

The Role of Gaps in Character Identity Construction

Being one of the most essential elements of the narrative, the character is shaped in its construction not only by the information present in the text but also by the existence of gaps. Taking Wolf Schmid's definition of the gap as a starting point, this article proposes a differentiation between two fundamental types of character-related gaps. Beyond those gaps that refer to the character's characterization, omissions that impact the character's ontological status also emerge. The article aims to show how gaps influence the construction of the character to such a great extent that its identification is affected to the point of non-identification. By analyzing the text of the novel *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* (1954) by Max Frisch, I demonstrate that gaps can hinder the possibility of identifying the character and, therefore, his ontological status.

1. Introduction

The gaps in the form of the nonnarrated, in the sense of Wolf Schmid,¹ may play a crucial role in the character construction, considering that the character is one of the essential elements of the narrative. A common omission concerns various pieces of information regarding a character's actions, thoughts, words, and relationships – omissions that can influence the construction of their identity and shape the reader's perception of them. This spectrum of gaps primarily affects the character's semantic sphere, which includes their defining features, respectively those elements that contribute to the characterization of the character. However, the gaps can also impact the ontological sphere of the character, especially when they are permanent. At this point, examples from fantastic literature are typically discussed, as these texts often play with gaps between narrative worlds. Furthermore, the character from fantastic literature may as well exhibit an uncertain ontological status². The central question this study will address is whether a character in literary fiction can be so deeply affected by gaps in their ontological sphere that identifying the character becomes complicated or even impossible. Those narrative procedures and techniques that contribute to the formation of gaps, like *delayed identification* or even *disrupted identification* of the character,³ will also be studied. The novel *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* by Max Frisch will be analyzed as an example of this topic. This text analysis will focus on highlighting the possibility or

¹ Schmid (2023, 10) clearly states in his study of gaps what he means by nonnarrated: “not taken from the happenings into the story, occurring but not explicitly depicted in the story.”

² Schmid (2023, 13–14) points out that permanent gapping is frequently in fantastic literature, that plays with “the »hesitation« between two ontologies.”

³ According to Fotis Jannidis (2004, 147–148), both these forms of identification represent two textual strategies that can be defined as follows: “Eine verzögerte Identifizierung besteht in einer Benennung, deren Merkmale keine eindeutige Referenz auf eine bereits eingeführte Figur erlauben; an späterer Stelle des Textes wird aber soviel Information bereitgestellt, daß der Modell-Leser nachträglich eine eindeutige Referenz herstellen kann. Eine gestörte Identifizierung liegt vor, wenn die Benennung einer Figur sich nicht eindeutig auf frühere oder oder nachfolgende Benennungen beziehen läßt.”

impossibility of identifying the main character or characters and the impact of gaps on the character/s construction.

2. Types of Omissions or Gaps

First, I will focus on highlighting the different types of gaps that are related to character. The fact that literary characters are abstract schemes has been emphasized in literary theory, as Wolf Schmid (2023) points out in his study about the nonnarrated:

While reading we focus on the selected elements and features and on their indexical and symbolic functions. In doing so we fill in the lacunae and gaps existing in the text – first, more or less automatically, unconsciously, and second, in a relatively abstract way, so that we would not be able to give a description of the character in question. Ninety-nine per cent of a character's features remain indistinct in the reader's diffuse conception. The concretizations are vague and are associated, above all, with a particular atmosphere and emotion. (Schmid 2023, 7)

This passage emphasizes the high proportion of gaps in the character's construction and foregrounds the fact that the text offers a limited number of selected features, rather than providing a complete and coherent image. Consequently, other aspects of the character are left entirely indeterminate. Furthermore, this multitude of indeterminate aspects encompasses a wide range of information.

Regarding the omission related to characters, I consider it necessary to distinguish between paradigmatic omission and ontological omission. By the term *paradigmatic omission* I mean the gaps of that information that refers on content-related information. To be more explicit, content-related information sums up the semantic and factual information provided by the events in which the characters participate, by their words and thoughts or by the relationships between the characters. A factual omission is, for example, in Kafka's (2007 [1926]) novel *Das Schloß*, where the basic factual information regarding his appointment as a castle's surveyor remains unclear until the end of the novel to both the protagonist and the reader. It is also impossible for K. to contact the castle officials directly and to receive a clear answer despite all his efforts. A semantic omission implies the lack of semantic information, more precisely the lack of that information that nuances the feature or the attribute of a character. A good example in this sense is Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. In this short story, Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning transformed into a "ungeheuren Ungeziefer," (Kafka 1970, 56) a monstrous creature whose nature remains ambiguous. The phrase has been translated into English in many different ways: as a "monstrous insect" (Kafka 1992; the translation by Malcolm Pasley), a "monstrous verminous bug" (Kafka 2007; the translation by Ian Johnston), and "horrible vermin" (Kafka 2002; the translation by David Wyllie), to mention only some of the existing translations into English. The text does not specify what kind of insect it is. This lack of information, more precisely this lack of specification, leads to the interpretation that the metamorphosis is psychological or mental rather than physical, as literary criticism has repeatedly emphasized (Engel / Auerochs 2010, 166). The multitude of variants with which this phrase has been translated only highlights this gap.

By *ontological omission* I mean the lack of that information that is the basis for identifying the character. "Identification is understood as the naming of the character, which establishes a distinctive entity from others within the narrated world and which is expressed at the textual level

by means of referential expression,” (Lăcan 2023, 31; my translation) as I establish in my study of the character *Die Identität der Figur*. Therefore, the ontological omission through the lack of information that would create the cohesion of a distinct entity and thus ensure the logical unity of a point of reference leads to the impossibility of clear and unambiguous identification of a character. The ontological omission becomes evident in the use of those narrative procedures and techniques that contribute to the formation of gaps, like delayed identification or even disrupted identification of the character. When the recipient manages to constitute the cohesion between various names referring to a character through bottom-up processing⁴ and thus form an entity; in this case we were dealing with delayed identification.

Both textual strategies that use the principle of identification as the basis of their procedure rely on that ontological omission, that creates ambiguous reference and thus prevents the reader from assigning a new name to an already introduced character. How the ambiguous reference to an already known entity is further developed in the text is determined by the type of the omission. If sufficient information is provided retrospectively in the text so that the recipient can subsequently relate the stored names unambiguously to an earlier character through bottom-up processes, then delayed identification is present. In this case, the cohesion of a distinct entity is achieved even if the identification process is delayed or difficult. An example of delayed identification is represented by the novel *Stiller* by Max Frisch (1954), which was translated into English under the title *I'm not Stiller!* (Frisch 1958 [1954]). The very first sentence of the text points to the problem of identification: “Ich bin nicht Stiller!” [“I am not Stiller!”] (Frisch 1958 [1954], 9). With this rejection of the identity assigned by the other characters, the main character enters the narrative world. Although the main character introduces himself as White, acquaintances and friends identify him as Anatol Ludwig Stiller due to the physical resemblance. Despite White’s consistent refusal to deny that he is Stiller, the text contains signals from the beginning that lead the reader to suspect that White, who is supposedly from America, and the Swiss Stiller are the same character. The gaps make it difficult to identify the character in this novel, but the cohesion of the identity is ensured by the convergence of information.

In the case of disrupted identification, the text abounds in ontological omission. That means that the various names and designations do not allow the recipient to clearly relate them to an earlier or subsequent character. This ontological ambiguity entails the lack of cohesion of a certain distinct entity. This phenomenon occurs when various clues are provided in the text, which, on the one hand, could lead to a possible identification of the character as one and the same, but, on the other hand, can also confuse the reader. In contrast to delayed identification, in the case of disrupted identification, the reader remains unclear until the end of whether a single character with different names is mentioned in the narrated world or if there are multiple characters. This type of gap is the subject of the present analysis and will be discussed closely based on the text *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* by Max Frisch (2023 [1964]).⁵ This text constructs a game of multifaceted and

⁴ Ralf Schneider (2001, 611) has pointed out how “[i]nformation from various sources, both textual and reader-centered, feed into the construction of mental character models. Text-understanding always combines top-down processing, in which the reader’s pre-stored knowledge structures are directly activated to incorporate new items of information, and bottom up-processing, in which bits of textual information are kept in working memory separately and integrated into an overall representation at a later point in time.”

⁵ The novel was translated into English by Michael Bullock in 1965 under the title *A Wilderness of Mirrors* and the same translation later reprinted in 1982 under the title *Gantenbein*.

multiply overlapping ego designs that lack a fixed identity. By the end of the novel, no clear identification of any character can be discerned from the entire palette of competing and divergent ego perspectives, and consequently no fixed or stable identity that exhibits coherence and cohesion can be recognized.

3. The Role of Ontological Gaps in Character Identity Construction in *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* by Max Frisch

The story of the novel *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* (2023 [1964]) features three plot lines organized around three characters, namely Gantenbein, Enderlin, and Svoboda. Theo Gantenbein is presented in the novel as a character who, after a car accident that could have had repercussions on his eyesight, plays the role of a blind man. Felix Enderlin an intellectual around the age of 40 has received an offer from Harvard, but cannot decide whether to accept it. Frantisek Svoboda, whose wife Lila is having an affair with Enderlin, awaits her decision regarding their relationship. Although these three fictive characters might at first glance be perceived as separate entities because they represent different perspectives, but as the novel progresses, intertwining gradually emerge between the first-person narrator and the identities he has created: Gantenbein-Enderlin-Svoboda (Constantinescu 1998, 176). The mutual interrelationships between the fictive projections lead to the treatment of the identity designs as hypostases of one of the previously mentioned characters. The impossibility of relating the perspectives of the narrator and of establishing the cohesion of an entity is due to omissions.

The ontological omissions influence the identification of characters, a fact that is reflected also by the diversity of interpretations regarding the identity of the characters. Accordingly, Andreas Schäfer (1989) assumes that the first-person narrator is the only stable identity in the novel; therefore, Gantenbein and Enderlin are understood as projections of a *Buch-Ich*⁶ (book-self). Richard Egger (1986) also points to a possible intertwining between the *Buch-Ich* (book-self) and Enderlin or Gantenbein, with the *Buch-Ich* (book-self) emerging as the sole narrative instance ensuring the logical coherence of the plot. Doris Fulda Merrifield (1968) offers another possible interpretation. She assigns the various hypostases to a character, for example, Enderlin. This character is given both narrator status and a consistent identity. Romanița Constantinescu (1998) provides yet another perspective on the text, pointing out the impossibility of establishing a central character and referring to the identity diffusion of the designs of the self.

The discontinuity of the narrator's perspective through the alternation of first-person singular and third-person singular narration causes confusion. The novel begins with an anaphoric use of personal pronouns in the third person singular, so that the receiver's expectation is to soon identify the character about whom the story is told – a fact that does not happen or seems to happen a few pages later, so that later a clear identification of both the perspective and the characters proves to

⁶ The term *Buch-Ich* is Max Frisch's own, as he uses it in his poetological essay "Ich schreibe für Leser. Antworten auf vorgestellte Fragen" (Frisch 1976, 325).

be impossible. The ontological gaps are further deepened as the self's projections intertwine, as highlighted by the following quote:

Ich kann mir beides vorstellen:
Enderlin fliegt.
Enderlin bleibt. [...]
Also Enderlin bleibt.
Ich nicht...
Wieso er und nicht ich?
Oder umgekehrt:
Wieso ich?
So oder so:
Einer wird fliegen –
Einer wird bleiben – (Frisch 2023 [1964], 117)

The ontological omission regarding the character's identity is already indicated in the title by the use of the subjunctive of type one of the German verb *sein*, meaning *to be* in English: *Mein Name sei Gantenbein*. The subjunctive type one is used to report a statement made by another person without taking responsibility for the truth of that statement. Therefore, the statement that the character's name is Gantenbein and implicitly identifying him as Gantenbein is not an assumed one. At the same time, this non-assumption of identity also represents an inexhaustible source of points of indeterminacy regarding the identification of the character and therefore the construction of his identity.

The gaps are also present at the discourse level and are visually marked by (a) blank line/s. The white or empty space between passages or between different stories fragments the text not only visually but also marks a break in the narrative thread and implicitly in narrative coherence. Fragmenting the text and implicitly the narrative thread by introducing a blank line can have such a great impact on the attempt to identify the character referred to in such a paragraph that it becomes impossible for the receiver to unambiguously identify the character or hypostasis in that fragment, even when a character or hypostasis is explicitly outlined in the previous or following fragment, whether it is Gantenbein or Enderlin or the book's self, as highlighted by the following fragment:

Enderlin kann keine Rolle spielen –
Ich kenne einen Gegenfall:
Ein Mann, Botschafter einer Großmacht, ist in der Sommerfrische zusammengebrochen, aber es ist, wie sich herausstellt, kein Herzinfarkt, nur eine Einsicht, was ihn betroffen hat, und da hilft kein Urlaub, um sich davon zu erholen, kein neuer Orden, um sich daran aufzurichten. [...] Und sogar wir, die wir nie viel geglaubt haben von ihm, ändern lautlos unser Urteil, weil er nie danach gefragt hat, angesichts seiner Totenmaske.
Gestern, in Gesellschaft bei Burri, redete man einmal mehr über Kommunismus und Imperialismus, über Cuba, jemand redete von Berliner Mauer, Meinungen, Gegenmeinungen, leidenschaftlich, ein Schach auch so, Zug und Gegenzug, ein Gesellschaftsspiel, bis einer, bisher stumm, erzählte von seiner Flucht. [...] – ich frage mich dann selbst, im stillen meine kalte Pfeife saugend, angesichts jeder wirklichen Geschichte, was ich eigentlich mache: – Entwürfe zu einem Ich!...
Wieder wieder einmal erwacht, noch ungekämmt, aber geduscht und angekleidet, wenn auch noch ohne Jacke und ohne Krawatte, so vermute ich, denn die ersten Verrichtungen sind mechanisch, Ohnmacht der Gewohnheit, ich weiß bloß, daß ich wieder einmal auf dem Rand eines Bettes sitze [...] einen Augenblick, jetzt bevor ich den Fuß auf den Teppich stele, halte ich inne: - immer wieder, ich weiß es ja schon und doch erschrecke ich reglos, bin ich Enderlin, ich werde noch sterben als Enderlin.
(Frisch 2023 [1964], 107–110)

The fragmentation of text by a blank line is also enhanced by the frequent use of the dash “–”. The dash in this novel does not fulfill the function of completing the text by explaining, but most

often represents an ellipsis, thus creating a place of indeterminacy and indicating a gap. In a similar spirit, the novel's ending, which remains open, is likewise marked by a dash.

Moreover, the use of the personal pronoun “I” or “he” in fragments when referring to a character, be it Gantenbein, Enderlin or Svoboda or the *Buch-Ich* (book-self), often does not allow a clear identification of the character. Therefore, the pronoun as a substitute in anaphoric or cataphoric reference in this novel no longer fulfills its purpose of being a means by which the identity of the character who speaks or is spoken of is marked, a fact also reflected in the following passage:

Ein Mann hat eine Erfahrung gemacht, jetzt sucht er die Geschichte dazu – man kann nicht leben mit einer Erfahrung, die ohne Geschichte bleibt, scheint es, und manchmal stelle ich mir vor, ein anderer habe genau die Geschichte meiner Erfahrung...
(Der Barmann ist es nicht.) (Frisch 2023 [1964], 11)

The novel is rich in many jumps in time and space, which ensure the continued emergence of gaps. Discontinuity and temporal jump, be it as ellipsis, analepsis or prolepsis (Genette 1972, 77-95, 138–139), which are also specific features of many fictional narrative texts, especially of modern and postmodern literature, affect the coherence and cohesion of character identification, to the extent that those connecting elements that ensure the correlation between one episode and another are completely missing. The effect of these temporal discontinuities creates a synchronic perspective, or as Gerhard Probst (1978, 323) points out in his study of the novel *Mein Name sei Gantenbein*, “[s]elbst wenn die einzelnen Teile des Romans in der Diachronie verlaufen, befindet er sich als Ganzes in der Synchronie oder auch außerhalb jeglicher zeitlichen Ordnung.” Therefore, narrative temporal discontinuities marked by the lack of logical connectors lead to the impossibility of reconstructing a coherent narrative thread and implicitly to the clear delimitation of a character or a distinct and indubitable entity and as such to the impossibility of attributing a related event to a specific character.

The first-person narrator affirms the following in the first part of the novel: “Ich probiere Geschichten an wie Kleider!” (Frisch 2023 [1964], 20). Unfortunately, the different stories of the different projections of the self do not converge to establish a distinct identity. The aleatory succession of narrative fragments does not lead to the formation of a coherent story, so the novel is notable for its “absence of plot and fixed characters” (Crooke 2008, 110). Likewise, the role-playing and storytelling creates a state of unreliability in the story. Also, beyond the veracity of the stories about one character or another, the main problem generated by the abundance of omissions in this novel is the impossibility of attributing the stories to a distinct identity. The frequent use of the first-type subjunctive at the end of many fragments in the novel, together with a sentence expressing doubt, serves to question or even undermine what has previously been presented.

In the same vein, there is also the attempt to identify the character through the interrelationships and relationships with the other characters. Any such attempt proves to be doomed to failure. Thus, Lila is presented in one hypostasis as Gantenbein's wife, in another hypostasis as Svoboda's ex-wife, and in another hypostasis as Enderlin's mistress, with or without a child. The feeling of randomness given by the transition from one role to another and from one partner to another makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify the main character unequivocally. Also, the fact that in the narrative world Enderlin and Gantenbein have the same friend Burri does not shed light on the identification of the character, but only potentiates the impossibility of unambiguously identifying the character: If the friendship with Burri is seen by Merrifield (1968, 161) as a clear

indication that Gantenbein is a projection of Enderlin, other interpreters such as Schäfer (1989, 268) or Egger (1986, 164) perceive Gantenbein and Enderlin as projections of a *Buch-Ich* (book-self).

A clear identification of the character is not possible in this novel because of the constant shift between the various deictic language elements, which point to multiple references and create countless ambiguities. Hence the impossibility of identifying a central character. The frequent use of the lexeme *sich vorstellen* – (to) *imagine* in English – and the statement “Ich stelle mir vor” [“I imagine”] calls into question the ontological status of all the characters mentioned and of all the hypostases. The characters, the relationships between them, and the events are under the sign of the hypothetical, which proves to be a source of places of indeterminacy and, therefore, gaps.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how gaps contribute to character construction. When analyzing the different types of gaps, a fundamental distinction must be made between paradigmatic omission (gaps that affect the semantic sphere of the character) and ontological omission (those gaps that impact the ontological sphere of the character). Furthermore, those literary strategies and techniques which facilitate the formation of gaps, such as delayed identification or even disrupted identification of the character, were highlighted, studied, and exemplified. Through the analysis of the novel *Mein Name sei Gantenbein*, it was demonstrated that the lack of information that could create the cohesion of a distinct entity and as such ensure the logical unity of a reference point, the possibility of clear and unambiguous identification of the character or characters is bound to fail.

In conclusion, gaps can have a major influence on the ontological status of the character: when the identification of the character becomes impossible due to omissions, the gap can be said to be ontological. And finally, I would point out that in addition to related concepts to gaps such as incompleteness, missing information – genre, convention, deviation – curiosity, confirmation, comprehension, coherence and incoherence, there is also that of cohesion and non-cohesion, which is the basis of the construction of the identity of character and therefore of their ontology.

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