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Eric Sterling

**WILDERNESS OF MIRRORS, A/GANTENBEIN (MEIN NAME SEI GANTENBEIN) MAX FRISCH (1964)** *Gantenbein* is the last full-length novel by the Swiss author MAX FRISCH (1911–91), whose reputation in both the German-speaking world and beyond was already firmly established by 1964. Today some critics consider *Gantenbein* Frisch's masterpiece, yet its publication incurred more critical disapproval than his other works. After such acclaimed literary best sellers as *I'M NOT STILLER* and *HOMO FABER*, expectations were high, and what Frisch delivered was certainly unfamiliar in its narrative experimentation. Even more radically than *I'm Not Stiller*, this novel problematizes within its modern Swiss setting the construction of identity, especially in the form of the social roles people play within marriage and the (auto)biographical projections and fantasies they impose on themselves and others.

Whereas the earlier text of *I'm Not Stiller* still followed an overarching plotline and was ascribed to a split but more or less consistent narrator, *Gantenbein* dispenses with both. Instead, it offers a series of fragmentary anecdotes of varying length and coherence. Apart from the reader's attempts at constructing a meaningful whole, these are precariously held together by many recurrent motives and plot strands. They are told by several different, though not always clearly distinguishable, first-person narrators—or perhaps one should say by an elusive authorial “I,” who, inspired by passers-by in the street, assumes the role of several different alter egos in the course of the novel (most prominent are those of Felix Enderlin and Theo Gantenbein). This bewildering narrative masquerade—or “wilderness of mirrors,” as the first English version of the novel is called—is already evident in the original German title, whose literal translation is “My name be Gantenbein.” It obviously preempts any conventional plot summary, though a few highlights might be given.

The book starts with an account of the death, presumably from a stroke, “of Enderlin. Or of Gantenbein?

Rather of Enderlin.” Then a character who can be read as a quasi-authorial narrator, seated in a bar, talks about expressing experience through stories and imagining the lives of strangers. Some enigmatic and partly symbolic anecdotes follow, prefiguring later ones, until the Gantenbein plot strand is introduced. After a car accident, Gantenbein pretends to be blind. This pose gives rise to many revealing public and private situations (e.g., with a prostitute who believes the seemingly blind man thinks her respectable, his wife at the airport kissing her lover good-bye before his eyes, a theater rehearsal, etc.).

Gradually and without warning, his story turns into Enderlin's, who soon seems to fuse with the narrator in the bar, where he tells the bartender a number of stories involving, among other things, a milkman, a man haunted by bad luck, a wartime encounter with a Nazi on a mountaintop. He then proceeds to seduce a married woman, with the narrator providing a running commentary, and thus introduces the topic of adultery. In labyrinthine and psychologically subtle variations, this topic gains prominence also in the context of Gantenbein's marriage to the successful actress Lila. While the latter's domestic conflicts become increasingly dramatic, Enderlin's story moves on to questions of aging and death.

Having lost interest in Enderlin, the narrator turns again into Gantenbein, who for his part decides to reinvent his marriage and his wife's biographical background. He imagines his life with her as a scientist, an Italian countess, an emancipated “woman of today,” a mother, and so on. There are also minor identifications with other characters, several picturesque travel accounts, satirical portrayals of the beneficiaries of Switzerland's postwar economic boom, awkward meetings between the narrator figures, reflections on theatrical stage conventions, glimpses of a murder trial that ends with the “revelation” that all the characters were invented, and all this interspersed with, if not in itself functioning as, highly symbolic vignettes, one of which, about an anonymous corpse floating down the river Limmat in Zurich, closes the novel.

This “mosaic” or “kaleidoscope” of stories, including temporary self-images, wide-ranging mythical allusions, and symbolic cross-references, clearly pushes novelis-

tic conventions to an extreme. *Gantenbein* has been linked with the French nouveau roman, although Frisch denied any direct influence. With the experimental process of narration itself forming the only unifying plot element (see Heinz Gockel, a German scholar), and in the absence of an identifiable “subjective” narrator beyond the various self-(de)constructions that constitute the text, *Gantenbein* has strong affinities to so-called postmodern literature. At the same time, however, the structural difficulties and, to some readers, provocations of his text are balanced by a very accessible and absorbingly realistic writing style (which is not incompatible with dense symbolism). As a consequence, the effect of playfulness usually associated with metafictional experiments is persistently undercut in this novel by the sheer illusory force of the narrative fragments.

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Rudolph Glitz

**WIND-UP BIRD CHRONICLE, THE (NEJIMAKIDORI KURONIKURU) MURAKAMI HARUKI (3 vols., 1994–1995)** *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the eighth novel by the Japanese writer MURAKAMI HARUKI (1949– ), is often considered his masterpiece. It was serialized in the Japanese magazine *Shincho* and published in two volumes in Japan in 1994, with a third book added in 1995. The English version, translated by Jay Rubin in 1997, is a slightly shorter version of the three compiled books. The novel follows Toru Okada's quest to find his wife, Kumiko—an action that is also the character's struggle to integrate better conscious and unconscious sides of his personality.