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On the Constitution of Characters in Poetry

The analysis of characters in literary texts has, for a long time, taken up a position between the poles of practical self-evidence and deficient procedural research: the interpretation of literary texts has always naturally included the examination of the characters involved; however, a convincing and sufficiently complex model of how to identify and define a literary character together with the proper means of analysing it has not been available for a long time. The situation changed in the 1990s, particularly with the research boom inspired by narratology, and there predominantly through the studies by Uri Margolin, Ralf Schneider and Fotis Jannidis.¹ In these contributions, a literary character is understood as the mental model of a human being in a narrated world, created by a reader from information in the text and the reader's world knowledge.² The categories for the description of characters – their designation, their construction in the text, etc. – are developed with reference to narrative texts, the examples used to exemplify these deliberations are taken from works in prose. The present contribution seeks to investigate whether these models and their respective categories of description might equally prove their worth with texts of poetry, or whether there is a genre-specific difference that makes the constitution of characters in poetry diverge from that in prose texts:³ How are characters constructed in poems? Do characters in poems diverge from characters in prose texts and if so wherein? Are there specific means that cannot be found in prose texts?

1 Cf. the introduction to this volume; also the historical survey of the different approaches to the literary representation of human beings from pre-modern poetics to the conceptions developed by literary scholarship in the 1980s, in Koch: *Menschen-darstellung*.

2 E.g. Jannidis: *Figur*, pp. 192f.; Schneider: *Grundriß*, pp. 349f.

3 I shall not deal with visual poetry whose graphic designs represent visual ›figures‹ that are semantically related to the content of the poems. I am here concerned – roughly speaking – with characters as the textual counterparts of human beings.

These are the questions to be answered. In a first step, the genre-specific or genre-typical features of poetry will have to be examined in order to elucidate the ways in which they may affect the constitution of characters (1). The various means of shaping the characters in poems will then be assembled in a kind of survey (2) and, finally, two exemplary aspects of the constitution of characters will be used to deal with the question how characters might be identified in poems (3). A summary of results will conclude the contribution (4).⁴

1 What Are Genre-Typical Features of Poetry?

The state of the theory of poetry is lamented quite frequently, although with diminishing proper justification. Targets of criticism are insufficiently clarified genre-typological premises, the lack of exchange with recent developments in literary theory, and poor terminological precision.⁵ The well-reflected adoption of categories developed in recent international research in narrative theory is seen by some as a possibility of breathing new life into the theory of poetry. Although some of the advocates of this direction are inclined to overestimate the clarity of narratological concepts just as they tend to underestimate the genre-typological consequences of such an adoption,⁶ this approach seems to be a viable one as has been demonstrated, for instance, in various contributions by Peter Hühn and Jörg Schönert.⁷ As the analysis of characters in the following will proceed from narratological considerations it seems reasonable to pursue this new direction of poetry research.

In order to be able to clarify in what ways poems diverge from narrative texts for which the categories of character analysis have been developed, the genre-specific features of poetry must first be established. It is all too well known that there is no consensus amongst researchers concerning the necessary defining features of poetry. Recently even the apparently consensual feature of verse has come under fire, a feature that has been declared – albeit in the context of differing arguments⁸ – to be

4 As my field is German studies, all my illustrative examples will come from German-language (lyrical) poetry.

5 E.g. Müller-Zettelmann: *Lyrik*, p. 131; Wolf: *Lyric*, pp. 21f.

6 E.g. Müller-Zettelmann: *Lyrik*, pp. 137, 142f.; cf. however the criticism of obscurities in narratological narrator concepts in: Köppe / Stühling: *Pan-Narrator Theories*.

7 Cf. Hühn / Schönert: *Analyse*, esp. pp. 302–305; Hühn / Schönert: *Einleitung*; with considerations of genre-theoretical consequences Hühn / Schönert: *Auswertung*, esp. pp. 328ff.; also Müller-Zettelmann: *Lyrik*.

8 Burdorf: *Einführung*, p. 20; Lamping: *Gedicht*, p. 63.

obligatory for poetry or ›lyrical poems‹ by Dieter Burdorf and Dieter Lamping whose suggestions have had a wide influence on lyric theory in the German-speaking area. But this criticism is actually aimed at an even lower level because the requirement of verse implies a concept of text that is inapplicable to Concrete Poetry or visual poetry and thus excludes these varieties from the domain of poetry.⁹ Rüdiger Zymner, by contrast, chooses a reception-oriented approach and defines ›poetry‹ as the ›representation of language as the generic display of linguistic mediality and thus as the generic catalyst of aesthetic evidence‹.¹⁰ ›Display of linguistic mediality‹ means a primary mode of reception that may be roughly understood as consisting in the reader's attention being directed towards language by linguistic and formal features,¹¹ and ›catalyst of aesthetic evidence‹ means a secondary mode of reception that comprises various kinds of hypotheses concerning the construction of meaning. Both modes taken together are distinctive, according to Zymner, and clearly delimit lyrical poetry against other literary kinds. Poetry is, consequently, not specified here with reference to linguistic features; but these features play an ›indirect‹ role in the definition insofar as they can release the two described modes of reception.

However, I need not enter here into the problem of genre definition – an unquestionably important problem. To my mind, it appears to be more productive not to search for an all-encompassing concept of ›poetry‹ but to differentiate concepts of poetry by placing greater emphasis on the historical conventions of production and reception for the specification of concepts of poetry. But it will be enough of a foundation for the following considerations to gather together those features by which different prototypes of poems diverge from narrative texts. I consider it fruitful, however, to include Zymner's reception-oriented perspective because the relevant linguistic features of texts are not meaningful in themselves but become significant for comprehension only in acts of processing.¹² As a consequence, we have to deal not only with the features of a poem but as well with the sequentiality of information processing. Two restrictions must be heeded in the following discussion: the statements about ›typical features‹ of poems apply only to particular groups of poetry; they are, furthermore, formulated relatively ›loosely‹ and would have to be empirically tested and differentiated historically by means of larger corpora. The point of departure might well be the set of

9 Vgl. Zymner: *Lyrik*, pp. 23ff.

10 Zymner: *Lyrik*, p. 140 (trans. by Alison Rosemary Köck / Wolfram Karl Köck).

11 Due to lack of space, Zymner's comments can only be rendered here in rough outline; for more precise details cf. *ibid.*: e.g. pp. 97, 111f. and 138.

12 Cf. also Weimar: *Text*, pp. 110ff.

features that has repeatedly been quoted in various attempts at explaining the genre of ›poetry‹, whose presence is, however, not a necessary condition of the actual occurrence of poetry. Such features are certainly typical of large groups of poems, i.e. characterise at least historical and genre-specific varieties of poetry: brevity, verse, a high degree of textual condensation, songlike qualities (›Sangbarkeit‹), self-reference and reflexivity, grammatical deviations from ordinary language, lack of fictionality, unmediated, ›direct‹ speech situation, the existence of a particular instance called the ›lyric I‹ (›lyrisches Ich‹, ›lyric persona‹) creating a particular closeness between the speaker-I and the author, and finally also the concentration on themes like emotions, moods and sentiments, and reflections about situations or events.¹³ Closer examination reveals that only three of the features of this set are suitable for distinguishing poems from narrative texts:

1. Even though there are very long poems and very short prose texts, the *brevity* of poems is generally a conspicuous criterion of distinction.¹⁴ It implies, amongst other things, that poems can communicate less propositionally formulated information than texts in prose.

2. *Verses or metrically bound speech* clearly distinguishes poems from prose. There are two implications: on the one hand, verse increases the amount of communicable information within the limited space available to poems as the schemes of metre and rhyme represent a second kind of information connected with its propositional type. This leads to the feature of condensation. On the other hand, verse can direct the attention of the reader or listener to the language and the form of the texts from which further information may be gleaned. I consider this to be an interpretation of the often-quoted feature of the self-reference of poems, which is non-metaphorical and describes the processing of texts.¹⁵

3. *Density or condensation* may be specified as the number of items of information in proportion to the amount of text, whereby the different items of information may overlap, i.e. may be gleaned from different levels of the text. High textual density is a characteristic feature of poems although narrative texts can unquestionably also exhibit high density. ›Structural complexity‹ or ›over-structuredness‹ are labels of the same

13 Cf. e.g. Wolf: *Lyric*, pp. 34–31; Burdorf: *Einführung*, pp. 20f.; Grosse: *Lyrik*, p. 45.

14 Counterexamples like Albrecht von Haller's ›The Alps‹ (›Die Alpen‹) or Bertolt Brecht's ›The Rearing of Millet‹ (›Die Erziehung der Hirse‹) do not refute the assertion that brevity is a prototypical feature of poems. It has to be admitted as a matter of course, however, that the deliberations of this contribution are primarily appropriate for German-language poetry after 1750 and would have to be differentiated historically.

15 Cf. Zymner: *Lyrik*, p. 140.

feature.¹⁶ Density in poetry is achieved by verse, on the one hand, by the rhetorical means of *elocutio*, on the other, which are both traditionally used in poems – even though with historical and programmatic oscillations. Furthermore, it can arise through the combination of the text of a song with a melody; in this sense, the criterion of songlike quality can be integrated here. Condensation may additionally be achieved by exploiting the semantically usable licence to handle linguistic rules at liberty, e.g. the rules of word formation with regard to neologisms as well as the rules of syntax.¹⁷ This particular feature of a potentially high density of information in a small space corresponds with the thesis of the potential relevance of every feature of the text of a poem in the analytical and interpretative dealing with poems. This thesis possesses the status of a genre convention for poetry.

Criteria that, to me, seem to be unsuited for the delimitation of poetry are the criteria of fictionality, the specific speaker instance, and the thematic specificity of poems. Not all poems are fictional nor are they always non-fictional – something that is equally applicable to narrative texts.¹⁸ The assumption of a particular speaker instance in poems, usually called the ›lyric I‹ (›lyrisches Ich‹), also seems to me unsuitable for the purpose of a fundamental distinction;¹⁹ the pronoun ›I‹ in poems has the same function as in narrative texts.²⁰ A special case in the history of poetry will be dealt with in section 3. And finally, there can be no doubt that emotions, moods, sentiments and reflections appear frequently in poems but in narrative texts as well, albeit not in comparably high concentration.

As the typical features – in the above-explained understanding –, which distinguish poems from narrative texts, may therefore be named brevity, verse, and the condensation of information.

2 Means of Constituting Characters in Poems

It seems reasonable to investigate the various possibilities of linguistically generating characters in poems on a contrastive basis. The point of departure will be the mechanisms by which linguistic information is placed, and that have been worked out for narrative texts under the aspect

16 E.g. Link: *Elemente*, pp. 92ff.

17 Cf. Grosse: *Lyrik*, pp. 45, 50.

18 Also Lamping: *Gedicht*, pp. 108–110; Zipfel: *Fiktion*, ch. 8.1.1, esp. pp. 303f.; Zymner: *Lyrik*, p. 11; and others.

19 For criticism of the concept ›lyric I‹ cf. Schönert: *Autor*; Borkowski / Winko: *Gedicht*.

20 Cf. Schiedermaier: *Lyrisches Ich*, pp. 89, 123.

of the construction of characters;²¹ the question is then whether these can be seen at work in poems as well.

First of all, it must be established more accurately, however, what elements of the fictive world of poems we are actually referring to whenever we speak of ›characters‹. Following a definition by Fotis Jannidis, »Character is a text- or media-based figure in a story world, usually human or human-like«,²² we shall in the following understand by the concept of ›character‹ human beings or human-like living beings in literary texts, whereby similarity to human beings is established by at least one of the following features: ›intentional action, speech, internal life and [...] external appearance«. ²³ A character arises as »a linguistically generated conceptual unit«, i.e. it is constructed through the interplay of the information given by the texts and the knowledge of the world supplied by the reader.²⁴ With Uri Margolin,²⁵ characters understood in this way must fulfil two conditions: for one, they must be ascribed ›existence‹ in the poem, i.e. they must be part of the fictive world even though this may, for instance, apply only in a hypothetical or a counterfactual mode. A character must, furthermore, possess at least one clearly identifiable feature (›predication‹). Characters according to this understanding need not be human beings; animals and even inanimate objects may also assume this function in texts. Such a conception of ›character‹ raises the question for ›object poems‹ (›Dinggedichte‹), whether the objects at the centre of these poems are characters or not. Do the archaic torso of Apollo or the blue Hydrangea in Rilke's eponymous poems have the status of characters? This question cannot be answered in a general way for all object-poems but must be carefully examined in every single case. Even though the plant in Rilke's »Blue Hydrangea« (›Blaue Hortensie‹) is endowed with anthropomorphic properties it lacks – in contradistinction, for instance, to the rose in Goethe's »Rose in the Heather« (›Heideröslein‹) – a feature like ›intentional action‹ and ›internal life‹ so that the question would have to be negated in this case. The torso, however, has been ascribed the property of intentionality at least by one particular interpretative tradition of this poem,²⁶ and it may therefore be designated a character.

21 Cf. for the categories adduced in what follows Jannidis: *Figur*, chs. 4 and 6; Schneider: *Grundriß*, ch. 4.

22 Jannidis: *Character*, p. 14.

23 Jannidis: *Figur*, pp. 119f (trans. by Alison Rosemary Köck / Wolfram Karl Köck).

24 Cf. *ibid.*: p. 147. Cf. also Schneider: *Grundriß*, pp. 80–90; Gerrig / Allbritton: *Construction*; Culpeper: *Character*, pp. 335f., 352ff.

25 Cf. Margolin: *Characters*.

26 See below, section 3.

2.1 Techniques of Character Constitution in Poems

The techniques of character constitution in texts comprise, amongst others, different means of designation and characterisation.

1. *Designation*. The linguistic means employed for designating a character are proper names, noun phrases and pronouns. A frequently used strategy for the generation of a character in prose texts consists in its designation *by means of a proper name*.²⁷ This kind of designation of a character by means of a name is found considerably less frequently in poetry than in narrative texts. In longer types of narrative poems, particularly in ballads and poems with historical or legend-related themes, this technique is used more frequently than in shorter or non-narrative types. There are distinctions to be drawn here: (i) fictive names, (ii) names of historical, legendary or mythological characters, and (iii) names representing a literary topos, for instance the ›Daphnes‹ and ›Chloes‹ of Anacreontic poetry. All proper names share the function of assembling and tying together the features of characters but they perform this function in different ways. (i) When fictive names are first introduced, only the feature of gender classification is, as a rule, associated with the character they refer to. That Lenore in Bürger's eponymous ballad is a woman or a girl is the only information apparent at the beginning of the text; the properties that distinguish her are only revealed in the course of the text. The attributes of fictive figures depend exclusively on the placement of information in the poem. In contradistinction (ii) the names of historical, legendary or mythological figures immediately conjure up a set of features. Examples are the character Nietzsche in Stefan George's poem ›Nietzsche‹, Squire von Ribbeck in Theodor Fontane's ballad, the Loreley in Heinrich Heine's or Clemens Brentano's poems, Saint Cecilia in Agnes Miegel's ›Santa Cäcilia‹ or Prometheus in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's prototypical *Sturm-und-Drang* poem. Although only a small number of the attributes semantically associated with the historical personages or mythological figures are explicitly attended to or re-interpreted in the poems – as in the case of Elagabalus in George's ›Algabal‹-cycle –, the spectrum of potential character attributes is certainly broad here. This holds equally for names that refer to literary characters, for instance ›Ophelia‹ in Georg Heym's eponymous poem, or ›Hamlet‹ whose characteristic attributes of hesitation and reluctance are used in Ferdinand Freiligrath's poem ›Hamlet‹ for describing and assessing the state of Germany. (iii) Names using literary topoi function in a similar way. Employing them, authors again rely on some type of knowledge available to their readers, but this knowledge is

27 Cf. Jannidis: *Figur*, pp. 110f.; Schneider: *Grundriß*, pp. 75f.

mediated by literature and is not so much directed at the individuality of a character as at its typological properties and functions. Examples are the already mentioned typified names of women in Anacreontic poems. As is well-known, ›Doris‹, ›Daphne‹ or ›Chloe‹ basically designate serene, attractive and lovable women, often scantily dressed and predominantly moving around in idyllic landscapes. The attribute ›natural‹ can be applied to them even if they are placed in a culturally marked setting.

The second group of linguistic expressions for the purpose of character designation are *noun phrases*. In Goethe's ›Rose in the Heather‹ (›Heideröslein‹), for instance, the two characters are designated as ›a rosebud‹ (l. 1) and ›the rash boy‹ (l. 15),²⁸ in his ›Erlking‹ (›Erlkönig‹) appears ›the father with his child‹, in Novalis's ›To Tieck‹ (›An Tieck‹) it is ›a child‹. A distinguishable subgroup of this kind of character designation is formed by designations of type as they appear for instance in folk-song-like Romantic texts, e.g. the cheerful huntsman, the beautiful miller's daughter, or the seductive witch in the work of Joseph v. Eichendorff, Wilhelm Müller or Clemens Brentano. Again the knowledge of the reader about topoi constituted by literature is alluded to by means of such designations. Among these typifying designations may also be collected the personifications of abstract nouns, for instance in Georg Heym's ›The War‹ (›Der Krieg‹). The abstract noun used here as a designation has the same function as a typified name: it designates the character and ties together a number of supra-individual properties whose knowledge is presupposed, in the case of ›The War‹ e.g. violence, total destruction and death.

The last group of linguistic means of designation plays a recognisably greater role in poetry than in prose texts: *designation by means of pronouns*. In numerous poems, there are no proper names or designating noun phrases, and the characters are marked exclusively by pronouns. As a rule, personal pronouns are used, especially ›I‹ and ›you‹, but there may also be indefinite pronouns as, for instance, in Hofmannsthal's ›Interdependence‹ (›Manche freilich‹), or demonstrative pronouns as in Leo Greiner's Gedicht ›Life‹ (›Leben‹), in which the speaker designates other characters only with the pronoun ›this‹, thus calling their identity into question. Pronouns do not communicate any information beyond their pragmatic functions in linguistic communication. The expression ›I‹, for instance, refers only to a speaking instance about whom nothing else is yet known, the expression ›you‹ refers to an addressee who is addressed by a speaking instance. In the linguistic context of a poem, the expression ›I‹ places whatever is represented in perspective and directs the attention of the

28 Zeydel: Goethe, p. 33.

reader towards the speaker²⁹ but does not communicate any further features of this character except that it is capable of speech. This third variant of the designation of characters is therefore semantically the poorest, and the question arises whether pronouns allow for the identification of figures at all. This question leads to the techniques of characterisation.

2. *Characterisation.* The technique of characterisation is understood here very broadly as the tying of information to a character.³⁰ According to this formal specification, all items of information ascribed to a character in a text contribute to its characterisation, i.e. all kinds of information relating to its external appearance as well as all kinds of information about its mental properties and the situative constellations in which it is located. For narrative texts the differentiation of stable and variable, central and peripheral, essential and accidental, etc. character information plays an important role because it allows for the distinction between characterisations that are ›characteristic‹ in the narrow sense from characterisations that are irrelevant. For poems, such a differentiation is less informative because due to the brevity of most of these texts; anyway, there is not very much space left for less relevant information or for the development of a character. In other words, the slight character information that is communicated must be ›characteristic‹, which in turn has the consequence that poems frequently contain typified characters. Due to the brevity of the texts, individualisation in the sense of a process in which new features are ascribed to the typified characters³¹ therefore plays a less significant role than in narrative texts. For the same reason, the above-stated designations whereby a character is introduced into a poem or that serve the tying together of features may simultaneously function as characterisations. They may even be the only characterising pieces of information available in the text. This applies to the designations by means of proper names and noun phrases but not to the designation by means of pronouns. In the case of pronominal designation at least one further feature must be provided that secures the attribute ›human‹ or ›human-like‹ to make it possible at all to speak of a character. The information required in this case may be communicated through the ascription of mental states or human actions. Both these possibilities of transforming a pronominally introduced ›object‹ in a poem into a character are used, for example, in Richard Dehmel's poem »Sultry Air« (»Drückende Luft«). Here neither a name nor a description is used to designate the female

29 Cf. Schiedermaier: *Lyrisches Ich*, p. 116.

30 Cf. Jannidis: *Figur*, p. 208.

31 Cf. Schneider: *Grundriß*, p. 143.

character but merely the pronoun ›she‹. That it is a woman to which the pronoun refers can only be inferred from the first occurrence on the grounds of the references to the activity (piano playing) and the emotional attitude (sadness) ascribed to her.

Even though such brief characterisations, i.e. ascriptions of minimal information, occur with a significantly higher frequency in poems than in prose texts, the categories suggested by research for the description of characterisation may be employed for both genres. The significance of the categories of character portrayal for poems shifts, however, and this will be briefly explained in the following.³²

Duration indicates how long and therefore also how extensively information ascribed to a character is presented; the duration of the allocation of character information is only ›informative‹ in relation to the length of the whole poem. As this category is measured by reading time, it will tend to be considerably shorter for poems than for narrative texts.

The *amount* of allocated character information in a poem indicates how many different features are ascribed to a character. The minimal option here is that one single feature must be given in order to speak of a character at all.³³ In narrative texts, this minimal amount of character-related information will occur only rarely, in poems, however, as already mentioned, more frequently, for instance in the appeal to fictive addressees about whom not much more is said than that they stand in a particular relationship with the speaker instance. However, it is even less possible in poems than in narratives or novels to infer the relevance of a character in the text from the amount – or the duration – of the character information. Here the feature of information density or condensation takes effect: even a single character feature may turn out to be of particular importance due to the superimposition of other kinds of information of the poem. Therefore, out of genre-specific reasons the weighing of the information in a text plays a stronger role for lyric than for prose. Such weighing may be carried out formally with the help of means subsumed under the categories ›frequency‹ and ›order‹, but also with reference to the content of what is being said. The meaning-related weighing of features may be achieved through the coupling of character information and other information in the poem (›context of information‹ and ›context of characters‹),³⁴ for example, by combining the character

32 Cf. on the following *ibid.*: pp. 220f. Jannidis quite rightly emphasises that the categories could also be constructed differently.

33 Cf. Margolin: Characters.

34 *Ibid.*: p. 201.

information with the topic of the poem or with information about the speaker character.

The *frequency* with which the same kind of information is ascribed to a character may be mentioned as the third quantitative element of potential qualitative consequence. For the very reason that poetry, due to its genre specifications, is generally parsimonious with information, the repeated mentioning of the same character feature, possibly in variations, is potentially significant. However, not every repetition in a poem can be directly understood as a straightforward indication of relevance. When character information in songlike texts is communicated in the refrain, for instance, then this repetition is motivated differently, namely by the conventions of the genre, as for instance in Goethe's »Rose in the Heather«, where colour and place are indicated for the rose that is constructed as a character (»Rosebud, little rosebud red, / Rosebud in the heather.« ll. 6f., 13f., 20f.).³⁵ It must be checked in every individual case whether the character information presented repeatedly in a refrain possesses additional relevance.

The *order* of character information has a qualitative function insofar as it contributes to the weighing of the stated features. Character information may, therefore, gain special significance through rhetorical placement: it may introduce the poem and thus assume a guiding function for the further processing of information, or it may conclude it and thus achieve particular prominence as the last item of information – possibly even by way of a sort of punch line. In contradistinction to narrative texts, poems command the instrument of verse, which provides additional possibilities of accentuating character information, namely by means of conspicuous metrical or rhyme-bound positioning. The scant information about a character will gain weight, for instance, if it is placed in a rhyming position. One of numerous examples is offered by Georg Heym's »The God of the City« (»Der Gott der Stadt«) where – in the original German version – the adjective »breit« (l. 1) ascribed to the principal character is placed in the stressed position at the end of this line, i.e. in the rhyming position, so as to make it more imposing.³⁶ Its dominance is increased even further by the rhyming combination of »breit« and »Einsamkeit« (l. 3), the attribute of the scattered houses outside the town that are set against the god of the city.

³⁵ Zeydel: Goethe, p. 33.

³⁶ Heym: Gedichte, p. 627. An English translation cf. Allen: Life, p. 82: »On a block of houses he spreads his weight. / The winds rest blackly round his brow. / He looks with rage into the distant solitude, / Where the last houses are lost in the land.« (l. 1–4).

The *density* of character information may be understood as the relation between the amount of information about a character and the total amount of information contained in the text. High density occurs in those passages of poems, which present concentrated information about a character, little density if character information is scattered throughout the text. In Hofmannsthal's poem »Interdependence« (»Manche freilich«),³⁷ for instance, the first two stanzas show high information density with respect to the two groups of characters that are set against each other, whereas the last three stanzas show only little density.

Two categories of character information are of particular significance to poetry: the *context of information* and the *context of characters*. They indicate with what kinds of information the features of a character are interconnected within the poem. As has been mentioned several times, the depiction of characters in poems is generally fairly scant; such relational information is, therefore, of importance because it may at least allow for the derivation of evidence indicative of omitted features that are nevertheless essential for the understanding of the characters. Such kinds of information may belong to the setting of the poem or to the constructed situation; it may also be part of the constellation involving the character in question with other characters. An example of such a way of characterising is given by the characters »Manche« and »Andere« in Hofmannsthal's »Interdependence« (»Manche freilich«).³⁸ It is not clearly stated what groups of human beings are actually referred to, it is only circumscribed and expressed indirectly by images of spaces and situations that are set against each other. Thus, the groups of characters are presented as types and at the same time are described so vaguely that ample room for interpretation remains, which has been extensively exploited by the Hofmannsthal scholarship community.³⁹

A good example of the interplay of different means of characterisation is offered by Brentano's »Song of the Spinstress« (»Der Spinnerin Nachtlid«). Striking here is the discrepancy between the amount and the relevance of character information, on the one hand, the proportional relationship between amount and frequency, on the other. Only two items of information are communicated about the character addressed, the »You«, in the poem: (i) the character left the »I« some time ago (»That you

37 Stork: Poems, p. 37.

38 Hofmannsthal: Werke, p. 26; Stork: Poems, p. 37, translates »Manche« as »Many men«, »Andere« as »Others«.

39 To mention only two different interpretations: Kayser: Kunstwerk, pp. 311–318; Grimm: Botschaft, pp. 36f.

have left me«, l. 12; »Since you left me«, l. 17);⁴⁰ (ii) the character stood in a close relationship with the ›I‹ some time ago (›When we were together«, ll. 4, 9; »How we were together«, l. 20).⁴¹ There is no need to debate the question of whether the ›You‹ represents a character at all because it clearly fulfils the above-stated conditions of the existence of characters: personality, existence and predication. This ›You‹ was at least part of the fictive world in the past and it is ascribed the two quoted features. However, that this character must be identified as an absent lover and that it plays a central role in the poem can only be inferred by reference to other pieces of information in the poem. The decisive factor here is the textual construction of the situation of the female speaker, the distress caused by the loss of the ›You‹ and the hope for a reunion with the help of God. The male gender of the ›You‹ and the identification of the ›close relationship‹ as a relationship of love are never made explicit, these features can only be inferred from the context – with reference, for instance, to the literary tradition of the deserted girl. The relevance of this extremely economical construction of the character of an addressee may be formally enhanced by a quantitative argument not related to the content of the information but to its frequency: it involves the recurrences (ll. 4, 9, 12, 17, 25). Although repetitions of phrases with scant variations characterise the whole poem and although even the moon and the nightingale appear repeatedly as subjects of such repetitions, it is the fictive addressee who turns up most frequently in these variations.

The example demonstrates that it is of the highest importance for poems to assemble all the different types of information in such a way as to enable the image of a character to arise in a text-directed manner. At the same time, it demonstrates that there are cases in which all the *explicit* items of information together still do not suffice to create such an image. The constitution of a character is only possible if the readers supplement all the explicitly given information with their life-world and also literary knowledge about types of situation, patterns of action or typified relations between characters.

40 Trans. S.W.; cf. Brentano: Werke, p. 131: »Daß du von mir gefahren«, l. 12; »Seit du von mir gefahren«, l. 17.

41 Trans. S.W.; cf. Brentano: Werke, p. 131: »Da wir zusammen waren«, l. 4; »Als wir zusammen waren«, l. 9; »Wie wir zusammen waren«, l. 20.

2.2 Information about Characters in the Context of Poems

Apart from the techniques of the construction of characters, two further modes of representation must be taken into account that have to do with the integration of character information into the context of the poem: the motivation of the reader, and the relationship between the reader and a character as it is suggested text-internally. Although aspects of both modes may play a role in the portrayal of a character, they will here be dealt with separately because they do not primarily serve the constitution of characters.

1. The investigation of *motivation* may either focus on the function of character information concerning the motivation of the actions in a poem,⁴² or it may deal with the question of whether the character information can be considered to be ›motivated‹ wherever it occurs in the poem, i.e. whether these items of information fulfil identifiable functions. In both cases, the investigation will concern the relations between character information and the actions and the events or situations in the poem. In a case of *causal motivation* the property of a character may release an action or provide its reasons or causes; the broken heart of the witch Loreley in Eichendorff's ›Conversation in the Wood‹ (›Waldgespräch‹), for instance, motivates her men-murdering behaviour, and the death sentence that is passed by the tyrant in Schiller's ballad ›The Hostage‹ (›Die Bürgschaft‹) is causally effected by the love of freedom that made Damon attempt the tyrant's assassination. Character information can hardly contribute to a *final motivation* because this type of motivation is connected with explanatory perspectives involving concepts of destiny or divine providence, and such perspectives allow for a retrospective integration of preceding elements of actions and events after the text has ended. Properties of characters may again be causally incorporated here as, for instance, in Bürger's ballad ›Lenore‹, where the death of the protagonist is certainly finally motivated but – as indicated by her accusations against God – still stands in a causal relation with a feature of the personality of this character. The third type of motivation, the *motivation by composition*, must be assumed as the ›default position‹, and not only with reference to the total action of a text.⁴³ All kinds of information in poems tend to be motivated by composition since the thesis of the potential relevance of every single textual feature has the status of a genre convention for poetry.⁴⁴ It would be rather bizarre for character

42 Cf. the three types of motivation in Martínez: Welten, pp. 27–32.

43 Cf. also Jannidis: Figur, p. 223.

44 See above, section 1, on the feature ›density‹.

information to appear in a poem without any recognisable compositional motivation. Consequently, compositional motivation is of particular relevance for poems simply for genre-specific reasons. However, the fact that actions are not depicted in greater detail and are occasionally rendered in a greatly reduced form does not warrant the conclusion that causal motivation is irrelevant in poetry. Even though causal motivation is not extensively represented in poems, it may still play an important role as presupposed knowledge. Because of the very fact of the parsimonious distribution of explicit information in poetry, the conventionalised assumption that there is a causal connection between an action X and a character property Z, though not mentioned in the text, is used to construct the connection in an implicit way. In Goethe's »Greeting and Farewell« (»Willkommen und Abschied«), for example, the causal chain propelling the action forward remains implicit all the time: the speaker character loves a woman and wants to meet her and therefore gallops through the night. The connection will in all probability be quite clear to every reader because it follows a pattern according to which the topic of the love of the »I« for the »You«, which appears only in stanza 3 – and there, again, only as an image – is connected with the apparently unmotivated haste expressed in the first two stanzas.⁴⁵

2. Further light is shed on the construction of a character by the means of specifying the attitude of a reader towards this character. The spectrum of possible *reader attitudes towards a character*, which is only insufficiently labelled as »identification«, comprises at least empathy, sympathy, recognition as a role model and aesthetic appreciation.⁴⁶ But not the actual attitudes of empirical readers are of importance here; it is the attitudes towards a character as they are suggested to the readers by a poem. Just as there are linguistic resources to establish the psychological condition of a character in a text, there are means by which attitudes of empathy, rejection and admiration may be evoked in the reader. Whether these effects are actually achieved in the end is not a concern of the present debate; the object of investigation is rather the linguistically induced potential. It must be stressed, however, that investigating this potential does not always lead to a better understanding of the poem: there are obviously poems that refrain from unambiguous attributions and do not make use of strategies that evoke sympathy or empathy but construct their characters in a neutral way.

45 Zeydel: Goethe, pp. 35ff.

46 Cf. section 12 of the introduction to this book. For an explication of the terms »perspective«, »identification« and »empathy« cf. Eder: *Figur*, ch. 12.2. Eder analyses characters in films but several of his findings apply to literature as well.

The ways and means used to produce certain attitudes towards characters in texts in general and in poems in particular have not yet been sufficiently investigated at all.⁴⁷ Among these means are:

(i) different narrative techniques that reduce the distance between the narrator and what is represented and – figuratively speaking – move the reader closer to the narrating instance. Such techniques are, for instance, internal focalisation, techniques of speech rendering, e.g. free indirect discourse, or a scenic mode instead of a narrative mode. The large group of poems with a homodiegetic or an autodiegetic speaker can bring about this very reduction of distance: voice and focalisation can be used so as to create the illusion of an authentic speech situation. This illusion is created through linguistic means, which generate the impression of perspective-dependence and, in this sense, of the ›subjectivity‹ of human perception.⁴⁸ The readers are granted an apparently ›direct view‹ of the perception or the reflection of the speaker in this way.

(ii) The second technique comprises various means of emotionalisation. Characters can be represented in such a manner as to make emotional attitudes like compassion, revulsion, joy or anger appear as the appropriate attitudes to be inspired in their recipients. This may happen explicitly as, for instance, in Fontane's ballad ›John Maynard‹, in which ›love‹ is postulated as the appropriate attitude towards the protagonist. In most cases, however, emotionalisation is brought about by implicit means: when a character is, for instance, connected with a situation that is quite clearly culturally coded as emotional – e.g. distress in a situation of loss – or when it performs an action whose motive is typically assumed to be a strong emotion – e.g. the self-sacrifice out of love, the murder out of jealousy. By alluding to such cultural patterns nameable emotions are evoked, whereas metrical, syntactical or rhetorical means may produce a less specific kind of emotionalisation.⁴⁹ Poetry uses possibilities of this kind in greater measure than prose. Although careful checking must establish in every individual case to whom the emotions in a poem are ascribed, emotionalisation as such may be considered to be a strategy to suggest particular attitudes towards characters.

(iii) A third means that cannot be separated distinctly from the second one consists of the text-internal evaluations attached to characters. They shed light on the position taken by a character within the ensemble of all the other figures in the poem and/or ›comment on‹ the properties or

47 Cf. e.g. Winko: *Gefühle*, pp. 143f.; more detailed: Hillebrandt: *Verhältnis*, ch. 2.

48 Cf. here Müller-Zettelmann: *Lyrik*, p. 142. On the close relation between the ›perspective‹ of the narrating instance and the representation of other characters, albeit in narrative texts, cf. Roßbach: *Figuren*, p. 86

49 Cf. in detail Winko: *Gefühle*, pp. 130–141, 143f.

actions of the character. Here again, explicitly evaluative poems must be distinguished from implicitly evaluative ones. Fontane's already mentioned ballad »John Maynard« leaves no doubt that the unselfish sacrifice of the central character deserves the greatest esteem and that this protagonist may even be attributed a moral model function. But also less explicit indications may render text-internal evaluations clear enough. In Eichendorff's »Conversation in the Wood« (»Waldgespräch«), as already explained above, the manner of action of the Loreley is justified by the account that she has been left by her lover, cannot act in any other way due to her »broken heart«, and is therefore doomed to bring disaster on all men. This account does not only serve to explain the manner of action of the character, it has the further function of an implicit commentary because it shifts at least part of the guilt onto the faithless lover. A technique of the implicit evaluation of characters is, therefore, the paralleling or contrasting comparison with actions or characters that have been given an unambiguously positive or negative moral evaluation, independently of whether such an evaluation is culturally accepted or is established within the text. Still other means are the commentary through the direction of actions, e.g. if a character turns out to be wrong at the end, or by linguistic or image-based references to contemporary discourses whose significance is beyond doubt. The use of all these means by poetry is in no way different from the possibilities commanded by narrative texts.

3 The Identification of Characters in Poems

How do we recognise characters in poems, and on what basis do we ascribe attributes to them? This question has only been marginally touched upon so far and will now be dealt with by the example of two problem cases. These problem cases will furthermore lead to questions that are even more fundamental.

3.1 Classification and Interpretation

Normally it does not present any problem to identify an entity in the fictive world as a character, not even in poems with minimal information about characters: a character is usually recognisable as the counterpart of a human being. In some cases, however, it remains unclear whether the textual entity in question is a character or perhaps an inanimate object, and the operations that are required to justify the ascription reveal the

mechanisms of the identification of characters. More precisely, they shed light on the relationship between textual analysis and interpretation in the act of the identification of characters.

One of the above-mentioned »object poems« may be used as an example, i.e. Rilke's sonnet »Archaic Torso of Apollo« (»Archaischer Torso Apollos«).⁵⁰ Title and beginning of the text make clear that the poem describes an object of art, a statue, and thus the representation of a character, which is, however, not a character itself. First doubts about the object status may arise in verse 4 that ascribes to the torso remnants of a lost »gaze« (»Schauen«) still recognisable but only as a kind of sheen. Doubts may also be raised by stanza 2 where the formulation »[...] nor through the soft turn / of the loins could this smile easily have passed / into the bright groins where the genitals burned« (ll. 6–8)⁵¹ ascribes the human property of smiling to the apparently fragmentary object. However, this attribution might be part of the tradition to depict objects in an anthropomorphic way without necessarily turning them into characters immediately. In the last line the torso is ascribed the ability to »see« the spectator – in the intentional sense of »looking at« –, and the order how this information is given puts an emphasis on the fact that the statue can actually see: It is communicated in a metrically prominent position in which – in German – three stressed syllables must be spoken one after the other: »[...] denn da ist keine Stelle, / die dich nicht sieht. [...]« (ll. 13f.).⁵² Together with the evidence quoted from the preceding stanzas this feature of looking makes it plausible to speak of a character. Furthermore: the last sentence of the sonnet, »You must change your life.«,⁵³ formulating as it does a surprising appeal for action directed at the spectator may be understood as motivated by the figure of the torso. Although no causal connection will be formulated here, the conclusion seems unavoidable that – if the appeal is not deemed as having no connection at all to the preceding depiction of the torso, i.e. if coherence can be assumed for the poem – there seems to be no alternative to the interpretation that the torso of the god Apollo is the cause of the concluding normative appeal. The character would thus be given the function of a moral instance.

The example demonstrates two things: for one, the classification of an entity in the poem as a character depends on ascriptions of meaning. There are cases in which a relatively complex interpretative act is required

50 Cf. MacIntyre: Rilke, 91.

51 »[...] und im leisen Drehen / der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen / zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.« (ll. 6–8); Rilke: Werke, p. 557.

52 Ibid.; cf. »[...] until there is no place / that does not see you.« (ll. 13f.); MacIntyre: Rilke, p. 91.

53 »Du mußt dein Leben ändern.« (l. 14); Rilke: Werke, p. 557.

in order to make a claim for an object described in a poem to be a character. Furthermore, it becomes clear that the interpretation of the poem is influenced by the hypothesis that the torso is a character: if the torso is an object it is more probable to assume that all the descriptions in the poem including the appeal for action rest on projections of the spectator and must be ascribed to the spectator; if the torso is classified as a character then he can take on the role of an agent and beyond that the function of a moral instance.

3.2 The Speaker as Character

As in narrative texts, the speakers in poems may be constructed as characters, but there are obviously numerous poems in which no character-like speaker instance can be identified.⁵⁴ Examples can be found throughout the history of literature and there is no particular need to document them here. Some of these poems are philosophical poems, some deal with religious or poetological reflections; others depict landscapes, evoke certain moods or enclose narratives. Poems with a character-like speaker instance, in their overwhelming majority, have a homodiegetic or an autodiegetic speaker instance. Generally, the speakers of these poems use the first-person singular pronoun, sometimes also its plural form. These speakers may be tagged as characters by a name or a description, often already in the poem's title. »Prometheus« states the identity of the speaker instance just as »Song of the Spinstress« (»Der Spinnerin Nachtlid«), and the speaker in Max Dauthendey's »Autumn of the Blind« (»Der Herbst des Blinden«) is characterised by his most important property, which motivates the plethora of synaesthesias in the poem, already in the title – and only there – as a blind person. In most cases, however, the poems with homodiegetic or autodiegetic speakers lack a character designation. As this applies to the overwhelming majority of poems, the question in which way characters can be identified in these texts gains relevance if merely for quantitative reasons.

The attributes that belong to the »I« as a character are indirectly communicated in these texts, i.e. they must be inferred. Two ways of such

54 According to James Phelan in poems »in which the speaker is not individualized and is not placed in any specific situation« the speaker's character [...] fades back into the image of the implied author« (Phelan: *Character*, pp. 411f.). In my opinion it is not necessary to assume a controversial concept as the implied author to classify the types of speakers in poems; cf. Kindt / Müller: *Implied Author. The attempts to adopt a lyric-specific instance of utterance are not plausible as well*; see Borkowski / Winko: *Gedicht*; for a dissenting position cf. Bernhart: *Überlegungen*, pp. 365–369.

›inference‹ must be distinguished. In the first place, the character information is extracted from the body of the poem's text. This may be achieved through formal information. As one can understand the utterances of a homodiegetic or an autodiegetic speaker with the contours of a character as the speech of a character, the same categories may be exploited here as with narrative texts. The stylistic specifics of speech may be just as well employed for the identification of this character⁵⁵ and the character's ›mind-style‹.⁵⁶ Both together may generally be extracted through the same linguistic instruments and resources as are used in prose texts, e.g. choice of words, syntactic structures, modes of argumentation, rhetorical means, etc. In addition, conclusions can be drawn from the selections made by the speaker character: the experiences, actions and situations described or omitted, the internal states topicalised – emotions, moods and sentiments, psychological conflicts, etc. –, all these may reveal the peculiarities of this character.

It would be an idealisation to assume, however, that only features derivable from text-internal information are used by readers to constitute the speaker character. It is quite common practice even amongst expert readers to transfer the gender of the author of a poem to the speaker instance even though the poem may not offer any evidence to justify such an ascription. Such transference, however, is also performed with reference to narrative texts, predominantly with texts that do not contain a narrative instance constructed as a character.⁵⁷ The procedure to adduce information about the empirical author in order to lend contours to the speaker character in poems corresponds to the ways of handling non-fictional autobiographical narrative texts. There is a set of poems that actually demands such a far-reaching transference because they are programmatically characterised by a specific relationship between speaker-›I‹ and empirical author: ›poetry of personal experience‹ (›Erlebnislyrik‹). These poems, *per conventionem*, construct the fiction that they express the personal experiences of their authors, their feelings and thoughts in concrete situations, which, however, must have the ability to be generalized.⁵⁸ Conditions of such fictions are (i) a conception of individuality tied to historical presuppositions shared by authors and

55 Cf. Koch: *Menschen*, pp. 188–197.

56 Fowler: *Linguistics*, pp. 76, 103ff.

57 This assumption is based on my observations and would also have to be tested empirically.

58 Cf. Wünsch: *Erlebnislyrik*, p. 498. Kaiser: *Erlebnisgedicht*, p. 141, however, assumes that ›Erlebnisgedichte‹ do not postulate to be based on a real experience; instead, he claims that these poems are ›absolute Vergegenwärtigung‹ and that genuine poetic means are essential for them.

readers, a conception that became possible in the German-speaking area only in the period of the late Enlightenment; (ii) features of content, in particular the topicalisation of internal states (emotions, moods and sentiments) of the speaker-»I«, and the (framing) presentation of an experience; (iii) the identification of the »I« with the author. This identification can be understood as the result of a sort of contract: the author pretends to be the speaking »I« in the poem, the reader joins the game and identifies the author with the speaker. Readers performing such an identification behave in complete agreement with the convention and are fully justified accordingly to supplement lacking information about the character of the speaker with knowledge they have about the author. Obviously, this procedure is incorrect by the standards of literary scholarship; it may, however, be stated here expressly that it is in conformity with the conventions of the production and the reception of »poetry of personal experience«. Conventions of this kind, which direct the textual understanding of those who know and accept them, must be given much more attention by literary scholarship.

4 Summary

It is not surprising that the constitution of characters in poems does not show any essential differences from the constitution of characters in narrative texts. The techniques of the construction of characters in poems seem to be fundamentally the same as in narrative texts, and the reference to mental models does not diverge from what previous investigations of texts in prose have already established as facts. The differences are of a quantitative nature and concern features like verse, density of information and resulting complexity, and the brevity of poems. The feature of verse and its specific mechanisms of metrical binding and rhyming provide a greater number of formal means of weighing the different types of information about characters. Textual density and the associated assumption about the relevance of potentially every single textual feature have the effect that minimal indications on different levels of the texts – phonetic, lexical, syntactic and rhetorical – may be employed to support the construction of characters. It should furthermore have become clear by now that top-down processes of understanding are of particular importance for the construction of characters in poetry. Of crucial relevance here is the feature of brevity: poems frequently contain only very few explicit items of information about characters. The consequence is, amongst other things, that poems depend more on schemata of characters or patterns of established characters and typified situations than

texts in prose. This insight involves two aspects: for one, poems must rely to a higher degree on schemata that are brought to the text by the readers for the purpose of understanding, and they must, furthermore, use a greater number of conventional features than texts in prose. This assumption is not meant to deny that prose also employs conventional features; but prose texts simply give their readers more time for the identification of characters and, therefore, have more room to play with variations.

The fact that conventions must play a more important role in poems *qua* genre than in prose is perhaps the most important result of the preceding analysis of the constitution of characters: to guarantee the recognition of a character as a character in an extremely limited space, conventionalised features must be expressed. Typified characters in standard situations are therefore found more frequently in poems than in narrative texts. In these texts more effort is devoted to the ›How‹ – the linguistic presentation and formal variation –, less on the ›What‹. The considerations presented have shown at the same time that considerable research is still needed on the topic ›characters in poetry‹: many of my assertions rest on the impressions of a scholar that has occupied herself intensively with German-language poetry but can unfortunately do no more than just formulate impressions; they would have to be tested with large text corpora in historical sequences. Furthermore, the instruments of analysis would have to be refined – e.g. with reference to the knowledge presuppositions on which poems rely. Rich material is thus available for in-depth studies of the constitution of characters in poetry.

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