

Die Vermessung der Welt

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Novel versus biography? Poetic truth may strike closer to the heart than factual. A biography is supposed to represent a life, and as such it has to comply to certain rules and derive its facts from the sources that accidentally have survived. It is a kind of paleontology, where the bare bones are being fleshed out circumspectly. What confronts the reader may more be that of a mere shadow than the real being to be portrayed, keeping in mind that a shadow traces the same grounds as what casts it; but mere presence is not the same as active participation.

Daniel Kehlmann has turned Alexander von Humboldt and Gauss into fictional figures, and by doing so necessarily taking great liberties. A writer of a novel has the license to do so, he can take any character he wants and fashion him and her to his delight. After all it is just for fun and a play, a frivolous make-believe with its own rules and logic, an alternate world, which may touch our own, but never really penetrate it, let alone swallow it up. Still it is somewhat unsettling. Whenever there are documented facts the author sticks to them. Clearly he is trying to limit his characters to within the boundaries of the real protagonists. The game he is playing is to endow them with an inner life compatible with that of their outward documented ones. Every piece of fiction makes an initial contract with the reader, and as long as the author sticks to that contract the readers are happy; but sometimes the seduction to go beyond is too much, and the result is that the readers feel cheated, as they should. One way this is done is for the author to imply what he is about to narrate is the truth. The truth in all its mundane details is always potentially interesting as all things that actually are, are all interlocked and connected. But what is not True is not always interesting, for fiction to arrest our attention it has to employ other means than mere factuality. It has to touch, not just describe. Anyone can make a report, not everyone make up one. Kehlmann is precariously close to doing this, cheating on the readers that is. Of course no reader in his right mind can suspect that Kehlmann, no matter how young and accomplished, could actually do this, yet seductively he hints, be it tongue in cheek, that he is going to say something about von Humboldt and Gauss, which is true, but will never be found in any biography. And it is only by somehow believing this outrageous claim that interest can be maintained. Will we after having read this never more think of Gauss and von Humboldt in the same way again? Will we, despite the skepticism of our common-sense, somehow believe that we have been made privy to something until now hidden?

The lives of von Humboldt and Gauss are being intertwined and finally made to connect. So they did in real life. The theme is obvious - measurement. But while measurement in the hands of Humboldt becomes an obsession, in the case of Gauss an intimation of a higher truth. Humboldt roams the globe, with Gauss it is enough to sit at one place and think. The German Baron is a busy-body without thought, with Gauss thought is supreme. There is a certain imbalance in the presentation. Humboldt becomes merely a

cartoon figure, his adventures in the Amazonas are vividly depicted, but in a flashy way with no depth at all. It could have been Hegre drawing the exploits of a Tin-Tin. With Gauss it is otherwise. Was he so dismissive of his progeny? Did he despise his second wife so much? Did he consort with prostitutes, being so attached to a Russian one that he dreamed about learning the language and in old age consider her the love of his life? Conventional biographies tell a completely different pictures, of a stern but devoted husband and father¹. On the other hand this is what conventional biographies are expected to do, so the author sows a seed of mistrust, whether justified or not, just as exceedingly hard to suppress as is all conventional gossip. But nevertheless Gauss is depicted as a true genius, as opposed to an apparent one, a challenge that Kehlmann has met with some distinction. The young Gauss is puzzled why everyone seems so slow in thinking, all those pauses in conversation. Are they just social conventions he has not yet instinctively picked up on? Gauss cannot help thinking, the demands of the everyday are inconvenient and irritating, yet he willingly in order to ensure steady support and the material comfort that goes with it, consents to do chores better suited to individuals less endowed. With growing age he feels that his mental powers slacken, his ability to concentrate is diluted, ideas do not come as effortlessly, the mind no longer as quick on the uptake; yet he realizes that they are still more than adequate. The sketch of Gauss that emerges is not unsympathetic, it actually endows the myth with yet another layer, be it appropriate or not. As a mathematician one should be gratified that a mathematician is made into an hero in a best-selling novel.

Still as a mathematician one reads critically. The author has picked up on things, gotten some right, some slightly wrong, just as in all journalism. One expects that the factual things should be accurate, this at least must have been the ambition of the author. To make up but to stay within the boundaries, that is the iron-rule. Thus slight inaccuracies irritate, the author, because of the intention just explained, cannot hide behind the freedom of an author to make up everything as he goes along. As noted before every piece of fiction comes with a tacit contract, and both parties better stick to it. Astral geometry, this is the designation of Lobachevsky. Gauss anticipated the Russian with many years, but of course he anticipated what could be discovered, not what had been accidentally and conventionally pasted on. A sign is a sign, its actual linguistic manifestation of little import.

But if you knew nothing of Gauss nor of Humboldt would the book be interesting? It is hard to tell? It is written in the style of magic realism, practised successfully by a Garcia Marquez or a Salman Rushdie. The moral of the story, of the superficiality of measurement is transparent enough (but of course with the figure of Gauss, the obsession of measurement is given depth), and the tragic-comic contrast between the original exploits of Humboldt in his youth and the orchestrated foray into Russia as a celebrity is farcial enough, one expects, to amuse most readers.

And then in the end there is the character of Eugene, Gauss son and assistant, the constant butt of his exasperation and contempt. Did he really despise his son so much, thinking him such a simpleton? Maybe he did? Malicious gossip as noted, is always hard to disregard, malice by itself is often considered a stamp of authenticity, in fact the two are often confused. The son was of course inferior to his father, but compared to other

¹ Compare e.g. the biography of Gauss written by the Swede Tord Hall

mortals, he was quite quick; maybe after all, the author implies, he being the geometric mean between his father and mother. If so, the reader should be assured that he has a confident future ahead when he is transported across the Atlantic. The kind of happy ending we all secretly expect of a novel?

Finally, the author has decided to write in the conjunctive. It makes for an elegant and poetic German, but does it also involve something else, which I as a critical reader have completely missed, not only making a fool of myself but rendering my reading of the book a pointless exercise?

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