

## Mahlers Zeit

*D.Kehlmann*

September 5-7, 2020

Kehlmann is a young writer and back in 1999 when this short novel was published he was but twenty-four, and One imagines, with a very short experience of life. The protagonist, by name of Mahler, is the proverbial 'nerd', fat, myopic and supposedly a mathematical genius. The latter manifests itself in an uncanny ability to notice the number of different things and to calculate multiplications and square roots of large numbers correctly and without any effort, a strange manifestation of supposed mathematical talent, more appropriate to an 'idiot savant' than a real mathematician. Maybe the author is being ironic rather than ignorant, but his tender age indicates the latter rather than the former. Now as a young man the protagonist has showed his mettle by writing a thesis in theoretical physics landing a temporary position at the local university. We get to know him when he finally after much work and reflection has come up with a way of disproving the second law of Thermodynamics, namely that the entropy is inexorably increasing, and hence gives time an arrow (physical laws are in general time reversible, and the arrow of time is something that emerges only in a more global setting). The arrow of time is what connects our mental sense of time flowing with physical reality as described mathematically. Thus the cancellation of this law would have profound consequences as to the nature of time. The contradiction referred is achieved by four formulas, which the author wisely leaves undisplayed. The discovery is of course a momentous one and the poor protagonist wants to share it with the world at large, and he believes that the only one able to understand him, would be the young Nobel laureate Boris Valintinov, but how to get in contact with him? Everyone else thinks that our friend Mahler must be a crack-pot. Finally at the end Mahler actually gets to meet his potential savior, but as he does so he suffers a heart attack and dies. Valintinov then acknowledges that he had received the handwritten notes of Mahler, found them hard to read and in the end rejected it. Story over.

This is admittedly fiction and what interests the author is the predicament of a misunderstood genius and his tribulations and ultimate destruction. It is a juvenile work and its deficiencies are obvious. It is in the form of a fantasy thought up by a still unripe and undeveloped mind. The description of the heart troubles and the final lethal attack are no doubt not realistic only the fruits of an uninstructed imagination, but this defect is of little consequence; however the musings on the second law of thermodynamics is basically nonsense, but not illegal nonsense as after all we are discussing a piece of fiction, but uninteresting nonsense. The references to the four formulas are just gibberish, enough to serve the purpose of the tale, but not to engage the imagination of the reader in any serious sense, although there are some feeble references to diminishing probabilities. It boils down to what is physically possible but so unlikely that it is in practice impossible. Can the molecules in a room say, all 'decide' to go to one half of the room and leave the other half a vacuum? A discussion of which has some potential but not to be found in this narrative.

So what are the strengths and merits of the tale? Not scientific by any means, but in

the usual literary sense of trying to convey the small mundane details of reality which makes for its palpability. The meticulous documentation of which, mirrored in the consciousness of an individual, is something that exerts a strong attraction to young would-be authors, and Kehlmann is no exception. As a reader one cannot read the book as anything else than a finger exercise, putting undeniable demands on the dexterity of an author, but with no ambition to serve a cogent narrative with a purpose and concomitant impact on the reader. The reader may be amused by some flashes of brilliance but not affected nor engaged, despite the obvious efforts to engender sympathy for the tragic protagonist. Tragedy involves some forms of catharsis but they are notably absent.

September 8, 2020 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se