

## The Body Doubled. Villy Sørensen's “Duo” and the Truth of the Body

Nathaniel Kramer

Brigham Young University

[nate\\_kramer@byu.edu](mailto:nate_kramer@byu.edu)

This paper explores Villy Sørensen's short story “Duo” and its interest in conceptions of corporeality and embodiment. Many of Sørensen's short stories and other works are populated with bodies that may be described as abnormal, aberrant, and at times even monstrous. While Sørensen's bodies are often drawn from the world of folktales and ballads and/or seen as symbolic of psychological and existential conditions (and certainly can be read in this way), one might also read Sørensen's short stories as indicative of a radical refashioning of the body itself as formed by/forming the 20th century. Indeed one might even argue that Sørensen's bodies prefigure postmodern concerns with embodiment which sees the body as not so much bounded and delimited in an absolute sense, a container as it were, but rather as fluid, fragmented, penetrated, and dispersed. Such bodies function no longer as natural and familiar objects in the world but as aberrant and disruptive forms that call for and often engage in new and different ways of relating to the world. “Duo” represents just such a text. Here Sørensen explicitly engages Cartesian dualism and opposes this to the encounter of the monstrous body that defies the categorical separation of mind and body. Sørensen explores the inability of the rational to deal with what is inherently absurd. By emphasizing the bodily and corporeal nature of what it means to be human in his short stories, Sørensen underscores the fragmentary and necessarily multiple nature of embodied experience.

“nogle var nærmest mennesker, nogle dyr, nogle begge dele, men alle spydede vand fra sig, nogle gennem forvredne munde, andre endda gennem enden...”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Villy Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*. København: Gyldendal, 1995, p. 78.

## Introduction

About two thirds of the way through Villy Sørensen's 1955 short story "Duo," the unnamed protagonist suddenly and viscerally becomes aware of the monstrous appearance of the titular character Duo.

I et nu fyldtes jeg selv af et så smærtende skrig at min krop ville sprænges, som en kvælerslange svøbte sveden sig om mig. Jeg havde set – og havde dog synet endnu – at Duo var dobbelt, han havde fire ben og to kroppe, den bageste var vokset fast til den forreste ved et par forkrøblede lemmer der skulle have været arme. Det forreste hoved, thi det bageste turde jeg ikke se, så på mig med et bedrøvet og samtidigt underlig trøstende smil.<sup>2</sup>

In no time I myself was filled with such an agonizing cry that my body nearly burst and the sweat clung to me like a boa constrictor. I had seen – and still saw – that Duo was double; he had four legs and two bodies, and the one behind had grown together with the one in front by means of a couple of stunted limbs that should have been arms. The foremost head – for I dared not look at the hindmost – was looking at me with a sorrowful yet strangely reassuring smile.<sup>3</sup>

Though the protagonist has met Duo before, it is not until this moment that the protagonist becomes aware of Duo as a monstrous fusion of two human beings. Indeed the shock and surprise of Duo's appearance not only induces the protagonist's physical revulsion mentioned above – the body nearly bursting and the profuse sweating – but, as we discover just after the description of Duo, a trembling and a shaking that prevents the protagonist from gaining control of his own body; the protagonist attempts to nod affirmatively to Duo that he understands but can't, his head involuntarily shaking in terror. The protagonist attempts to comfort Duo but his hand remains trembling in the air above Duo's two shoulders, unable to touch him. Strange, but perhaps most revealing, is the protagonist's admission towards the end of his sudden realization of Duo's hideous appearance. As Duo starts to walk, the protagonist "vaklede frem ved siden af hans forreste del, og det beroligede mig syndigt at den bageste ikke havde arme så de pludselig kunne slå mig bagfra, ikke, ikke af grusomhed... men for at straffe mit fejge hoved der stift så lige ud og ikke turde se sandheden i øjnene" ("tottered forward beside [Duo's] front half, and it felt awfully comforting that the back half had no arms with which to knock me down suddenly from behind – not out of cruelty... but in order to punish my cowardly head which looked fixedly in front of it, not daring to look truth in the face").<sup>4</sup> This fear of Duo swinging his arms to strike the protagonist is cerebrally dismissed – Duo's back half has no arms – but the protagonist reproaches himself for failing to, as he puts it, "look truth in the face."

The connection, or indeed the conflation, of Duo with truth is both remarkable and undoubtedly strange. How are we to understand Duo as the face of truth? However, the significance of such an equation is underscored when we remember that the setting of the short story foregrounds the very idea of truth and the search for it. The narrative begins with the arrival of an unnamed protagonist in the city of Sandburg (in Hostrup-Jessen's English translation, Truborough). The protagonist has come to Sandburg to attend an event titled the Truth Conference (sandhedskongressen) hosted at the local university. We learn shortly that the protagonist is himself a "truth-seeker" (sandhedssøger) of sorts, albeit of a different kind than most attending the conference. And although we only once hear one of the plenaries on

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2 Ibid., p. 86.

3 Villy Sørensen. *Harmless Tales*. Trans. Paula Hostrup-Jessen. Norwich: Norvik Press, 1991, p. 104.

4 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 78; English trans. p. 104.

truth, the Truth Conference nevertheless functions as the salient backdrop for the events of the narrative; including this traumatic encounter with Duo. Indeed, it is the repeated and involuntary running into Duo, which takes place always outside of the university and the Truth Conference, that seemingly structures the narrative. Unlike the protagonist in the above who refuses to look Duo and hence truth in the face, it would seem that in order to understand the nature of truth that Sørensen's tale obviously invokes, one must look, as it were, Duo in the face. Furthermore, the reader must also recognize the startlingly fact that the face of truth, if it is indeed the face of Duo, does not have one face but two.

That Duo is two human beings fused together into one monstrous whole underscores what I take as fundamental to the nature of the protagonist's encounter with Duo, and hence with the very nature of truth as it is figured in Sørensen's short story. That is, Duo, first of all, is a physical and embodied entity. This to say that truth in the case of Duo quite literally has a face(s), and not just a face but a body as well. The protagonist's encounter with Duo – literally riding into him – emphasizes this corporeal presence of Duo, the realization of which is repeated throughout the tale. This corporeality of Duo, furthermore, is not just metaphorical but, as I will argue in the following, fundamental to the notion of truth pursued in Sørensen's tale. To insist on the concept of the body and embodiment in Villy Sørensen's work may run against the general perception of Sørensen and his work as occupying a somewhat rarified sphere, and his work based on a kind of philosophical density that seems antithetical to the materiality, to the concreteness of the body and notions of embodiment. In such a light, Sørensen's tale is therefore about the notion of an embodied truth, the facticity of the body itself and the postulate that human experience is irreducibly incarnate.

Secondly, the startling appearance of Duo rests not just on the fact of his corporeality but that his body is described as monstrous and grotesque. The protagonist's extreme reaction to Duo, one registered significantly in his own body, is rooted in the grotesque and abnormal physiognomy with which he is suddenly confronted. While Sørensen undoubtedly intends a connection between Duo and the myth of the androgyne found in Plato's *The Symposium*, a subject I will treat below, Duo is also very much a monster.<sup>5</sup> Of course there are many ways of defining monsters, but Noël Carroll's definition of the monster as "a being in violation of the natural order, where the perimeter of the natural order is determined by contemporary science" is I think particular resonant here.<sup>6</sup> Carroll uses this definition to counter the idea that the concept of monster need not necessarily imply something disgusting, impure, or even dangerous. Certainly Duo's passivity and even impotence imply such a view of the monster. What makes Duo monstrous, however, is precisely the way he violates what might be considered natural or normal. Such monstrous corporeality seemingly contravenes and overrides the conceptual schemas generally used to orient oneself in the world. Such a body, though not necessarily a physical threat, might be construed as a disruptive and unruly force that challenges the sometimes superficial codifications of truth which the tale critiques. Thus a prevailing condition of normalcy or a universal reality, which seemingly undergirds the tale, is challenged by the veritable presence of Duo as monster such that the very assumptions which govern a sense of what is normal is constantly eroded. If Duo's body in Sørensen's tale is grotesque, it thus becomes a site of resistance precisely because it is that which contravenes the attempts of the truth-seekers to discover some universal, disembodied truth. Therefore the philosophical attempt to understand must include, despite its objections, the fact of the body itself in its monstrous and irrational impenetrability.

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5 I have Anker Gemzøe to thank for this connection and reference to Plato's *The Symposium*.

6 Noël Carroll. *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York & London: Routledge, 1990, p.40.

## The Sources of Sørensen's Conception of the Body

The issue of embodiment and embodied experience is a ubiquitous one in Sørensen's corpus. One might call into service any number of the early short stories to investigate the function and role of the body and embodiment. For example, in his first collection of short stories, *Sære historier* (Tiger in the Kitchen and Other Stories) from 1953, the infamous tale "Blot en drengestreg" ("Child's Play") is about two brothers who amputate the leg of another boy. The apparent innocence of the boys viscerally contradicts the brutality and horribleness of their actions. One might also consider the story "Fugl i jomfruham" ("Bird in Maid's Disguise") which, amongst other things, calls attention to the relation between the human and the animal body. The prevalence of eyes throughout Villy Sørensen's short stories also serve to underscore the of the materiality of the body, not just in its referencing a tradition visual but really in the foregrounding of experience as embodied. Sørensen's short stories are in short populated with a diverse and varied universe of characters whose corporeality can only be described as abnormal or which becomes abnormal in the course of the tale. While many of Sørensen's short stories engage embodiment and corporeality in explicit ways, it is within the story of "Duo" from Sørensen's 1955 collection *Ufarlige historier* that the stakes of the materiality of the body are explored in the context of the very nature of truth itself.

Before addressing the short story in further detail, it is perhaps in order to ask where Villy Sørensen's conception of these bodies, and the body more generally, come from. It may be difficult to trace a genealogy of the body in Sørensen briefly, yet I would like to contextualize a discussion of the short story "Duo" by at least hypothesizing some of the possible sources of Sørensen's interest in embodiment and corporeality. The first source, and the most obvious one, is the Western philosophical tradition itself and its longstanding concern with mind-body dualism. Indeed Sørensen's tale might well be read as a historical allegory of this problem. Generally speaking, the tradition of Western metaphysics and philosophy of mind has privileged the mind over the body as the seat of the self. The mind, in its Cartesian formulation, is a discrete entity in and of itself and the body is relegated to either part of our "animal" nature or treated as mere physical mechanism. For Descartes, seen as the primary figure who articulate the modern formulation of the mind-body problem, the body was a material substance extending into space whereas the mind was an immaterial substance with abstract properties. Pure knowledge for Descartes could only be achieved by disregarding the senses and the sensate world of the body. To be sure, Plato formulated well before Descartes this dualism and the privileging of the mind over the body. For Plato, the body as the seat of emotion was inferior, and second-rate copy of the superior reality of the Forms which could only be apprehended through reason.

Friedrich Nietzsche is often credited with an important and radical affirmation of the body opposed to Descartes' dualistic thinking. Rationalism, according to Nietzsche, could only be maintained at the expense of the body. Inverting Descartes' pronouncements on reason, Nietzsche saw thought and reason as functions of biology. That is to say, we think the way we do because of the kinds of bodies we have and that knowledge itself springs from the needs and interests of the body. Nietzsche's critique of Western metaphysics and its view of the body is perhaps most succinctly formulated in *The Gay Science*, where he exclaims that philosophy has been "merely an interpretation of the body and a misunderstanding of the body".<sup>7</sup> Sørensen's own engagement with this Western philosophical tradition begins, at least in part, with Nietzsche.

Another source more diffuse than Sørensen's interest in the critique of the Western philosophical tradition is Sørensen's interest in Freudian psychoanalysis and more particularly

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7 Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kauffmann. New York: Random House, 1974, p. 35.

his interest in the problems of hysteria and trauma. Sørensen's *Digtene of dæmoner* (Poets and Demons) represents an important and early attempt to engage the concept of trauma and Freud more generally. To be sure, Sørensen critiques Freud's physicalist and biologicistic explanations of psychological illness as being too reductive. Still Sørensen does seem vested in, in my opinion, the hermeneutic relation between the body and the psyche. Freud had already challenged traditional ways of perceiving the body by emphasizing that we are sexual bodies right from childhood and that the adult body always carries the traces of the child's body. The drives and instincts carried over from childhood, and most notably the sexual instinct, are difficult to categorize because they live on the threshold between mind and body. In the cases of hysteria and trauma, this relationship between mind and body becomes pathological where the part of the mind tasked with handling traumatic experience shunts the traumatic affect off from the rest of the mind in order to protect the self. This may result however, due to the conservative nature of memory, in repeated somatic acting outs and unconscious behavior symptomatic of the traumatic experience. This pathological relationship between body and mind in Freud becomes an important foundation for Sørensen's own interest in conceptions of embodiment.

A third and final source that deserves consideration, especially because of its linkage to the avant-garde and avant-gardist conceptions of the body, is Sørensen's interest in the Austrian painter Egon Schiele. Schiele is noted for, among other things, his self-portraits which Villy Sørensen took especial interest in during a stay in Vienna. In fact, Villy Sørensen would come to own a couple of these self-portraits. What is remarkable about these self-portraits, especially those from 1910 on, is their radical re-presentation of the human body. Situating Schiele's vision of the body historically and aesthetically, the art historian Jean-Louis Gailleman writes that:

Never before had the criteria for the beauty of the nude body, as codified by Winckelmann and the academy, been flouted to this extent. The 'calm grandeur' of antiquity gave way to the hysterical agitation of a beetle, while 'noble simplicity' was transmuted into ignoble contortions. Instead of the 'unity' of a body caught 'all at once,' there were now convulsive rhythms that the eye ran over in panic.<sup>8</sup>

The figures within the frame are, for the most part, shifted off to the side of the paper with no background to anchor them in a recognizable world, suspended in some void as it were. They gesture in painful and unnatural ways, their bodies contorted and twisted. The disfigurement and even mutilation may function as metaphors for a self still in search of itself; incomplete and in search of wholeness. Thus the body becomes a site or a stage for the theater of modern life, of existential dramas writ large on the body.

The shifts occurring in the 19th century in the philosophical as well as aesthetic apprehension and representation of the body are nicely summed up in Tom Gunning's analysis of early avant-garde cinema. Gunning writes:

[b]ut while the body may have been new territory for an aesthetics that traditionally had sought the image of the ideal, the Avant-Garde could not claim to discover this new modern body of sensation on its own. Throughout the nineteenth century the physical sciences had been staking their claim through ever more advanced observations of the body and its senses. The cinema emerges partly from this new technology of observing and claiming the body for scientific knowledge. It is perhaps in cinema and photography that we most dramatically encounter the interaction between a science of bodily

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8 Jean Louis Gaillemain. *Egon Schiele: The Egoist*. New York: Abrams, 2006, p. 32–33.

knowledge and control and an Avant-Garde anxious to discover in the body a realm beyond calculation.<sup>9</sup>

While there is too little time to develop the connections between the avant-garde representation of the body and Villy Sørensen's interest in the body, I will merely note a possible genealogy from Schiele to Oskar Kokoschka and Expressionist theater that then becomes adapted to the screen. One might also note new approaches to performance and dance that Schiele himself was interested in as well as Expressionist theater. Avant-garde cinema would also avail themselves of these new ways of performing and representing the body. The last lines of the Gunning quote therefore suggest the stakes of this new vision of embodiment: the body as a realm beyond calculation. And it is this view of the body that, in my view, Sørensen seems particularly interested. Such a body, as I have suggested above, stand opposed to the attempts of the truth seekers and the Truth Conference to come to some universal, categorical understanding of truth.

### “Duo”

The narrative announces this relationship of the body to truth early in a discussion between the protagonist and two of the students staying in the dormitories and plays off the similarities in the Danish words for truth and health: sandhed and sundhed.

Mon det passer at sandheden trivedes bedre dengang da det stod skralt til med sundheden?

– Det er blevet sagt, sagde jeg, at ånd er sygdom

– Og stræben efter sandhed et symptom på galskab. Og nå man hører sandhedssøgerne her i byen, deriblandt sig selv, præke om sandhed, er man lige ved at skringe: sandhed er galskab, længe leve den dørske sundhed!

Perhaps it's true to say that truth was better off in the days when health was in a bad way?

'People say that intellect is sickness,' I said. 'And striving for truth a symptom of madness.

And when you hear the truth-seekers in town, oneself included, preaching about truth, it almost makes you shout 'Truth is madness, long live that sluggard health!'<sup>10</sup>

The inverse relation between truth and health – that truth is better off when health is worse – not only applies to a psychological state in this discussion between Guillame and the protagonist but to the body as well. Guillame figures truth as if it were a sick body in a formulation reminiscent of Nietzsche. While it is difficult to know if Guillame speaks truth, as it were, at this point in the tale, it is clear that the pathologized, diseased, and abnormal body will be recouped in the encounter with Duo as well as other characters in the story.

As mentioned above, in the course of the short story we are given very little of the discussions taking place at the university. At most, the reader listens to a dormitory discussion of truth between the protagonist and his roommates – one of these described above – and a brief glimpse into one of the plenary sessions. Instead, most of the short story follows the protagonist as he encounters several individuals: Vilhelm, Vilhelmine, William, Guillame, and visits parts of the city. Towards the conclusion of the narrative the protagonist also

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9 Tom Gunning. “Vienna Avant-Garde and Early Cinema”. Symposium: Das frühe Kino und die Avantgarde/ Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde, Wien / Vienna 8. – 13. 3. 2002.

<[http://www.sixpackfilm.com/archive/veranstaltung/festivals/earlycinema/symposion/symposion\\_gunning.html](http://www.sixpackfilm.com/archive/veranstaltung/festivals/earlycinema/symposion/symposion_gunning.html)>

10 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 70-71; English trans. p. 86.

encounters the strange figure of Duo. Within these encounters with the other characters of the narrative as well as his visits to a cathedral and to a circus, we realize that these are where the discussions of truth are really taking place and not in the university. Implied here is the opposition between the cold sterility of the academy and the world of lived experience, of physical activity – a frequent trope in Sørensen's tales and writing. Indeed, it is in these encounters that the corporeal takes on especial significance and emphasis.

Seeking respite from the abstraction and intellectualism of the Truth Conference, the protagonist rides into the mountains. Here he finds a circus populated, as one would expect, with all kinds of what has become known in freak studies (not a pejorative name for the academic study) as “exceptional bodies:”

En mand med opblæste kinder stod og blæste på trompet som tegn til at en forestilling skulle begynde i den nærmeste fremtid. Og nu trådte en forvokset kvinde frem med hovedet nede mellem skuldrene og talte...  
– I dette telt går en dans med dværge. Vore primadonna er den verdensberømte Tommelise der kun er knap 47 centimeter høj fra hjorden.

A man with puffed-out cheeks stood blowing the trumpet as a signal that a performance was about to being. And then an oddly shaped woman with her head sunken between her shoulders stepped forward... ‘In this tent there eez going to be a dwarf dance. Our prima donna eez the world-famous Thumbelina, who eez no more than nineteen inches tall.’<sup>11</sup>

The idea of the circus itself and its spectacle represents a counterpoint to the university and its Truth Conference. Circuses or freak shows have their own history which extend back to classical antiquity. In this case, while the spectacle serves as entertainment, it also occasions a more philosophical reflection on the part of the protagonist:

Hvad skal den store menneskeforstand stille op med en lille dværg, tænkte jeg mens jeg anstrengte mig for at finde plads i en friluftrestaurant... Er det ikke en spot over vor opfattelse af mennesket at mennesket kan være vanskabt og ligefrem dværg? Er da vor tanke om mennesket usand, thi hvem tør sige at en dværg er en usand skabning?

What is the great human reason to make of a little dwarf, I wondered, as I tried to find a seat in an open-air restaurant opposite... Doesn't it make a mockery of our view of man that a human being can be deformed and even a dwarf? Then is our idea of man false, for who would dare say that a dwarf is a false creation.<sup>12</sup>

Such a question can be mapped along the binaries already structuring the tale to this point: mind and body, male and female, natural and exceptional, normal and abnormal. But what seems to be taking place here is not a lapse into binary logic so much as it is a challenge to it. As Leslie Fiedler has written,

although extraordinary bodily forms have always been acknowledge as atypical, the cultural resonances accorded them arise from the historical and intellectual moments in which these bodies are embedded. Because such bodies are rare, unique, material, and confounding of cultural categories, the function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment.<sup>13</sup>

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11 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 81; English trans. p. 98.

12 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 82-3; English trans. p. 100-1.

13 Leslie Fiedler. *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978, p. 2.

The intellectual seriousness of the university and its rational discourse is situated against the circus, its spectacle, and more importantly, the veritable presence of the exceptional body. Following Fiedler, this confounding of categories introduced by the presence of the exceptional body calls into question the truth of the nature of the human being.

This turn toward the circus is further explored in the protagonist's encounter with a body that is not just exceptional nor abnormal but indeed monstrous and grotesque. Duo has been likewise part of the circus, but the particular form of Duo's body is reminiscent not just of the sideshow but of other sources as well. Sørensen's figuration of Duo's body is obviously connected to the myth of the androgyne found in Plato's *The Symposium* (as well as esoteric, mystical, other classical sources, and many more modern ones as well). In his relating of the myth of the androgyne, Aristophanes describes the androgyne as follows:

the shape of each human being was a rounded whole, with back and sides forming a circle. Each one had four hands and the same number of legs, and two identical faces on a circular neck. They had one head for both the faces, which were turned in opposite directions, four ears, two sets of genitals, and everything else was as you would imagine from what I've said so far. They moved around upright as we do now, in either direction as they wanted. When they set off to run fast, they supported themselves on all their eight limbs, and moved quickly round and round, like tumblers who do cartwheels by keeping their legs straight as they go round and round.<sup>14</sup>

Aristophanes continues with his narration of the myth by suggesting that the androgynes became ambitious and threatened the kingdom of the gods. Zeus responded by cutting each of the androgynes in two, effectively turning them into males and females.

While this conflict introduced by the androgyne, has been most often discussed recently in terms of its ambivalent sexuality, this hermaphroditic being, the androgyne can also be read as standing for a different kind of body; a kind of corporeal complementarity, the embodiment of a *coincidentia oppositorum* which wholeness therefore does not absorb the alterity of the other so much as incorporates it within itself. "Androgynes may be regarded as...symbolically successful, when the image presents a convincing fusion of the two polarities...that is, when it is [not] a mere juxtaposition of opposites [but] a true fusion".<sup>15</sup> The symbolic success – might I add this as part of Sørensen's notion of truth here – is that Duo represents a fusion of opposites and not just the juxtaposition of opposites.<sup>16</sup> Maria Brennan, also writes that

[i]n both classical and modern accounts, the androgyne variously appears as a mystical figure of wholeness and fragmentation, of sacrality and transgression, whose metamorphic processes of separation and reintegration mark the fractured limits and the interwoven boundaries of humanity itself. Throughout its various incarnations, the

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14 Plato. *The Symposium*. Trans. Christopher Gill. New York: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 22–23.

15 Mircea Eliade. "Androgyne". In *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Volume 1. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, p. 276.

16 In the tale everyone either walks or rides a bicycle, with the last being the preferred mode of transportation. What is more, the people who ride bicycles most often ride tandem bicycles. The tandem bicycle in the tale becomes the modern equivalent of the androgyne and enacts the ambivalence of identity itself that Sørensen is interested in. It is important to recognize here however that Duo is apparently two male figures fused together. Duo is not the hermaphrodite that Plato's androgyne is though there are instances through Western and non-Western mythologies of the double male. Despite the references throughout to the tandemness of heterosexual couples (Guillame and Vilhelmine for example), Duo stands in marked contrast to such heterosexual union. Although I can't take the time here to explore this, it is possible to explore the homosexual/heterosexual relationship in Sørensen's tale.

androgynous thus instantiates extraordinary states of being that engender an ambivalent sense of difference within, and beyond, difference.<sup>17</sup>

In Brennan's formulation, the androgynous functions as extraordinary body because it points to both itself as a total being but also simultaneously to its own difference within itself. The androgynous therefore incarnates a tension within itself figuring both completion and lack, it's both here and not here. In doing so it both points to itself and points to some beyond. The very name Duo, when read aloud in Danish, suggests this "you/and..." structure; the "you/and something else beyond yourself.

It is revealing that the protagonist doesn't initially "see" Duo as monstrous, even though he has encountered Duo at least once before. During this second encounter, however, the protagonist suddenly becomes aware of Duo's monstrous appearance: "I et nu fyldtes jeg selv af et så smærtende skrig at min krop ville sprænges, som en kvælerslange svøbte sveden sig om mig. Jeg havde set – og havde dog synet endnu – at Duo var dobbelt" ("In no time I myself was filled with such an agonizing cry that my body nearly burst and the sweat clung to me like a boa constrictor. I had seen – and still saw – that Duo was double).<sup>18</sup> The awareness on the part of the protagonist that Duo is indeed two is palpably delayed. It is only when the protagonist attempts to introduce Duo to Vilhelmine that he becomes aware of Duo's monstrous and doubled appearance. This delay in perception is symptomatic of the traumatic experience.

In this delayed response, we might read a classic case of repression and then the eruption of what is repressed into the consciousness of the protagonist. The protagonist's awareness of Duo as monster is not initially an act of cognition but one that is registered first by the protagonist's body. In fact, in the protagonist's first encounter with Duo – where he never becomes consciously aware of Duo's physiognomy – the protagonist still senses something is not quite right in his body.

og således kom jeg til at køre ind i et menneske der stod lige foran mig... Jeg skulle netop til at undskylde min ubehændighed med de mange menneskers tilstedeværelse, men aldrig så snart havde jeg peget på alle menneskene før de ikke var der mere, biler og tandemcykler jog derfra i rasende fart, fodgængerne trak sig baglæns tilbage og lod til at betragte os i dybeste forfærdelse. De stod med forvredne munde og ligblege ansigter, nogle smilte groteske smil... alt blev mig med et så grænseløst uforståeligt at jeg frygtede for min forstand. Deres forfærdelse smittede mig, mine øjne klamrede sig som syge biller til deres blege ansigter for at finde en forklaring i dem.<sup>19</sup>

and in this way I accidentally rode into someone standing straight in front of me... I was just about to blame my clumsiness on the presence of so many people, but no sooner had I pointed at all the people than they were no longer there; while cars and tandems were rushing away at a furious pace, pedestrians backed away, seeming to regard us with the utmost terror. They stood with wry mouths in ashen faces, some of them smiling grotesque smiles... everything seemed at once so totally incomprehensible that I was afraid I had lost my mind. Their terror infected me, and my eyes clung like sick beetles to their pale faces, seeking an explanation.<sup>20</sup>

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17 Marcia Brennan. *Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson*. Houston: Rice University Press, 2009, p. 50.

18 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 78; English trans. p. 104.

19 Ibid, p. 73–74.

20 Sørensen, *Harmless Tales*, p. 89-90.

It is telling that the crowd around the protagonist sees what he cannot, and yet both because of their terror and also what the protagonist cannot see but instead sense, he registers this running into Duo precisely in his body. He describes this sense of his own reaction and the others as totally incomprehensible in the English, and tellingly in the Danish as “grænseløst uforståelig”. This inability to rationally comprehend what has happened despite the need for an explanation is imprinted crucially in his body that has become infected, as he says, by terror.

Even after this first almost unconscious awareness of Duo’s monstrous body, the protagonist records in his final encounter with Duo “[d]et var dig der stod bagved, stammede jeg, og mine øjne var lige så bange for at røre hans ansigt som mine fingerspidser dagen før” (“It was you who stood behind, I stammered, and my eyes were just as afraid of his face as my fingertips had been the day before”).<sup>21</sup> I will merely note that for Merleau-Ponty, one of the important critics of the West’s Cartesianism, it is the body that perceives: “the subject of perception is the body”.<sup>22</sup> Thus Duo’s monstrous appearance exceeds the protagonist’s ability to comprehend it, to understand it in a rational, logical way. He perceives Duo first in terms of his own body, and only later “sees” Duo.

To further drive this point home, the careful reader will remember that the protagonist keeps riding into Duo, crashing his own body into Duo’s repeatedly: a bodily collision reminiscent of trauma. The first took place on the protagonist’s arrival in Sandburg earlier in the story. The surprise on running into, quite literally, this figure again, elicits the response from the protagonist, “Å undskyld...jeg ved ikke hvordan det kommer at jeg altid *skal* køre ind i dig...” (“I’m so sorry, I don’t know why I always have to ride into you...!”).<sup>23</sup> The italicized “have to” in the English and the “skal” in the Danish suggest a kind of necessity in these collisions, almost as if these collisions were unavoidable and therefore due to some force that operates unseen within the lives of the characters, at least those of the protagonist and Duo. This notion of the traumatic force that escapes cognition but is registered precisely on the body is carried throughout Sørensen’s short story.

This problem of the ambiguity of truth in the doubled figure of Duo reaches its climax in the end of the story when the protagonist discovers that Duo is scheduled for an operation; an operation intended to separate the two halves of Duo. This operation is apparently intended to normalize Duo, to do away with his monstrosity. The implication of the figure of Duo is that the human being itself is doubled, split as it were into two contradictory aspects. We might see these as any of the binaries that have been the foundation of Western philosophical discourse: male/female, right/wrong, good/evil, human/animal, mind/body etc. The Western tradition hasn’t only established this kind of dualistic thinking but that it has also created a hierarchy of privileged terms; the first term serving as the privileged one over and against the latter term, which therefore functions as the first term’s negative other. In privileging one term over another, not only has a preference been established but also conditions of normalcy have likewise been constructed. The operation performed on Duo is intended to return the monstrous Duo to a state of normalcy, to cut off that which is seemingly alien and other to this state of normalcy. In Roland Barthes’s reading of Michelet’s writings in terms of the androgyne, Barthes sees the myth of the androgyne in Michelet as a representation of wholeness. “The conjunction of adverse sexes into a third and complete ultra-sex represents the abolition of all contraries, the magical restoration of a seamless world which is no longer

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21 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 95; English trans. p. 114.

22 A.D. Smith. “The Flesh of Perception: Merleau-Ponty and Husserl.” In *Reading Merleau-Ponty: On Phenomenology of Perception*. Ed. Thomas Baldwin. London and New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 2.

23 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 84; English trans. p. 102.

torn between contradictory postulations”.<sup>24</sup> Indeed the androgyne in Barthes’s formulation could “explore change while providing reactionary coherence against the threat of disorder.” The operation separating Duo into two distinct halves thus becomes the reaffirmation of the contradictory postulations and of binary thinking once again.

The operation is an apparent success as, the next morning, one half of Duo addresses the truth seekers. And seemingly tells them what they want to hear: that truth is love. Still, this half of Duo is figured quite literally as lifeless, almost ghostlike, arguably one even on the verge of becoming disembodied.

Var det fordi vi var vant til at se Duo gå så tungt at han nu syntes at svæve op på prædikestolen?... de fleste sad rigtignok så langt borte fra prædikestolen... at de kun kunne se omridset af hans krop, og de der i rørelse udbrød: “Hvor er han blegt!” gjorde det vel kun fordi de på forhånd vidste at et menneske der lige er blevet opereret sædvanligvis er blegt.<sup>25</sup>

Was it because we were accustomed to seeing Duo walk so heavily now that he seemed to glide up to the pulpit?... Certainly, most people were sitting so far away from the pulpit... that they could just see the outline of his body; and those who gasped ‘How pale he is!’ presumably did so because they already knew beforehand that a person who has just been operated on is usually pale.<sup>26</sup>

What is more, the protagonist here again as with the pre-operation Duo, experiences the preaching of Duo precisely in the body. He describes a peculiar “hovedpine der vanskeligt lader sig lokalisere i hovedet, men som langsomt erobrer hele kroppen og breder sig ud over alverden” (“kind of headache that cannot be easily located in the head but which slowly penetrates the entire body”).<sup>27</sup> This peculiar headache is peculiar precisely because of the way that it succumbs or is transmuted into a body-ache, the pain of the body. The other half of Duo, as mentioned above, is entirely forgotten except for the protagonists who accidentally stumbles upon him as he rides out of Sandburg.

## Conclusion

This other half of Duo here again at the end confronts the protagonist with his monstrosity, with his veritable corporeality. “Han stod med sit sørgmodige undskyldende smil... han ikke kunne skjule sine forkrøblede forlemmer som blodet endnu dryppede fra” (“He stood there, smiling his sad and apologetic smile... he was unable to conceal his stunted forelimbs from which blood still dripped”).<sup>28</sup> Underscoring to the protagonist that he too shares in the truth of this corporeality, and in a scene reminiscent of Kafka, Duo stabs the protagonist.

Jeg trådte frem for at lægge en førende hånd på hans skulder, men han trådte tilbage, stod der med sine blødende lemmer løftet mod mig... Jeg følte igen denne mærkelige ømhed, ja det var som om den var ømmere og mærkeligere nu, den blev til en uudholdelig borende kval i brystet, som om der blev skåret i mit hjerte... Jeg havde en kniv i hjertet... Jeg turde ikke trække kniven ud. Det var sandsynligt at alt mit hjerteblod ville følge efter.<sup>29</sup>

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24 Roland Barthes. *Michelet*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1987, p. 187.

25 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 93.

26 Sørensen, *Harmless Tales*, p. 111.

27 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 94-5; English trans. p. 113.

28 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 95; English trans. p. 114.

29 Sørensen, *Ufarlige historier*, p. 96.

I stepped forward to lay a guiding hand on his shoulder, but he stepped backward, standing there with his bleeding forelimbs raised against me. I felt again that strange tenderness – it seemed even stranger and more tender now; it became an intolerable, piercing agony in my breast, as if someone were cutting into my heart... I had a knife in my heart... I dared not pull out the knife. It was probably that all my lifeblood would have followed after.<sup>30</sup>

Villy Sørensen's "Duo" has been read in terms of the necessity of the Other in any calculus of truth. The very name Duo seems to suggest this insofar as the name might be separated into "du" and "og," a "you" and something else that is precisely not the I. One hears something akin to Kierkegaard's "either/or" or Martin Buber's "I/Thou." In the foregoing, I have suggested that another way of reading this you/and... might be in terms of the body. If Duo is the Other, he is figured as such by his peculiar corporeality. This is to say that his body is other to the bodies that live within the community of Sandburg. While this notion of embodiment and embodied truth may be only one way to configure what it means to be other, my claim in the foregoing is that in Duo's radical monstrosity the figure of Duo stands for something that cannot be contained with binary thinking or a dualism. The monstrous body is excessive and plethoric. It's veritable presence gestures towards something that exceeds the imperatives of logic, and thus incorporates the irrational as the necessary other of truth. Duo's corporeality (as do the other maimed and disfigured bodies in the text) functions as a device to create a kind of ground zero for meaning and interpretation of his text; that is to say, that the veritable monstrous embodiment of Duo refutes any ready ascription of meaning, both to those within the text and to the reader as well.

According to Peter Sloterdijk's analysis in *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, the

Enlightenment bequeathed to contemporary western society a seriously distorted form of thought, one that constitutes itself as the negation of the materialism of the body. Thus knowledge has come to be understood purely in terms of the categories of the understanding and the logical intricacies of moral reasoning. Whether one is an empiricist or a rationalist, idealist or realist, the epistemological orientation to the world neglects the fact that the act of knowing is bound up not only with logic, but also the world of sensation, of sedimented bodily knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

Sørensen's preoccupation with the body is not simply a gap that critics have failed to pay attention to, rather I would argue, it is a central point in his authorship. The body functions as the inescapable other to the West's rationalism, and in the case of Duo, the desire for a pure disembodied truth.

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30 Sørensen, *Harmless Tales*, p. 115.

31 Qtd. in John Wall, and Dafydd Jones. "The Body of the Voice: Corporeal Poetics in Dada". In *Dada Culture. Critical Texts on the Avant-Garde*, Ed. Dafydd Jones. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, Avant-Garde Critical Studies 18, 2006, p. 67.