

Ruhm

Ein Roman in neun Geschichten

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Geschichten in Geschichten in Geschichten. Man weiß nie, wo eine endet und eine andere beginnt! In Wahrheit fließen alle ineinandert. Nur in Büchern sind sie suberlich getrennt.

The words are those of Leo Richter, the alter ego of the author, thus a hybrid figure of fiction and reality, who is both part of the stories, as well as their creator. Thus the novel, consisting of nine separate and independent stories, although tenuously linked, make up a kind of Moebius strip, in which fiction and reality are locally separated, but globally meld into each other, no consistent orientation possible, no consistent separation between the real and the fictional maintainable. Is this art? Tolstoy would have answered No. It is counterfeit art, he would have claimed, conveying no genuine feeling, only distracting and amusing through mere interest. But who cares about what Tolstoy thought a hundred years ago? This is a modern novel, consisting of nine short stories, each one easily digestible, and as each is connected to the other, the interest of the reader is continually maintained by spotting those connections, and like a child who is asked to find the mouse in every picture in 'Good Night Moon' giving up a scream of joy whenever being able to point it out¹.

It is indeed a modern novel, at least in the sense that it is concerned with modern gadgets and how those redefine our lives. Cellular phones in particular, disassociating a person from his spatial position. In fact through the mobile phone you can make up where you are. This gives new possibilities as to infidelity and leading a double-life, as discovered by one of the characters (in 'Wie ich log und starb'). Also Facebook, Youtube, chatsites are being invoked, especially in 'Ein Beitrag zur Debatte'. The author lets one character, a computer nerd, addicted to the Internet and mindless chatting, get his fifteen minutes of attention, expounding in a German generously laced with English computerese. A misshapen individual, in his late thirties, living with his mother, who constantly worried that he will meet some 'Weibmensch', he realizes that his world is a virtual one, and the only woman he seems to want to fall in love with is a fictional character. Could he not enter into a story, and in this way meet her vicariously at least? By chance (as is the prerogative of fiction) he meets up with the author in a hotel, tries in vain to ingratiate himself with him, make him notice him and put him in a story. The author, Leo Richter

¹ This refers to the classical American childrens book first published in 1947, written by Margaret Wise Brown, and illustrated by Clement Hurd, in which a single room is being shown as night descends and the child is saying good night to all the things and animals inside it. The attentive child will find a tiny mouse in each one of the pictures, and I recall the joyful cries of excitement my little toddling daughter ejaculated each time she spotted the mouse.

by the way (who else?) flees the scene.

What is the relation of an author to his characters? Is he in a sense a God to whom they owe their existence? But if they speak back? If they plead with him to change the fate he has in store for them? Will he listen? The idea is taken up in one story - 'Rosalie geht sterben' about a woman diagnosed with terminal cancer heading for an institute in Zürich which will assist her in her final act. Yet, even being a fictional character, she wants to live after all. The story is referred to in the other stories, and the author is, who else but Leo Richter, the alter ego of Kehlmann, thus real and fictional at the same time.

Are the story gripping? Some are so slight as if hardly to warrant inclusion, such as that of the famous Brazilian writer, reference to whose bestselling self-help New Age books are sprinkled in almost every one of the stories, who is about to blow his brains out. Probably the best story is 'Osten' about a female writer of successful 'Krimis' joins a writers tour of some unspecified Central Asian Republic, as a stand in for Leo Richter (who else?). The touch is almost like Max Frisch, with some not inept evocations. One finds oneself reading it with some excitement of suspense. The story (der Ausweg) about the famous movie-star, that plays at impersonating himself, finding that other can do it better than himself. Predictably he ends up being taken for an impersonator, his rightful place usurped by a real impersonator. There is a certain clever logic to the story, and yet does it touch you as Tolstoy would have asked? One is reminded of modern art-exhibits given to installations. Each of them being based on a more or less clever idea, and one wonders in what way the manifestation of that idea, often rather space-consuming, really adds to the idea itself as expressed in plain prose?

The final story ties up loose ends, although not as consistently as in a detective story. It turns out that the fictional characters of Leo Richter joins him in real life. The idea is of course an attractive one, to have your world of fantasy somehow merge with the real one, in fact, like in a Moebius strip being unable to take them apart. The idea of the Moebius strip is a charitable spin on the novel, would that have been executed with some consistency, there would have been some real cleverness to the collection. Cleverness, yes, but Art? Tolstoy would shake his head. But who cares about Tolstoy these days, and his somewhat artificial sentimentalization of the simple people and the wonders of their religion. No one who wants to be taken seriously would want to write as Tolstoy would demand. Not even Tolstoy did that at his peak. But even then, disregarding his explicit censures, a piece of art is something that should touch your heart, not just your interest?

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