflection that labor to impose (and thus, actively invent) a certain interpretation of what has come before; they gain a certain exegetic authority by sheer virtue of the fact that they come *last* and that little is uttered in their wake. The Robber’s monumental monologues at the novel’s end may be only ironically tinged performances, but they nevertheless make an irreversible difference in the structure of the novel and are thus “serious play.”

As many critics (along with the narrator’s own intimations) have emphasized, the *Robber*-novel is haunted by the possibility that the narrator and the protagonist could merge into the same personality; there is a “slip” or “error” already in one of the novel’s earliest scenes, where the robber responds to a public chastisement. His response, as it appears in the text, is: “«Ich habe kein Besitztum», erwiderte *ich* (“I have no property,’ *I* answered”; R 16, my emphasis). The meaning of these moments

of identification, or contagion, is perpetually in question; towards the end of the novel, it is suggested that the robber is collaborating with an author in writing a novel, intimating that the robber's influence on the narrator's *I*- and *we*-enunciations has permeated the work. There are, in any case, numerous possible forms of identification and influence, of which a *Doppelgänger*- or split-personality scenario would be only one model; in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, the narrator appeared *doubled* in a distinct way: through the revelation, or delusion, that the narrator's field of experience depended on the unbroken in-flow of the voice of the other. The scenario in the *Robber*-novel is not altogether incomparable to that in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, in that it is an apparent *Doppelgänger*-scenario that is not immediately explicable as the case of a narcissistic split personality. In both *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* and the *Robber*-novel, the existential bond to the other is not based around a discrete and preexisting personality that is then "split"; the twinlike bond of the pairing must first be established (or argued) through a narrative trajectory.

In short, if one claims that the narrator in this work "is" the robber, this still does not explain the meaning of the often *upheld*, if only virtual distinction, between the two subject positions. *When* does the distinction break down, and *how*? Possible answers to these questions will be sought in this section.

The robber is described from the start as one who gives *lectures*: he finds a means of further existence in exchanging his "beautiful lectures" for food, and his own biographical backstory is itself presented in a "lecture evening" that he holds for the public. These formalized, ritualized monologues are, however, never quoted in full; through the lens of the narrator's rhetoric, the content and length of the lectures remains radically undefined. The robber is repeatedly characterized as a 'loose cannon' given to the kind of *Geschwätzigkeit* that the digressive narrator frequently indulges in, yet his public fulminations and improvisations are often only cross-cut

with other pieces of dialogue and narration. Unexpectedly, it is not until the robber resolves to seek a medical diagnosis, and finds himself sitting opposite a doctor in a private office, that he finally produces a monologue that is fully quoted and never interrupted as it runs over the course of (in the paperback edition) several pages. I would like to designate this monologue as a crucial event (perhaps the *only* event deserving of the name thus far) of the novel, where the confusing tangles of ambiguous relations presented over the course of the text are suddenly recast in a new light—a light that seems to come from above and from outside of the preceding text.

Sitting before the doctor, the robber begins with a brief and direct admission, for which the doctor then expects exegesis:

«Ich bekenne Ihnen ohne Umschweife, daß ich mich dann und wann als Mädchen fühle.» Er wartete nach diesem Wort, wie der Doktor sich äußern würde. Der aber sagte bloß leise: «Fahren Sie fort.» Der Räuber setzte nun auseinander: [...]

“I admit without digression that I now and then feel like a girl.” He waited after this word, to see how the doctor would respond. He however only said quietly: “Go on.” The robber now explained: [...] (40)

At this point, it would appear that the robber is solidified into the role of patient, whose explanation will elicit the expert’s prescription of a course of treatment. But the robber talks, and keeps talking, and produces a discourse that retroactively transforms the structure of his “provisional” social existence, as well as his intimate interrelation with the narrator.<sup>43</sup>

The robber proceeds by undercutting the basic premise of his visit to the

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<sup>43</sup> Jochen Greven’s 1960 dissertation (reprinted 2009) convincingly employs the term “provisional” to capture the perpetually unbound nature of Walser’s protagonists (especially those in *Geschwister Tanner* and *Der Gehülfe*). Greven could not include a study of the *Räuber-roman* in his dissertation (for he would not ‘decode’ the work until the 1970s), yet the term “provisional” fits the protagonist of Walser’s final novel better, perhaps, than any of the previous Walser good-for-nothings. For, even the descriptions of the robber, and not just his navigation of the social and physical world, are provisional, constantly in need of revision.

doctor, by stating that his condition is by no means troubling, and that he is “ein Mann wie irgendein anderer” (“a man like any other”), with the single exception that he feels “kein Angriffs-, keine Besitzlust, weben und aus [ihm] herausdrängen” (“no pleasure in aggression or possession weaving and pushing out of [him]”; 141). This he attributes to an inner child, who refuses to aggressively appropriate others around him. Further, he returns to his opening statement (the confession that he sometimes feels like a “girl), and attributes this to a pleasure he finds in serving, in doing basic household chores. The robber is giving his own account of what one could call his innocence, but which he explicitly calls “Liebsein,” which he opposes to the presumably sexual, appropriating “Menschenlieben” that others tend toward (143). He considers himself to *be* love, rather than being one who *loves* things. What is the structure of this love-being? The robber is very articulate:

Auf gewisse Weise, lieber Herr Doktor, vermag ich alles Erdenkliche, und vielleicht besteht meine Krankheit, falls ich meinen Zustand so nennen kann, in einem zu vielen Liebhaben. Ich habe einen ganz entsetzlich großen Fonds an Liebeskraft in mir, und jedesmal, wenn ich auf die Straße trete, fange ich an, irgend etwas, irgend jemand lieb zu gewinnen

In a certain way, dear Herr Doctor, I am capable of everything thinkable, and perhaps my illness, in case I can call my condition thus, consists in too much holding-dear. I have a quite terrifyingly large fund of love-power in me, and every time that I step onto the street, I start to become fond of something, someone (143)

Walser here reworks a scenario that was of central importance to his Berlin prose, and which might be called the “primal scene” of literary modernism: the “street life” where (for Walser) the walker revels in “the equality of all” in the great “balling and mixing of human life-energy and fates” (Greven 75). The robber’s engagement with the street here is, however, not simply a utopian yielding of oneself to a heterogeneous mass of the crowd. For the robber, this sudden falling-in-love with



anything and anyone that happens to contingently cross his path. Rather, the robber specifies that this moment of *Liebgewinnen* is always also the moment of the erection of a hierarchical structure of involvement. The robber is transported into “liebliche Lustigkeit” (“dear merriment”) whenever he “in Gedanken irgendwen bediente” (“served anyone, in my thoughts”; 142). The moment of falling in love is bound to a “gewisses Verlangen, mich jemandem zu unterordnen, sei’s Frau, sei’s Mann” (“certain desire to subordinate myself to someone, be it a man or a woman”; 142). The robber’s *dear-being* or *love-being* is a generative force that serves to establish institutional structures. These are structures that would, then, require the formation of narratives:

Um zu einem menschlichen Glück zu kommen, muß ich immer erst irgendeine Geschichte ausspinnen, worin die oder die Person mit mir zu tun bekommt, wobei ich der unterliegende, gehorchende, opfernde, bewachte, bevormundete Teil bin.

In order to arrive at human happiness, I must always first spin out a story in which this or that person comes to deal with me, whereby I am the one lying underneath, the obeying one, the sacrificing one, the watched-over one, the one to be domineered over. (144)

Being placed *below* is the single set requirement for the robber’s “happiness”. Beyond this, he claims to be absolutely fluid and flexible with regard to the placement and form of these hierarchies: “Ich bin einer, den man hinstellen könnte, wo man wollte, z.B. in eine Grube, in einem Bergwerk oder zuoberst auf einen Berg, in ein Prachthaus oder in eine armselige Hütte” (“I am one whom one could situate wherever one wants, for instance in a trench in a mine or at the top of a mountain, in a luxurious house or in a poor hut”; 142). The robber casts himself as a perfectly plastic being that can continually take on new forms, without retaining a trace of his previous life; he starts over and over again, allowing himself to be molded by whomever or

whatever he loves. Interestingly, the robber does not understand his radical plasticity as passivity, a weakness or naïveté: the initiation of the affective bond is always made from his own side, so that despite his pleasurable surrender to the desires of the other, it was his *own* desire that made this connection possible in the first place; no other person can *choose* the robber.

Viele Leute glauben, es sei demnach also furchtbar leicht, mich in Behandlung, gleichsam in Dressur zu nehmen, aber diese Leute irren sich alle sehr. Denn sobald jemand Miene macht, mir gegenüber sich zum Meisterlein zu erheben, fängt etwas in mir an zu lachen, zu spotten, und dann ist es natürlich mit dem Respekt vorbei, und im anscheinend Minderwertigen entsteht der Überlegene, den ich nicht aus mir ausstoße, wenn er sich in mir meldet.

Many people believe it is thus terribly easy to take me in their care, to train me, but these people all fool themselves very much. For as soon as someone looks to raise themselves being my little master, something inside of me begins to laugh, to mock, and then it is over with the respect, and in the seemingly inferior one the superior one emerges, whom I do not kick out of myself when he calls. (144)

The decision-making power, then, lies entirely with the robber, even if he is pursued, punished, insulted and humiliated; *he* must choose his debaser. *Liebsein*, plasticity of being, while driven into form by a formless affect, nevertheless involves an originary intention.

In the robber's boundless sphere of existence, which is continually being built up again from the liminality of the street-scene, there is no relation that would be given in advance, none that would not have been elected and erected by his *Liebsein*. The jarring insight produced through this monologue, then, is that the *Aufsicht*—the presumably humiliating *surveillance* and *watching-over* of the robber that the narrator has frequently claimed to be responsible for, is a fully temporary and arbitrary hierarchical arrangement that is subject to dissolution and disappearance.

The robber insists to the doctor that public opinions of him as a “charakterloser

Mensch” (“person without character”) are to be laughed off: “was ich Sie bitten möchte ein wenig zu belachen” (“which I would like to ask you to laugh at a little”; 143). The robber is vehement that the condition of *Liebsein* is not about a lack, some missing trait that would provide a greater stability and durative lifestyle. Rather than being outside of the bounds of human character, the robber has tapped into the debasing force that creates character in the first place.

### *Labyrinth, Revisited*

Once the robber has delivered his momentous address to the Doctor, one of the more confusing themes of the novel is cast in a clarifying light. Whenever the question of the robber’s social embedding and kinship ties is raised in the novel, the narrator fashions new explanations and models for how the robber is positioned toward others. The erratic manner in which the narrator has designated these ties seems, at first, due to the arbitrary inventions of a novelist-narrator who has not yet decided *what* he wants his protagonist to be, who with a teasing sovereignty is able to impose roles onto the robber, by way of an oppressive ‘rumor machine’ that he, from an authorial position, operates. But in the wake of the robber’s explication of *Liebsein*, the circuitousness of the robber’s biography becomes explicable as the *robber’s* practice of establishing and abolishing social hierarchies by, as he describes, going out into the world and falling love with things and people.

Looking back across the beginnings of the novel, the erratic shifts between the robber’s different affective ties suddenly appear under a new light. What may have been interpreted from the outside as a problematic or even schizophrenic indecisiveness suddenly appears as the legitimate generative activity of *Liebsein*. When one sees how the robber suddenly switches between his attachment to a boy of

high status to a devotion to the young Wanda, whom he prays to and who in turn makes him into a “corpse,” one cannot claim that the robber does not know what he is up to, for in retrospect it is clear: the robber is laboring to build, from his wanderings in the streets outward, the structures that will hold the world together. His promiscuous role-playing is of existential importance to the “city” that is, periodically, also the narrator of this novel.

The vocabulary associated with the robber’s itinerant *Liebsein* in this early portion of the novel, in fact, corresponds very exactly to the vocabulary employed in the lecture delivered to the doctor, in particular in the use of the term *Dienst* and *Dienstmädchen*. When the account of the robber’s infatuation with the young Wanda breaks off, it gives way to the story of his attachment to the “internationaler Knabe” (“international boy”; 26). When the robber meets the boy, he asks: “Darf ich dein Dienstmädchen sein? Das wäre süß für mich” (“Can I be your servant girl? That would be sweet for me”; 27). Although the boy is reluctant to take on the services of the protagonist, the narrator immediately adopts the name “das räuberische Dienstmädchen” for the protagonist as he kisses the knee of the boy (“robberish servant girl”; 27). But the narrator soon abandons this designation: “Auch die Dienstmägdelei braucht uns einstweilen nicht mehr stark zu beschäftigen. Wir wollen den Räuber einen Staatsschreiberssohn nennen” (“Nor should the servant-girlishness concern us much anymore for the time being. We want to call the robber a state clerk’s son”; 28). The narrator is unable to clarify the lasting significance of the robber’s desire to subjugate himself to the “widely traveled boy,” and he quickly abandons this anecdote. However, the discerning reader who has heard the robber’s lecture can retrospectively recognize its structural importance. This also holds for instances when it seemed that the narrator had only employed the term *Dienstmädchen* as part of an arbitrary, improvised rhetoric.

Much later in the novel, when the narrator provides an account of the robber's childhood (including the genesis of his class status and gender determination), one again sees the protagonist playing the role of a servant girl. The narrator explains that, because the robber's father had no success in business, "dem Räuber [sind] seine zierlichen Epauletten abgenommen worden und [er ist] zum Stubenmädchen degradiert worden" ("the robber was stripped of his epaulettes and degraded to a parlor maid"; 136). The narrator tells of how excellently the robber wore the costume of a parlor maid, and how well he studied the gestures and etiquette of girls. In the midst of this account, the narrator makes reference to his own act of novel-writing, saying that he is concerned here with *this* novel, "der davon handelt, daß vielleicht zeitweise der Räuber wirklich ein Mädchen, so eine Art Mägdlein geworden war" ("which is about how the robber really became a girl, a sort of maid"; 137). The narrator's generalization about the content of the novel is qualified, then, several times: he states that the robber became a girl "zeitweise, und aller Wahrscheinlichkeit nach nur innerlich" ("temporarily, and most likely only internally"; 137). Struggling to define the content of the novel as he sees it, the narrator now insists that this becoming-girl of the protagonist was merely a temporary adaptation to a difficult situation, a sort of defense mechanism. Again and again, the narrator attempts to provide clarifications, to stand above the limited perspectives of individual moments, by offering his own glosses on the robber's enigmatic social shapeshifting. But whenever he does this, he furtively corroborates the primacy of the robber's own elective affinity-construction, which he, the narrator, is also ensnared within. In each instance where the narrator displays a privileged knowledge of the "actual" state of affairs between characters, he in fact echoes the robber's own theoretical explication of *how things come to be*.

When Edith and Wanda, two of the robber's seemingly "central" love interests,

lead a private and inconclusive debate about who bears what responsibility with regard to the robber, the narrator steps in to explain what “the truth” is: “In Wahrheit hatte sich der Räuber Wanda gegenüber als Vater gefühlt und Edith gegenüber als Knabe. Beide Mädchen wußten aber davon nichts” (“In reality, the robber had always felt like a father towards Wanda, and like a boy towards Edith. Both girls, however, knew nothing of this”; 168). This line, which might otherwise be taken as an indication of an all-knowing narrator whose function it is to gloss and rationalize events, in fact serves only to echo the robber’s own claims as to the total and radical plasticity of his own social being: that he can be here a father, here a son, depending on the intentional direction of *Liebsein*, in which he, as the temporary superior to the robber, is also ensnared. The robber’s monologue endows him with a degree of exegetic authority that the narrator has continually avoided.

### *Metalepsis*

By making a strong interpretive and genetic claim about the entire surrounding field of narrative, and his own role in the formation of social ties in the fictional world, the robber’s monologue before the doctor constitutes an instance of metalepsis. And yet, it must then be asked what is *different* about this instance, when great stretches of this text are characterized by an ongoing chain of metalepses? Perhaps an excursion into the specifics or narratological terminology can help to answer this question. Returning to Gérard Genette’s initial definition of the term, metalepsis is “the intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse” (235). *Intrusion* perfectly characterizes Walser’s nameless narrator’s metaleptic feats, which are each time marked by an admission of audacious arrogance. The narrator (as “we”)

explains, for instance, that wherever “wir etwas finden, etwas nur Haardünnes, das einem Fehler gleicht, so zerren wir ihn zu [Edith, *one of the robber’s central love interests—PJB*], müßten wir ihn auch bei den Haaren hinschleppen und würde er auch dabei laut um Hilfe rufen (“we find something, something only hair-thin that resembles a mistake, so we tear him to her, even if we would have to drag him by his hair and he were to cry out loudly for help”; 134). Such passages are apparently intended to disabuse a reader of the sense that this is a text where *anything goes*, where ideas of *guilt* or *correctness* would lose all currency because of a playful-provisional rhetoric of free association and digression. Rather, at such moments the narrator asserts there *is* someone who decides what could constitute an error, who *does* pursue the robber

Elsewhere, the narrator wonders aloud, when speaking of the robber’s sexual innocence, whether he should not simply let his protagonist “sleep”:

Der Räuber lag da gleichsam unschuldig wie in einem Bett und schlief. Würde ich meinerseits so ein Kind nicht lieber schlafen lassen, statt ihm Bemerkungen wie oben erwähnte ins Ohr zu gießen, ihn da fest zu zupfen, um ihm hochintellektuell: «Du, steh auf, es ist Zeit»? Und mußte denn natürlich der Räuber aufstehen, und hier steht er nun.

The robber lay there quasi innocent as in a bed and slept. Wouldn’t I, for my part, rather let such a child sleep, instead of pouring comments like the above-mentioned into his ear, to pluck him tightly, in order to tell him in a highly intellectual manner: “You, wake up, it is time”? And then the robber naturally had to wake up, and here he stands now. (R 138)

Here the question of innocence and guilt, introduced in an earlier section of this chapter, is now clarified as being a matter of the narrator’s will: *should I let the robber remain innocent?* Such moments seem to be *the* revelatory moments of meta-discourse that offer insight onto how the universe of the novel is structured. Dragging the robber around by his hair, whispering things into his ear that wake him up: these

are all instances of metaleptic intrusion. Whether these *draggings* and *whisperings* are metaphorical embellishments or literal acts, the set of relations advanced by the narrator clearly casts the robber as a puppet who must be pushed and knocked around to be brought to action. One is reminded, reading these *intrusions* by the metadiegetic narrator, of this narrator's own anecdote, introduced in the first pages of the novel, where he provides an exposition of his characteristic habit of *intruding* into the private spheres of others:

Ich kam in die Stadt und berührte mit meinem Stab einen Studenten. Mehrere Studenten saßen in einem Café an ihrem runden Stammtisch. Der Berührte schaute mich an, als schäue er auf etwas Nochniebishergesehenes, und alle anderen Studenten schauten auf mich. Es war, als hätten sie urplötzlich vieles, vieles überhaupt noch nie begriffen.

I came into the city and struck a student with my stick. Several students sat in a café on a round regular's table. The one I'd struck look at me as if he was looking at something never-before-seen, and all the other students look up to me. It was as if they had all of the sudden, never understood very, very much. (11)

The narrator shows himself as one who violently and arbitrarily introduces shocking moments of new understanding: he comes in and thrusts his walking stick into the circle of young ones, to make them understand that such an intrusion is possible. Knowledge of *this* possibility throws the students' knowledge into disarray. This is the manner of his metalepsis: the narrator's intrusions serve the function of establishing a ubiquity of free "play" (on his part) that is simultaneously humiliating and enlightening. Genette suggests that such moments of metalepsis are "transgressive" in any case and "comical" in many cases (235). And yet here the metalepses are more than this: they appear as a foundational moment of aggression, where the narrator claims a law-giving and law-enforcing power not only over the robber's physical movement, but over the distinction between guilt and innocence,



between knowing and ignorance. He can “wake up” the innocent robber, just as he wakes up the students who would otherwise be assured of the sanctity of their communicative sphere. In other words, the narrator’s intrusions appear to lay bare the mechanism that stands behind the tangible events of the narrative.

In the labyrinth of the narrator’s playful yet ruthless displays of ubiquity and sovereignty, the robber’s monologue before the doctor stands out, in Mieke Bal’s terminology, as an “embedded text” that “contradicts or contravenes” the primary text, in that the robber provides an account of his own experience as being thoroughly untroubled and healthy (1997: 64). Yet his monologue does not only ‘contradict’ the many imposing claims of the narrator. Rather, the robber’s monologue establishes the protagonist’s *Liebsein* as the precondition for the narrator’s superior position. The robber explains that he is *always again* falling in love and submitting himself to others, but then breaking these bonds of submission of his own will. By extension, then, the hierarchical structure that places the robber under the control of the narrator (and allows him to be *verfolgt* by the collective *we*) is, in fact, a temporary product of a fleeting affection that sent him flying through the street towards *someone* or *something*. When on the final pages, the narrator writes with a quasi-medical authority “Ich befürworte, daß er unter Aufsicht gestellt wird” (“I recommend that he be placed under surveillance”), the echo of the robber’s monologue is heard (R 189).

Thus, to return to Genette, one can say that the robber’s specific enactment of metalepsis is not only the “intrusion” of a diegetic character into the metadiegetic level on which the narrator dwells and creates. The robber declares his own *Liebsein* as the foundational affection to which the narrator’s every utterance about him is indebted. The robber’s affection, one is to believe, is what first allows the metadiegetic intrusion of the audacious narrator into the diegesis. One could thus call the robber’s monologue a case of meta-meta-lepsis.

### *Corroboration*

Two utterances follow the robber's *Liebsein*-monologue, which corroborate the arguments it advances. The doctor, once the robber has presented his case exhaustively, finally interrupts with a validating assessment: "«Lassen Sie sich so, wie Sie sind, leben Sie so weiter, wie Sie bisher gelebt haben. Sie kennen sich ja anscheinend ausgezeichnet, finden sich ausgezeichnet mit sich ab»" ("Leave yourself as you are, live on as you have lived until now. You apparently know yourself excellently, you have come to excellent terms with yourself"; 145). The response provides a shock, because the robber's speech ostensibly presents a delusion of sovereignty over the social world, and because there have been previous statements, circulated by the narrator, suggesting an actual pathology that drives the robber's actions (the inner voices that plagued him). And yet the doctor not only fully validates the robber's account, but befriends him and refuses to accept payment for the 'therapy session,' if it can be called so. A second corroboration of the robber's monologue, then, comes after a section break, where the narrator impatiently resumes his discourse to claim his sovereignty over the narrative fabric: "Und so behalte ich denn jedenfalls über diese Räubergeschichte hier die Direktion" ("And so I maintain in any case the direction over this robber-story"; 143). The ensuing discussion is a high-point of Walserian humor, an extended and rambling "slow burn," where the narrator attempts to provide a hypostasis for his claim of omniscience, but nervously undercuts each prior statement:

Ich glaube an mich. Der Räuber traut mir nicht recht, ich lege jedoch keinen großen Wert darauf, daß man an mich glaubt. Ich muß hiezu selber in der Lage sein. «Ich glaube an Sie», sagte mir einmal eine Frau, aber ich hielt dies Wort bloß so für eine Art Streichelei, für vielleicht aufrichtig gemeint. Die Frau war also der Meinung, sie glaube an mich, aber was sind Meinungen.

Meinungen können sich rasch ändern, und der Glaube gehorcht der Meinung. Wir tun nicht gut, jemand so etwas zu sagen, denn wie können wir die Schwierigkeiten ermessen, die demjenigen bevorstehen, an den wir glauben und der nun diese Glauben rechtfertigen soll unter Bekämpfung der Schwierigkeiten.

I believe in myself. The robber doesn't really trust me, I place no value in the issue of whether or not one believes in me. I must myself be in the condition to do so. "I believe in you," a woman said to me once, but I took this word as a mere comforting, perhaps meant sincerely. The woman was thus of the opinion that she believed in me, but what are opinions. Opinions can change rapidly, and belief obeys opinion. We don't help people by saying such things, for how can measure the difficulties that stand before those whom we believe in and who should not justify these beliefs through a struggle against difficulties. (145)

The narrator, in this way, successfully escapes the question of his own reliability, and flees into a discussion of the semantics and ethics of belief, the abstractness of which makes it easy to forget the specifics of the last scene (even the encouraging statement of the "woman" is almost meaningless, for it is unclear *for what* or *to what end* she believes in him).

The trauma that the narrator is now working through is that of having been suddenly fully *on the robber's time*. The practice of citation has shifted: the unabridged appearance and sustenance of the robber's monologue means that the narrator has been, suddenly, locked into a posture of patience. The narrator has been able to *undo* everything that he has done, has been able to habitually postpone narrating certain pieces of information—the second sentence of the novel is: "Hievon nachher mehr" ("Of this more afterwards"; 7). The narrator's position has been defined by free jumping, excluding things with the promise of including them later. When the robber begins his monologue before the doctor, suddenly such postponement is no longer possible: what was previously glossed over with a single word (*Vortrag* or *Vortragsabend*) returns now unabridged as an extemporaneously composed text, which by postponing interruption allows the crystalization of a

conceptual framework—the framework of *Liebsein*—to descend, assert itself and exert pressure on the rest of the text.

When the robber subsumes the surrounding fictional world into his particular model of sociality, the question arises as to what general model of consciousness Walser has imparted to his fictional characters, and what the nature of the social universe of this novel is. The turning-point brought on by the robber’s monologue hypothetically appears to be in line with a shift that Mikhail Bakhtin saw as an the crucial contribution of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s art: the formation of the “*all-devouring consciousness of the hero*,” which is no longer a element among others within an authorial discourse (1984: 49), but rather “a *particular point of view on the world and on oneself*” (47). The novelistic text becomes, according to this model, a site for the coming-to-light of a subjectivity that could never be described or functionalized (in a disciplinary manner, for instance) by a sovereign author. Rather, the only possible *other* factor that could be opposed to the self-consciousness of the “hero” would be that of another hero. If one were to align the robber’s “self-revelation” in front of the Doctor with the sort of self-declaration that Bakhtin sees in Dostoevsky, one could designate the robber’s monologue as a moment when it becomes clear that the narrator is not a godlike author who imagines a world of things populated by, among other things, a robber, but that this outside only exists insofar as it is filtered through the robber’s self-consciousness. Thus, when the robber clarifies the structures of his world with his concept of *Liebsein*, the work would not be presenting a character as a figure, but as a pure self-consciousness that articulates by itself how it sees itself and others: specifically, this robber-self-consciousness sees that the social bonds inside of which it is strung are built upon a notion of foundational affection, *Liebsein*. This would be a moment in Walser’s novel, then, that subjectivity is finally present as “infinite function” and not as a fossilized “integral image” of character (49). This is

Bakhtin, again, on Dostoevsky's accomplishment: "What is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself" (47). Let us consider a potential connection to Walser: the robber, in the moment when his monologue is finally *cited unabridged*, is shown to be capable of positing a comprehensive narrative account of experience in time, and is able to correct himself, reflect on his own statements, *exactly* as the narrator has, and thus he, as hero, has gone from being a pawn in the narrator's game to a pure and irreducible point of view giving onto the world.

And yet: is Walser's text not stranger or smaller, in some sense, than Dostoevsky's? Is there not a pervasive *monologism* in his prose (identified by Sprengel and Greven among others) that would be opposed to the ostensibly revolutionary dialogism of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky? What would Bakhtin have had to say about Walser, whose ambitions of conjuring a variety of linguistic registers result in a possibly far less *polyphonic* prose that hardly ever strays from the effusive dictates of *Geschwätzigkeit*, just as the later fiction of Thomas Bernhard would hardly ever stray from the self-imposed conventions of the misanthropic-apocalyptic rant? What is the difference between the "hero's self-consciousness" in the presumably "minor literature" of Robert Walser?<sup>44</sup>

Bakhtin insists that Dostoevsky, as author, fashions a particular structural world-model that remains essential for the emergence of characters as nodes of pure self-consciousness with no fixed traits: "*To the all-devouring consciousness of the hero the author can juxtapose only a single objective world—a world of other*

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<sup>44</sup> The term "minor literature" (recalling Deleuze and Guattari's idea of Kafka's "minor literature"), would fit Walser's work insofar as his novels and prose miniatures lack the ambition and scope of the major works of German modernism, such as the novels of Thomas Mann and Robert Musil—not that Musil would have opposed Walser's aesthetic project. Musil penned a laudatory review of the free play in Walser's writing, which he was as a source of "moral wealth" and humanity (Greven 2008: 10-11). Nevertheless, a difference in scope still clearly divides these writers, with Walser's novels looking comparatively "small."

*consciousnesses with rights equal to those of the hero*" (50). Bakhtin pinpoints a spatial transformation of the plain of reality rendered by fiction: rather than imagining a *setting* as a plain covered in objects and peopled by characters, the novel presents a space that is filled only by a multiplicity of perspectival openings, each of which is both conscious of other consciousnesses, and conscious of itself. There is no "ground" in this "objective world," only the dynamic and interactional existence of distinct subject-positions. For Bakhtin, such a world clearly has a utopian dimension, or at least potential, for it is a world that is continually changing, eternally incomplete, radically democratic. If "orality" had a special status in such a world, it would be because orality is the truth of all language, as a fundamentally relational and phenomenon through which words are produced and reproduced in social dialogue. Nothing in Dostoevsky's works, for Bakhtin, *would not* talk: even the written confession to oneself would contain internal polemics against unnamed other voices. In Dostoevsky's (via Bakhtin) infinite world, there would never be something like excess, for even the most apparently *endless* talking would justify itself as the ever-evolving self-assertion of subjectivity.

I emphasize this notion of an excess, a term that does not and could not arise within Bakhtin's account, because the arrangement of Walser's provisional novel *does* engender the impression of *too much talk* escaping from the mouth of the hero. If Walser has an objective world, it does not carry in it the same infinity as Bakhtin's ideal novelistic universe. In Bakhtin's particular formulation, the self-consciousness and outwardly-directed consciousness of the hero is "first and foremost" the object of writing. The importance of the hero's perspective is primary, *preceding* any other decisions that would be made in the authorial construction of a novel. In Walser's novel, it is an *afterthought*. As I have explained, the robber's two extended speeches, despite their radically "clarifying" effect, are staged only as finales to an extended and

confusing arabesque by the narrator that has consistently *promised* more explanation *later*: “Of this more afterward” (“Hievon nachher mehr”; R 7). In Bakhtin’s conception of Dostoevsky—because it insists as a *point of departure* on a world of self-consciousnesses with equal rights not ruled over by any higher authority—it would make little to no difference what voice came first and what voice came last. Indeed, Bakhtin’s ideal notion of the novel is one that *never* has to come to an end, and where the endings provided by the author, “monologic” as they seem, are simply an embarrassing fluke dictated by the material demands of publishing: the only novel by Dostoevsky, according to Bakhtin, without “a *conventionally literary, conventionally monologic ending*” is *The Brothers Karamazov*, as it remained incomplete (39). Over and over again, Bakhtin dreams of an internal infinity to the novel: “Dostoevsky’s hero *always* [my emphasis, PJB] seeks to destroy that framework of *other people’s word* about him that might finalize and deaden him” (59). There will *always* be something else afterward, *always* another statement from the hero about himself.

When the robber finally takes the floor in the doctor’s office and fights to destroy the framework of “*other people’s words*” about him, to quote Bakhtin, interestingly, it is only to efface the notion of his own *self-consciousness* and to posit instead a *pre-conscious* affectivity. The robber does not aim to assert a notion of the autonomous subject, but instead is interested in the primacy of social ties and hierarchies, based on affect, in producing the effect of subjectivity. It is with *this* as his chosen subject-matter that the robber, in monologue, attempts to fight against those “other words” of the narrator and the collective voice of the community: he claims his own generative role in founding that community. As such, the robber is not strictly speaking only *speaking for himself*, he is *speaking for the text* and attempting to highlight the strange, eccentric historicity of its emergence: its dependence on his own

itinerant force of love. In other words, the robber's monologue makes the *Robber*-novel *monologic*, seemingly aiming to close off interpretive possibilities. Perhaps the reason that Walser's novel does not fully rhyme with Bakhtin's idea of a polyphonic novel is that, instead of imagining an "objective world" of autonomous but dialogically involved and dynamic nodes of consciousness, the *Robber*-novel presents something like two stages, one on top of the other, with the narrator standing on the upper level, looking down and laughing tearfully at the robber, who stands on the level below—until the robber (without looking the narrator directly in the eye) points out with laughter that he is the one who is holding the stage above him in place.

### ***Re-inscription of monologue***

I still use the word *seemingly* when I suggest that the robber provides a monologic closure to the novel with his "story," in particular because his one-on-one monologue before the doctor is followed by an encore, as it were, in public. Here, the robber's act of extended oration is given an unambiguous religious valence: it is a "Kanzelbesteigung und Predigt" ("ascent to the pulpit and sermon") at a church, attended mostly by "girls" along with some representatives of the "Herrenwelt" ("world of men") who have gathered to hear the robber speak (R 172). By what authority the robber organizes this sermon, is unclear: the priest at the church refers to the robber as his "lieben Freund und arbeitenden Mitmenschen" ("dear friend and working fellow man"), leaving the question open as to the robber's institutional ordainment within the church, let alone his bearing towards the (presumably, insofar as this is a fictionalized Switzerland) Catholic church (173).

The robber's ascent to authority over the labyrinthine novel recasts the robber as an unlikely, disguised saint, yet his actual "Auftreten" as a performer in the church,



suggests that he has appropriated the site of the church's authority because there would be no other mechanism with which he could tangibly elevate and present himself to the public without earning immediate comparison to a clown and thus an insincere joker (thus he does not choose a stage, which would mark his discourse immediately as fiction). The pulpit emits no certain Christian meaning when the robber ascends it, but exudes a vague aura of the lofty, the true and the solemn, providing a proper stepping-stone from the seclusion of the doctor's office, where the robber can externalize and disseminate his discourse.

This culminating scene of the novel presents a monologue that does not simply repeat the theoretical content of the robber's speech to the doctor, but *enacts* the reversal of power relations that the robber had mentioned to the doctor, where "im anscheinend Minderwertigen entsteht der Überlegene" ("in the seemingly inferior one the superior one emerges"; 144). As superior, the robber suddenly lays claim to an entire field of vocabulary he had renounced privately: whereas he told the doctor that he had never felt the slightest desire to *possess* anyone, here from his pulpit he sings the praises of possession: "der Besitz einer Geliebten hat etwas so Aufhelfendes, endlos Zufriedenstellendes, daß man zu beinah nichts als fröhlicher Dankbarkeit neigt" ("possession of a loved one has something that helps one up, something endlessly satisfying, so that one tends to nothing but happy thankfulness"; 177).

This would appear at first to be a simple change of tone; the robber is only praising his love to Edith, and not speaking of *possession* in any sense that has to do with power or superiority. He compares himself to a cart of fruits that nearly falls over from its overload of freight taken from Edith (178), then tauntingly declares: "Ich gehöre ihr an, ohne daß sie das Mindeste von mir hat. Es beliebt mir, sie zu lieben. Diese Liebe kostet mich nichts ("I belong to her without her having the slightest bit from me. I choose to love her. Love costs me nothing"; 178). The robber, having

been pursued with a real monetary debt to Edith (the “famous hundred francs”), declares himself free of any debt to the one he loves, audaciously demonstrating his ability to restructure the configurations of debt and emotional relations as it suits him—even as, pages earlier, it was declared that he had taken on the position of a son to Edith-as-mother. Such improvisation is, in any case, far from harmless; for a long breath afterwards the robber’s monologue turns to a flaunting of Edith’s alleged stupidity, a polemic that exhudes an air of misogyny, and that sprawls onward until the robber falls down unconscious, shot down by Edith with a pistol.

Here, at this singular *event* in the novel, there seems to be a momentary possibility that the improvised affective entanglement of the robber could *get serious* and re-enter something like *grand histoire*. For, as soon as Edith is asked why she had shot the robber, she explains: “Weil man mir hinterbrachte, er habe den Tod Walther Rathenaus beklatscht” (“Because someone told me he applauded the death of Walther Rathenau”; 182). This moment of applause, in fact, was recorded by the narrator at an earlier point, in a scene containing a double index of the contemporary cultural climate: in the instant that the robber discovers that “ein Großer sei von einigen Unbedeutenden überwältigt worden” (“a great man has been overthrown by some insignificant men”), he uses as a justification for his joy (this being reported through the narrator’s free indirect speech) the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche: “Denn ist nicht nach Friedrich Nietzsche das Anschauen, das Miterleben einer Tragödie im feineren und höheren Sinn eine Freude, eine Lebensbereicherung” (“For is looking at, witnessing a tragedy not, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, a joy, an enrichment of life”; 21). The moment of this work containing the strongest indication of and inseparability of the intellectual and political life of the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe is also a declaration of sheer and dubious innocence. This innocence seems, then, at the novel’s end, ready to be shattered by Edith’s gunshot. For a split second, Walser’s

work becomes a *Zeitroman* that, like Musil's *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* and Broch's *Schlafwandler*, integrates and fictionalizes the biography of Walther Rathenau; Edith apparently steps in as a disguised representative of a certain ideology that might, now at the end of the novel, be revealed. But no: when she is probed further, and asked if this is true, she replies: "Nein, ich sagte das bloß so" ("No, I just said said it so"; 182). Even at this moment, Edith seems to be following the logic of *Beliebigkeit* dictated and claimed by the robber. Seeking revenge on the robber serves to reproduce his elected social order. The novel decidedly does *not* open onto the everyday, onto historical time, through the introduction of an historical event. Instead, the novel re-enters the common, the prosaic, by suggesting the possible persistence and ubiquity of the robber *for us*. Somewhat like Kafka's novel, where the narrator screams out to a passer-by and destroys the narrative function of the work, Walser's work also attempts to step out into its audience by reframing and redefining its generic affinity.

### *And if they haven't died...*

The revisionary monologues of *Der Räuber*, as in Kafka's *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, concern the formation of social ties *by* the text, in rendering a situation of the fictional subject's total formlessness (and measurelessness). In Kafka's novella, the middle section of the text witnessed the screaming-out and attempted escape of a dimensionless being *from* the text *into* the street. There, too, the text produced a plastic creature, awaiting the response of an anonymous other, who would step in to provide a measure and a form for this creature. Kafka's text *screamed* for this measure, but Walser's text, covered in the characteristic "friendliest light" that W.G. Sebald spoke of,<sup>45</sup> ostensibly finds a gentler way of interpellating the reader and

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<sup>45</sup> Sebald describes Walser as an author "der so von Schatten bedrängt war und, dessen ungeachtet, das freundlichste Licht ausbreite auf jeder Seite, einen Autor, der Humoresken verfaßte aus reiner

implicating them in the relational *Liebsein* of the robber. Walser's final novel, like Kafka's first novella, does contain moments of metalepsis that sees an overstepping of the boundaries between inside and outside of the text, yet it is brought on by the employment of a generic device from a non-novelistic tradition of writing: namely, of the fairy tale. The final lines of the *Robber*-novel contain a peculiar turn towards the orienting gesture that classically would close a German fairy tale, and which Benjamin had already noticed in his short essay. Without having access to the *Robber*, Benjamin innovates a link of Walser's corpus to the *Märchen*: "Walser setzt ein, wo die Märchen aufhören. »Und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, dann leben sie heute noch.« Walser zeigt, *wie* sie leben" ("Walser begins where the fairy tales end. 'And if they haven't died, then they are still living today.' Walser shows *how* they live"; 352). For Benjamin, Walser's writings bear witness to the threshold between the redeeming glow of the fairy tale ending, and the rhythm of the prosaic. His writing always comes *after* the "and if they haven't died" line, departing from the assumption that they have not died, but have found their way from a mythical into an historical time. The *Robber*-novel sets up a different temporal relation between the fairy-tale ending and the prosaic. Its closing lines has the distinct effect of 'sending the robber off' into an undefined future:

[...] und so unlogisch das auch scheint, bin ich des Glaubens und erkläre ich mich mit allen denjenigen einverstanden, die meinen, es sei schicklich, daß man den Räuber angenehm finde und daß man ihn von nun an kenne und grüße

[...] and as illogical as it may seem, I am of one mind with and declare myself to be in agreement with all that think that it is seemly to find the robber pleasant and that one from now on should know and greet him (R 191)

Through dizzying circumlocution, the narrator clarifies that the robber is now

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Verzweiflung" ("who was so filled with shadows, and nevertheless spread the friendliest light over every page, who fashioned humoresques out of pure despair"; 132).

out there to be known and greeted. *And if he has not died, then he is living today*, wandering streets in his unmitigated *Liebsein*, ready to fall in love and ‘hold dear’ whomever might know and greet him. Here the novel gestures towards a kind of perpetual motion: the entire intricate tangle of affective bonds, kinship ties and power structures that found their fleeting and energetic dictation, is left in the chronicled past, while the erection of a new such tangle—through the fleeting and random encounter with the robber in his ever-ready *Liebsein*—is offered, or threatened, to whomever would read these final lines: the robber could step up to you, offer to serve you and build up his new kinship tree from scratch right here and now. Coupled with the original fairy-tale closing line, one can assume that this possibility either looms yet in the future, or it is a missed opportunity, for the robber has passed away. The novel’s ending, then, wavers between (on the one hand) a desire for a projected infinity, where the whole set of occurrences narrated in the novel could be recast and replaced by ever new occurrences, and (on the other hand) the looming threat of a final ending to this radically plastic *Liebsein*, which despite its seeming infinity of possibilities is limited by the fact of death. The narrator’s admission that his decree for all to know and greet the robber should sound “illogical,” could well be a reminder of the fragility of the robber’s life: only moments earlier, the robber has been lying in a bed recovering from a gunshot wound inflicted by Edith, whom he provoked to violence through a ruthless display of his idiosyncratic *Liebsein*. A liberal translation of this final line, in light of the events that precede it, could well be: if the robber has not yet been killed, you may yet be implicated in his demise. For the *Robber*-novel is shot through with hints that the spontaneous subordination and erection of power relations, to which the robber in his *Liebsein* is radically given over, is not harmless, inconsequential and always-reversible play. The robber, in the end, provokes the threat of his own death from Edith. The idea that the robber could remain a mere child, after what has occurred,

appears at once as a pervasive fantasy and a painful foreshadowing of a reversal.

Returning to Benjamin's idea that Walser shows us *how* "they," the fairy tale creatures, live yet today, one could say that the *Robber*-novel is haunted by the pressing question of *whether* these characters could live today. This question of *whether* further existence is possible is, in fact, present in Walser's own fairy tales. In his unpublished *Märchen* from 1928/29, an unidentified first-person narrator describes how he came upon a great inheritance, fell in love with an undescribed "loved one," and finally one day turned from a man into a sphere: "ich wurde kugelrund und rollte statt zu Fuß zu gehen und kugelte herum" ("I became round like a ball and rolled instead of going on foot and rolled around"; EWI 311). The narrator claims he was happy as this ball, but the loved one, not knowing what to do with him/it, "[gab] mir einen, wenn auch nur kleinen, feinen Fußtritt [,] der mir in Erinnerung blieb" ("gave me an, even if it was small, fine, kick, which stayed in my memory"; 311). The plasticity of the body, while appearing as a joyful joke, in retrospect is remembered around a "small, little" act of aggression. The final line of the fairy tale, which indirectly echoes the ending of the *Robber*-novel, ambiguously declares: "Jahre vergingen seither. Mit der Zeit habe ich neue Formen angenommen" ("Years passed since then. With the time I have taken on new forms"; 311). What have these new forms been? Was it a free switching from one to the next, or an erratic expansion and contraction, each of which was accompanied by another *kick* or worse? Has this narrating thing been flattened, killed off? Such fearful questions are not far off, in a story that so vehemently insists on the painlessness of pain.

Another fairy tale by Walser, "Das Ende der Welt" ("The End of the World") ends with a transformation of a plastic being: here, a child (neuter, *ein Kind*) with neither parents nor siblings decides to run away "bis es an das Ende der Welt käme" ("until it came to the end over the world"; DS 151). What initially appears as a sad

trip into the oblivion of non-existence—a step beyond the *nothing* of the nameless child’s sociality into the *nothing* of no-world-at-all—actually achieves a kind of “happy ending.” When the child arrives at a house with the sign “The End of the World” outside, it goes inside and is taken in by a mother, who conjures out of the child’s nothing-existence a gender, a familial role and a practical, servile employment: “Wir können eine schaffige Magd wohl brauchen, und wenn du brav bist, so wollen wir dich halten wie unsere Tochter” (“We can certainly use a proper maid, and if you are well-behaved, we will keep you like our daughter”; 154). The child agrees, and stays happily. But the story places an emphasis on an uneasy tension: the story begins by positing a child’s radical isolation, freedom and namelessness that wishes to proceed into a *total freedom from existence* (to cross out of the world, we presume); but it ends, then, with a determined existence that would be subject to all the disciplinary strictures of a social life. The prior possibility yielded to the latter, moreover, by way of a trick: the child meant to reach the actual end of the world, but only reached ‘The End of the World.’ Here *it* will find *her* end, rather than an undefined end of nothingness. The *it* will in any case yield and cease to exist; provided with an identity, it will perish. The transformation of the undefined being, here as in the previous fairy tale, does not move unambiguously in the direction of liberation.

Walser tells fairy tales about formless beings who proceed into an uncertain future. The texts do not simply know *how* the fairy-tale characters live, but appear as anxious reflections on whether what comes beyond their transformations might still be called life, and when it might end. The *Robber*-novel escalates this questioning by vividly imagining the entanglements of the plastic creature, then projecting this creature’s existence into a time and place beyond the bounds of the text. This is the text’s unexpected shock-effect—or one could call it an unsettling, for “shock” is not a

category of experience that one would usually associate with Walser's prose—is its apparent leakage into the outside. It is *unexpected* already by virtue of the “found” condition of this novel, which needed to be excavated, decoded and forced into a book years after the author's passing.

### *Revising the Good-for-Nothing Novel*

If the genre of the fairy tale lies at the boundary of the *Robber-novel*, what then is the specific innovation that this work makes for its presumed auxiliary genre—by which I mean, what has the robber done to the *novel*? This question might best be approached by considering what tradition Walser's first novels inserted themselves into. *Geschwister Tanner* has long appeared as a rewriting of Eichendorff's *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*, primarily because of the characterization of the protagonist Simon Tanner “als Vagabund und Verächter bürgerlicher Berufsbilder” (“as a vagabond and despiser of bourgeois images of career”; Sprengel 211). Benjamin's reading famously counted Walser's writings in general as part of a Germanic tradition of outsider-literature, in which Eichendorff figures as a “master”: “Es gibt bekanntlich gerade im germanischen Schrifttum einige große Prägungen des windbeuteligen, nichtsnutzigen, tagesdiebischen und verkommenen Helden” (“There are, famously, precisely in Germanic letters, several great impressions of the windbag, the no-good, petty-thievish and reprobate heroes”; 350). It is notable that such attachments of Walser's narratives to a wider tradition, occurs by way of an identification of an unbound hero, an eccentric vagabond who stands somewhere *in* the text as a centerpiece thereof. *Geschwister Tanner* connects to the *Taugenichts* because of a resemblance of Eichendorff's unnamed hero and Walser's Simon. But how has Walser altered the habitation of these good-for-nothings? What contribution do



Walser's heroes—his Tanner-siblings earlier, his robber later—make that set them apart from late Romantic models?

A comparison with Eichendorff leads one to consider the particular tensions that pervade that writer's novelistic writing. Eleven years before publishing the famous *Taugenichts* (1826), Eichendorff composed a response to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, the comparatively infrequently read *Ahnung und Gegenwart* (1815), a novel tracing the adventures of a young aristocrat, Friedrich, following his university studies. Like the *Lehrjahre*, Eichendorff's *Bildungsroman* does not permit its protagonist(s), following their picaresque wanderings, nature reveries and nationalist militancy, to gain a total redemption in a purified sphere of aesthetic experience. This was Novalis' strategy in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, but ostensibly Eichendorff retained reservations about letting his heroes retain artistic aspirations. And yet, unlike Goethe, Eichendorff does not release his characters into the prosaic world of commerce. Instead, he splits up the pair of friends and sends them down two separate but complimentary paths toward the renunciation of a German life that is now only an aberration of itself, plagued as it is by an encroaching, corrupting European cosmopolitanism: the lasting friend Leontin, after marrying, boards a ship to the new world where he will establish a life on the frontier, and the main character Friedrich, after numerous disappointments in love, retreats into a monastery. Unlike Wilhelm Meister, whose life of adventure would be archived in the library of the tower-society, these heroes cannot be provided with a future social existence once the chronicle of their young years have been concluded: they must be entombed (in a cloister) or erased (vanishing into a blank new world).

Narrative closure, for Eichendorff, needed to be established through a firm geographical or spatial index, the heroes placed in a place without time; in this regard, Eichendorff's early "outsiders" are archived more brutally and irreversibly than

Goethe's. The end of a course of *Bildung* would not be the arrival at a moment of reflection where the narrative of one's development becomes visible in retrospect, but a literal physical isolation that would expedite the forgetting of this prior course of change. The *Taugenichts* attempts to avoid the terrifying austerity of such a conclusion by eliding the strong biographical determinations of *Ahnung und Gegenwart*. The good-for-nothing has no past to speak of, but only a father's house out of which he is, one day, kicked. *Taugenichts* is no extended *Bildungsroman*, following more the closely the structure of a novella: the hero is homeless and unbounded and has no inheritance to reclaim, no education to speak of that would create a structure of expectations. The novella is structured as a series of outrageous coincidences that eventually deliver the clownish protagonist into a happy marriage with a woman who, like him, is not of noble birth, but who will nonetheless be raised into an aristocratic life by the good graces of a countess. Eichendorff's work imagines a fantastic genesis of aristocratic life, a genesis that would place the central persons simultaneously inside and outside the world of wealth, and create an "alternate" economic model whereby the ones who are *truly* rewarded with the boundless wealth of a pre-capitalist form of property (a castle), are the ones who refused to participate in a bourgeois narrative of work, accumulation and investment. It would be a mistake to equate the "purposelessness" of this hero with a roundabout allegory of aesthetic autonomy that narrativizes the uselessness of art: here, being 'good for nothing' means that one is literally good for everything, and should *not* have to do without. This structure of reward is very much in accordance with the conclusion of Tieck's late romantic, early realist novella *des Lebens Überfluß*, where the ones who decide that they can do without the most basic material "necessity" (a staircase leading into their home), are eventually rewarded with inexhaustible wealth.

In the preceding readings, I have attempted to underscore what I would say

constitutes the oft-recognized conservatism of late Romantics such as Tieck and Eichendorff, but chiefly by underscoring their elected mechanics of narrative closure. Their prose works are, no doubt, ripe with interesting internal contradictions and witty moments of spontaneous subversion of dominant discourses, yet their *endings* are always constructed with an eye toward *securing* something: property, unclaimed territory, radical seclusion. Walser's *Geschwister Tanner*, even if it is planted most closely to an Eichendorffian model of picaresque narrative, does not end with a moment of tangible redemption. Rather, Simon, having wandered around Christmas-time into a mountain chalet, encounters a woman who, working as a proprietor of the inn, kindheartedly asks Simon to tell his story. A long monologue ensues where Simon provides a panoramic exposition—thus far missing from the novel—explaining the background of his poor family and the diverging lives of his siblings. The monologue would be best described as a *summary*, and does not yet constitute a turning-point in Simon's perpetually episodic, provisional story: he closes with the words "Jetzt kennen Sie mich einigermaßen" ("Now you know me to some extent"; 300). The woman's response, because it constitutes the final paragraph of the novel and thus sketches out a spectral trajectory for a future narrative, I will quote in full. First, she kisses him, then begins:

»Nein«, sagte sie, »Sie werden nicht untersinken. Sonst, wenn das geschähe, wäre es schade, schade für Sie. Sie dürfen niemals wieder so verbrecherisch, so sündhaft über Sie selber aburteilen. Sie achten sich zu wenig und andere zu hoch. Ich will Sie davor behüten, gegen sich selber so allzustreng vorzugehen. Wissen Sie, was Ihnen fehlt? Sie müssen es eine Zeitlang ein bißchen wieder gut haben. Sie müssen in ein Ohr hineinflüstern und Zärtlichkeiten erwidern lernen. Sie werden sonst zu zart. Ich will Sie lehren; das alles, was Ihnen fehlt, will ich Sie lehren. Kommen Sie. Wir gehen hinaus in die Winternacht. In den brausenden Wald. Ich muß Ihnen so viel sagen. Wissen Sie, daß ich ihre arme, glückliche Gefangene bin? Kein Wort mehr, kein Wort mehr. Kommen Sie nur.«–

"No," she said, "you will not sink. Otherwise, if that happened, it would be

too bad, too bad for you. You must never judge yourself criminally, so sinfully. You respect yourself too little and others too much. I want to protect you from proceeding against yourself too strictly. Do you know what you're missing? You must have it a little better for a time. You must whisper into an ear and learn to answer affection. Otherwise you'll become too frail. I want to teach you: everything that you are missing, I want to teach you. Come. We will go out into the winter night. Into the roaring forest. I must say so much to you. Do you know that I am your poor, happy prisoner? Not another word, not another word. Just come."– (GT 300).

The woman's concluding monologue promises, above all, things that are *temporary*. Simon must have it good again "for a time." And moreover, what he should *have* is strongly emphasized as being of a linguistic nature. She has much to *say* to him, he must learn to *whisper*. If Eichendorff is to serve as a measure for Walser's own practice of closure, it becomes notable how rigorously the latter avoids the former's dramatics of possession and settlement. Simon is not offered anything tangible by the woman's chalet monologue: he is offered, in fact, not much more than a tonal shift in speech, a shift from a talking voice to a whisper, and he is given the opportunity *not* to speak ("Not another word"). The woman's question "Do you know that I am your poor, happy prisoner?" offers no strict definition of how their relation is to proceed, for it remains a rhetorical question rather than becoming a declaration of possession.

Both the *Robber*-novel and *Geschwister Tanner* stray from an Eichendorffian settlement by ending with a dissolution into vagueness. But for Simon Tanner, it is a vague trajectory into the unknown, hand-in-hand with the generous woman at the chalet. At the end of the *Robber*-novel, there is no designee entrusted with the robber: *his* ending is one of absolute dispersal, like a glass jar of marbles dropped forcefully in the street, so that they roll outward in every possible direction, waiting to be picked up and used at the will of their finder, if they haven't already shattered. The ailing/healing robber-protagonist is projected into the "beyond" occupied by the

reader, opening up the possibility that the robber will ‘take on a new form’ in the manner of the fairy-tale’s ball-round man. The fairy tale of *Liebsein* is potentially anywhere and anyone.

### *Inner Voices, Outer Monologues*

The robber’s monologically explicated notion of *Liebsein* recalls a number of (academic) structural theories of emotion and affect, without perfectly agreeing with any of them. Julia Kristeva’s early theory of *Revolution of Poetic Language* (1974) imagines how the semiotic “chora,” as a free-flowing pre-subjective affect, is set up into structured symbolic orders, which rest in the tension of this frozen affect. Literature, for Kristeva, is this field where the simultaneous setting-up and abolishment of the symbolic could be born witness to: hence, *revolution*. Viewed up close, this is precisely what *Liebsein* is: the robber (as a literary figure) wanders randomly, falls in love, finds himself as a servant in a particular order, but then abolishes this order. And yet, having read more of the *Robber*-novel than *only* the robber’s exclusive description of *Liebsein*, one might be tempted to read his idea of a free-flowing erotic impulse as only the outermost, visible layer of a sealed-off and potentially disturbed consciousness: that, is, one might be lead to the later Kristeva, who in *Black Sun* (1989) would suggest that literature, rather than being a site for the construction and destruction of the symbolic, is in fact the medium for the inscription of trauma that occurs on the bodily level. Most readers of Walser feel, on some level, that they *are* reading texts that indicate an underlying disturbance, a mental illness that remains a tragic biographical fact. Following the later Kristeva, one would see the model of *Liebsein* not as a cipher for the constructive/destructive nature of poetic language, but as one stage of a translated trauma, which indexes something other than

itself. In this case, the work would present a fantasy of omnipotence that covers up an prior, unspeakable lack. Like the robber, Kristeva defines affect as a formative force that precedes the determinations of language. Unique to Walser's novel is, however, the disruption brought about through the uncovering of this realization. When the robber declares his love to be a structuring force in the world, the legibility of the surrounding text is thrown into question.

If the word *Sein* within *Liebsein* is given a certain elevated level of attention, one might be led to draw a parallel to the Heideggerian theory of emotion developed in Paola-Ludovica Coriando's book *Affektenlehre und Phänomenologie der Stimmungen* (2002), where it is argued that affect, in Heidegger's work and in western literature more generally, is rendered as a privileged mode of relating to being, as it represents a moment where the subject opens onto otherness.<sup>46</sup> Again, there are traces of such a structure in the robber's identification of loving with an openness to everything—yet in many respects the robber *avoids* openness by insisting on his own ineffable, intentional self as the origin of *Liebhaben*, and thus never fully concedes his self-identity. *Liebsein* begins to seem, then, more like a myth of the self than a comprehensive theory of emotion.

While the mystery of *Liebsein* cannot be solved in this study, its interrelation with the intra-textual phenomenon of monologue can be made meaningful in an understanding of how *Walser's* text reflects on its own necessarily incomplete conception of affectivity.

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<sup>46</sup> Compare to the ideas of emotion presented in Rei Terada's 2002 study *Feeling in Theory*, where she argues that emotional experience *always* involves the transgression of the boundaries of the subject, as emotion involves an amplification of sensation through its projection onto an outside that is subsequently identified with. Thus, non-identity with oneself is the condition of possibility of emotional experience. Of all the theories I have explicated here, Terada's is the most flexible and in my view the most productive for the understanding of Walser's work, insofar as it encourages an ongoing analysis of moments of projection; in Walser's analogy-ridden work, one subject's characteristic is constantly displaced onto another object (for instance, the narrator projects onto the robber), and this could well be the mechanism that regenerates the effluent emotion apparent in Walser's work.

Namely, the monologues or “lectures” held by the robber towards the end of the work, provide a consolidated understanding of what constitutes “voice.” The narrator’s voice, oftentimes speaking in a collective *we*, functions as a synthesizing force, pulls and pushes together elements that by no means seem to fit together, adopting multiple incompatible perspectives and opinions. The multi-voicedness of this narrator would have a positive valence for “us” as modern readers, who expect the semantic stream of narrative prose to step beyond law-like, monotone and *monologic* modes of narrative. And yet, for the robber, this monumental multiplicity of voices that coalesce into the narrator—this linguistic field that surrounds, imagines and constitutes the robber—bears a resemblance to the “certain inner voices” that plagued him upon his arrival into the city, and thus into the novel. With his retroactive reduction of the world around him to a variegated construction of his *own* affectivity, the robber is able to silence the many voices and hear only his own *talking about how it is the origin of all other voices*. The gap between the ambitions of this silencing and the potential *fact* of the work’s polyphony,<sup>47</sup> then, would be the place where the pain of Walser’s work arises, the overstretching of the novel’s plasticity into something it may not be able to become. And so the work does become something else: a fairy tale, a vague lingering rumor.

### ***In Conclusion***

In this chapter, I have attempted to show the node within Walser’s *Robber*-novel where the discursively constructed “world” pictured by a narrator is radically revised and reframed. The ironies of this “revisionary moment,” constituted by two

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<sup>47</sup> I refer to polyphony as a “potential fact,” since in the wake of Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, the notion of “pure monologue” and of a “singular ineffable voice” must appear to a large extent as an outmoded fiction. The meaning of polyphony and dialogism for the novel will be further explored in the next chapter.

lengthy monologues, I have argued, contribute to the impression of an unspoken affect beneath the surface of the text. With this reading, I hope to have shown how the “emotion” that is “contained” by prose such as Walser’s, is not revealed through a structure of expression, whereby a fictional agent betrays their inner state. Instead, the impression of affect—and thus, of a troubled subjectivity—seep into the text at those moments where the representational structure of the “novel” has broken down: when the robber’s monologue “outgrows” its function as the oration *of* a fictional character, and turns instead into a monologic interpretive model. For, in witnessing the limitations of this interpretive model, the impression of a *remainder* arises, a *something else* that moves beyond the text.

In its radically de-realizing and revisionary moments where traditional generic forms are forcefully redefined, Walser’s prose bears an affinity to Kafka’s prose. Yet where Kafka’s work is haunted by a dream of speech as a means of conjoining separate subject positions, Walser’s work imagines speech as the vessel through which an inexhaustible supply of inner feeling (*Liebeskraft*) would be used to fill and structure the world. In other words, monologue in Kafka participates in the imagining of an inexpressably, unrepresentably *dialogic* social universe. Monologue in Walser, on the other hand, appears attached to a defensive desire to secure a unidirectional, monologic power with which to constitute a fictional reality.



## CHAPTER 3

### *URWALDGLEICH:*

### THOMAS BERNHARD'S POETICS OF OVERGROWTH IN THE UNPUBLISHED *LEICHTLEBIG* NOVEL

#### *Prelude to an Attempted Archaeology of Concrete*

In my readings of Kafka and Walser, I have examined the ways in which an extended monologue can double and disrupt an established narrative discourse, and raise anxiety-inducing questions about the ways that social relations and hierarchies are figured through speech and within narrative prose. With Kafka, I noted that the breaking-in of monologue coincided with the emergence of a radical idea of sociality built around the narrative device of embedding. With Walser I examined how disruptive or irruptive monologue served the rhetorical indexing of a foundational affect, which would be the precondition for any social tie. In turning to the prose of Thomas Bernhard, I will be interested in looking again at the struggle between narrative discourse and character monologue, and how Bernhard's prose, in dramatizing such a struggle, articulates a deep reserve—or even, terror—at the notion of positing a world and a set of fictional social structures within literary language. Perhaps more palpably than Kafka and Walser, Bernhard appears to be working *against* the elected genre of his work.

However, associating the prose of Thomas Bernhard, a postwar Austrian novelist, with works by two authors—Kafka and Walser—whose generic redefinitions became paradigmatic of a certain idea of high modernism, provokes some questions

about the literary-historical *placement* of these authors. How do we read Bernhard *alongside* authors whose names are explicitly integrated *into* his prose? What does our reading of these “three” authors mean, when a “conversation about Robert Walser” appears in the early Bernhard prose work *Ungenach* (U 98), and the recommendation of Kafka’s *Das Schloß* as “essential reading” figures into Bernhard’s final novel *Auslöschung* (A 7)? To gain hold of this question, I will consider the ways in which Bernhard has been, most recently, integrated into a history of European and world literature.

From within the first decades of the twenty-first century, a solidified idea of Thomas Bernhard’s contribution to world literature appears to have been determined through press reception, critical scholarship and self-commentary by prominent authors. One could call this contribution Bernhard’s *concrete*, as a building material for novels: the breathless, dense, unbroken, solid mass of prose as *sheer monologue*.<sup>48</sup> Bernhard did not likely invent the one-paragraph novel (which is also anticipated by Samuel Beckett’s prose). But for Bernhard in particular, the novel *as* solid monologue has become a signature identifiable across languages and literary traditions.

Intriguingly, adaptations and reworkings of Bernhard’s signature novelistic practice often unfold as extended elegies. The American writer John Edgar Wideman has poignantly linked the sprawling sentences of Bernhard’s work—in particular the novel *Correction*—as participating in a dynamic of “weight, meaning, and memory,”

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<sup>48</sup> In using the metaphor of “concrete,” I necessarily allude to Bernhard’s 1982 novel *Beton* (*Concrete*), where the image of concrete has a particular tragic meaning (it is the concrete onto which the narrator’s deceased acquaintance jumped to her death). If, in *Beton*, there is a relation between the “density” of the prose and the tragic association of the word “concrete” in the title, it could move in two directions: first, the “concrete” density of the prose serves, like the concrete itself, as a surrogate gravestone for the dead; second, this “concrete” prose could represent more than simply a memorial, but could suggest a complicity of the prose work with the woman’s suicide, as it is the thing she jumps down onto. My short discussion of this interpretation in this footnote should help to highlight the complexities of the meaning of density in each particular work by Bernhard, which although often strikingly similar to one another, nevertheless serve as distinct sites for reading and interpretation.

driven by an obsession to remember that can only continue through persistent repetition and reiteration.<sup>49</sup> *Obsessive remembering* frequently provokes an invocation of Bernhard: the final work by the American novelist William Gaddis, *Agapē Agape*, explicitly quotes Bernhard's novel *Concrete* and follows its block-form as it presents, in the first person, the obsessive project of a dying writer who attempts to restore the memory of a crucial point in the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century commodification and mechanization of culture—the emergence and disappearance of the player piano. Early into the work, he accuses Bernhard of having “stolen” his own first sentence. W.G. Sebald, the writer who is likely most responsible for recent re-evaluations of Bernhard amongst an English-language readership, adopts Bernhard's models of interwoven monologues—one endless voice within another endless voice—as part of a complex narrative project that circles around the search for human life, and life in general, that has been irretrievably lost. For Sebald, prose monologue serves as a medium for imbibing into language the last traces of fading memory.

Quite often, as in Sebald, the appearance of a Bernhard-esque sheer monologue is associated with the remembrance of not just anything, but rather with the victims, perpetrators, the site and traces of fascism, including but not limited to German National Socialism. Beyond the well-known example of Sebald,<sup>50</sup> the Serbo-Croatian-language writer David Albahari has also employed the technique of the one-paragraph-novel, as in *Götz and Meyer* (1998), in a narrative about a schoolteacher's present-day research on two SS officers who gassed thousands of residents of

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<sup>49</sup> In the article “John Edgar Wideman's Bookshelf,” appearing in *O, the Oprah Magazine*, on March 15, 2007: <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/Writer-John-Edgar-Widemans-Bookshelf/4>. Wideman wrote this article shortly before publication of his novel *Fanon*, which, interlaced with structural echoes of Bernhard's *Correction*, narrates the troubled labors of a writer attempting to create a biography of the philosopher and revolutionary Frantz Fanon.

<sup>50</sup> Amir Eshel, for instance, observes that the childhood of Sebald's central figure Jacques Austerlitz (in the eponymous novel *Austerlitz* from 2001), “will be told through [his childhood nursemaid Vera], in periscopic narration à la Thomas Bernhard” (78). Eshel also cites an interview from *Der Spiegel* in 2001, where Sebald explicitly states that he derived this technique from Bernhard's prose.

Belgrade.<sup>51</sup> Recently the literary scholar Florencia Martín has drawn attention to the explicit and implicit affinity between the Argentinian novelist Sergio Chejfec and Thomas Bernhard, in the latter's novelistic engagement with the specters of Argentina's fascist regime.

Thomas Bernhard should certainly not be “thanked” or given “credit” for these innovative and ethically urgent revisionings of the novel as a genre. Drawing attention to Bernhard's posthumous literary friendships, as it were, instead should help to think about what the different flexible functions and meanings of an “unbroken monologue” within narrative prose could be. For, while monologue in Bernhard's later work frequently *does* emerge as *mnemotechnic monologue* that embarks on an excavation of a fascist regime (for instance in the novel *Auslöschung* from 1986), it is far from clear that Bernhard initially settled upon this signature form as a tool for a specific kind of ethically imperative historical remembrance.

Bernhard's late prose would appear to participate in the complex constellation of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature that Huyssen saw as the “return to history” in high modernism, “the new confrontation of history and fiction, history and representation, history and myth that distinguishes contemporary aesthetic productions from most of the trends that made up the post-1945 neo-avantgardes from absurdism to documentarism and concrete poetry, from the nouveau roman to the Artaud revival in theater, from happenings and pop to minimalism and performance” (1995: 88). With this assertion of a new period of aesthetic production opposed to the older paradigms of high modernism, Huyssen draws a dividing line between two forms of engagement with art: on the one side of this line, high modernism of the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>51</sup> Many thanks to Alexandar Boskovic at the University of Michigan for introducing me to the issue of Bernhard's impact within Serbian literature. As Alexandar has explained, Bernhard's first novel *Frost* (1963), upon its translation into Serbian shortly thereafter, made him into a quasi-subversive literary figure whose writing polemicized against ideas of a national tradition.

merited a reception based on its inversion and “play” with aesthetic ideas, and generated intrigue based on a sheer estrangement of artistic convention from itself. In other words, the two authors I have examined in the first chapters of this dissertation—Franz Kafka and Robert Walser—in their experiments with genre, would fit with the range of artistic production that is associated with, runs in parallel to, or feeds into, the avant-gardes and their signature *experiments with form*.<sup>52</sup> On the other side of this line, there are for Huyssen the late-20<sup>th</sup> century artists, beginning to appear in the 1960s, who signal a turn towards history: Alexander Kluge, Peter Weiss, Peter Handke, Christa Wolf, Anselm Kiefer (88). These artists would be interested in aesthetic “innovation” insofar as it would reflect the problems of the (un)representability of history, the vicissitudes of memory and the pervasion of cultural amnesia. W.G. Sebald’s work, which explicitly draws on many of the above mentioned artists (Handke, Kluge, Weiss), would apparently echo this turn of European high artistic production to memory. One could speculate that Bernhard might fit into this turn as well, especially in light of his late works, the novel *Auslöschung* and the play *Heldenplatz*, which explicitly and polemically thematize the persistent specter of Austria’s Nazi past. And yet placing Bernhard on one or the other side of a turn to history would oversimplify the interrelation of formal experimentation and historical reflection encountered in Bernhard’s work. Bianca Theisen’s evaluation of Austrian literature since the 1950s productively complicates the opposition of “avant garde experimentalism” and “historically concerned”

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<sup>52</sup> Kafka was championed by Breton and the surrealists, but his status as an engaged avant-garde cannot be asserted; even *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, considered to be Kafka’s closest encounter with expressionism, has been cautiously called “experimental Reflection-prose” by one historian of the expressionist period (Oehm 1993: 195). And Mark Anderson could only retroactively locate Kafka within the aesthetics of *Jugendstil* (See Anderson 1988). Walser, too, has retrospectively been integrated into ideas about expressionism, and while he was initially published in the journal *Die Insel* alongside Frank Wedekind, I hope with my own reading to have re-demonstrated a by-now commonly accepted idea that Walser’s work does not participate in any clear narrative of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism, even if it constitutes to some extent an “experiment with form.”

literature introduced by Huyssen:

But Austrian literature moves beyond a happy embrace of the self-consuming artifact, the disengaged play of endless self reference, the excessive metanarrative deflation of ontological levels, or the blithe proliferation of simulacra typical of postmodernism. When it responds to the silence that continues to shroud Austria's historical past, to the muffled relationship between landscape, culture and social structure, Austrian literature after 1945 wants to retrace an untold history cut deeply into the physiognomy of social life. (2003: 1)<sup>53</sup>

In other words, to look for the “engagement” of Bernhard’s works—even the earliest ones—one might look for an engagement with the muted history of fascism precisely *in* moments of formal experimentation. The question provoked by Theisen’s account of Austrian literature from the 1950s onward (in which Bernhard figures heavily), is how an ongoing fascination with *monologue* as a building block for novelistic narrative is related to historical recollection—and revision. For although recent works exhibiting a style comparable to Bernhard’s<sup>54</sup> employ monologue as a vessel for lost memories, in the earliest prose works by Bernhard, monologue plays precisely the opposite function: it erases, overrides and revises fragile constructions of memory. Monologue is *complicit* with amnesia.

Within the 1960s, the first decade of Bernhard’s prose output, there is a clear shift in the repertoire of stylistic devices encountered in his novels: the total elimination of quotation marks. The novels *Frost* (1963), *Verstörung* (1967) and *Das*

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<sup>53</sup> This description is lifted from the introduction to Theisen’s book, which contains two studies of Bernhard’s work and its experiments, in the medium of fiction, with extra-literary and non-fictional forms, most importantly, autobiography and photography. The basic argument of Theisen’s book, which finds complex reiterations, is that Austrian literature since the 1950s has pointed to an evasion of the Austrian past not by directly *narrating* or *picturing* this past, but by indicating the medial practices that have occluded this past. Bernhard’s writing, alongside that of Peter Rosei, Gerhard Roth, Peter Handke, Gert Jonke and others, *indicate the indication* performed by verbal and photographic images.

<sup>54</sup> A style integrating long monologues, “periscopic” embedding of one voice within another, lack of punctuation or paragraph breaks.

*Kalkwerk* (1970) each contain characteristically “Bernhardian” monologues, but they are, along with other portions of dialogue, bound by quotation marks or cited through free indirect speech. But gradually, first in Bernhard’s shorter prose works (*Watten* in 1969 and *Gehen* in 1970), the quotation marks disappear and the prose is presented as a solid, uninterrupted block in which the major characters’ monologues can only be differentiated from another character’s through occasional punctuating phrases such as “he said.” The first novel-length work by Bernhard to *fully* lack quotation marks is *Korrektur* (1975), where this lack of punctuation accentuates an existential affinity and virtual undiscernibility of the narrator and his deceased friend Roithamer.

It would be too simple, however, to insist that the disappearance of quotation marks from Bernhard’s novel signifies a sudden break, a stylistic transformation whereby a stratified, conventionally “narrated” work becomes replaced by a monologic block. This disappearance, as I will demonstrate, is already at work on the level of narrative discourse in Bernhard’s earliest prose. In *Frost*, a fictional work that is presented as the collected journal entries and letters of a young medical student who is observing an insane painter in a village in the Austrian Alps, one notices that the more the young narrator cites the interminable speeches of his elder interlocutor, the more difficult it becomes to discern his own voice. This is manifest, for instance, in an anomalous passage roughly two-thirds through the novel, where the narrator begins to quote an extended speech by the painter, beginning so:

Er sagt: »Es gibt hier [...]  
He says: “There are here [...] (230)

However, the end of this speech is not marked by a close-quotation mark. The line “Die Wahrheit liegt auf dem Grund wie das Unerforschliche” (“the truth lies on the base like the unresearchable”) is followed by a line break and the heading of the

next section (the 21<sup>st</sup> day), but there is no diacritic indicating that the student has finished quoting the painter's speech (230). Due to the sheer volume of citation done by the student, this kind of mistake appears inevitable; his own voice hardly figures into the journal entries anymore. But this particular moment is significant, for it signals that the student's observation and writing has begun to exceed the limits and logic of the quotation mark, which upholds a difference between two sources of speech. *Frost* stages a takeover by an elder character's monologue of a younger narrator's privately composed discourse. The uncanny fact that this young narrator is able to *remember* and *reproduce* the monologue of the painter after the fact, is eclipsed by the uncanny suggestion that this young narrator has *become* his interlocutor.

Looking into Bernhard's earlier drafts of *Frost*, one finds that Bernhard actually often does not use quotation marks, but introduced this convention in his later drafts, so that the characters' voices appear properly separated. And yet, even in the early version of *Frost*—which with its different setting and characters constitutes a separate novel from the published version—this same thematic of a takeover of the older voice by the younger voice is played out within the framework of a conventional third-person, past-tense narrative, into which the elder's extended monologue *irrupts* like concrete that flows and hardens over the narrative substrate. Bernhard's earliest attempts at novelistic writing, then, are interested in dramatizing the process of erasure and uncanny revision that can be triggered by a single voice. In examining the destructive effects of monologic speech in these early works, the later "fully" monologic works such as *Korrektur* and *Der Untergeher* appear to be based, in their formalized interweaving of two- to three near-identical monologic voices, on an initial destruction and voiding of the narrative field, and a forgotten *loss* of another, literally younger voice. Bernhard's novelistic oeuvre begins, then, with the continual, often



violent replaying of a thematic complex that might be called *the erasure of the unhappy young man*. It is with this phrase in mind that I begin my analysis of Bernhard's unpublished predecessor to *Frost*.

### *Erasing the Unhappy Face*

An exquisitely timed, alternate history of 20<sup>th</sup> century art: in April 1945, with American and German tanks lined up for battle outside the window of an Austrian Alpine inn, a young woman in catatonic despair destroys the practice of representational painting. An eruption of physical, military violence synchronizes perfectly with a moment of aesthetic rupture. With only a pane of glass separating her from “the most feared weapons of their time,” the woman dabs ever more marks onto an oil painting she has recently finished, which depicts an “unhappy young man that she knew” (W1/3a: 105). The countenance of this man—is he a lover? A friend? A fallen soldier?—quickly disappears behind a dense mesh of new brushstrokes. “Soon nothing more of this likeness was to be seen but raw horrible spots, the whole thing looked like a large ulcer” (105).<sup>55</sup> Her brother, looking on, is afraid to distract her from this act of erasure, “for she was closed into her brush” (105). He doubts whether she is conscious of what she is doing, and believing that their final hours are upon them, he considers shooting himself and her with a Romanian pistol he found during the last

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<sup>55</sup> The complete passage reads: “meine Schwester tupfte mit ihrer Pinsel so lange [*illegible* -PJB] ein ihr [*illegible*] fertiges Ölbild, dass es bald ruiniert war: ein schönes Bild: darstellend einen unglücklichen jungen Menschen, den sie kannte; bald war von diesem Bildnis nichts mehr zu sehen, als raue fürchterliche Flecken, wie ein grosses Geschwür sah das Ganze aus; wahrscheinlich wusste sie gar nicht, was sie tat, und ich lenkte sie von dieser grausigen Beschäftigung nicht ab, denn in diesem Pinsel war sie eingeschlossen, während ich glaubte, unsere letzten Stunden seien angebrochen und: was tun?” (“My sister dabbed with her brush so long [...] a her [...] finished oil painting, so that it was soon ruined: a beautiful picture: representing an unhappy young man whom she knew; soon nothing more of this portrait was to be seen but raw, horrible spots, the whole thing looked like a large ulcer; probably she did not know at all what she was doing, and I did not distract her from this horrible activity, for she was closed into her brush, while I believe that our last hours had downed and thought: what to do?”; W1/1: 105)

world war (105).

In the heightened tension of this moment, the young woman abolishes the tenets of realistic portraiture: by transforming the young man's countenance into a bodily affliction (ulcer), the sister rejects the face as a durable marker of individuality. She also refuses the notion of legible emotion, as the unhappiness of this particular young man dissolves into a depersonalized affect of fear and disgust that circulates between the picture and the viewer. It is a timely gesture; this framed rectangle of dark, non-signifying markings perfectly reflects the ravaged world outside.<sup>56</sup>

This particular parallel-universe end of art, this dramatic crossing of 20<sup>th</sup> century geopolitical- and art-history, appears in the early 1960s, in the monologue of a fictional character called simply “The Doctor,” created by Thomas Bernhard in a novel that would never be published, but was revised into the published *Frost*. The Doctor's dense monologue, an interpolated discourse within the narrative that constitutes much of the novel, displays a stylistic sensibility that is ostensibly similar to that of his sister: as in the defaced portrait, material is heaped upon material to create a dense mesh of words, an overgrowth of demarcations that eclipses the human characters in the novel. And yet there remains an important difference between the brother's monologue and the sister's defaced ulcer-portrait. The sister's obliteration of representational art is (1) bounded by a rigidly defined frame, and (2) concretely situated in a particular (political- and familial-) historical situation. On the other hand, the Doctor-brother's monologue is neither bounded by a stable frame, nor does it stay firmly situated in a well-defined context. Although it begins as a contribution of

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<sup>56</sup> The destruction of painting with German and American tanks lined up outside resembles Kojeve's dramatic description of Hegel writing the final words of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* with Napoleon's cannons thundering outside, which Kojeve describes as a moment of perfect simultaneity and mutual penetration: “Hegel caused the completed whole of the universal real process to penetrate into his individual consciousness, and then he penetrated this consciousness.” In both dramatic scenes, creative-synthetic intellectual production and the historical moment are perfectly bonded together (1969: 35). But the sister's gesture is not triumphant, like Hegel's; it is cryptic and elegaic.

dialogue delivered in a scene of two men (the Doctor and the railroad worker Leichtlebig) ambulating around a snowed-over Alpine village, the monologue exerts a palpable violence on the frame in which it is interpolated, re-defining the fictional world from within, as it were. This “mad monologue” spills over the textual boundary in which it is initially contained, and ultimately subverts (through the contaminating force of rhetoric and metaphors) the novelistic narrative. While the sister's painterly act of erasure appears as a fleeting and vivid moment in a longer narrative stream, the brother's monologue erases the very narrative that was its precondition.

This is the difference between the *brother's* monologue and the *sister's* painting: her picture *makes sense* in the context of its appearance, whereas the brother's monologue overwhelms the context of its appearance. Conventionally, a novel-character's monologue serves a *function* in the narrative in which it is embedded, playing some role in a narrative economy (such as exegesis of events/persons, providing of backstory, emotional deepening of character<sup>57</sup>), managing an “excess” or producing a “surplus” of narrative information (Todorov 1977: 78). By contrast, the Doctor's monologue resists functional integration within its frame narrative, preventing the novel from being completed, as it were. If there were an easily summarizable message in the Doctor's framed monologue, it might be: “*I cannot be framed! I am not a function!*”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> A list of possible functions of the '*Binnenerzählung*' (embedded/framed telling) can be found in Andreas Jäggi's study on the frame-narrative in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These functions include: “characterization of the *Binnenerzähler* (*framed* narrator) and his listeners”; “self-representation”; “teaching, example-setting”; “delivery of news”; “establishment of common ground (order)”; “thematization of narrative motifs such as: –entertainment, amusement (*Zeitvertreib*), –creation of fiction or counter-worlds, –therapy, self-exploration”; “reanimation of the past”; “interrogation”; “convince the listener to behave in a certain way”; “a demonstration of the creative process by the framed narrator” (Jäggi 57). Bernhard's “framed teller,” the character of the Doctor, arguably fulfills *all* of the above functions with his monologues. And yet the dimensions of his discourse also go beyond the fulfillment of any particular function, and the monologue seems aimed at declaring that it is in fact *not* a function of any framing narrative, historical or literary.

<sup>58</sup> My gratitude to Anette Schwarz for this apt, synthetic summary, which does not appear word-for-word in any text dealt with in this dissertation, but be found in the metafictional novel *Thru* (1975) by Christine Brooke-Rose.

Such a resistance to narrative functionalization and framing is, furthermore, linked to a refusal by the Doctor's discourse to lodge itself into any durable historical metanarrative. So long as the novel focuses primarily on the proletarian figure Leichtlebig, the text appears to be a *Zeitroman* concerned with Cold War political anxieties and Austrian parliamentary intrigues. But as the Doctor's interpolation breaks into the novel, the work loses its firm orientation in any recognizable narrative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At times, the work appears as an End-of-Days novel, at others the Doctor recasts the narrative world as a time capsule, whether of the fallen Austro-Hungarian empire or a corrupted yet primordial *Heimat*. An oversaturation of determinations of time—which Botho Strauß' prose of the 1980s<sup>59</sup> would associate with television channel-changing—stems here from an overgrowth of authorial speech spouted by the Doctor. In this way, he avoids recreating the artistic accomplishment of his sister, who destroyed a practice of painting at the moment World War II ended, with tanks outside the window. The Doctor's self-negating discourse, constantly reframing itself, makes it impossible to say exactly *what is going on outside the window*. The sister's timely gesture affirms the possibility of an artwork that does justice to its historical context: a framed rectangle of dark, non-signifying markings perfectly reflects the ravaged world outside. The fact that the sister's act of creation is narrated *within* the brother's monologue is telling; his sister's artwork is an image of the relevance that he cannot himself achieve. The question is, then, what the interpolation of his monologue in the unpublished novel *does* manage to achieve.

As signaled by the sister's “ulcer” painting, Bernhard's early unpublished novel, like his final novel *Auslöschung* (1988), focuses on processes of elision and erasure. But unlike most early Bernhard narratives, *Auslöschung* is frequently read

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<sup>59</sup> See Strauß' novel *Der Junge Mann* (1987), which for many readers signaled an explicitly conservative turn in Strauß' writing, and which bemoans the impossibility of a unified historical metanarrative.

specifically as a commentary on (a) the murder and subsequent erasure from memory of Europe's (and Austria's in particular) Jewish population, and (b) the desired erasure of an Austrian aristocratic familial heritage which was complicit with Nazism.<sup>60</sup>

Bianca Theisen, more succinctly, argues that in *Auslöschung* Thomas Bernhard “wants to eradicate the National Socialist language of eradication” (2003: 171).

The erasures that occur over the course of the *Leichtlebig* novel are of a different nature. The Doctor's monologue can be read as a critique of the novel from within: a provocative exploitation of a *loophole* in the practice of novelistic writing, which points to the erasure internal to the novel as an ideal form. This early work, by an as-yet unpublished novelist, struggles with foundational imperatives of novelistic writing<sup>61</sup>: the imperative to (a) create an internally dynamic character, to (b) let this character change and grow, and to (c) let this character's voice and views collide and intertwine with, and disentangle from, those of other fictional characters; Bernhard seems to take seriously and implement every one of these seemingly harmless conventions. And yet a certain question crosses the entire manuscript: Does the construction of a central figure of identification in a narrative—a novelistic *hero*—not also entail a defacement and erasure of other personae? Or even, a transfiguration of the fictional world itself? Bernhard's *Leichtlebig*-novel, initially recalling the *Bildungsroman*, lingers at the moment once noticed, and cautiously applauded, by Bakhtin: the novelist, in order to fully “make visible” a hero's self-image and self-understanding, must allow the hero to violate the “field of vision” of other characters, rewrite their internal laws, and supplant realist conventions with fantastic ones (1984:

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<sup>60</sup> For a compendium of relevant readings of *Auslöschung* see: Höller 1995.

<sup>61</sup> Which I might define heuristically as a genre that involves a reinscription, in prose fiction, of the conventions of (auto)biographical writing. Conflicting theories of the novel (such as Lukács' and Bakhtin's) assume to varying extents the necessity of an individual life story for the novel as the novel (no matter how unstable and uncertain the form is otherwise).

54).<sup>62</sup>

Bernhard places special emphasis on this moment of violation, circling around an aporia of novelistic writing: that in order to fully give voice to a fictional character, other characters must be muted or erased. He thus underscores the potential of the novel, as a genre, to silence and coerce—and to perpetuate an emphatic, elevated idea of individuality that precludes dialogue. The definitive accomplishment of this fragmentary, unpublished and unknown novel is a *perverse alignment of third-person constative narration* (“He did this”) with *second-person injunction* (“I order you to say you did this!”). An elder male character (the Doctor) takes on a quasi-omniscient authorial position, eclipsing and erasing the countenance of a younger character (the proletarian autodidact Leichtlebig) by first *ordering* Leichtlebig to narrate a particular version of his biography and second *forcing* Leichtlebig to admit that this account is accurate. In this perverse moment, Bernhard's work “swerves away from dialogic norms” (Frieden 30) and recasts narratorial constative discourse as a violent imposition, and moreover as a violent imposition that does not disappear with the abdication of a strong authorial voice. The monologist Doctor is not an author standing outside the text, but a character dwelling within the diegesis. He thus challenges the assumed, or desired, democracy of the novel as a virtual social space, as a “a paradise of individuals where everyone has the right to be understood” (Kundera 159).

Producing such a critique of the novel 'from within' represents a shift in Bernhard's literary strategy. His previous prose project (also unpublished) of the late 1950s and early 1960s, primarily known as *Schwarzach Sankt Veit*<sup>63</sup> set a tone “of an

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<sup>62</sup> Bakhtin expects that any such violation will be paid back, as it were, by the ongoing dialogic movement of language; any voice that impacts its environment will, in the end, be impacted in turn.

<sup>63</sup> Bernhard submitted a version of this “novel-attempt” for publication to the S. Fischer Verlag under the title *Der Wald auf der Straße*, and it was subsequently rejected. The work was not published in any form until 1989, when Bernhard revised the work under the title *In der Höhe. Rettungsversuch*,

explicitly anarchistic-deconstructive nature” (Janner 197). This “novel-attempt”<sup>64</sup> restages the destructive gestures of the prewar *Avant-gardes*: Bernhard creates a “language-confusion resembling Dadaism” (189), while his “deformed sentence economy” recalls French Surrealism in its “unbridled, associative flow of thoughts” circling around the topic of death (204). A “multiplicity of perspectives”—which would have been the hallmark of the novel genre, according to Bakhtin—is merely “feigned” (199). The construction of characters through the “bundling of individual traits” is likewise refused (199), as evidenced by the bleeding-together of its “three (four?) protagonists” (Huber 38).

Much as *Schwarzach Sankt Veit* reads like “the exerted, epigonal attempt to connect with the narrative techniques of Modernism,” the term “stream of consciousness” inadequately describes many pages of the project (42). The work resists the notion of an unhindered flow of subjective thought, as large portions are structured according to a tabular outline structure with numbered and lettered subheadings, feigning an intentional organization of knowledge, classified by concepts (such as “THE POLEMICAL” and “DEMONSTRATIVENESS”) (NLTB 12.18: 11, 60). Inside of this organizational structure, we find an erratic series of morbid visions of an unclearly defined *I*, sorted diary-like according to set dates of the year (13<sup>th</sup> of April, 14<sup>th</sup> of April, etc). The themes of death and decay are continually recycled across these partitions: in one scene, the *I* opens a window and a corpse falls onto him (168), while elsewhere it is declared that “Im grossen Frost werde ich sie einfrieren lassen und in der grossen Hitze verfaulen (“In the great frost I will let her freeze and in the great heat decay”; 11). A permeating thematic of decay appears within an aggressive

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*Unsinn* through the Residenz Verlag of Salzburg.

<sup>64</sup> In the *Anhang* of the 2003 edition of *Frost*, the editors refer to Bernhard's efforts in long prose preceding *Frost* as “Romanversuche” (339). This designation implies that Bernhard had begun to chase an ambition that he would not do justice to until the appearance of his 1963 novel *Frost*.

fragmentation of narrative prose.

Bianca Theisen has convincingly argued that Thomas Bernhard “detect[s] a subliminal violence and oblivion in the microcosm of social relationships,” and points to “the microfascisms latent in common percepts” (2003: 3). This argument rings true with regard to *Schwarzach Sankt Veit*, inasmuch as the work establishes a link between bureaucratic, schematic organization of ideas on paper, and a Dante-like hell of infinitely repeated deaths. Yet the violence of *Schwarzach Sankt Veit* is in every respect *overt*, and can hardly be described as subliminal or latent; fragmentation on the formal level corresponds to the violence and decay on the thematic level. Bernhard's late-career description of himself as “a destroyer of stories,” Martin Huber argues, “applies here more than to the later work” (2006: 39). With *Schwarzach Sankt Veit*, Bernhard appears to recreate, stroke by stroke, an Avant-garde destruction of art in general.

The hidden (*subliminal, latent*) and the small (*microcosms, microfascism*) first gain importance in the novel-attempts Bernhard made in the early 1960s, immediately following his abandonment and dismissal of *Schwarzach Sankt Veit*.<sup>65</sup> In these works, intimate social relations—leisurely walks and conversations between two recent acquaintances—serve as the site of a virtually demonic possession (“inundation,”<sup>66</sup> “infection,”<sup>67</sup> “invasion”<sup>68</sup>) of one interlocutor by another. In order to stage such scenes, Bernhard first replicated a typical novelistic setup, making an effort to adapt his stylistic sensibilities to (or force them into) conventional narrative templates. Like *Frost* (1963), the *Leichtlebig*-novel is more “conventionally” narrated

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<sup>65</sup> Bernhard wrote onto the manuscript of the associated work *Der Wald auf der Strasse* that what he had written was “inflated nothing” [“aufgeblasenes Nix!” (13.15/2: 1)].

<sup>66</sup> See Naqvi 2004.

<sup>67</sup> This is the word used by “the Doktor” character in the draft W1/1a to describe his influence on his younger interlocutor: “es ist mir entsetzlich zu wissen, dass ich Sie anstecke” (“it is horrible to me to know that I am infecting you”; W1/1a: 6).

<sup>68</sup> See Winkler 1995



than *Schwarzach Sankt Veit* and its revisions (Huber 42).

The unpublished “Leichtlebig” novel, written directly before *Frost*, which became a “quarry” for the writing of that novel, showcases this effort of adaptation (Bernhard 2003: 351). Not so much an attack *on* or a total resignation *to* he *Bildungsroman* genre, the Leichtlebig novel looks like a critical attempt at compromise: Bernhard cross-cuts a radically improvisational and dissonant mode of writing, with a sort of coming-of-age narrative about a youthful character with whom a reader could identify, and whose thoughts are delivered more or less transparently to the reader by a close third-person narrator. The “language confusion” of *Schwarzach Sankt Veit* is by no means *missing* from this novel, rather it is provisionally localized, limited to the voice of one particularly eccentric character. Within the voice of this ill and eccentric Doctor, the work of fragmentation and destruction begun in *Schwarzach Sankt Veit* is continued in a (temporarily) contained form.

Turning to Bernhard’s next novel-attempt, an ostensible *Bildungsroman*, one notes a clear difference from the ubiquitous confusion and fracturing of the *Schwarzach Sankt Veit* project. This time, Bernhard's youthful figure of identification is fittingly identified with a proper name, *Leichtlebig* (presumably his family name), while his elderly, eccentric counterpart has no name but the title *der Doktor*, which implies a nominal scientific-philosophical authority (although the Doctor is specifically a *Doctor juris*). The name *Leichtlebig* (lit. “easy-living”) belies a freewheeling life of leisure and carousing, but Leichtlebig has suffered numerous hardships and personal losses, and until his recent aspirations to become an erudite writer, his life has been almost entirely dominated by material worries. The morbid *Doktor*, by contrast, is 'at the end of the line,' and he fills up the limbo preceding his death with a series of lengthy monologues.<sup>69</sup> These monologues appear, in Markus

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<sup>69</sup> The Doctor acknowledges at one point that the monologues are a sort of preparation for death

Janner's words, as a locus of free-associative "language-confusion," an exclusive site where an "anarchistic-deconstructive" tone is generated and from which it is broadcasted (197). Thus, Bernhard's own youthful Avant-garde impulses are recast as the eccentric ramblings of a single elderly character, transformed into monologue as defined by Ken Frieden, as "physically or semantically solitary speech acts that deviate from dialogic norms" (1985: 30). Leichtlebig, who is accustomed to small, uninvolved conversations over beer with his colleagues, finds himself plunged into ceaseless and unanswerable monologues. These not only unsettle him emotionally, but also begin to erase the boundaries drawn in the initial setup of the novel—namely, the boundary between dialogue and narration, between different characters as agents, and between the outside setting and the characters' inner thoughts. The Doctor's subversive monologues serve as a catalyst for this breakdown.

With the unfinished *Leichtlebig* of 1962 project and its follow-up *Frost* in 1963, Bernhard settled on a medium that could be accepted by a wide readership and literary-critical establishment. Both the *Leichtlebig* novel and its 1963 successor recycle a familiar *Bildungsroman*-trope: a young man engaged in study and apprenticeship travels to an unfamiliar territory, where he meets a character who possesses knowledge and experience that he himself does not. In regard to *Frost*, several critics have noted a similarity to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, where again "the visitor of an ill man becomes ill himself and can just barely save himself" (Koller 108). A recent American reviewer of *Frost* called it "a 'magic mountain' without the magic" (Benfey 2006). Mann's High Modernist *Bildungsroman* narrates, among other things, the young protagonist's discovery of a new structure of experience (for instance, of an alternate mode of temporality known only to Alpine tuberculosis patients). But Bernhard's early novels do not emulate the *Bildungsroman* exclusively

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(W1/1a: 24)

with relation to Mann; as many critics saw *Frost* as a response to Adalbert Stifter's *Der Nachsommer*. Timothy Malchow reads *Frost* as “an inverted Austrian *Bildungsroman*,” in which the young protagonist “finally loses his very sense of identity” (65). And Willi Winkler sees that Bernhard's novel aimed to “destroy” the German *Bildungsroman* because it, as a genre, represented the pinnacle of art's political and social-reproductive instrumentalization. By Winkler's account, the culmination of *Frost* is not, as the paradigms of the *Bildungsroman* genre would dictate, a settling-down or a gaining-of-insight and balance. Instead, *Frost* is about how a dying man teaches a young man how nature “wrings one's throat,”<sup>70</sup> not so that this young man can be enriched and enlightened, but because the older man parasitically feeds on him, and can only stay alive as long as he spreads his own morbidity. If the *Bildungsroman* is a vehicle and impetus for a particular kind of social reproduction, Winkler implies, *Frost* breaks this cycle by reproducing only death.

The commentaries noted above have in common a tendency to see the adaptation of a paradigmatic novelistic schemata and motifs, rather than as an epigonal, belated recreation of the Avant-garde's attempted explosion of the category of art. Bernhard's adoption and manipulation of a more “conventional” or “traditional” form no doubt helped his work gain readerly and critical recognition, but one should be careful not to map a teleological model of upward- and forward-progress onto Bernhard's literary career. It should not be forgotten that the dawning of

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<sup>70</sup> The painter tells the narrator: “Machmal dreht einem auch die Natur den Hals um, *die Natur ohne Einfachheit*, man sieht dann: diese unendliche Kompliziertheit der fürchterlichen Natur” (“Sometimes nature also wrings one's throat, *nature without simplicity*, one sees then: this unending complexity of horrible nature”; 190). One can note that this “lesson,” while it is presented as a derivation of experience, is posited as a timeless truth. The painter's discourse turns much that may have born the marker of historical determination into “nature,” so that violence and pain are no longer *caused*, but “just happen.” This, then, nullifies the project of narrating a personal history to a pedagogical end, for there is no sense that going through a course of development and edification will somehow shield the growing young man from these dangers; they are inevitable facts of “nature.”

this “*Bildungsroman*”-phase was simultaneous to a decisive narrowing of Bernhard's thematic scope. In the more “experimental” *Schwarzach Sankt Veit*, as it drifts through a vast register of death-visions, one finds a passage in which the horrors of Nazi gas chambers are briefly but unambiguously invoked, in language that appears to have been influenced by Paul Celan's “Todesfuge” (Janner 206). Considering the rarity of such direct indices of the Holocaust in Austrian literature of the time (and even in the most 'engaged' postwar German literature by Böll and Grass), one could consider Bernhard's “shift” to be regrettable or repressive. After *Schwarzach Sankt Veit* was rejected for publication by the S. Fischer publishing house (under the title *Der Wald auf der Straße*), Bernhard took seriously the editors' criticisms that his literary ambitions had outstripped the material itself (Huber 36). In his next work, the Leichtlebig-novel and in *Frost*, direct references to the Nazi genocide were omitted. “Auschwitz” would not return to his writing until the 1967 novella *Verstörung*. For the time being, Bernhard appeared most concerned with a self-conscious insertion of his work into accepted literary traditions—and not only “local” ones.

Beyond certain motifs and premises of the German *Bildungsroman*, Bernhard's fiction also explicitly links back to 19<sup>th</sup> century tropes of the *perverse* and the *extreme*, the “exceptional reality” and “experience of limits” with which Baudelaire undergirded his idea of imaginative art (Todorov 1973: 48). Poe and Dostoevsky overshadow Bernhard's early work; the Painter Strauch in *Frost* mentions that during his time as a teacher, he was reading Poe alongside Stifter (F 173).<sup>71</sup> And in Bernhard's autobiographical writings he casts his discovery of Dostoevsky's *Demons* (a work of “insatiability and radicality”) as a conversion experience *par excellence* that set him onto the path to become a novelist (*Kä* 140). While this emphatic assertion of influence is undoubtedly a narrative self-stylization and self-fictionalization, it

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<sup>71</sup> For a more extensive exploration of the connection between Poe and Bernhard see Ruthner 1999.

participates in the creation of a mythology of “great writing” that is already present in *Frost*.<sup>72</sup>

Through the *Leichtlebig* novel and the subsequent *Frost*, Bernhard fashioned models of the extreme and the perverse that would not just call into question the sanity of the text or the author (as in Poe and Dostoevsky), but the very integrity of his texts. In Bernhard's extreme narratives, key characters seem to exert (or claim to exert) an uncanny influence on their environment. Their moment of extremity arrives when one character appears to have the ability, through speech, to alter not only their fictional environment, but—through speech acts of their own—they appear also to alter the textual environment in which they as characters are rendered through linguistic figures. In Bernhard's narratives, through extended acts of speaking, the characters appear to intervene not only in *fictional reality*, but also in the *reality of the operations of the text*.<sup>73</sup> The first section of *Frost* promises that the text will “etwas Unerforschliches [...] erforschen. Es bis zu einem gewissen erstaunlichen Grad von Möglichkeiten aufzudecken” (“research something unresearchable. Uncover it to a certain astonishing degree of possibilities”; F 7). I would argue that the astonishing insight produced over the course of the novel is, in fact, a probe of the novel's *own* inner and outer boundaries, a discovery and “erasure of ontological boundaries” (Dolezel 164), and of a single figure who suddenly brings together in his person “beings of two ontological orders”—the painter becomes a character and a godlike author figure who remotely controls the pen of the first-person narrator. This “erasure of ontological boundaries” by the painter, I would argue, makes up the “radicality that lies in thought and goes the to outermost” mentioned by Ingeborg Bachmann with

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<sup>72</sup> Also in the early works *Amras* and *In der Höhe*

<sup>73</sup> I derive the notion of “fictional reality” from Lubomir Dolezel's theory of possible worlds in fiction, and the notion of “reality of the operations of the text” from Bianca Theisen's systems-theoretical work on Austrian literature.

regard to Bernhard's writing.<sup>74</sup>

A moment of uncanny mimesis, this shocking correspondence between a fictional character's utterances and the fictional environment, defines Bernhard's *Frost*. The mad painter, one day, speaks of a dream he has: "Mein Kopf blähte sich auf, und zwar so, daß die Landschaft sich um einige Grade verfinsterte und die Menschen in Wehlaute ausbrachen, in ungeheuere Wehlaute, wie ich sie noch niemals gehört habe" ("My head inflated itself, and in a way that the landscape darkened by several degrees and the people broke out into moans of pain, in monstrous moans of pain like I have never heard before"; F 37). In the dream, the painter's head (a metonymy for his thoughts, words, visions) swells in a way that affects (darkens) the environment and possesses other human subjects in the vicinity. The shock of the novel comes not, however, from this dream alone, but from the correspondence between the painter's description of the dream, and what happens in the narrative. The Painter does turn out to have the ability to darken the world, and, in turn, to darken the very writing that is describing him. In the *Leichtlebig* novel, this "darkening"—the overflowing of the elder male's discourse into the entirety of the narrative world—is even more radical and structurally destabilizing.

### *Sketching Character: Leichtlebig*

What topographical features lead one to believe, in reading the unpublished *Leichtlebig* drafts, that Bernhard has created a kind of *Bildungsroman*? The first preserved typewritten draft of the novel (W1/1) begins with a threshold-crossing: *Leichtlebig* enters the small mountain town of Schwarzach in the middle of winter, and moves into a small room where he hopes to finish writing an article for his union

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<sup>74</sup> Bachmann is here quoted after Honold and Joch 1999, 75.

newspaper. The protagonist is presented, much in the manner of Wilhelm Meister or Hans Castorp, as a young man suddenly removed from the material, social, and emotional strictures of everyday life, on the verge of breaking into a new experience of time and space. Yet Leichtlebig's crossing-over into Schwarzach is first distinguished as a truly transformative (and thus, lesson-giving) experience when he finds himself constantly accompanied by the morbid, elderly “Doctor,” who from the beginning of their acquaintance exercises “einen nicht geringen Zwang” (“no small force”; W1/1: 11) over him. The Doctor's endless speeches<sup>75</sup> not only unsettle him emotionally, but also begin to erase the boundaries drawn in the initial setup of the novel—namely, the boundary between dialogue and narration, between different characters as agents, and between the outside setting and the characters' inner thoughts.

In the first pages (W1/1), motifs associated with formative experience or “growing up”—loss and mourning of family members, professional training, first-time reading experiences, political awakenings, flirtations with romantic love, overcoming of illness—are first presented through close third-person narration, as part of an as-yet unfinished life-story. Much of the protagonist's (Leichtlebig's) past returns in flashbacks; transplanted to the mountain village of Schwarzach, Leichtlebig suddenly has occasion to reflect upon how he has arrived at his lot in life, and what he might do to change it. A recurrent theme at the start of the novel is Leichtlebig's reminiscence of his past familial, romantic and collegial relationships.

Eine wirkliche Freundschaft hat er wohl niemals gehabt, man könnte diese Verbindungen all mit intensiveren Bekanntschaften überschreiben. [...] Im Allgemeinen sind Eisenbahnbedienstete keine zu grossen, intensiven Freundschaften neigenden Menschen. Das verträge sich nicht mit der Art ihrer

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<sup>75</sup> I hesitate to use the word “tirade” traditionally associated with Bernhard's characters' speeches, because the the Doctor's monologues are not exhausted, in content or function, by the notions of “calumny” or “slander.”

Arbeit.

He had certainly never had a real friendship, one could put all of these connections under the heading of ‘more intense acquaintances’ [...] In general railroad employees are not people who tend towards great, intense friendships. That wouldn’t suit their sort of work. (W1/1: 13)

For Leichtlebig, the constraints of a worker’s life have hampered any formation of emotional ties. Elsewhere, his attempts at heterosexual romantic love are probed, after being cajoled by a villager to tell of his exploits with women. Leichtlebig privately recalls his past lukewarm forging of romantic ties, coldly remembering the “girls with whom he sometimes laid in bed” (29). Venturing into more specific recollections, Leichtlebig remembers the most recent episode in his relationship with a certain Phila, an argument in a coffee house in Attnang before his departure for Schwarzach, after which he “verabschiedete sich ohne jede Nachdrücklichkeit” (“bid farewell without the least bit of emphasis”; 29). He regrets hurting Phila, but insists to himself that it had not been “right” between them, and that their relationship “verlangte nach einer Trennung” (“was asking for a break”; 29). Leichtlebig “ist nie einer gewesen, der sentimentales Aufheben macht” (“has never been one to make a sentimental fuss”; 29). This lack of sentimentality is not, however, presented as an eccentric whim of Leichtlebig’s character. Rather, it appears as a residual of his working-class upbringing, where emphatic emotional expression has been tamped down by material constraints. This includes mourning of the dead; following his mother’s death, Leichtlebig’s father is asked by relatives if the death of his wife was not “ein furchtbarer Schlag” (“a terrible blow”; 26), but the father was unable or unwilling to answer. The only communications the father was able to make after his wife’s death dealt with practical issues of inheritance: “ab und zu sagte der Vater, dass das und jenes aus dem Besitze der Mutter seiner Stiefschwester gehöre” (“now and



then the father said that this and that from his mother's possessions would belong to his stepsister"; 26):

Und so waren die Tage unmittelbar nach dem Begräbnis seiner Mutter ausgefüllt mit dem Einpacken dieser Sachen. Am Abend nach dem Begräbnis war sein Vater übrigens schon wieder zur Arbeit auf den Bahnhof gegangen, er hatte Nachtdienst.

the days immediately after the burial of his mother were filled with the packing-up of these things. Furthermore, on the evening after the burial, his father had already gone back to work at the train station, he had the night shift. (26)

For the surviving members of the family, extended and articulated mourning is a luxury not afforded by the circumstances. The material constraints of Leichtlebig's existence persist in rhythmic uniformity; the events following Leichtlebig's father's death closely mirror the aftermath of his mother's death. Again, Leichtlebig goes to the same inn (this time, alone) and eats the same meal of smoked meat, and although he was on the verge of tears, he does not cry. On the same night he, like his father, must rush off to a night shift to fill in for an ill coworker (26).

The construction of Leichtlebig as a person in the early stages of Bernhard's novel involves first the definition and reiteration of a radically deterministic position in a social class. Emotionally, socially, intellectually Leichtlebig has been "a worker" bound by recurring regimens, which are the precisely reproduced and reenacted regimens of his father's life; Bernhard's intricate narrative includes minutiae such as Leichtlebig's decision not to go into a cinema because he wants to save money (6). Yet in parallel to this deterministic portrait, the novel also explores in detail how Leichtlebig has gradually become conscious of the limitations in his life, has grown curious about expanding the possibilities of his existence through intellectual and political activity. In advancing this theme, the narrative tends towards ekphrasis,

providing vivid pictures of Leichtlebig's nascent political and intellectual engagement: we discover, for instance, that Leichtlebig has created, in his room back in the railroad junction town of Attnang, a small library with books on politics and history, which have been collected from different sources. When he compares his room to those of his co-workers, he feels comfortable there (2). Leichtlebig also attempts to fill the social void he finds himself in by frequenting the meetings of the “party,” a leftist worker’s organization for which he acts as treasurer. At these meetings, members read aloud from “mostly political” books, watch films and theater performances, and listen to talks by visiting speakers who come from larger cities (1). The meetings are rendered in striking detail: it is reported that the participants are mostly postal and railroad workers dressed in their civilian clothing, and that the wife of an older party member prepares a buffet with beer, bread, sausage and meat (1). The narrator’s exposition of these meetings helps to root Leichtlebig’s existence in an environment that is distinct from that of the Doctor, in terms of geography, class and political practice. But the meetings also help to transition into a more detailed discussion of Leichtlebig’s burgeoning side-career as a writer, where his intellectual and political self-awareness, as well as his own theories about writing, are showcased at length (the specifics of his writing career are described in subsequent sections of this chapter).

An amassing of biographical detail, and the narrative tracing of Leichtlebig's threads of ambition, give the impression that the novel will be *about him*, and that he has been building up towards a transformation. And yet these threads, vividly presented as they are, cease to constitute the core themes of the novel when Leichtlebig makes the acquaintance of the 'logorrhic'<sup>76</sup> Doctor. The Doctor detains

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<sup>76</sup> See Koestenbaum 1994. Koestenbaum argues that the term logorrhea can never be employed neutrally, and argues that the word “*Logorrhea*” (not the phenomenon) expresses a “murderous” distaste for human speech, human productivity, human flaw and flow. I find his argument convincing, and therefore only employ the term in quotes, and emphasize that the defining trait of the Doctor's discourse is not that it is simply long-winded and drawn-out, but that it actively violates

Leichtlebig as a captive audience and 'tells him how it is,' as it were, and the novel swerves away from the biographical trajectory it initially appeared to follow. In this swerve, the threads of ambition that define Leichtlebig disappear behind the thick undergrowth of Doctor's monologues. The impression, provided by the initial pages of the work, that Bernhard is writing a *Bildungsroman* centering around the development of a single protagonist, in retrospect appears as a—strikingly convincing—feint. In the subsequent sections of the novel manuscript dominated by the Doctor's monologues, the constituent motifs of Leichtlebig's *Bildungs*-narrative are reframed, atomized and rearranged in an alien context, reappearing as elements of a dense, radically aleatory and self-negating confessional discourse that purports to tell an incalculable history of pain and destruction.<sup>77</sup> The familiar novelistic themes of individual growth and self-cultivation are thereby “made strange” (Shklovsky) through juxtaposition; the development of character, as mediated by a narrator, is forced into parallel with (and thus implicitly compared to) the forceful verbal heaping of details and visions by a mad, or fatally ill man who professes to have a panoramic view of world history, from prehistoric origins to apocalyptic future. Moreover, by re-narrating the initial premises of the novel, the Doctor's discourse comes to pollute higher levels of the text, constituting a new authority that supplants that of the narrator. For this reason, the *violation of another's field of vision* plays out differently than in Dostoevsky (in Bakhtin's version of Dostoevsky). The endlessly speaking character violates not only the fields of vision of other characters (of Leichtlebig), but also any reader who tries to envision a mappable fictional environment from Bernhard's manuscript.

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the listener it is addressed to; that it enacts a revision of Leichtlebig's very biography. Leichtlebig himself could be termed “logorrhoeic” in his obsession with words and writing, yet he allows himself to be interrupted at times.

<sup>77</sup> Or, in the words of Markus Janner, [der] ausnahmslos[e] All-Zerfall” (317).

The movements and consequences of the jarring interpolation of the Doctor's single, monumental monologue can be traced and illuminated through a central motif and metaphor: *Gestrüpp*, approximately the German term for "undergrowth," which is repeatedly recycled across the pages of the manuscript.<sup>78</sup> The English word "undergrowth," though technically referring to the same "confused, wild" growth, places emphasis on lowness to the ground, whereas *Gestrüpp* is built around the root of *Strupp*, meaning "bush." *Strupp* is (as the Grimms noted) "als simplex nicht sehr häufig" ("as a simplex not very common"), and is more commonly encountered in the "kollektivbildung [sic]" ("collective formation") of *Gestrüpp*, which could be translated as a *bundle of roots, strands, branches*. Unlike "undergrowth," *Gestrüpp* suggests multiple bushes overlapping, whose branches have grown together to become indistinguishable and impenetrable. *Gestrüpp* serves both as a descriptive term for the complex environments surrounding the characters, but also for the emergent structure of the text itself, as it is increasingly dominated and densified by the outgrowth of a single dense discursive strand. Tracing the transformative journey of the motif of *Gestrüpp* can help attain purchase on the precise problems of understanding, interpretation and biographical narrative confronted by Bernhard in this work

The word *Gestrüpp* first appears in the context of Leichtlebig's personal story, as a metaphor for the complex fields of material and social reality through which Leichtlebig has learned to find his way without fear or confusion. *Undergrowth* is a metaphor that he, along with the narrator, uses to describe the virtually organic complexity of his environment. It appears in the earliest portions of the narrative, as Leichtlebig quietly recalls the course of his career up until the present:

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<sup>78</sup> Selection from the entry in the Grimms' dictionary: *Gestrüppe, Gestrüpp, n.*, "wirres Dickicht [...] verwachsenes, verwirrtes und verwildertes Gewächs." See entry in the online edition of the Grimms' dictionary: <http://germazope.uni-trier.de/Projects/DWB>

Während der Doktor schwieg, dachte Leichtlebig an Attnang, an das grosse schwarze Gestrüpp von Geleisen, die ihm zum Schicksal geworden sind.

While the Doctor remained silent, Leichtlebig thought about Attnang, about the great black undergrowth of tracks that have [sic] become his fate.  
(W1/1: 1)

As a rail-switcher (working in the “*Stellwerk*”), Leichtlebig must oversee the navigation and operation of trains, a great responsibility that allows no lethargy (3). He and his coworkers have memorized all the combinations of possibilities of this “labyrinth,” which they could now navigate “in their sleep”; their industry has become second nature (13). But “Gestrüpp” does not remain a botanical metaphor for the complexity of industrial infrastructure. As a nascent intellectual and writer, Leichtlebig deploys the metaphor again (in his private thoughts), as he reflects on the possibility of coming to terms with his “environment,” which stands before one's eyes in all its intimidating, botanical complexity. Leichtlebig combats confusion by reading Lenin:

Lenin, dachte er, ist eine Fundgrube für einen sich mit der Umwelt auseinandersetzen wollenden Menschen, für einen, der mit dieser Umwelt fertig werden will. Das ganze Buch besteht im Grunde genommen nur aus Verhaltensmassregeln, aus ganz einfachen Sätzen, die einen das *Gestrüpp*, das vor einem urwaldgleich wuchert, lichten lässt Schritt für Schritt.

Lenin, he thought, is a quarry for one who wants to deal with the environment, for one who wants to have finished with this environment. The entire book consists, at bottom, only of rules of conduct, of entirely simple sentences, which allow the *undergrowth* sprawling before one like a primeval forest to be cleared up step by step. (17; my emphasis)

With Lenin's help, it is possible to navigate, interpret and write about the

density of the world. The authority and practical applicability of Lenin's text lies in its strong maintenance of internal boundaries; his sentences do not flow together, each states a distinct measure that is to be taken (*Verhaltensmassregel*), and the reading/thinking subject can discern between them. In Marxist terms, Lenin's book allows Leichtlebig to pierce through the mystical veil of ideology that enshrouds one's worldview; Lenin helps one to overcome the alienation that obscures the connection between his own, specific labor (as a railroad worker) and the power exercised within the political superstructure (in the national parliament, for instance).

From the first use of the metaphor (to describe the rail system) to the second use (to describe the density of the "environment" or the *Umwelt*, lit. "world around us"), *undergrowth* mutates from a word that describes the sensory impression made by an aggregate of concrete objects into a word that describes (besides the complex textures of the concrete material world) the abstract, overarching superstructures that form the social and political world. These parallel and contrasting uses of the undergrowth-metaphor capture the thematic core of Leichtlebig's narrative: a struggle to mediate between physical labor and intellectual labor. The metaphor of undergrowth helps to bind together the abstract work of interpretation with the concrete word of industrial labor. In both cases, success rests on one's ability to navigate the complexity of a system by focusing on a particular line, whether (literally) the line or branch of a complex, interwoven rail system, or a particular line of Lenin's text.

As contributing writer for the "Eisenbahnergewerkschaftsblatt" ("railroad worker's union newspaper"; 15) Leichtlebig has tried to preserve the connection between the union's medial organ and the average worker's experience. His career as a writer began when he wrote a letter to the editor unmasking the author of an article "als politischer Stümper und als völlig unzuständig in Gewerkschaftlichen wie auch in

Eisenbahnfragen” (“as a political dilettante incompetent in union matters and in questions of the railroad”;15). Leichtlebig's letter was printed and the editors immediately asked him to write an article on an issue that concerned him and his coworkers, as the “Parteivorstand” (“party executive”) has decided that only railroad workers themselves should write in the paper, not pensioners or laymen (15).

At this point in Bernhard's novel, a great deal of space is devoted to the dynamic expansion of Leichtlebig's literacy of different genres, and his development of an effective writing practice. As Leichtlebig learns to emulate the style of the books that come into his possession, studies the “Ausdrucksweise” (“ways of expression”) used in various newspapers, expanding his vocabulary to include words such as “subaltern” and “vehemence,” Leichtlebig eventually becomes a successful writer of political commentary (17). He even attempts to instill the impression of virtuosity in his readers by using certain foreign words, a technique he has learned from mainstream journalism. Eventually, he publishes an article in the union paper entitled “Das System ist schuld” (“The System is To Blame”) that is eventually reprinted in different liberal, conservative and even non-political daily newspapers (17). The key to Leichtlebig's popular success seems to be his ability to mix authentic content and stylistic artistry. When Leichtlebig picks a topic, he first reads “alle einschlägige Literatur dazu” (“all relevant literature”; 17). Finding all of these writings unsatisfactory, Leichtlebig turns to his coworkers, and it is in conversation with them, that he finally culls the material necessary to write convincingly. He suggests, in the opening sentence of a past article, that he is not merely an outside observer journalistically reporting the facts, but is giving voice to thoughts that emerged organically from life in the proletarian milieu: “Seine Ausführungen darin waren, so sagten sie, in ihrer eigenen Sprache gehalten, und sie drückten jedesmal gerade das aus, was sie alle, oder wenigstens ein hoher Prozentsatz von ihnen, auf dem

Herzen hatten, auch vorbringen hatten wollen” (“His achievements [in the newspaper] were, so they said, carried out in [the workers’] own language, and every time they expressed what all of them, or at least a high percentage of them, had on their hearts, could have also wanted to achieve”; 15). His writings are addressed directly to his proletarian colleagues, and do not assume a veil of journalistic objectivity; rather, they highlight a seemingly organic link between addressor and addressee, and he begins one article with the comfortable apostrophe: “ich möchte der Kollegenschaft heute ein paar Gedankengänge mitteilen, die mich seit langer Zeit beschäftigen” (“I would like to report to my collegueship a few trains of thought that have long occupied me”; 15). Leichtlebig does not simply deliver information, he filters authentic thoughts and experiences of workers, as raw material, through a matrix of stylistic devices borrowed from other texts. Thus, Leichtlebig’s writerly ambitions are matched with an immersion in his own proletarian milieu, and he seems to constitute in his own person a solid link of the intellectual with the forces of production.

As the novel begins, Leichtlebig is still on track with his writing, taking a leave of absence from his work in the junction town of Attnang and renting a room in Schwarzach, with the intent of beginning and finishing a new article. Sitting in his rented room at the inn, he strains to find the right tone to begin, thinking that he must first simply write something that is true. He eventually settles on the topic of wage taxation and price regulation, and begins, early in the morning, with the words “Der Kampf geht weiter!” (“The struggle continues!”; 18). Leichtlebig writes against the cartels of firms and employers that have, until now, opposed and neglected the resolutions of a commission for parity within the national parliament. His argument pleads for the strict regulation of companies that seek to increase prices and reduce the buying power of the Schilling, counteracting the efforts of workers for higher wages. With a copy of the unnamed book by Lenin at his side, Leichtlebig finishes writing



this introductory passage (17). But in the exact moment that he is convinced that he has found the right tone, he realizes he must put on his coat and rush off—for the Doctor is waiting at his door.

Facing writer's block, and a compulsion to take ever more walks with the Doctor, Leichtlebig finds himself circling through courses of thought that weaken his faith in the possibility of *clearing up* and *seeing through* the world's undergrowth. He begins to reflect on the viability of conventional conceptions (*Vorstellungen*) of the world, and questions the viability of achieving clarity in any matter:

ich zerbreche mir oft den Kopf, warum ich so und so und das und das bin und nicht anders und etwas anderes, warum ich diesen und nicht einen anderen Weg gegangen bin. Mir ist beinahe alles unerklärlich.

I often break my head over the question of why I am so and so and that and that and not otherwise and something else, why I have gone this path and not another. To me nearly everything is inexplicable (19)

The Doctor takes Leichtlebig's existential lament as an indication that he is a “more ripe thinking person,” since it is pure philistinism to believe that one has “seen through something completely.” The undergrowth-metaphor quietly echoes in this passage. One remembers that there was once a time Leichtlebig maintained hope that it would be possible “to have done with the environment,” and to “make a clearing” (*lichten lassen*), but now he ceases to see the sense of devoting himself to any particular approach to the world; he finds himself floating. The Doctor's affirmation of Leichtlebig's despair leads to a convergence of the two men's “paths,” but Leichtlebig has arrived at this uncertainty by pursuing, at first, his own trains of thought.

The grounds for such a takeover of Leichtlebig's subjectivity were, to a certain degree, already in the making before the Doctor became Leichtlebig's interlocutor; after arriving in Schwarzach, Leichtlebig begins to doubt the truth-value of the

language he has learned to employ for his engagement with the world. In discovering the tricks of journalistic writing, Leichtlebig learned to borrow and deploy sophisticated vocabulary, and to couch his authentic accounts of working-class experience in a well-coined style. He considered this a breakthrough in his writing. But when he arrives in Schwarzach, where he hopes to finish writing his next article, he finds himself troubled by the clichés inherent in all descriptions and conceptions of the world. Leichtlebig approaches breaking through to his own form of language skepticism that seems—rather than being imposed through a dominant intellectual discourse—to have organically arisen from his own attempts to grasp his perceived environment:

Er schaut zu den Bergen hinüber, die sind schwarz und schroff. Überhaupt, denkt er, man hat von beinahe allen Dingen eine Klischeevorstellung, und diese Klischeevorstellungen sind alle wahr, man kann sie drehen und wenden, wie man will: die Berge sind schroff, schwarz, übertrieben kann man auch noch schweigsam dazu sagen, aber das ist gefährlich. Wohin man schaut, alles entspricht vollkommen den hunderten und tausenden und zehntausenden von Klischeevorstellungen.

He looks over to the mountains, they are black and craggy. Actually, he thinks, one has clichéd conceptions of nearly everything, and these clichéd conceptions are all true, one can rotate and turn them however one likes: the mountains are craggy, black, hyperbolically one can also say silent besides that, but that is dangerous. Wherever one looks, everything corresponds completely to the hundreds and thousands of clichéd conceptions. (8)

Leichtlebig is troubled by clichés not because he perceives them to be “inaccurate” or misleading, but because he feels that an awareness of the guiding power of these clichés would disrupt and discontinue not only speaking and writing, but also existence itself. When he thinks to himself that every spoken and written word is a pre-scripted “phrase,” he cautions himself: “But one must not think about that: don't think about it, he says to himself, otherwise everything will stop. Right,

then it would be the end” (8). But Leichtlebig cannot stop himself; in the next sentence, he looks over to a mountain and things: “Das alles ist wie auf einer Postkarte, wie von einem Mann ohne jedes Künstlertum, gemalt doch wahr!” (“That’s all like on post card, like one made by a man without a trace of artistry, painted but true!”; 8). More self-aware observations follow: Leichtlebig sees train smoke that looks like fog, then “the energy minister, a man with a face like the face of an owl, disingenuous, politically quite leftist. All those are clichéd conceptions, thinks Leichtlebig” (“Der Energieminister, ein Mann mit einem Gesicht wie das Gesicht einer Eule, verschlagen, politisch ganz links. Alles sind Klischeevorstellungen, denkt Leichtlebig”; 8). But the threatening potential of this train of thought comes when Leichtlebig turns to himself: “Und ich selber? Reden wir lieber nicht darüber” (“And myself? Let’s not talk about that” 8). Here, Bernhard’s novel approaches a crescendo in the rendering of Leichtlebig’s emergent self-consciousness. Namely, Leichtlebig begins to suspect that the world he exists in is constructed of *accurate clichéd conceptions*, a construction that could well be translated into *true fabrications*, and one step further, then, into *true fictions*. In other words, Leichtlebig’s internal discourse, as a fictional node of subjectivity, begins to suspect that it is *surrounded by* and *articulated through* fiction. Leichtlebig approaches, but does not go over the brink of, an awareness of his own fictionality. This awareness would, one is led to believe by his own reflections, *stop everything* and breach the fabric of the fictional text. In other words, Leichtlebig’s *full* self-consciousness, having pursued the awareness of its own fictional embedding to its radical end, would put to an end the fictionalization to which it is subject. Bernhard approaches an intriguing possibility, which his novel however backs away from: that subjectivity as subjectivity is not represented *in* literary texts, but is the moment of self-awareness that de-realizes the fictional material it is in, “comes alive,” and “makes it out.” This near-emergence of

Leichtlebig's self-consciousness does not, however, serve as a primary mechanism for the self-undoing of Bernhard's texts. Rather than dispersing, the novel *thickens* with the monologue of the Doctor, who seizes the opportunity of Leichtlebig's nascent self-doubts. Leichtlebig backs away from a de-realizing discovery about "himself" as a fictional character. Rather than following through on his thoughts on the arbitrariness of identity and the role of convention in language, he gives the floor to the Doctor, who eagerly addresses Leichtlebig's epistemological and linguistic doubts.

Thus begins the Doctor's long, gradual assimilation of Leichtlebig's character and story into his own spoken discourse. As the Doctor responds to Leichtlebig, a crucial word first incubated as a productive metaphor inside of Leichtlebig's head now reappears in the Doctor's mouth, as if by magic trick, or an unseen kiss. This word, again used to signify the impenetrability of the world, is *Urwald*, primeval forest, that *urwaldgleiches Gestrüpp* that Leichtlebig once braved with Lenin as his guide. In other words, whereas Lenin helped Leichtlebig to understand that the transformation of historical experience into a natural formation (industry into a forest) was a function of false consciousness, the Doctor blurs and nullifies the distinction between separate realms—between subjective confusion and historical-biographical complexity:

Leichtlebig, sagte der Doktor, ich verstehe so wenig von der Welt, als man nur verstehen kann, und auch von allen anderen Dingen habe ich überhaupt keine Ahnung, alles zerfällt, wenn ich versuche, es anzugreifen, das ist es ja auch, was mich bis zu diesem Punkte getrieben hat, denn nicht der Urteilspruch über den physischen Teil meiner Existenz ist es, der mich verzweifeln hat lassen und hier im Schnee und im ländlichen Stumpfsinn herumirren lässt, das wäre allzu primitiv für eine mehr oder weniger doch glanzvolle Entwicklung, die ich durchgemacht habe, es ist nichts als die grenzenlose Unwissenheit, die mich zugrunde quält, das Bewusstsein, unfähig gegenüberzustehen allen, selbst den einfachsten Zusammensetzungen der Natur, und je älter ich geworden bin, desto unentwirrbarer stellte sich mir alles dar, mit der Zeit wurde der Urwald dichter und grausamer und die Luft

Leichtlebig, said the Doctor, I understand as little of the world as one can

understand, and I also have no clue about all other things, everything disintegrates when I try to touch it, that is indeed what has driven me to this point, because it is not the verdict over the physical part of my existence that made me despair and go astray in rural boredom, that would be all too primitive for a more or less sparkling development, such as the one I completed, it is nothing but the boundless ignorance that tortures me into collapse, the awareness of standing incapable in the face of everything, even the simplest compositions of nature, and the older I have become, the more inextricable everything presented itself to me, with time the primeval forest became thicker and the air more dreadful (19).

The Doctor's monologues do more than confirm Leichtlebig's epistemological doubts and hermeneutic confusion; they actively generate ever more confusion. Listening to these endless speeches, Leichtlebig confronts a field of density that supposedly cannot be navigated or mapped with any existing cognitive model: the Doctor's head. The Doctor describes his head as a place where the progression of time, relative to the outside world, is radically compressed and sped up: "In my head I have constant sunsets and constant sunrises and again sunsets; this compressed experience of time he describes as "hypertrophies," i.e. as an expansion of organic tissue within his head. Time, then, is trans-substantiated into cranial ballast; the organ in his skull is bursting with time, with future time that has not yet occurred, as well as long-forgotten history.

An entire field of natural-historical vocabulary grows out of the Doctor's discourse. His head has a "gravity" so great that, it has the potential to crash through the entire sphere of the earth and into the universe "under the earth" (W1/3: 48). The "horror" of his head in its infinite density could be dispersed if someone would strike it with "mit einem unendlich harten Gegenstand, einer Riesenhake zum Beispiel" ("an endlessly hard object, such as a giant hook"; 48). The Doctor thus implies, however bizarrely, that he would like to *cure* this cranial density, and that it is a symptom of a disorder that might be one day banished from his body. When he says that he cannot

see his shoes for the swelling of his head (61) he suggests that this density is a real product of his body's immune system. Yet his descriptions tend toward a proliferation of quasi-poetic language, in which he articulates visions that nobody else can see or experience:

Mein Kopf sieht nichts. Ich sehe seit ungefähr einer Stunde nichts. [...] bald fließen alle diese Farben ineinander und ich sehe nichts als Schmerz [...] In meinem Kopf ist eine Kreissäge installiert, diese Kreissäge macht einen fürchterlichen Lärm, Sie müssen wissen, dauernd verklemmen sich riesige Holzbretter irgendwo oben, ich kann Ihnen nicht genau sagen wo.

My head sees nothing. For about an hour I have seen nothing [...] soon all these colors flow into one another and I see nothing but pain [...] A circular saw is installed in my head, this circular saw makes a horrible noise, you must know, constantly enormous wooden boards jam somewhere above, I can't tell you exactly where. (61)

Familiar motifs reappear here: accelerated time, previously manifested in the constant sunrises and sunsets, now appears as a relentlessly spinning saw blade that causes painful noise, but also serves, it seems, to cut apart the clogs and jams inside his head, the “enormous wooden boards.” These jammed boards are themselves a reiteration of the *undergrowth*-motif, as multiple pieces of wood stuck together that create blockage. The saw (compressed time) and the boards (compressed matter) struggle against one another, further increasing the internal density of the Doctor's head. This fractured yet uninterrupted verbal arabesque represents an effort on the part of the Doctor's discourse to hypostatize its own infinite, impenetrable density, which exhausts even the most sophisticated interpretive paradigms for the understanding of the subject: “Fiele ich einem Manne wie Freud in die Hände, er fiel in Ohnmacht, denn hier hätte er das grösste Arbeitsfels aller Zeiten!” (“If I fell into the hands of a man like Freud, he would faint, he would have the greatest working-rock of all time”; 48). The Doctor is not a “mere” subject, he is a towering monument of

endless mind. As such, his monologue, Leichtlebig is made to believe, can only be chipped away at, but it would also overwhelm any attempt to see into it. What is found on the page, and what Leichtlebig hears, is only a diminished mutation of what he has to say, since “everything rebels in my palate,” and is transformed before it can leave his mouth. One is to see his dense outgrowth of words as being metonymically linked with the contents of his head, but not as an accurate representation of his mental state; the reader, along with Leichtlebig, is only *scratching the surface* of a diamond-hard concretion of mental activity. The thickest thicket, the most impenetrable undergrowth, is the Doctor's monologue. Sprawling across the pages of the manuscript, the monologue eclipses other perspectives on the world of Schwarzach; it takes over the responsibility of narrating the fictional world, introducing a new node of narrative authority that proves to be irreconcilable with the narrator's. This monologue projects its own pronounced density onto this world, literally revising it. In an extended rant<sup>79</sup> on the dangers of the countryside around Schwarzach, the Doctor proclaims that his interlocutor should be careful not to travel here when “Die Zeit der Mücken” is nigh (“The Time of The Mosquitoes”; W1/1a: 19). At this time, the riverbeds will dry up, the people will all disappear, and the sky will darken with mosquitoes. “Sie müssen sich vorstellen, alles ist schwarz, eine tödliche Schwärze” (“You must imagine everything is black, a deadly blackness”; 19). The Doctor implies that this “Time of the Mosquitoes” is a yearly season, but his apocalyptic tone is unmistakable; the End comes as a black cloud of descending insects, and at this very moment, the outside world corresponds with the inside of the Doctor's head.

The more the Doctor speaks, the more his subjective standpoint becomes a

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<sup>79</sup> This rant appears at the precise end of the excerpt entitled “Argumente eines Winterspaziergängers,” the single portion of the Leichtlebig novel that came into possession of the S. Fischer Verlag; it is also an excerpt in which Leichtlebig's name never appears; comprised entirely of a transcription of the Doctor's monologue, the younger interlocutor is mentioned only as “Sie” by the Doctor.

base for the determination and description of the ways and laws of nature. Unsettlingly, these images of “nature” are not strongly disproved by the accompanying atmospheric details of the text. There are occasional indications that what is in the Doctor's head is in fact similar in nature to what Leichtlebig sees in the outside world, meaning that the undergrowth that Leichtlebig once perceived was, in fact, a first glimpse of the thicket in the Doctor's head. In the earlier portions of the manuscript, the area around the village of Schwarzach “submerges” Leichtlebig “in in eine graue feuchte Schwermut hinuntertauchte” (“in a gray, moist melancholy”; W1/3a: 110). Leichtlebig's sad, wet *gray*, foreshadows the apocalyptic, desiccated *black* that the Doctor portrays. And this darkness appears to be written into the place-name of *Schwarzach*, which means “black water,” mirroring the Doctor's prophesied mosquito-darkened skies. To dwell in *Schwarzach* is to dwell in dark density, in black water.

Another hint: upon Leichtlebig's arrival in Schwarzach, he is repulsed by the walls of his room at the inn, which are covered with a “strange pattern” that he thinks of as an “algae-like formation.” Leichtlebig hates this “Walzmuster,”<sup>80</sup> preferring white-washed walls. In the rough patterns in his guest room, he feels that he can recognize “a sort of female face”<sup>81</sup> staring out at him (50).

The world of this novel, as seen through Leichtlebig's eyes, sometimes seems built to agree with the aesthetic taste of the Doctor, who mentions that he enjoys looking at tangles of overlapping lines and patterns. He professes a fondness for

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<sup>80</sup> *Walzmuster* refers to a practice of decorating walls in which, rather than glueing on pre-decorated wallpaper, the wall itself is painted with a decorative pattern with a roll carved with a pattern, which is dipped in paint and rolled over the entire surface of the wall.

<sup>81</sup> Note that Claude Haas has hypothesized about a complex poetics of boundary-making and boundary-effacing in the monologues of the Painter Strauch in *Frost*. Guided by Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection (whereby disgust arises when the boundaries of the body become unsettled or uncertain), Haas sees *Frost* as an image evoking both freezing (fixing of boundaries) and thawing (their dissolution). The decisive imagery in the Leichtlebig novel is, by comparison, more botanical: undergrowth, algae, primeval forest, make up the world in which Leichtlebig finds himself.



“schwarze Baumstämme und für dieses schwarze Astwerk” (“black tree-trunks and black branches”), and in the same breath, for “japanische Tuschzeichnungen” (“japanese brush drawings”) where such images are a common motif (109). Such arrays of crossing branches, he says, are “hochkünstlerisch” (“highly artistic”), and he at one point encourages Leichtlebig to follow him into the larch forest, where this artistic ideal of crossing lines will surround them, erasing the difference between the Doctor’s purified aesthetic vision and the immediate physical environment. After Leichtlebig declines, the Doctor forcefully concludes: “let’s go into the larch forest,” leading Leichtlebig into the “poetic air” of the forest where the tracks of foxes cross those of the deer. But the Doctor also imagines the forest as a palimpsest of overlapping traumatic histories: “the French fucked and murdered here” (“die Franzosen haben hier gefickt und gemordet”; 110). Further, with much more shocking, grisly concreteness, the Doctor implores Leichtlebig: “Come, I will show you the place where I found a young soldier shot dead, whose cut-off penis was stuck into his mouth, come” (“Kommen Sie, ich zeige Ihnen den Ort, an welchem ich einen erschossenen jungen Soldaten gefunden habe, dem der abgeschnittene Penis im Mund steckte, kommen Sie”; 110). Much like the wall-patterns in which Leichtlebig sees a woman’s face inside a layer of algae, the larch forest appears, through the lens of the Doctor’s words, as a mesh of organic growth, crossing paths and overlapping histories. The Doctor is the gardener of an aesthetic of the grotesque, of the dark.

Thickening and darkening—these are precisely the processes that the Doctor later associates with any encounter with Nature: “Mitleidlos schwärzt [die Natur] die Gedankengänge, wo man sich in ihnen auf den Weg macht, jeder Abmarsch in sie hinein führt in absolute Finsternis” (“Pitilessly Nature blackens one’s trains of thought wherever one sets off in her [sic], every excursion into it leads into absolute darkness”; W1/3: 31). The blackness, as a violent condensing force, is distributed equally

between his head and the outside world: “der Schwarz in meinem Kopf, müssen Sie wissen, zieht mir die Ohrloben bis zu den Knien herunter” (“The black in my head, you must know, pulls my earlobes down to my knees”; W1/1a: 6).

In the Doctor's monologic “arabesque,” the motif of the *path*, and of *crossing paths*, gradually stands out against a field of related motifs (undergrowth, overlapping branches, jammed boards). The Doctor uses the *path* to discuss an individual's biographical narrative. He insists with increasing authority that, although the two are freshly acquainted, their paths have crossed, merged and overlapped now to such an extent that they will never be disentangled from one another.

I come now to the moment where the verbal-pictorial tendencies of Bernhard's novella intersect with a narratological problem. The *thickening* and *densifying* function of the Doctor's discourse finds its fullest realization, however, as the Doctor works to condense (I am thinking of the German verb *verdichten*) Leichtlebig's biography into his own oral autobiographical discourse. When the Doctor addresses the subject of Leichtlebig's life, it is often only to abolish the distinctions that individuate Leichtlebig:

Ihr Leben, Leichtlebig, ist genauso interessant wie mein Leben. Im Grunde gibt es gar kein Leben, das interessanter wäre als alle Leben und auch keins, das uninteressanter wäre. Alle Leben haben die gleiche Bedeutung, sagte der Doktor.

Your life, Leichtlebig, is just as interesting as my life. There is, at bottom, no life that would be more interesting than all lives, and there would be none that would be less interesting. All lives have the same meaning, said the Doctor (W1/1, 19)

The Doctor deploys the metaphor of the “Weg” (“path”) to speak of Leichtlebig's fate. When acknowledging that he is “infecting” Leichtlebig with his own illness, the Doctor commands Leichtlebig to “gehen Sie Ihrer Wege” (“go [his]

own paths”; 235). But this liberating gesture is at the same time a subordination and interpellation of Leichtlebig as a mere extension of the Doctor's persona and will: “Gehen Sie...das ist ein Befehl!” (“Go...that's an order!”; W1/1a: 15). With each injunction that Leichtlebig go away, the Doctor re-inscribes the subjection that occurred in first the moments of their acquaintance:

zuallererst die Begegnung mit dem Doktor: gehen Sie mit mir? Er hatte es noch im Ohr, es klang wie ein Befehl, nicht wie eine Aufforderung; ziemlich willenlos hatte er Ja gesagt

first thing the encounter with the Doctor: will you walk with me? He still had it in his ear, it sounded like an order, not like an invitation; pretty much without will he had said Yes (W1/1: 11)

It is not long before the Doctor turns this initial injunction into the conclusion: “Sie haben den Weg vor sich, den ich hinter mir habe” (“You have the paths in front of you that I have behind me”: W1/3: 97). He later refers to his own labor of assimilation as “human domination”:

...es ist mir entsetzlich zu wissen, dass ich Sie anstecke, meine Krankheit, wissen Sie...und ich nütze Sie aus, das ist mir ein furchtbarer Zustand. Aber da ich, wissen Sie, ein Meister der Menschenbeherrschung bin, und mich immer habe aufs Äusserste einschränken können...

It is horrifying for me to know that I am infecting you, my illness, you know...and I exploit you, that's a horrible condition for me. But since I, you know, am a master of dominating people, and I have always limited myself to the ultimate things... (W1/1a, 6)

Where the Doctor discusses Leichtlebig's fate, he deploys the metaphor of the “Weg” (“path”; 6). When acknowledging that he is “infecting” Leichtlebig with his own illness, the Doctor commands Leichtlebig to leave him alone and to make another one of the villagers his companion. But the Doctor's plea, seen in the context of his other

statements, function as a *captatio benevolentiae*, casting him as a sympathetic companion who has yet to reveal the deepest affinities that bind him to Leichtlebig. He likens his own situation as an intellectual to Leichtlebig's: "Sie haben den Weg vor sich, den ich hinter mir habe" ("You have the paths in front of you that I have behind me"; W1/3: 97). The reader (and Leichtlebig) might object, since the Doctor's position as a banker (gained through nepotism via father) allowed him to pursue research and writing in the field of paleontology.

Leichtlebig's own pursuit of writing has been constrained by his position as a rail-switcher with no inheritance; acquisition of a single book requires great effort and patience. And yet the Doctor sees a parallel between their positions: "Ihre Anstellung im Stellwerk möchte ich als Gegenstück zu meiner Anstellung bei der Bank bezeichnen" ("I would like to designate your employment in the switching-works as the counterpart to my position at the bank"; 97). Leichtlebig himself points out that, while the Doctor was able to travel the entire world, from East Asia to North America, he himself is only given ten days of vacation each year, including the time of commuting to and from each destination. The Doctor, however, declines to see a difference: Leichtlebig is his own image, standing across from him on the trail.

As the Doctor loudly labors to assert the unity of his own biography with that of Leichtlebig, he quietly introduces an idiosyncratic notion of kinship, which can be related to the motifs of density discussed above. The Doctor's worldview entails the constant convergence of disparate materials, of tangled lines and crossing paths. Things that appear distinct from one another can, through the all-synthesizing activity of his monologues, be merged. For him, when producing language, *new* connections are forged that are not based on any logical or predetermined relationship:

Ich weiss nicht, warum ich darauf komme, Ihnen alles das zu sagen, aber schliesslich, man fragt nie nach woher und warum, in den meisten Fällen

jedenfalls nicht. Die Einfälle und Sätze stricken sich zusammen zu Gedanken und zu Gedankengängen, zu Gedankenformationen [...].

I don't know how I come to say all this to you, but finally, one never asks wherefrom and why, anyhow not in most cases. The ideas and sentences weave themselves together into thoughts and courses of thought, into thought-formations. (97)

He imagines speaking and writing not as a teleological or deductive progression whereby one thought begets another, but rather as a process by which separate units of thought and language gravitate toward one another and converge, even if they were created for an entirely different purpose. This logic of aggregation and combination, I would argue, is also evident in the Doctor's verbal efforts to bond himself with Leichtlebig. He temporarily ignores the difference their personal histories, revising and erasing qualities that would separate them. By “qualities” I mean not primarily the “established facts” about Leichtlebig's life, but rather the characterizations of Leichtlebig that the *Doctor himself* makes elsewhere, which patently contradict his assertion of their sameness. A few examples can be recorded:

ich belästige Sie...in ihrem Leben ist auch nichts einfach, aber es ist viel einfacher als in meinem....Zuerst, sagte der Doktor, haben Sie alle Möglichkeiten, schliesslich begeistern Sie sich für Vieles

I am burdening you...nothing is simple in your life, either, but it is much simpler than in mine...first of all, said the Doctor, you have all possibilities, after all you are enthusiastic about many things (W1/1a: 11)

Having many times described the infinite density and complexity of his head, he cries: “Leichtlebig, Sie sind doch ein unkomplizierter Mensch!” (“Leichtlebig, but you are an uncomplicated person!”; W1/3: 36). This condescension goes hand in hand with a professed admiration for the life of the “simple people,” a sort of hypocritical populism that is parodied in many of Bernhard’s subsequent works, such as *Der*

*Untergeher* and *Korrektur*. The Doctor asserts that he has “Ich habe es immer geliebt, vor irgendwelchen Handarbeitsmenschen zu stehen” (“always love to stand before any sort of people who work with their hands”) and he feels that “diese Leute hätten das richtige Gewand angezogen, das Arbeitsgewand” (“these people have put on the right clothes, working clothes”; 32). This romanticism leads to a reconsideration of the Doctor’s biographical trajectory, raising the suspicion that the Doctor wants to *steal* Leichtlebig’s past and appropriate it for himself. He wishes that he had learned a craft as a child, and feels jealous of those people who are not always clean, who do not fear dirtying their hands and feet (32). With this valorization of the working class, the Doctor moves to assert a deep bond with Leichtlebig, a common biography. His own conception of kinship consists in a willful act of revision. It is perhaps no coincidence that, moments after asserting that he and Leichtlebig share a “path,” the Doctor begins to discuss the issue of “Verwandtschaft” (“kinship”; W1/3a: 98). He insists that this concept must be fundamentally revised, since all individuals are always fundamentally alone, whether they are linked by “Blutverwandtschaft” (“blood relations”) or by any other means (98). While refuting the validity of any previously existing form of kinship, the Doctor furtively affirms his own particular mode of creating ties, which looks like kinship by another name. Slowly but surely, the Doctor is incorporating Leichtlebig into his spoken discourse about himself, emptying Leichtlebig of his specific traits, taking over the narration and interpretation of Leichtlebig’s life. The Doctor, who sees all kinds of affinity and kinship as futile, nevertheless manages to take possession of Leichtlebig (whether temporarily or permanently, this is unclear). This is not simply a *delusion* on the part of the Doctor; more than one scene in the novel’s fragments confirm that the Doctor *really does* hold the pen in his hand, so to speak, in the further crafting and revising of Leichtlebig’s biography. Early on, Leichtlebig senses that the Doctor exercises “einen nicht geringen Zwang” (“no small

force”) over him (W1/1: 11).

Wherein does this “Zwang” consist? Just as the Doctor’s death-illness condenses physical and mental illness into one complex, the Doctor’s “human-domination,” exercised over Leichtlebig, conjures and condenses several kinds of relations: political governance (he *rules* over him), pedagogy (he *teaches* him), contagion (he *infects* him), possession (he *controls* him) and authorship (he *narrates* Leichtlebig’s life). The categories of the political, the religious, the biological and the linguistic are freely mixed in the evocation of a generalized “force,” all collected within a monumental, self-contradicting monologue whose quotation and transcription has become the sole aspiration of Bernhard’s nascent novel.

The narratological implications of the “human domination” being constructed through and represented by the Doctor’s monologue becomes tangible to the reader when the Doctor takes the liberty of narrating Leichtlebig's early life *for him*, fully rearranging the presumed hierarchy of (at top) a narrator whose discourse is focalized through (in the middle) Leichtlebig, who encounters (at the bottom) the Doctor as an object of observation and partner in conversation. On yet another walk through the snow, the Doctor repeatedly goads Leichtlebig to tell the story of his childhood. “Machen Sie mir das Vergnügen und erzählen Sie mir Ihre Kindheit!” (“Allow me the pleasure, and tell me about your childhood”; W1/3: 36). He quickly follows up his demand with the assurance: “Im Grunde genommen weiss ich alles” (“In principle I know everything”; 36). From here on, the doctor alternates between ordering Leichtlebig to narrate his childhood and asserting that he himself already knows everything about Leichtlebig’s childhood. “Ich weiss, wie Sie anfangen, aber fangen Sie an” says the Doctor (“I know how you will begin, but begin”; 36). He does not let Leichtlebig begin, but rather commands him to say and authenticate certain things: “Das ist ein Befehl!” (“that’s an order!”; 36). Although the two men were perfect

strangers when they first met, the doctor is now able to recount all the essential details of Leichtlebig's childhood, including the troubles of his family "und Ihr Vater, der Alkoholiker!" ("and your father, the alcoholic!"; 36). Amazingly, Leichtlebig himself corroborates the doctor's stories. It is as baffling to Leichtlebig as it is to the reader that the doctor possesses this knowledge. Leichtlebig asks how the doctor knows about such miniscule details of his childhood:

Woher wissen Sie das? Das stimmt, das mit dem Weissbrot am Sonntag. Und der Ausflug stimmt auch. Und auch das mit den Wanzen

How do you know this? It's true, the bit about the white bread on Sunday. And the trips, that's true too. And about the bugs (36).

The doctor's response is: "Sehen Sie, Leichtlebig, sagte der Doktor, alles stimmt, immer stimmt alles" ("You see, Leichtlebig, everything is true. Everything is always true"; 36). The doctor evades explanation with a baffling syllogism involving circular argumentation and radical generalization; his statements about Leichtlebig's childhood are true because *everything* is true. The explanation sounds absurd, and yet the truth-value of the Doctor's statements have been affirmed once already by Leichtlebig. When the Doctor teaches Leichtlebig that "everything is always true," he asserts an authority to "authenticate" statements—all statements, in fact (Dolezel 150). Here, as the Doctor accedes to a position of authority comparable to that of a narrator, his speech gains an illocutionary force that allows him to say what has happened in the narrative world. His status as authenticator, interestingly, rubs against precisely the set of conditions, laid out by the narrative theorist Lubomir Dolezel, by which a fictional character should be able to pronounce and fix fictional facts. Dolezel works to answer a rhetorical question about the truth status (within the fictional world) of the statements of a fictional character. The contents of a character's monologue would



necessarily be counted among these “virtuals”:

The first, more difficult problem with the virtuals introduced in the fictional persons' discourse is this: can they become fictional facts, and if so, how? The question is tantamount to asking whether in the dyadic function fictional persons possess some degree of authentication authority. The answer is positive in principle, but we must add immediately that this authority depends on strict conditions, three of which seem to be necessary: first, the speaker has to be trustworthy (“reliable”); second, there has to be consensus among the persons of the world with respect to the entity in question; third, the virtual must never be disauthenticated in the authoritative narrative. If these conditions are met, the virtual becomes a fictional fact. (150)

The Doctor's knowledge of Leichtlebig's childhood—his positing of fictional facts in his own monologue—only truly meet *one* of the three criteria laid out by Dolezel. The Doctor is certainly not “trustworthy,” he is rather marked as a madman by himself and others. Furthermore, the Doctor's virtual has always already been disauthenticated by the authoritative narrative because based on the simplest premises of the novelistic narrative (i.e. that he and Leichtlebig have only just met) he *cannot have this knowledge*. The authenticity of his “virtuals,” the details of Leichtlebig's childhood, are confirmed purely by Leichtlebig's surprised corroborations. In fact, the criteria laid out by Dolezel have become shockingly irrelevant by this point in the novel's development, since the “authoritative narrative” that would be one side of a dyad (on the other side the characters' discourses) has already vanished. There has been, as during the fat man's monologue in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, a total eclipse of whatever presumed primary narrative may have existed at some point. The “authoritative” has been forgotten, replaced by a revisionary voice attached to the Doctor's supposedly infinitely dense head, filled as it is with a concrete block of frozen natural-historical time.

In order to prove that the Doctor's newfound authentication authority is not

merely an isolated *fluke*, the Doctor relentlessly re-asserts his authority by enumerating at length the later stations of Leichtlebig's youth, the father's transfer to another train station, and Leichtlebig's involvement with the communist party: "Sie sind Kommunist geworden...Sie haben die illegalen Versammlungen im Eisenbahnviertel besucht, haben sich sogar etwas zu sagen getraut, Leichtlebig...Jaja, Sie müssen nicht, ich zwinge Sie nicht! ich kann Sie nicht zwingen! ich will Sie nicht zwingen!" ("You became a communist...you visited illegal meetings in the railroad quarter, even had the courage to say something...Yes, yes, you don't have to [say], I won't force you! I can't force you! I don't want to force you!"; 36). Leichtlebig's moment of political *Mündigkeit* (maturity/voicedness) is presented here by commandeering and inhabiting Leichtlebig's voice. His biography has gone from a privately maintained chain of memories to a command delivered in the second person by the omniscient Doctor, who now clearly inhabits the position of an author, providing the exact years of Leichtlebig's life where transformations took place.<sup>82</sup> Consequently, Leichtlebig capitulates and admits that he has no voice of his own: "es ist ja für Sie einfach, so zu reden. Ein Mensch wie Sie, der alles weiss, und der auch alles sagen kann, wie er es sich denkt. Ich kann nicht sagen, was ich mir denke" ("it is easy for you to speak thus. A person like you, who knows everything, and who can say everything that he thinks to himself. I cannot say what I think to myself"; 37).

As the Doctor reveals his knowledge of Leichtlebig's childhood, and thereby underscores his illocutionary power and authentication authority within the fictional world, discursive threads, or lines, are made to cross that should not cross, with the Doctor acceding to the fantastical position of an omniscient narrator. This crossing of

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<sup>82</sup> "Ihren Vater haben Sie ungefähr vom zwölften Lebensjahr an verachtet" ("You hated your father from approximately your twelfth year of life onward"; 37). The Doctor is also able to recount how Leichtlebig loved the smell of his mother, how he slept on the ground because his childhood bed had become too small.

lines, I would argue, is a reiteration of the *Gestrüpp* motif. One single spoken discourse becomes inextricably interlaced with all other discourses in the novel, and retroactively claims them. The boundaries between different subject positions are blurred, as if they had grown together. Thus the motif of *thicket* or *undergrowth* has been recycled once more, integrated on a higher level of the text: *Gestrüpp* now refers to the page of the text, where formerly distinct lines of discourse are forced to cross and to merge.

But is the Doctor not insane? Does a difference not remain between the hypertrophies in his head, and the appearances of the *exterior* fictional world? To be sure, there *have previously been* moments when what the Doctor says appears out of place in the narrative world, as when he sits alone on the bench and cries out “The war is over!” despite the fact that the war, even by his own account, ended years ago (W1/3a: 25). And the Doctor is not always aware of his surroundings; at one point, while speaking, he becomes so oblivious to his surroundings that he sinks into a hole in the snow, and Leichtlebig needs to lift him out (50). Half of the time, the Doctor appears helpless and delusional, and half of the time he appears to be an authentic soothsayer who knows more about the fictional world around him than both the narrator and Leichtlebig.

To tackle this apparent contradiction, it is necessary that one consider the extent to which a coherent fictional world is or is not posited by this text, whether there is a set of consistent fictional facts upon which the narrative is based. The manuscript does contain other glaring contradictions: the “first” meeting of the Doctor and Leichtlebig is rendered at least twice. The coexistence of two mutually incompatible events might lead us to conclude that the manuscript posits an “impossible world” where the different versions of events remain, in the words of Lubomir Dolezel, “juxtaposed, unreconciled, unexplained” (163). In this case, there

would be no fictional world to map out and interpret. If two events or facts “cannot coexist,” then “none of them exists” (163). And indeed, the Doctor's pronouncement that “everything is true” hints that he and Leichtlebig are dwelling in an impossible world.

One can, however, discern between different types of contradictions in the manuscript. Finding multiple versions of the first meeting of Leichtlebig and the Doctor<sup>83</sup>, one is not immediately compelled to describe this discrepancy as “unbelievable.” Rather, one can expect to find contradictions and errors of this kind in a first-draft manuscript that was intended for further editing (and was indeed exhaustively edited, in pencil, after being typed). Much of what I have called the “Leichtlebig novel” is, in fact, crossed out in pencil, and only small portions of it were preserved and recycled in the published novel *Frost*.<sup>84</sup>

The apparent contradiction encountered in the scene addressing Leichtlebig's childhood, on the other hand, cannot be explained as a result of a writer's “trial and error” in writing a first draft. The Doctor's knowledge of Leichtlebig's childhood is vigorously and repeatedly asserted in one detail after another, and the Doctor appears to have a particular possessive intention in parading Leichtlebig's own life before his eyes. As such, this scene is something of a revelation, and represents a shift in the relationship between these characters; one of the central premises of the acquaintance between these two men was an initial recognition of their disparate origins, and

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<sup>83</sup> In one version, the Leichtlebig sees the Doctor around the inn for several days before approaching him, in another version the Doctor appears in front of Leichtlebig all of the sudden and asks him if he wants to go for a walk; in this story Leichtlebig has never laid eyes upon the Doctor before.

<sup>84</sup> A large number of quotes and materials were cut from the Leichtlebig novel and included unabridged in *Frost*, though the primary dyad of characters in that novel has changed from the young railroad worker and the Doctor to a first-person narrator and the “Painter Strauch.” Although, as I will show later in this chapter, Bernhard seems to have regarded the Leichtlebig novel as having been “ended,” he instead used it as raw material for his next project. The Leichtlebig manuscripts exhibit a large amount of editing, suggesting that Bernhard was already considering changing the constellation of characters (changing the Doctor into “Joseph Michaelangelo Malta”, a name that presumably is supposed to evoke the cliché of an eccentric painter) and shifting the work from third- into first-person.

Leichtlebig has felt compelled to listen to the Doctor's monologues because he has never met such a man (nor this man in particular) at any point in his life. How, then, does the Doctor know about Leichtlebig's childhood? I can conceive of a number of explanations, none of which can be verified:

1. The Doctor is telepathic, and he sees into Leichtlebig's head.
2. The Doctor knew Leichtlebig as a child, and has kept silent about this.
3. Somebody told the Doctor about Leichtlebig's childhood (but who?).
4. Leichtlebig's working-class background makes it easy to guess what the hardships of his childhood would have been. In other words, Leichtlebig is himself a cliché.
5. Leichtlebig is the Doctor's creation; the Doctor is the creator of the fictional world, and he knows what he has created.

If any of these speculations and conspiracy theories could be corroborated, then it would be clear what kind of “world” these two characters are dwelling in, one could designate the novel as *fantastic fiction* (in the case of number 1) or as *metafiction* (in the case of number 5). But the conclusion of this 'childhood' scene is not a revelation about the location of authority in this world, it is the lingering question, posed by Leichtlebig: “Where do you know that from?” What is the source of this authority, this privileged knowledge? It is a question that is often asked about so-called omniscient narrators, and the sensible answer in that case is: from convention (Dolezel 149).<sup>85</sup> According to this logic, readers are accustomed to narrators that know everything, but not to characters that suddenly know things that

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<sup>85</sup> Jonathan Culler (in *The Literary in Theory*, 2007) persuasively argues that the word “omniscience” is a term that obscures and naturalizes various delimited forms of knowing that are at work in narrative texts. Dolezel, on the other hand, does not fully dismiss the idea of omniscience, insisting on its status as a fictional fabrication, but one that nonetheless conventionally informs reading.

they should not. The Doctor's voice, although he is a mere *function* of a fictional text, is vested with a performative force that authorizes him to define the world he lives in.

Thus, Bernhard's text, after establishing the authority of an anonymous narrator who follows Leichtlebig's thoughts, ventures to inaugurate *another* equal authority at another *site* in the text. This site is the Doctor's distinct monologue, which emerges as a new locus of world-exegesis and world-creation.

The processes of growing-together in the Leichtlebig novel (of the Doctor and the narrator, the Doctor and Leichtlebig), which might be conventionally termed fantastic and thus “anti-realist,” might yet be explained with reference to the first-draft nature of these novel-fragments. But even as Bernhard begins to *revise* the Leichtlebig-fragments, he appears to be very deliberately cultivating a thematic, prevalent in his published works, of a growing-together of distinct persons. Bernhard imagines, again and again, an inverted *Doppelgänger*-scenario: rather than focusing on one person who splits into two and encounters their mirror-image personified, Bernhard devises narratives of two characters gradually becoming indistinguishable. Examining a single heavily-edited page of the Leichtlebig-project, we can see how Bernhard reworked a portion of the Leichtlebig-material into a *Doppelgänger*-scenario. A scene narrated in the third person, featuring *two* characters (Leichtlebig and the Doctor), becomes a scene narrated in the *first* person, featuring *one* character. The first block of text was typed, with few edits, whereas the second block is derived from a series of edits and deletions made in pencil over the typed text.

First version:

In der vergangenen Nacht war Leichtlebig von einem Schrei aufgeweckt worden, er wusste ganz genau, dass es ein Schrei war, ein langgezogener fürchterlicher Schrei, der Schrei eines alten Mannes, der Schrei eines Sterbenden, langgezogen und entsetzlich verkrüppelt. Leichtlebig hatte sofort an den Doktor gedacht, denn wer sonst wäre für diesen Schrei in Frage

gekommen? ausserdem wohnte ja kein alter Mann im Gasthaus ausser dem Doktor. Leichtlebig richtete sich im Bett auf und horchte, aber es war totenstill. Da er aber nicht glaubte, diesen Schrei geträumt zu haben, stand er auf und schlüpfte in seinen Mantel [...] Leichtlebig tastete sich das Stieggeländer entlang vor sich bis zur Balkontür und blieb stehen. Tatsächlich sah er einen Mann am unteren Treppende stehen und seufzen, es war niemand anderer als der Doktor, der sich im Nachthemd am Treppengeländer aufstützte. Leichtlebig hielt den Atem an, um sich nicht zu verraten. Er sah, wie der Doktor sich auf die unterste Stufe setzte und wie da sein Seufzen nachließ. Leichtlebig hörte, wie der Doktor zweimal vor sich hin sagte: furchtbar, und wie er ein drittesmal sagte: furchtbar.

In the last night Leichtlebig had been woken up by a horrible scream, he knew very well that it was a scream, a drawn-out horrible scream, the scream of an old man, the scream of a dying man, drawn-out and terrifyingly crippled. Leichtlebig had immediately thought of the Doctor, for who else could have come into question for such a scream? Besides, no other old man lived in the inn other than the Doctor. Leichtlebig sat up in bed and listened, but it was deadly silent. But because he did not believe he had dreamt the scream, he stood up and slipped into his coat [...] Leichtlebig felt his way along the stair railing up until the French window and stayed standing. In fact he did see a man standing and sighing at the bottom of the stairs, it was none other than the Doctor, who leaned in his nightshirt on the railing. Leichtlebig held his breath, in order not to give himself away. He saw how the Doctor sat down on the lowest step and how his sighing then abated. Leichtlebig heard how the Doctor said twice: horrible, and how he said a third time: horrible. (W1/3: 28)

Second version:

In der Nacht bin ich aufgeweckt worden, ein langgezogener Schrei, der Schrei eines alten Mannes, eines Sterbenden, langgezogen und entsetzlich verkrüppelt... ich hatte sofort an mich selbst gedacht, denn wer sonst wäre für diesen Schrei in Frage gekommen? Ich richtete mich im Bett auf und horchte, es war totenstill. Da ich aber nicht glauben wollte, diesen Schrei geträumt zu haben, stand ich auf und schlüpfte in meinen Mantel. [...] Ich tastete mich das Stieggeländer entlang bis zur Treppe. Tatsächlich sah ich mich am unteren Treppende ... ich, müssen Sie wissen, ich, Josef Michelangelo Malta, der ich im Nachthemd am Treppengeländer stützt, ich hielt den Atem an, um mich nicht zu verraten. Ich sah, wie ich mich auf die unterste Stufe setzte und wie da mein Seufzen nachliess. Ich hörte, wie ich zweimal vor mich hin sagte: furchtbar! Und wie ich ein drittesmal sagte: furchtbar.

In the night I was woken up, a drawn-out scream, the scream of an old man, of

a dying man, drawn-out and terrifyingly crippled... I had immediately thought of myself, for who else could have come into question for such a scream? I sat up in bed and listened, it was deadly silent. But because I did not want to believe I had dreamt this scream, I stood up and slipped into my coat. [...] I felt my way along the stair railing to the steps. In fact did see myself at the bottom of the stairs ... me, you must know, me, Josef Michelangelo Malta, me who stood in his nightshirt leaning on the railing, I held my breath, in order not to give myself away. I saw how I sat on the bottom step and who my sighing abated. I heard how I said twice: horrible! And how I said a third time: horrible. (28)

This scene closely resembles the initial *Doppelgänger* encounters in Dostoevsky's *The Double* and Poe's *William Wilson* (of which Dostoevsky's text is a double): Darkness, sneaking, the sudden shock of recognition. Bernhard does not introduce anything particularly new to this archetypal scene of the nocturnal *Doppelgänger* encounter, and it is unsurprising that Bernhard never chose to include this rather clichéd scene in any of his published works. It is however striking that Bernhard “discovers,” as it were, a *Doppelgänger* scene in his nascent novel, because it underscores the extent to which Bernhard's novelistic writing gravitates towards a dramatization of condensation. Bakhtin saw the *Doppelgänger* as a sign of a self that is always already doubled because it is constituted through the intertwining and dialogue of multiple voices. But Bernhard, by conjoining Leichtlebig and the Doctor into the outrageously named figure of Josef Michelangelo Malta, demonstrates the violent erasure entailed in such a convergence, which only succeeds by scratching out, in pencil, the ink characters that gave Leichtlebig a presence on the page. For this painter Malta—likely a forerunner to the misanthropic, aged Painter Strauch in *Frost*—contains no trace of Leichtlebig within him, and helps to dilate, disperse and distribute the bundle of character traits associated with the Doctor, making them into atmospheric facts of the fictional world. The Doctor spreads and asserts narrative omniscience, and across the various discursive layers of the text. His peculiar impact



and influence on the environment derives from the way in which he mimics and deploys the very models of narrative-novelistic authority that helped to convey Leichtlebig's biographical narrative. The Doctor's "power" lies in his ability to duplicate the world-making capacity of narrative discourse; he, too, knows (inexplicably) the story of Leichtlebig's childhood and is eager to recount these facts so that Leichtlebig can be better understood. If the narrator can know such things and retell them, why can't the Doctor? The deeply troubling nature of the Leichtlebig novel is its radically non-democratic cosmological structure, which is nevertheless continually presented as superlatively democratic, in which a fictional character is given the ability to restructure his environment in accordance with his own vision. When the Doctor adopts this sort of narratorial authority, he recasts and redefines narratorial world-making and world-envisioning authority as something monstrous, violent and arbitrary, even as it claims to operate in accordance with laws.

### ***Disappearance and Reappearance of Political Conviction***

The Doctor's proleptic, apocalyptic view of history has a specific consequence for his young listener Leichtlebig: the political engagements that have half- or wholeheartedly interested Leichtlebig thus far are folded into the worldviews of the Doctor, who has a panoramic view of geopolitical trends and a knowledge of history that allows him to make general prescriptions for the future of humanity. His alleged sovereignty, coincidentally, is said to have arisen out of a coming-of-age narrative that recalls (but differs significantly from) Leichtlebig's. The Doctor explains the genesis of his current political views with a *Bildungs*-narrative that passes through familiar stages of (1) youthful rebellion and idealism, (2) ascension to prominence, (3) disillusionment and (4) qualified enlightenment. Having always been, on the inside,

“on the side of the opponents of capitalism,” the Doctor joined the socialist party at nineteen, and quickly moved from his parents' bourgeois home into a room “im Wiener Gemeindebezirk” (“in the Viennese collective quarter”; W1/3: 64). Soon he became a leader, “devoted myself to propagandistic goals” and worked as an agitator on the docks and in the Prater park. This meteoric rise to prominence and conviction is brought to an end by “something” that “caused the socialist building to rock so much that it collapsed,” which he however declines to elaborate on. After this narrative ellipsis, the Doctor concludes that: “What today calls itself socialism is in reality what socialism fought against until, say, 1936.” From this he extrapolates:

Die Zukunft gehört dem Kommunismus. Der Kommunismus ist eine wirkliche Chance für die Welt, für die Gesellschaft, für die Menschen. Ich denke da natürlich in ganz ungeheueren Grössenverhältnissen, auf einer rein biologischen Grundlage baue ich da auf. Der Kommunismus kann so etwas wie eine generelle, alle Erdteile erfassende und gleichmachende Vermenschlichung darstellen.

The future belongs to communism. Communism is a real chance for the world, for society, for humans. I am thinking here in totally monstrous macro-relations, I am building here on a purely biological basis. Communism can give something like a general humanization that encompasses and makes equal all parts of the globe. (64)

The choice between communism and socialism is thematized earlier in the manuscript: shortly after arriving in Schwarzach, Leichtlebig finds himself drinking with the other workers lodged at the inn, and he listens as their conversation turns to “Wortgefechte” (“word duels”) over politics, “wobei sie sich alle gebräuchlich sozialistischkommunistischen und katholischen Schlagwörter an den Kopf warfen” (“whereby they threw all the common socialist-communist and catholic buzzwords” W1/1: 24), eventually agreeing that the blame for their misery is to be found with the government in Vienna. Here their voices become a chorus:

Dem Sozialismus gaben sie einige Chancen, die Kirche machten sie lächerlich und stellten sie auch als eine einzige grosse Lächerlichkeit hin und den Kommunismus war ihnen ein grosses östliches Rätsel, vor dem sie alle sichtlich Angst hatten, sie gebärdeten sich so, als würde der Kommunismus plötzlich aus den umliegenden Wäldern herauskommen und sie erschlagen

They gave socialism some chances, made fun of the church and made it look like one big ridiculousness, and communism was to them a great oriental mystery, which they all visibly feared, they acted as if communism would come suddenly out of the surrounding forests and strike them dead. (24).

The drunken men, as the narrator implies, are given to oversimplifications and stereotypes: they immediately assume that Leichtlebig is a socialist, because “everyone at the railroad is a socialist,” though they do not ask him his opinion, and he opts not to participate in the discussion, sitting instead as a presumably skeptical observer.<sup>86</sup> The men's demonization (and orientalization) of communism seems to result from an uncritical absorption of buzzwords and clichéd phrases. After the passage quoted above, one man recites the sentence “Communism comes at night and deals you a blow.” The men's political beliefs appear to Leichtlebig as a parochial, superstitious belief in monsters.

By contrast, the Doctor's positive appraisal of communism claims to be abstract, based on an evaluation of global circumstances and on “biological” principles. His superficial disgust with the masses has not, he says, affected his political convictions (even in his youth, “mein Gefühl gehörte der breiten Masse,

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<sup>86</sup> Leichtlebig displays a level of shyness with the rail workers, which appears to distinguish him as a “less coarse” worker who is more turned inward. For instance, Leichtlebig is asked (but does not apparently respond to) questions from the men as to whether he knows “tactics” with which to “have a certain woman in bed,” the word they use for *woman* being “Frauenzimmer” (W1/1: 24). Still, Leichtlebig is not left with an unambiguously negative portrait of these men: “Um Mitternacht hatte Leichtlebig Angst, sie konnten in eine Rauferei hinkommen, aber es ging alles gut aus” (“At midnight Leichtlebig feared it could come to a brawl, but everything turned out well”; 24). This image of the rural, working “masses,” while unflattering, is much more sympathetic than the Doctor's apocalyptic portrayal of rural degeneration.

wenn sie mich auch oberflächlich abstoss” (“my feelings belonged to the wide masses, even if they superficially repulsed me”; W1/3: 64).<sup>87</sup> With this sentence, the Doctor appears to resolve the contradiction of his purported populism and his acerbic elitism. *Appears* to resolve, because glaring contradictions remain in *what sort of future* the Doctor actually imagines. At another juncture of his monologue, the Doctor proclaims that the Austrian rural population, now fully contaminated with alcoholism, amorality and sexual crimes, can only be redeemed by a “eine Umstellung nach der sowjetrussischen Methode” (“change after the Soviet Russian method”; W1/3 38). He imagines the Russian *kolkhoz* model of collective farming to be a provisional, imperfect solution to local decadence. He thereby fully inverts his earlier assertions that his support of communism is (a) grounded in general abstract, deductive thought rather than in his own sensuous experience, and (b) that he supports leftist alternatives

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<sup>87</sup> The contradiction between disgust with and sympathy for the “common people” and “workers” propels the development of large portions of the Doctor’s monologue, and seems to constitute a defining “inner” conflict of his character; early on in the manuscript, the narrator gives an account of a mass lunch at the inn, where the Doctor eats at a table with Leichtlebig. This is a rare situation in which the Doctor “zwang sich zur Kommentarlosigkeit” (“forced himself to make no commentary”; W1/1: 22); these meals are for the Doctor “das grösste Martyrium” (“the greatest martyrdom”), but he only once tells Leichtlebig that he finds them unbearable, letting the noises of eating and “Wortfetzen” (“scraps of words”) resound in the dining hall without, this time, filling the space with his own monologue. The lead voice in this scene is that of the narrator, who places a special emphasis on the sonic and olfactory dimensions of the mealtimes (22). The mostly faceless workers arrive in the inn in “thick winter coats” and “rough gray sail-cloth jackets,” and try to stuff “as much as possible” into their stomachs. The noises their eating causes the Doctor feelings of “grenzenlose Abscheu” (“borderless disgust”) but Leichtlebig thinks nothing of it, as this scene is reminiscent of his everyday experiences as a worker, eating in the canteen of the railroad worker’s home, and in the evening meetings of “the party,” which are filled with a “sweet-sour” smell whenever they are well-visited, and when it is hot enough that they uniform sticks to” one’s body. But the narrator concentrates on those details that repulse the Doctor: the “white noodles in the “water soups” stick together in “hard clumps” if they are not eaten immediately, the meat, mostly beef, comes from “emergency slaughters” of animals so that prices will remain low. The paleness of the “whitish” noodles in the watery soup is reflected in the (misspelled) image of “waserüshcigen [sic] Gesichtsfett” (“watery facial fat”) and the “whitish” eyes staring out from within these amorphous faces (21). The increasing disgust in the narrator’s voice suggests a closer focalization through the Doctor than through Leichtlebig. When it is stated that everyone there looked like “great thick-bellied or great emaciated and stretched-out insects, who stuck onto wherever there was something to stick onto,” and that this “image” could be observed “as if through a giant spider web,” the alienation between observer and observed is threefold: the workers are (1) dehumanized as insects, they are (2) seen as an “image” rather than as conscious subjects, and they are (3) seen through a deadly-hostile (and non-manmade) barrier of a spider web.

to capitalism *despite* his superficial disgust at the proletariat. Here, it is not *despite*, but rather *because of* his disgust that he supports the Stalinist model of communism. The Doctor, mired in these contradictions, always imagines *more*, and always delivers an *excess* of historical pronouncements and prescriptions, preventing a listener from deriving a coherent worldview from his speeches. He continually redefines the nature of the narrative in which his life is embedded. Thus, we would be mistaken to explain the contents and effects of his speeches with reference to a particular coherent political ideology. The monologue proves to be a device for the presentation and estranging harmonization of a myriad of “gebräuchliche [...] Schlagwörter” (“conventional [...] buzzwords”; 24). The Doctor’s monologue transforms what would have been, dispersed across different discursive modes and narrative layers, a polyphony of different voices, and fashions out of these one monstrous symphony: from a certain angle, this appears to be Bernhard’s unflattering reflection of narrative discourse.

### *Eschatology, Endpoints*

The Doctor’s title denotes a degree in law: he is *Doctor juris*, and this fact of his curriculum vitae rarely seems to link up with his professed academic interests, which concern nothing less than natural history (paleontology). This interest in *secular* history, moreover, appears as part of a dark *theological* perspective on the end of time and of natural history. This is epistemological confusion and conflation as *Gestrüpp*: distinct forms of language grow together in his speech.<sup>88</sup> With an eye to this

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<sup>88</sup> The conflation of these distinct realms of the secular-legal and the theological-creaturely can be productively brought into dialogue with Sigrid Weigel’s recent incisive work on Walter Benjamin’s writings. Countering the school of Benjamin scholarship informed by Carl Schmitt and Agamben, which has attempted to unfold from Benjamin’s writings on violence and the creaturely a comprehensive theory of the law and the state of exception, and has seen in Benjamin’s thought a productive confluence of the legal and the theological, Weigel insists that Benjamin’s project is to *criticize* the conflation of these spheres. In an analysis of Benjamin’s use of a quote from Adalbert

surreptitious, seductive conflation of the legal, the natural-historical and the theological, one can notice a certain sense in how the Doctor's monologues, diverging radically in subject matter and sentiment, aggregate around an obsession with eschatology. Over and over again, the Doctor gives different views of the end of the world, the end of historical periods, the end of political movements, the end of life, the end of art. Each time he cycles through another possible "end," he feigns to answer the question of whether (I quote Poe here) "the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin" (Poe 96). Establishing the origin of his unease, of his ceaseless talking, would help to define the narrative trajectory in which he locates himself and which would thus provide a durable frame in which to understand him.

This frame, I would argue, is never provided; he continually feigns a totalizing explanation, but always retracts it. Briefly the Doctor hints that the "palpable origin" of his illness might be, in fact, an old war injury. In the final sequence of pages leading up to the novel's abrupt "conclusion," the Doctor speaks of a serious head-wound he suffered while stationed in Romania during the First World War; a fragment of shrapnel apparently became lodged in his brain in combat (W1/3a: 101), whilst he

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Stifter in the *Karl Kraus* essay, Weigel distills Benjamin's critique of Kraus' conflation: "Anklage, die Sprache des Rechts, und Klage, die Sprache der Kreatur, richten sich an verschiedene Instanzen; sie sind nicht nur unvereinbar, sie stehen vielmehr im Widerstreit" (34). Benjamin is, for Weigel, precisely highlighting the mistake of combining the notion of the theological and the juridical, which has been carried out in the political-theological embraces of Benjamin and Schmitt. Thomas Bernhard produces a monstrous literary figure that devouring multiple vocabularies of the worldly and the otherworldly, showcases the violence and erasure that accompanies such conflation. The link between Weigel's discussion and my own analysis of Bernhard need not, however, remain only analogical. Bernhard, the early as well as the late Bernhard, is (as has been mentioned elsewhere in this chapter) noticeably engaged in a struggle with Stifter and his "soft law" of nature that has also become a law of novel-writing in Austria, at least for Bernhard who begins his literary career under the shadow of his grandfather's attempt to create an alternate or new *Heimatliteratur* that would not be purely indebted to Stifter. Bernhard's eschatological, cannibalistic Doctor could be seen as the "monstrous truth" of Stifter's supposedly soft law, which (in Weigel's words) functions as a "Deckbegriff für eine verschwiegene Vorstellung vom Heiligen" (30). The Doctor's horrifying monologue breaks the interminable silence of Stifter's calm and inauthentically secularized universe. Whether it introduces anything in *place* of Stifter is an issue that will have to be explored in the future.

was acquiring “knowledge of warmaking” (105). The presence of a foreign object literally inside his brain could provide a solid physiological explanation for the erratic, obsessive ranting to which the Doctor is prone. And yet he quickly clarifies, as soon as he mentions this injury, that he had recovered from it “quickly” in ten fast years, and that it is impossible to relate his current “outbreak” to this past injury:

aber auf einen Granatsplitter ist dieses späte Wiederausbrechen der noch immer in meinem Kopf steckenden Krankheit nicht zu führen, denn alle Durchleuchtungen haben ergeben, dass sich kein Granatsplitter, kein noch so kleiner, in meinem Kopf mehr befindet; man weiss die eigentliche Ursache nicht

but this late recurrence of an illness that still lurks eternally in my head is not to be traced back to a grenade-fragment, for all X-rays have shown that no grenade-fragment, not even a little one, is still in my head; one does not know the actual cause (101).

The physiological explanation is ruled out, and the significance of the injury is displaced onto another field: the ten years of convalescence, the Doctor explains, allowed him time to learn about “physics,” which he now claims is the decisive science he is interested in (at other times he says that he was principally concerned with “paleontology”). He morphs from a soldier into a scientist, once more reframing his spoken discourse unto a different end.

Despite the apparent *endlessness* of the *ending*-discourse spouted by the Doctor, which could apparently have sustained the novel into infinity or at least into indefinitude, the Leichtebig novel itself *does* come to an end of sorts, at a moment when the manuscript appears to have reached a saturation point, with the Doctor's monologue taking up virtually every line of every page, with only the most sparing and nominal interjections from Leichtebig. The manuscript is terminated—or perhaps, satisfied—when the overgrowth of the Doctor's discourse has brought about a

near-total eclipse of narrative discourse.

This final page, the 112<sup>th</sup> of the convolute-folio W1/3a, can be identified as the “ending” because Bernhard, playing the role of editor, declared it to be so in pencil, writing over the typed text: “ENDE.” A date and location follow: the fourteenth of June 1962, at the Café Zögernitz in Vienna. On this page, the Doctor struggles to bring several discursive threads to a conclusion, and yet the page leaves the reader hanging as to what the outcome of the Leichtlebig-Doctor relationship will be.

In the last sentences of 112, the Doctor asks Leichtlebig how much longer he will stay in Schwarzach, expressing in the final sentence the hope that the two of them will take plenty of walks together before Leichtlebig's departure: a fully *non sequitur* happy ending; in an earlier part of this same exchange, the Doctor retreads some of the same topics that the two men covered in the first moments of their acquaintance. Blatantly contradicting his earlier raging denunciations of Schwarzach, the Doctor declares that the area is a good place to “recover,” and he agrees that it is “cheap and good” here (W1/3a: 112). His discontent has vanished, and the glaring lack of his characteristic negativity makes these final sentences appear virtually apocryphal, following the body of the text neither logically nor chronologically. Rather than appearing as the end of monologue, and the beginning of a dialogue and a beautiful friendship,<sup>89</sup> these final sentences lend support to the Doctor's earlier declaration that “nothing is stable,” and that the narrative premises presented elsewhere in the manuscript are subject to revision (above all, by the Doctor himself). The tentative nature of this conclusion stands in stark contrast to the historical “ending” indexed

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<sup>89</sup> If I appear to have made a cacophonous comparison to “Hollywood” conventions of narrative ending, in particular to the 1942 film *Casablanca*, it is primarily because of the lasting shock that set in upon my first reading of these quasi-redemptive lines, which are diametrically opposed to the fatal ending of *Frost*, with the famulant writing some pages before the conclusion “Ich bin nicht mehr Ich” (“I am no longer I; 281), then leaving the village of Weng and reading in the newspaper of his elder interlocutor's disappearance and presumed death.



near the top of the page: the end of World War II. The Doctor tells of how he once, many years ago, sat writing on a bench here (in Schwarzach), when his sister ran up to him and cried “der Krieg ist aus! Der Krieg ist aus! der Krieg ist aus!” (“The war is over! The war is over! The war is over!”; 112). The repeated announcement of the war’s end becomes a gesture that the Doctor can himself cite as his own concluding gesture. Interestingly, the sister’s announcement is marked by a “time lag,” dated as the fourth of May, which the Doctor puzzlingly refers to as being “in the Summer.” And yet the Doctor’s citation of this announcement does not immediately lead to a “happy ending,” but becomes one element of many in the continuing monologue, which moves on to a fatalistic, concluding condemnation of present-day Schwarzach and of the world more generally, which the Doctor says he is visiting “for the last time,” as “die Gegend ist düster und die Menschen unzugänglich” (“the area is dark and the people inaccessible”; 112). The word *Gegend* is subsequently crossed out, replaced in pencil by *Welt* (world), again turning the Doctor into a harbinger of end times. Such are the movements of the Doctor’s externalized stream of consciousness: ending and ending and ending.

This single page is covered in additional references to *the end*, to points of narrative termination. The Doctor bitterly begins to discuss a prominent politician named A., who was a “young and convinced, socialist,” now “he lets his rear-end be wiped by socialism,” is now sixty years old, rich, lives periodically with a Viennese actress, and could some day potentially become president of the parliament, even though his past is marred by a “sexual crime” for which he served time in prison. This third ending, in the form of a brief tale of political cynicism echoing the Doctor’s personal narrative of political disillusionment, solidifies the sense that, from sentence to sentence, the Doctor is looking for an appropriate note to end on, culling concluded stories from personal and political history. But there is too much, the novel is ending

on *too many* notes, leaving the impression that it is ending with each narrative thread suspended in mid-development. The concluding dialogue between Leichtlebig and the Doctor, in the final lines of the page, foreshadows more of the same:

Wie lange bleiben Sie also? Ich weiss nicht, sagte Leichtlebig, aber bestimmt noch drei, vier Tage. Da haben wir noch Gelegenheit zu ausgiebigen Spaziergängen, sagte der Doktor.

So how long will you stay? I don't know, said Leichtlebig, but definitely another three, four days. Then we still have the opportunity for plenty more walks, said the Doctor. (112)

A reader would search in vain for a turning-point on this final page. I would argue, rather, that an illuminating turning-point arrives when the Doctor discusses, several pages earlier, the contrasting creative endeavors that he and his sister engaged in at the end of the second world war. In describing the sister's disturbing art-creation, the Doctor quietly provides a potential tool for the reframing of his own seemingly endless discourse.

### ***Erasing the Unhappy Young Man***

The Doctor narrates his experiences with his sister at the end of the Second World War as a perverse second childhood. His age, ever uncertain throughout the course of the novel, is especially unclear at this juncture. Although already a veteran of the First World War, in April 1945 the Doctor and his sister find themselves in Schwarzach immersed in peaceful bourgeois hobbies, pursuing a sort of aesthetic education with tanks lined up outside their windows. At the exact moment that his sister informed him of the war's end, the Doctor was sitting on a bench making notes in his diary; before this, to stave off the fear of death, he would hourly read a passage

from the bible. To be sure, the Doctor describes the end of the war as a horrifying experience, and recounts how he considered shooting himself and his sister with a “Romanian pistol” he had acquired during the last war. Yet he just as clearly remained sensitive to intellectual concerns and aesthetic pleasures. He and his sister cowered in a room, which he had “als mein Arbeitszimmer eingerichtet gehabt habe” (“set up as his workroom”; W1/3a: 105). The poetic air of springtime is not missing: “es war gegen Ende April; die Luft war frisch vom Schnee, der auf den Bergen lag, die Erde schon warm von den Sommerstrahlen” (“It was around the end of April; the air was fresh from the snow that lay on the mountains, the earth already warm from the beams of summer”; 105). And beside this intellectual work and aesthetic observation, the Doctor's sister was “closed into her brush,” working on an oil painting she had finished earlier (105). At least one substantial meaning can be culled from this passage: that, at a node of intense military violence, and in landscape removed from urban comforts, the Doctor and his sister remain archetypal *Europeans*. They reproduce the sensibilities of *Kultur* despite an acute and justified fear of annihilation. Life is still measured, to quote Dostoevsky's mocking underground man, with “your little European yardsticks” (1981: 53).

But the two siblings, in this war's end ennui, produced two radically distinct cultural artifacts, aligning each character with a particular model of intellectual-artistic creation. The brother is apparently, like so many of Bernhard's later *Geistesmensch*-protagonists, working (in making notes in his notebook) on a scientific written work that knows no boundaries and continues to accumulate mass without becoming any more clearly defined in its goal or discipline; the endless monologues he delivers in Leichtlebig's presence appear to be a continuation of this study, which appears only tentatively to have been solidified in a published book (Leichtlebig was apparently given this book to read, but there are no pages preserved in any of the Leichtlebig-

fragments that explain L.'s reception of the work). The Doctor's verbal “work” is endless, it lacks borders, and it escapes his mouth to pollute the entire narrative world around him, obliterating and revising elements of setting and plot in its wake.

The sister, on the other hand, creates a work that is firmly framed: a horrific *Übermalung* (painting-over) of a portrait she had previously completed. This is the moment, mentioned at the beginning of my analysis, where the idea of an avant-garde destruction of art enters into the fold of Bernhard’s text.

At the moment the Doctor tells the story of his sister's artwork—which he suggests was created *unintentionally*, in a trance state—his monologue appears as a *parallel* to his sister's “ulcer.” And yet parallels do not simply imply identity, they create a dissonance within what is assumed to be a harmonious whole (Shklovsky 1991). The striking similarity between ulcer-painting and thicket-monologue calls attention to the limitations of the medium that each “work” is contained in, and the involvement of each in their respective environments.<sup>90</sup>

The sister's painting respects and maintains its own boundaries; everything that is blackened and defaced remains within the frame of the oil painting (she does not, for instance, cover her sibling in dark paint). As such, her painting does not violate the perspective of an observer looking upon it. The observer, the brother, feels repulsed and frightened by the painting, but it does not obscure his view of what is actually going on outside the window; more importantly, it does not obscure the position and implication of the brother and the sister in the historical juncture at the war's end. The sister revises and redefines her own status as a creator of art in the moment she dabs the brush over the face, but does not pretend to change anything more. By remaining devoted to the same frame over time—the square of the canvas is the same from the portrait to the ulcer—the sister's artwork challenges the viewer to

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<sup>90</sup> Here I am making a use of an idea advanced by Bianca Theisen in her book *Silenced Facts*.

look into the space beyond the frame to consider the meaning of the defacement, to the window where the German *Tiger* and *Panther* tanks, and American Sherman tanks can be seen lined up in battle (105). No specific violence is described, and neither armed side is implicated, but the erasure of the unhappy young man gains a certain semantic weight through this juxtaposition; is he erased because he is perceived to be a victim? Or because he is a perpetrator? Bernhard's text hardly enters the victim/perpetrator (*Öpfer/Täter*) debate of postwar literature, but the scene of the brother and sister in the back room of the inn remains one of the most concise, provocative 'set pieces' in the entire Leichtlebig novel. The Doctor's only commentary on this juxtaposition is, indeed, an injunction to reflect upon and imagine the meaning of the scene: "Sie können sich vorstellen, was das heisst" ("You can imagine to yourself what that means"; 105).

The Doctor's monologues resemble the sister's painting insofar as they *deface* Leichtlebig and turn the novel of which he is the hero from a biographically bounded quest for meaning, into an impenetrable palimpsest of contradictory narrative facts. The density of the brother's monologues—full as they are of hallucinations, prescriptions and prophesies of the future, ekphrastic descriptions and long-winded theorizations—results in a different interaction with the environment than that of the sister's painting. At first glance, the Doctor's monologues appear located firmly within several rings of a hierarchically structured universe: they are part *of* one voice *in* the field of experience *of* a character (Leichtlebig), who dwells *in* a fictional postwar Austria posited *through* the voice of an anonymous narrator, who has authority *within* the pages of the manuscripts. Yet, as these monologues emerge, they effect a radical myopia; a reader can no longer see anything but what the Doctor says, not even the listener Leichtlebig, who becomes a voiceless prop in the novel. Unlike the sister's painting, which inserts itself as a bounded object into its environment, the brother's

monologue aims to erase its environment, and it is able to do this because it is made out of the same material as its environment (language). The Doctor exploits and enlarges the banal fact that a character's speech is only ever *virtually* different from narratorial discourse, and that the two are, after all, both just lines on a page of paper. Legibility of a narrative text is contingent upon the observer's (reader's) upholding of the difference between speaking agents. By effecting a myopia through the density of his own monologue, and unexpectedly inhabiting the position of an omniscient narrator, the Doctor disrupts the coherence and integrity of the text he is constituted by.

The Doctor's language has, without a doubt, a destructive bent. But it is a sign of the author's (Bernhard's) promethean rejection of all previous forms of writing in favor of a radically new kind of “absolute prose,” as demanded by Gottfried Benn? It might be asserted—as Christian Klug asserted with regard to *Frost*—that the Doctor's monologues are in fact the first manifestation, in the young author's works, of a language of “Zusammenhangsdurchstoßung” and “Wirklichkeitszertrümmerung” (“coherence-puncturing” and “reality-smashing”; 119 quoted after Klug), a language that amasses “sovereignly mastered modes of expression that awake a metaphysical need without satisfying it” (121). The Doctor's discourse does claim for itself a metaphysical *gravitas*, and does appear to fracture the reality around it. Yet, as I have pointed out, the Doctor's peculiar impact and influence on his environment derives from the fact that he mimics and takes over the very models of narrative-novelistic authority that characterized the novel at its more traditional moments. The Doctor's “power” lies in his ability to duplicate the world-making capacity of narrative discourse; he, too, knows (inexplicably) the story of Leichtlebig's childhood and is eager to recount these facts so that Leichtlebig can be better understood. If the narrator can know such things and retell them, why can't the Doctor? The figure of

the monologic Doctor constitutes a locus of the self-reflection of literature *inside* literature, reproducing monstrous versions of the very conventions that have traditionally facilitated the readability of novelistic narrative.

The Doctor, is a “modal alien” in the fictional world, possessing a knowledge, a handicap and a clairvoyance that set him apart from all other characters in the fictional world (Dolezel 114). Yet his status as an extreme, radically unprecedented<sup>91</sup> outsider is established through a familiar aggregate of character traits typically associated with literary renderings of “the genius”: he is a failed independent (isolated) scholar who has written an ambitious scientific work, he has traveled the world, he has panoramic political views, he is plagued by physical and mental illness, he is dying. The Doctor represents a literary stereotype well known to German literature: the hypochondriac, misanthropic, megalomaniacal and socially paranoid male intellectual<sup>92</sup> who was the focus of Elias Canetti's *Die Blendung*, and who is already prominent in 18<sup>th</sup> century prose writing (for instance, in J.M.R. Lenz's self-destructive aesthetes and trivial literature)<sup>93</sup> and who survives well into late 20<sup>th</sup> century European literature.<sup>94</sup> But Bernhard does not (and cannot) simply recreate verbatim a static stereotype and its corresponding “conglomeration of features”—eccentricity, masculinity, illness, misogyny, genius, logorrhea—in order to affirm the

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<sup>91</sup> Unprecedented especially since he claims to far exceed any previous specimen available for psychoanalytic inquiry.

<sup>92</sup> When I speak of this “sort” or “type” of character, I mean fictional types circulating in literature.

<sup>93</sup> Examples in Lenz can be found in the stories “Zerbin oder die neue Philosophie”, “Der Waldbruder: Ein Pendant zu Werthers Leiden,” and in the short dramatic piece *Der Engländer*. In these works, the agonized protagonist tends to distinguish himself through an avowed affinity with the genius of Francesco Petrarca, who is perceived to stand with the modern hero, against the world. In the realm of trivial literature, the mad, dust-encrusted and sex-fearing intellectual finds an amusing concretization in the short comic novel *Herr Kaspar: ein Roman wider die Hypochondrie* (1787) by the Viennese satirist Joseph Richter.

<sup>94</sup> The Hungarian novelist László Krasznahorkai, in his novels *Satan Tango*, *The Melancholy of Resistance* and *War and War* produces portraits of intellectuals who, literally or figurally, board themselves into their studies and spout (like the Doctor) long, heavy monologues about the catastrophe of human civilization.

natural and necessary coexistence of these features (Culler 1975: 237).<sup>95</sup> Bernhard's deployment of the familiar literary type of the genius-hypochondriac is "directed" (237)<sup>96</sup> toward an experience of radical estrangement and dissociation of narrative and characterological convention. As the Doctor's character is, page after page, clarified and explicated through monologue, he increasingly appears less as a "familiar type" and more as an ontologically impossible being, whose combined character traits result in an irresolvable paradox.

I may, in asserting this, appear to be giving Bernhard more credit than he deserves in critically engaging with assumptions about male intellectual superiority. And yet, as mentioned earlier, the *Leichtlebig* novel is explicitly interested in problematizing the "Klischeevorstellungen" ("clichéd conceptions") that overlay reality and which constitute the fictional actors in the novel (W1/1: 8).<sup>97</sup> In the drama of the Doctor and *Leichtlebig*, a number of incompatible but equally current conventions and "clichéd conceptions" are radicalized and run against one another: assumptions about (a) the singularity and autonomy of a "main" character, and assumptions about (b) the composition of singular, absolute genius. The Doctor is poised to assert his intellectual sovereignty and reproduce himself by funneling all of his thoughts and words into the younger, more impressionable *Leichtlebig*. Both the

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<sup>95</sup> Culler insists, against Todorov, that a character cannot be considered a mere aggregate of traits, but rather is a strategically selected set of characteristics that refer or play on "cultural models." In other words, character as a literary stereotype, for Culler, must be read against the complicating background of the social text in which it is imbricated.

<sup>96</sup> As Culler writes, the "set" of traits that make up a character is never static or eternally stable; it is in each case the result of "selections based on cultural models," interacting with conceptions and assumptions that circulate in and outside of literature. The coexistence in a single character of brilliance and illness, for instance, is created *toward a particular end* and plays on cultural assumptions about the mind and the body.

<sup>97</sup> *Leichtlebig* realizes that he himself is probably just a cliché, and that if he were to become fully cognizant of this fact, then "everything would stop." Literary convention may dictate that self-awareness is a prerequisite of a "well-developed" character, yet *Leichtlebig* must recognize its limits in order to continue to survive as a fictional character; by remaining cautious, *Leichtlebig* avoids destroying the fictional world. The Doctor, on the other hand, by asserting the sovereignty of his own verbal discourse, *does* in effect destroy the fictional world and the manuscript through which it is represented.



Doctor himself (as the archetypal hypochondriac/genius) and his chosen medium for self-expression (sprawling, emphatic and intimate intellectual dialogue between male friends) are tropes indigenous to the novel genre. And yet the Doctor's verbal self-expression of his own singularity is so sovereign and all-contaminating that it abolishes the boundaries between characters (fictional agents) that facilitate the legibility of narrative. By showing his "true character," the Doctor makes his own story unreadable. Bernhard's novel thus suggests that, if the sovereignty and transmissibility of this kind of eccentric, masculine intellect is to be taken seriously as an object of novelistic narrative, then it would bring about the disintegration of the novel. Canetti's megalomaniacal male intellectual Kien burns himself in his own library, but Bernhard's Doctor has no need of such an immolation; his unsorted monologue hinders the very collation of the pages of the novel, unfinished, unsorted, unpublished. Bernhard's novelistic writing in the wake of the self-destructing Leichtlebig manuscript, pursues a *thematization* and *integration* of this collapse of writing.

### *An Ironic After-effect?*

The great irony of this confusing, fragmentary novel is that, by its end, the Doctor's endless rants appears as the epigonal attempt to recreate the sister's timely destruction of representational art. The silent sister,<sup>98</sup> having made this poignant

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<sup>98</sup> Verena Ronge (2009) sees silence (*Schweigen*) as the principal means by which Bernhard's female characters undermine and ironize male authority, which is primarily asserted and exercised through speech. Ronge argues that Bernhard's novels (though frequently read as statements of unfiltered misogyny, in particular by Ria Endres in the 1980 study *Am Ende angekommen*), actually aim to point to the artificiality of gender. Bernhard, according to Ronge, undermines essentialist notions of gender difference through hyperbole: through the crass, ever strong-asserted opposition of the *talking male* to the *silent female*, which is in turn mapped onto the opposition of *geistig* vs. *fleischlich*. In *Frost, das Kalkwerk* and *Korrektur*, the male who asserts sovereign power through speech ultimately brings about his own undoing, and showcases nothing but his own insufficiency, which often has a baleful effect on others. And indeed, also in the Leichtlebig novel, the sister appears to make a stronger (because more durable) artistic statement than the Doctor, although she remained silent and "closed into her brush."

concluding gesture, has long since disappeared into a new life in Mexico, while the brother has remained in the same village where she made that painting, talking in an eschatological language that knows no end, and which preserves a static narrative situation, in which various possible endpoints are continually present and supplanted.

The *Leichtlebig* novel terminates in an impasse without sketching out how *any* character has changed. Yet it *has* successfully perpetrated one trick: it makes its own repetition of the Avant garde's destructive gestures—e.g., the apodictic refutations of the novel by the Surrealists and the Dadaists—appear as *something other* than an amateurish imitation of old artistic revolutionaries. Instead, it creates a fictional predecessor, ever so vaguely sketched out, in the figure of the sister. It was *her* traumatic and traumatizing destruction of art, apparently, that made the Doctor into a wrecker of stories.

Bernhard's novel stages the emulation of *one* medium's destruction in another medium: a disfigured painting is imagined to be a predecessor to a disfigured narrative. And yet something is lost in the translation across media; erasing a young man by painting over his face is markedly different from erasing a young man's story by *speaking over* his voice. For, at each juncture of the Doctor's monologue, the reader still has a record of *what* is being erased, and no matter how dense and cryptic the Doctor's monologue becomes, it is still marked as an autobiographical discourse with sovereign authority (it has a face).<sup>99</sup> The Doctor's act of *speaking-over* is driven by the myth of an agonized, masculine genius who has the right and responsibility to remake the world as he sees fit. His intervention in the novel is confusing, but not illegible; the text always remains something more than an inhuman aggregate of black marks: it is *his* text, and it agonizingly labors to affirm his impossible authority. The

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<sup>99</sup> In this sense, Bernhard's narrative adheres to the structure of autobiography as described by Paul de Man; the countenancing of language as someone's *life writing itself* necessarily effects, at the same time, a disfiguration.

sister seems to have come much closer to creating a post-human art-form; the Doctor's own act of blotting-out does not obliterate a desire for paternal sovereignty over the page. This, Bernhard implies, is very difficult to do in the domain of the novel, which has since its proliferation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century depended upon a biographical structure. Literary tradition, in the words of Arne Höcker, has set the central formal principle of the novel as an “abgeschlossene Geschichte einer Individuation und Subjektwerdung” (“the concluded story of an individuation and the becoming of a subject”; 2007: 242). Once, as Adorno claimed, the position of the narrator has been made impossible by administrated modernity (1974: 41-47), the structural vestiges of the *Erzähler* persist, for Bernhard, as larger-than-life monsters. When the Doctor hijacks the autobiographical element of Leichtlebig's novel, he countenances the wounded text with his own superlative individuality.

### ***Epilogue: After the Frost***

Leichtlebig's virtual disappearance into the *Gestrüpp* of the Doctor's monologues might not make the novel fully illegible, but it likely made the work seem unsuitable for publication. Bernhard's rewrite of the Leichtlebig material in *Frost* attempts to fashion a new, more coherent narrative trajectory out of such a process of merging. One major subtraction from *Frost* is the sister's wartime defacement of painting, which served in my reading of the Leichtlebig novel as a helpful “metacommunicative frame” in which to understand the unraveling of the novelistic narrative (Theisen 2003: 47). The sister in *Frost* (though she, too, has fled to Mexico) is no painter, and plays a significantly smaller role than the Doctor's catatonic yet revolutionary sister. Instead, the role of “painter” is displaced onto the figure of the elder misanthropic male: the Painter Strauch, the obvious correlate to the Doctor, who

is again an ill intellectual who tending to hyperbolic prophesy and hallucination, but he is *also* an artist. A failed artist, but one who continues to earn, in the narrator's discourse, the designation of painter.

Not only character traits, but also many motifs are carried over from the Leichtlebig novel and rearranged in *Frost*. Much of the poetic imagery associated with the verbal over- or undergrowth of the Doctor's monologues is retained in a muted form: the painter *Strauch*'s name intimates that he is one individual growth (a “bush”), taken apart from a thicker aggregate of bushes (*Gesträuch*, virtual synonym of *Gestrüpp*). But in this case, the connection between *textual* density and the nature-imagery associated with and surrounding the characters is more subtle. *Frost* is full of ekphrastic moments lingering on images of ragged natural formations (rock and wood). Whereas the strongest “reality effect” (Barthes<sup>100</sup>) in the Leichtlebig novel derived from vivid descriptions of Leichtlebig's industrial-proletarian lifeworld, in *Frost* the reality effect manifests itself in descriptions of a disappearing and corrupted village life surviving in the fissures of mountain rock.

In this setting, the “merging” of characters occurs through an extended drama of observation, imitation, seduction and possession: the “narrative style” of the “reasonably sane narrator increasingly mimics the discourse of the madman whom he has been observing” (Cousineau 24). There is no assertion, from the start, that the painter exercises an inexplicable power over the student-narrator; rather, the force of influence that the painter has over the student is derived, initially, from the student's conviction that he is researching, in his observations of the painter, “the unresearchable” (F 7). The student becomes lost in his observations of the Doctor (one might call it 'participant observation'), eventually adopting the very rhetoric used

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<sup>100</sup> For Roland Barthes, the “reality effect” in fiction lies from the accumulation of detail that is not clearly a function of narrative (1989:141). Ekphrasis, or description, contributes to the reality effect since it serves no clear purpose other than to authenticate the fictional discourse in which it emerges.

by the painter; towards the end, the reader faces the disorienting dilemma of deciding *who* the narrator is, and *how* the novel is being narrated at all. In the Leichtlebig novel, as was shown earlier, the Doctor exhibits a curious ability to narrate events before either the protagonist or the extra-diegetic narrator can. The Doctor appears to possess a particular kind of clairvoyance with which he can see into the fabric of the novel's fabula, beyond the limits of his own perspective as a character; this clairvoyance, which constitutes an instance of *metalepsis* (Genette) appears to spring from to a superlative (absurdly so) paternal authority exercised by the elder male. In *Frost* Bernhard affirms a strong link between the moment of metalepsis and merging (when the painter "hijacks" the discourse of the student) with an exhaustively developed thematic of gender and reproduction. The painter, despising heterosexual reproduction for its necessary dependence on "women" and on "the flesh," aims to assert an autonomous paternity that is exercised and reproduced entirely through language.

Many of the Doctor's misogynist rants reappear word for word in *Frost*, spoken now by the painter. Women, according to the Doctor, "[verachten zutiefst] alles, was mit Geist und Vernunft zusammenhängt" ("deeply despise everything related to intellect and reason"; W1/3a, 89). This phrase is encountered in the painter's mouth, with small alterations, in the student's diary entry of his eighteenth day in the mountain village of Weng. According to the painter (as well as the doctor), women are entirely concerned with creation of children, securing a domestic life, and subjecting a man to her own wishes, opposing all intellectual pursuits. In their condemnations of women, these elder males reinforce a firm distinction between mind and body, which is elsewhere entirely abolished (as on the example of illness, which is for both of them always mental *and* physical). One can pinpoint a significant difference, however, between the painter and the Doctor in the former's relentless probing of alternative

means of reproduction that do not involve heterosexual coupling. The painter condemns motherhood as “Selbstmordschaft” (“suicidehood”) and believes that the decision of parents to bring a child into the world is “einen ununterbrochenen Selbstmord *auszulösen*” (“to *release* an uninterrupted suicide”; 309). In parallel to this belief, the painter is interested in the possibility of fashioning new individual beings without biological parenthood. A vivid illustration of this obsession is found late in the novel, in a short passage entitled “*Die Felsschlucht*” (“*The rock canyon*”), where the painter goads the student into conjuring an imaginary man (290)

The student is told to imagine this man walking into a rocky canyon. “Diesen Menschen zwingen Sie gemeinsam mit mir, der ich ihn für Sie und für mich erfunden habe, hinein in die Felsschlucht, Sie herrschen ihn an, Sie ohrfeigen ihn, Sie simplifizieren ihn” (“Together with me, you force this man, whom I have invented for you and myself, into a rock canyon, you order him, you slap him, you simplify him”; 291). The painter gives no specifics, but he suggests that this man has concrete attributes. He is (much like the fictional character of Leichtlebig) bound to a particular world, to parents, to a certain city, scholarly-scientific activities and kinds of labor; he is even said to have a name, but no further details are given, except that this particular man is a teacher. After having this teacher unpack his books in a cave, the painter announces that he must let the man die “einen furchtbaren Tod” (“a terrible death”; 294), actually a second death, because for the painter “für mich ist der Lehrer ist schon immer längst tot gewesen” (“the teacher has always been long dead”; 294). A negative affect surrounds this instance of asexual person-making: the painter takes care to emphasize the “demonic” nature of the environment into which he has shoved his creation, and the teacher’s second death is accompanied by the breaking-in of an “Eiszeit” (“ice age”; 294).

The painter’s monologue in *The Rock Canyon* makes a strong, rapid impact on

the student who hears and transcribes it. After providing the closing quote, the student is too exhausted and confused to provide any additional interpretation or gloss on what has been said. He abdicates his position as a commentator, and instead tells the reader to look back to the beginning of the painter's monologue, to the phrase "wenn das Gehirn plötzlich nur noch Maschine ist" ("when the brain is suddenly only a machine anymore"; 295). For the student, the importance of the *Rock Canyon* monologue is its role in mechanizing and automating the functions of the mind, in conquering the subjectivity of a listener; the student even insists that his own act of pulling out and transcribing the painter's words was not of his own doing, but was actually accomplished "mit der Rücksichtslosigkeit seines eigenen [des Malers -PJB] Gehirns" ("with the ruthlessness of his [the painter's -PJB] own brain"; 295). The painter's authorial discourse—which has the capacity to build up a world and populate it, in the manner of an omniscient narrator—paralyzes the student as a free agent and actor.

Many readers have remarked that *Frost* can hardly be considered a novel, not least because nothing appears to "happen" in it. The critic Ben Marcus writes that *Frost* is "not so much a novel as a persuasive case against happiness" (2006: 89) But *Frost* does appear to adhere to the novelistic convention of bringing about a transformation in a protagonist towards its conclusion. If there is a cluster of transformative events in *Frost* that give the novel something like an *outcome*, it is those moments where the student reflects, in his narration, on how the painter is taking over his mind and language. Eleven pages before the end, the student writes:

wie Er schiebt ganz einfach seine Hinfälligkeit in Form von Sätzen in mich hinein, photographische Bilder in einen Lichtbildapparat, der dann diese Schrecken an den immer vorhandenen gegenüberliegenden Wänden meiner (und seiner) selbst zeigt

He very simply shoves his decrepitude into me in the form of sentences, like photographic images into a slide projector, which then shows these horrors on the ever-present opposite walls of my (and his) self (F 305).

The narrator is not only a vessel of the painter's "horrors," he is *adjoined* with the painter in being a projection-surface for these horrors; the two of them, in the end, share a common imagination. To provide credence for above description, the student immediately adds that even this idea of himself as a slide projector is itself "eine Vorstellung des Malers" ("a conception of the painter"; 305). Apparently, the student's inner discourse is now fully possessed by the painter. In this way, *Frost* moves from being a text *about* the painter towards being a text *of* and *by* the painter, and the student turns from *observer* into *offspring*. "Through the function of the force of language," the painter Strauch enters a kind of "fatherhood" vis-à-vis the student (Judex 106).

*Frost*, more so than the *Leichtlebig* novel, can be read as a disfiguration of the family romance, an attempt to speak a new kind of paternity into existence that does not depend on the binary structures of mother/father, male/female. A comparative counterpoint could be Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, where the poet (who is, intentionally or not, strongly gendered as a male hero) attempts to become his *own* father. The situation in *Frost* is somewhat different; here, the painter talks and talks until the very written text that is supposed to serve as an analytic document of his existence, turns into a prosthetic extension of himself. The student's journal entries and letters, intended to *picture* the painter, ultimately reproduce his voice. This shocking transformation of the text of *Frost* leads to a quick termination of the narrative; the student, exhausted and fearful, leaves the mountain village of Weng and leaves the painter to die a lonely death. The two characters go their separate ways, retaining their individual boundaries. *Frost* ultimately respects and upholds the internal boundaries of narrative, and it limits the amount of free flow between one voice and another. The *Leichtlebig* novel, by contrast, remains a



challenging and highly destabilizing work. In its abolishing of internal boundaries—such as the one between peripheral character and narrator, and between one character and another—it calls its own integrity as a text into question. The preservation of this work as fragments—as drafts shuffled in between other drafts, with hardly two pages collated together that logically or chronologically follow from one another—appears not *only* due to the author's neglect of the manuscript. It appears to be a necessary consequence of the precarious narrative structures written across its pages. In this way, Bernhard's work intimates that disjunction in literary language causes, even if imperceptably, a ripple through the material environment, and that it is bound to the unmarked space beside the page.

Whereas Bakhtin convincingly argues that “character speech almost always influences authorial speech (and sometimes powerfully so),” in the *Leichtlebig* novel even the dynamic “social world” that Bakhtin assumes as a non-transcendable frame for all linguistic exchanges, is engulfed by the thicket of discourse spouted by the Doctor (1981: 315). The stage for dialogue is destroyed, leaving no room for the sort of “stratification and speech diversity” that Bakhtin sees as the hallmark of the novel genre (315). Bernhard's novel does something that Bakhtin insists must never happen in any novel: it attempts to introduce “authoritative discourse” (through the lips of the Doctor) into a “cacophonous dialogic life” (*Leichtlebig's* noisy, overpopulated proletarian life-world). This authoritative discourse, although Bakhtin would insist that it is necessarily bound up in a dialogic social world, manages to revise, remake and reshape the fictional environment: “the context around it dies” (Bakhtin 344) Bernhard *lets* this happen to the novel, suggesting that one can by no means assume that the novel is automatically or paradigmatically a liminal space where all categories and authorities are constantly relativized through dialogue, hybridity and speech diversity. Bakhtin essentializes the emergent modern novel, heralded by Dostoevsky,

as a genre that is *inevitably* democratic, in spite of any authorial intention or wish. But a fictional social world filled with contrasting, dialogized voices, does not exist *de facto*, it must be contractually established between the reader and the text, for a novel is not anything in particular to begin with, but a stack of collated papers. If a “second-order unity”—a material integrity of the work, which would allow the reconciliation of internal fissures and rifts in the fictional construct—cannot be established *contractually*, then the novel can decay into a sprawling monologue and nothing more.

One could say, as Walter Benjamin did of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, that the movement of Bernhard's unpublished novel is like the “Kratereinsturz” (“collapse of a crater”; 2007: 19). Benjamin links the collapse of the world in *The Idiot* to the disappearance of youth and nature, of which the hero Mishkin represents a fleeting remnant; Mishkin remains distinct as a bundle of traits that are nowhere to be found in his environment. The collapse of Bernhard's *Leichtlebig*, however, is not due to an irreconcilable gap between the characteristics of the central figure and his barren environment. The implosion of Bernhard's *Leichtlebig*—occurring not only on the level of story, but also on the level of page collation and type—results not from an irreconcilable difference between hero and world, but from an irreconcilable difference between two competing loci of narrative authority. This competition, I would argue, ultimately makes it impossible for the reader—as editor—to decide which pages belong to the manuscript, and which should be thrown away. *Leichtlebig* is posited (a) as the pre-existent object of the narrator's observations, but also (b) as an arbitrary construction of the Doctor's will, a will that the Doctor phallically extends into the environment through monologue. Thus, *Leichtlebig* and his backstory are (a) already assumed to be present and determined when the novel begins, yet they are also (b) *in situ* improvisations of the Doctor, who has the capacity to invent and establish as fact elements of *Leichtlebig*'s biography. The Doctor's monologic discourse is a monstrous and

parasitic double of the disembodied narratorial discourse.

It is not my intent to disqualify Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel (or his general theory of the dialogic nature of the word), but merely to show how Bernhard's earliest novelistic writing challenges the notion of the novel as a genre that *de facto* allows for a relativization of the authority of *any* and *every* voice, and thus the creation of a virtually liminal state of social being. For Bakhtin's positive notion of a “polyphony of different voices,” which for him defines the novel genre, is nevertheless “anchored in an emphatic notion of the subject” (Theisen 2003: 106). One could add that polyphony is not only *anchored* in such a notion, it is also *destroyed* by such a notion. And it is a notion that has, one might agree, been transmitted and perpetuated *by* a tradition of novelistic writing that, as a central repository for ideas of the *protagonist* and the *hero*, crystallized around the individual biography. Bernhard's *Leichtlebig* records the trauma of an entry into this novelistic tradition. Attempting to reconcile and incorporate varying notions of literary authority, Bernhard's work caves in, breaks off and begs to be revised into a more stable form. And in the published *Frost*, Bernhard establishes once again, with greater discipline, a set of initially distinct characters based around the same dyad of elder and youth. *Frost* is also a story of the transmission of literary authority—a young student, recording the mad monologues of a hermetic painter, eventually becomes possessed by the man he is observing, and his journal turns into an extension of the Painter's will. Again: narration, infection, possession. But compressed and collated into a publishable and consumable form. The *Leichtlebig* novel, on the other hand, could only consume itself.

In the later, “formalized” Bernhard prose works, character monologue begins to participate in an elegant geometric structure, in which several (usually, three) misanthropic characters, each playing foil to one another, are bound together in a

doomed struggle for intellectual or artistic greatness.<sup>101</sup> Two, or three, obsessive and musically repetitive monologues (whether written or spoken) make up the body of each novel. In these works, the fragmentation of a lost manuscript is often explicitly, sometimes humorously depicted as a narrative event (and often as the *only* narrative event). For this reason, Bernhard lends himself to description as an author who writes about failed writing. However, the “failed writing” humorously dramatized in Bernhard’s later works is significantly different from the internal fragmentation of the *Leichtlebig* novel (and to some degree, the often-noted incoherence of *Frost*). For in his earliest prose, Bernhard seems to be advancing a robust fear of novelistic writing in general. The structural transformations of the *Leichtlebig* novel indicate the anxiety that each utterance ascribed to a fictional character could threaten to disrupt and erase the history chronicled so far within the fictional work, and allow the imposition and domination of a single, monumental subjective delusion. Dialogue, then, holds catastrophic potential. In this regard, Thomas Bernhard emerges early in his career as a postwar writer who is uncertain as to whether postwar literature should even be able to exist. His early writing engenders an interpretive anxiety, moreover, whereby each cited utterance of a fictional subject threatens to become an act of violence. Here, one can speculate on Bernhard’s proximity to his contemporary Ingeborg Bachmann, whose prose reflects on the persistence of fascism in the sphere of the family, the everyday and in language. Bernhard’s prose, comparatively narrow in its tonal register, fearfully indicates the potential of a fascistic structure within the genre of the

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<sup>101</sup> In his book *Three-Part Inventions* (2008), the literary critic Thomas Cousineau employs René Girard’s notion of mimetic desire to understand the triadic structures of Bernhard’s novels—beginning with *Das Kalkwerk* (1970) and omitting *Frost* (1963) and *Verstörung* (1967). Cousineau sees that each work is based around the struggle between three protagonists, all of whom must fail in order for the author Bernhard to “build his masterpiece” on the failure of the three fictional men. For the purposes of this study, Cousineau’s work is important in particular because it does not attempt to apply this schema to the earlier Bernhard prose works, in which, one can assume, these geometric structures have not yet been formalized.

novel, and labors through many decades of new texts and stylistic transformations to redefine this threat through irony and self-reflexion.

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