THE NOVEL IN GERMAN SINCE 1990

EDITED BY

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17 See Karin E. Yeşilada's '"Nette Türkinnen von nebenan": Die neue deutsch-türkische Harmlosigkeit als literarischer Trend', in Helmut Schmitz, ed., *Von der nationalen zur internationalen Literatur: Transkulturelle deutschsprachige Literatur und Kultur im Zeitalter globaler Migration* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 117–41.
18 Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System: Essays toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton University Press, 1971), 71–84.
19 Nadje Al-Ali and Khalid Koser, eds., *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home* (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.
20 Ayhan Kaya, 'German-Turkish transnational space: A separate space of their own', *German Studies Review*, 30:3 (2007), 483–502, 483.
21 Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).
22 Ulrich Beck, *What Is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 14.
23 The fact that Hasan corrects himself by saying that the apartment building is located on the border rather than next to it also recalls the popular German children's song 'On the Wall, on the Lookout', which in the GDR received an ironic subtext with its reference to the Berlin Wall and Stasi bugging devices. Also, the allusion to divided streets recalls Thomas Brussig's film *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999), which he co-directed with Leander Haußmann and subsequently converted into a novel.
24 Kara provides the English translation in a footnote: 'Fuck your mother.'
25 Zafer Şenocak, *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* (Munich: Babel Verlag, 1998), 47.
26 Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy', *Public Culture*, 2:2 (1990), 1–24, 7–9.
27 Yadé Kara, 'Ich hatte die Figur vor Augen und den Ton im Ohr: Das Berliner Zimmer im Gespräch mit der Berliner Autorin Yadé Kara'. www.berlinerzimmer.de/eliteratur/yadekara_interview.htm (accessed 22 April 2010).
28 Regina Römhild, 'Confronting the logic of the nation-state: Transnational migration and cultural globalisation in Germany', *Ethnologia Europaea*, 33 (2003), 61–72, 69.

CHAPTER 17

Daniel Kehlmann's Die Vermessung der Welt (Measuring the World)

Stuart Taberner

Non-Euclidean geometry, number theory, and the eighteenth-century geological cult of Neptunism – these and other scientific obscurities scarcely seem to be the stuff of a novel destined to be a global hit. Yet Daniel Kehlmann's *Die Vermessung der Welt* (*Measuring the World*) was precisely that. Following its release in 2005, it topped the German best-seller lists for over a year, sold more than a million copies by 2007,[1] was translated into forty languages, and won a range of literary prizes, including the Candide Prize (2005), the Heimito-von-Doderer Prize (2006), and the Kleist Prize (2006). A book about two German historical figures, the explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) and the mathematician Johann Carl Friedrich Gauß (1777–1855), opening with their meeting in September 1828 at the seventh German Scientific Congress and then moving back in time to tell, in alternating chapters, of Humboldt's travels to South America and central Asia and Gauß's obsession with parallel lines and 'curved space', had seemingly demolished the truism that when it comes to German literature and international markets 'only Nazis sell'. (The previous honourable exception was Patrick Süskind's *Parfum* [*Perfume*] from 1985.) As Mark M. Anderson pithily commented in *The Nation*: 'Even more surprising: It has nothing to do with Hitler.'[2]

Frequent references in newspaper reviews to Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997) and to Latin American magical realists such as Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Màrquez and Juan Rolfo confirm both the novel's global reputation and the intertextual ambition of its author.[3] Without doubt, Kehlmann's narrative is strongly reminiscent of Pynchon's tale of the dour Charles Mason (in *Die Vermessung*, Humboldt is the killjoy), the licentious Jeremiah Dixon (Gauß in the German book), and their desire to give geometric expression to the Age of Reason by mapping the 'new' continent of America. The two surveyors of British North America even get a brief, most likely ironic, mention in the text.[4]

As far as magical realism is concerned, bizarre happenings or illogical breaks frequently cut across an otherwise matter-of-fact narrative, disrupting the neat categorisations of Enlightenment thinking and revealing the German characters' inability to cope with phenomena that they cannot measure or explain scientifically. Suddenly confronted by a sea monster off the coast of Tenerife, for example, Humboldt's reaction points not only to the absence of a capacity for wonder but perhaps also to the rationalist prejudices of German and European culture at the time: 'He decided to write nothing about it' (45).

Kehlmann's *Die Vermessung der Welt*, it might be argued, self-consciously references 'world literature' – Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* and magical realism qualify as such according to the definitions offered by David Damrosch in *What is World Literature?* (2003) – in order to position itself as an 'opening-out' from the supposed provinciality of postwar German writing. Certainly, the appearance in *Die Vermessung der Welt* of Goethe, who first suggested the term *Weltliteratur* ('world literature'),[5] and the allusions to Kafka, in the chapter 'Der Garten' ('The Garden'), which draws on *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*, 1922),[6] may indicate nostalgia for past instances of German literature's global impact. To this extent, Kehlmann's novel displays a perhaps surprising affinity with other recent works such as Christian Kracht's *Faserland* (*Frayed-Land*, 1995), in which a self-alienated dandy's journey through a pitifully provincial Germany swamped by globalised consumerism ends in Switzerland at the (grotesquely defiled) grave of Thomas Mann.

Geometry, mathematics and geology are thus clearly not the real themes of *Die Vermessung der Welt*. Indeed, as Kathryn M. Olesko points out, 'there are gross inaccuracies that make historians of science wince'.[7] The more profound concern is with the unstable simultaneity of a provincial longing for 'home' and an unbounded attraction to the vastness of the world that, ever since Humboldt's era, has been seen as 'typically' German. Humboldt writes in French and prefers Paris to Berlin (214) but ultimately returns to the Prussian capital. Gauß never leaves the German-speaking lands, having little interest in foreign parts, but even he recognises the provinciality of his home: 'Germany was not a land of cities ... it was made up of thousands of forests and villages' (194). The background to this interplay of *Fernweh* ('longing-for-afar') and *Heimweh* ('longing-for-home'), embodied in the only apparent contrast between Humboldt and Gauß, is the period from the Napoleonic invasion up to the 1848 revolutions, a time of growing national consciousness as well as a time

when Germans began to engage more intensively with the world. The correspondences between this epoch and the post-1990-unification period should be self-evident.

In this chapter, I argue that *Die Vermessung der Welt* can be read as a sophisticated engagement both with broad philosophical questions relating to cross-cultural understanding and, more locally, contemporary Germany's place in the world. The novel's alternating chapters on Humboldt's travels to South America and central Asia and Gauß's work on 'curved space' generates, I suggest, an intriguing dialectic between Enlightenment universalism (that universal Reason leads to universal understanding) and cultural relativism – that is, the proposition that cultures are so shaped by history, custom and language that attempts to 'translate' them are doomed to be inadequate. This dialectic was central to Humboldt's period, of course, roughly equating to the dialogue between Weimar Classicism and Romanticism, but the novel most likely also intervenes in the modern-day reworking of the same debates, for example, in relation to the legacy of 1968, to Germany's post-Holocaust self-critical tolerance, and to multi-culturalism. More generally, its tone of (often tragicomic) self-effacement perhaps reflects the vulnerability of liberal humanism in the face of religious, ethnic and ideological bigotry since the end of the Cold War and post-9/11. Notwithstanding these rather sobering contexts, however, the synthesis of the extremes of universalism and relativism suggested via the juxtaposition of Gauß and Humboldt may also offer a more optimistic possibility for German culture in the present. Thus Gauß's postulation that seemingly parallel lines in fact exist in an ever-changing relationship of convergence and divergence to one another, even potentially intersecting, certainly discredits universalism (i.e. everything is relative) but it also allows for multiple perspectives that may cross. German culture need not move along a (gloriously separate) parallel trajectory; nor need it deny its own specificities while creatively traversing the lines drawn by others. In the case of Kehlmann's novel, a 'German' story of scientific genius, failed liberalism and emerging nationalism intersects with a 'non-German' aesthetic emphasising readability, entertainment and humour. At the same time, this intersection of perspectives may not be able to resolve the novel's own contradictory *Fernweh/Heimweh*: its straining to participate in *Weltliteratur* on the one hand and, on the other, its (nostalgically tinged) anxiety that German culture imitates rather than leads, that in the present, as in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Germany remains a 'belated' nation.

DIE VERMESSUNG DER WELT

'"You come from us," said Goethe, "from here. You remain our ambassador, even over the seas"' (37). The hint of smug superiority implied within the emphasis on 'from us' and 'from here' is hard to miss as Germany's greatest poet sends Humboldt into the world as an ambassador for Weimar Classicism. Nor does Humboldt display any greater humility when he arrives in South America. His disgust at the persistence of slavery is genuine, an emblem of his Enlightenment conviction that reason inhabits all men (the British later prevent him from travelling to India on account of his anti-slavery rhetoric), yet his grasp of the way concepts such as reason and freedom are culturally determined is limited. Thus he buys three slaves in order to free them but cannot fathom their reaction: 'One of them asked where they were supposed to go now' (70). Elsewhere, his inability to reflect on his own assumptions has more damaging consequences. For Humboldt, then, it appears entirely 'reasonable' that he would remove body parts from a burial site in order to transport them to Europe for examination (120).

What is intriguing about Kehlmann's text, however, is that it does not straightforwardly present the critique of nineteenth-century European condescension that the modern reader, alive to the complexities of cultural difference, might expect. The book is not an invitation to perform an 'orientalist' reading in the manner of Edward Saïd of Humboldt's voyages, therefore. (Indeed, Kehlmann offers a balanced impression of the real Humboldt's ambivalent status as exploiter, colonial stooge, abolitionist and proto-environmentalist.)[8] Rather, there may be a suggestion that the failure to understand 'others' may not simply be a matter of insufficient self-reflection but a symptom of a multitude of different ways of perceiving the world. In an extreme form, the cultural relativism thereby implied would demolish the universalist message at the heart of Enlightenment thinking. Here, however, gentle irony softens the blow. The four rowers who bear Humboldt into the Amazonian wilderness, for instance, are blessed with illustrious first names, invoking four famous magical-realist story-tellers: Gabriel (García Márquez), Julio (Cortázar), Carlos (Fuentes) and Mario (Vargas Llosa).[9] Not only is the European incapable of making sense of the stories they attach to the alien environment he seeks to map, he is also not even able to narrate the world in the same way as they do: 'He didn't know any stories, said Humboldt and pushed his hat, which had been turned round by a monkey, into the correct position' (128).

The complexities of communicating to 'others' the *form* in which a culture perceives the world (rather than simply the content of its knowledge) is frequently adumbrated in the text, first and foremost in the repeated failure of translation. Most striking is the conclusion to the episode in which Humboldt declares that he knows 'no stories' when he renders into Spanish 'the most beautiful German poem'. What follows is a version of Goethe's 'Ein Gleiches (Wandrers Nachtlied)' ('Wayfarer's Night Song II'): 'up above all the tops of the mountains it's still, there's no wind to be felt in the trees, and the birds are quiet too, and soon one will be dead' (128). Nothing remains here of the poem's 'essential Germanness':

Über allen Gipfeln	[Over all the hilltops
Ist Ruh,	is calm.
In allen Wipfeln	In all the treetops
Spürest du	you feel
Kaum einen Hauch;	hardly a breath of air.
Die Vögelein schweigen in Walde.	The little birds fall silent in the woods.
Warte nur, balde	Just wait… soon
Ruhest du auch.	you'll also be at rest]

Johann Wolfgang Goethe: 'Ein Gleiches' (6–7 September 1780)

In the original, 'Gipfeln' (hilltops) and 'Wipfeln' (treetops) evoke the mountain meadows of the Thüringer Wald where Goethe composed the poem. More profoundly, the melancholia of the ultimate harmony with nature – death – echoes the sentimentality associated with Germany in the middle of the eighteenth century and predicts Romanticism (e.g. Schubert's setting of Goethe's poem to music of 1823), to which Humboldt's 'scientific romanticism'[10] – his attachment to the natural world he measures – is connected. In Humboldt's rendition, however, only 'content' remains: 'bald werde man tot sein'.

Humboldt's tragedy is not simply that he is incapable of understanding the 'natives' but that his translations of his own culture are so mediated. The version of Humboldt's rendition of 'Ein Gleiches' set out in the text is thus a translation of a translation – it is a German version of Humboldt's translation into Spanish of Goethe's original. (And Humboldt's 'real' language may well be French.) Indeed, all of Humboldt's (and Gauß's) words are a form of translation. The reported speech employed throughout signals that the phrases attributed to Humboldt and Gauß come to us via a 'translator' – that is, via Kehlmann as Humboldt's (most recent) biographer. This translation is not nearly as ironically hopeless as Humboldt's

efforts to explain his Enlightenment universalism to Chinese representatives during a later journey to the 'oriental edges' of Imperial Russia – 'There were no interpreters' (284) – but it is still insufficient.

The epistemological shift intimated, in telescoped form, in *Die Vermessung der Welt* is from a nineteenth-century optimism to the principle of doubt which emerges from the early twentieth century: from Enlightenment universalism to the notion that everything (culture included) is simply relative. 'Sometimes it's enough to make you a little nervous', Gauß confesses at the start of the book as he muses on where his theory of 'curved space' might lead (12). Where it leads is to the dismantling of Euclidean geometry and the stablity it had offered for over two thousand years. Thus Euclid's fifth postulate sets out that for any given line ℓ and a point A, not on ℓ, there is exactly one line through A that does not intersect ℓ: this line and ℓ are parallel to one another. Gauß, however, argues that this can apply only if we assume space to be flat. If we can show that space is elliptically curved then any line through A intersects ℓ. Or, if it is hyperbolically curved, there are an infinite number of lines through A which do not intersect ℓ. All relationships are relative: it is a matter of perspective. From here to Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity (1905) and General Theory of Relativity (1916) – that time and space are one, and that gravity 'curves' spacetime such that its relativity is compounded – is a short journey, and from there to philosophical relativism it is not much farther (although the step from scientific innovation to philosophical theory is by no means inevitable).[11]

Unlike Humboldt, however, Gauß appears to experience relativity not only as a cause for anxiety but also as a moment of liberation. Speaking to Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier, the first man, with Marquis d'Arlandes, to undertake a free balloon flight in November 1783, Gauß reveals what he has learned from a brief excursion over the (manifestly curved) earth:

> Now he knows, said Gauß.
> What, knows what?
> That all parallel lines cross one another.
> Wonderful, said Pilâtre. (67)

Later, he races to Königsberg to see Immanuel Kant on his death bed to relate the same. 'Poppycock' (96), replies Kant, as well he might, since Gauß's insight threatens his theory of perception – and Reason – to the extent that Kant too bases his notion that the rational structure of the mind reflects the rational structure of that reality on Euclidean geometry. Subsequent to his precocious challenge to orthodoxy (and rebuttal), Gauß returns to his own 'reality'. He marries, prostitutes his genius by servicing popular astrology, and visits his mistress Nina (supposedly) for the last time. The alternative reality, in which he would have learned Russian (Nina's mother tongue) and led a different life, is denied. (Humboldt conforms by sublimating his homosexuality into science.) Towards the end of the book, however, in a rare episode in which both men feature, Gauß repeats his heresy: 'The old Kantian nonsense ... Reason doesn't shape anything at all and it understands even less. Space bends and time curves' (220). Humboldt, the less original of the two, dismisses the foolishness that space might be 'bent', noting that he has heard such 'distortions' before: 'He had some porters on the Orinoko river who made similar jokes' (220).

The (unintended) implications of Humboldt's attempted put-down are startling. Gauß's geometry (in the anti-Kantian, proto-Einsteinian version it assumes in the novel), it would seem, ultimately *intersects* with the 'alternative' perception of Humboldt's magical-realist rowers, Gabriel (García Márquez), Julio (Cortázar), Carlos (Fuentes) and Mario (Vargas Llosa). Western science and Latin American magical realism do not travel along parallel lines but eventually cross one another. This inflects the novel's philosophical premise in a subtle direction. The universalism of the European Enlightenment is discredited, certainly, and translation is clearly problematic, but the unexpected intersections between different perspectives may make possible, however briefly, alternative realities. Both Humboldt and Gauß generally fail to recognise such moments, however. In the chapter 'Der Garten', modelled on Kafka's *Das Schloss*,[12] Gauß is thus unable to recognise God in the comically named character Graf Hinrich von der Ohe zur Ohe as he passes from the 'real' world into an alternative dimension.[13] Ensconced within a paradise-like garden, God reminds Gauß that he had once berated him – as a young man Gauß had complained of the inconsistencies in the laws of nature (88) – but compliments his work on circular division in his *Disquisitiones Arithmeticae* (1798), remarking that it contains 'thoughts' (189) from which he was able to learn. Gauß misses the hint that even God cannot know all the possibilities of the universe(s) he has created: what Gauß had once lamented as 'chance' – the 'enemy of all knowledge' (13) – may simply be the non-predictable intersection of different potentialities. Humboldt, similarly, attributes the distorted perception that he and his companion Bonpland experience on their climb up Mount Chimborazo (1802) to the change in atmospheric pressure (171), whereas Bonpland simply adjusts to his own appearance in three forms (a version, perhaps, of Schrödinger's famous

thought experiment with a cat both dead and alive): 'one who walked on, one who watched the one walking, and one who gave a running commentary on everything but in a language no one could understand' (175).

How does all this relate to German identity? Quite simply, Humboldt's and Gauß's inability to grasp the dynamic possibilities of intersecting perceptions of reality leaves them tied to the inherent conservatism of the Prussian state in the post-Napoleonic era. The reforms of government, army, state bureaucracy, tax, economic activity and education that followed the defeat by France in 1806 were 'reasonable', certainly, but they were hardly progressive.[14] For Humboldt, however, no alternative can be imagined: 'The Restoration was a blight over Europe ... On the one side tyranny, on the other side the freedom of fools' (218). Order or anarchy – this is just one of the binary oppositions within which Humboldt, the Prussian civil servant, is paralysed: reason or sentimentality, megalomania or melancholia, self-denial or vice... In short, he is 'typically' (if parodically) 'German'. 'Must you always be so German?' (80), Bonpland asks Humboldt. Gauß may be less stereotypical but he too betrays a 'German' predilection for conformism and obeisance to the state, serving the Duke of Braunschweig, Napoleon, and the Kingdom of Hanover with equal meticulousness and lack of political curiosity.

Both men once entertained alternative visions. Humboldt's youthful fantasies of a 'freer' existence (for humankind in general, but perhaps also for himself as a homosexual) are destroyed by his mother's educational zeal. Gauß, similarly, dared as a child to challenge his mathematics teacher, using the theory of triangle numbers to add up the numbers from 1 to 100 (57). 'Germans', then, are made, not born. Gauß's characteristically precocious retort to his father's insistence that a German 'is someone who doesn't sit curved' (54) – 'nur das?' – thus indicates a degree of youthful scepticism about a supposedly 'German' discipline. At the same time, obviously, the language used ('curved') also anticipates Gauß's theory of 'curved space'. As previously discussed, the problem encountered by the Germans in the novel may be precisely their inability to 'bend' their own particular reality in order to open up new perspectives.

Kehlmann's inverse correlation of straightbacked Germans and 'curved space' is not only an aesthetically pleasing metaphor – it is also funny. Yet it is precisely humour that Germans, according to the stereotype, lack. Bonpland's comment that a German is as likely to examine humour as a bird is to examine air is thus both meant ironically and is ironic in itself – it is a 'joke' that Humboldt fails to get (111). In each of these examples of comic intervention, in fact, as so often elsewhere in the book, it might be

argued that Kehlmann's novel endeavours to transcend the limitations of its German protagonists by appropriating the humour attributed to its 'foreign' characters, ranging from the Frenchman Bonpland to the four Latin American magical-realist porters and their 'jokes' (220), in order to profit from intersections of cultures, histories and perspectives across curved space and non-parallel lines. Its ironic nods to Pynchon, Márquez or Nabokov (one of Kehlmann's declared influences),[15] then, are most likely also markers of gratitude. To this extent, *Die Vermessung der Welt* is not dissimilar to other recent German novels such as Georg Klein's *Libidissi* and Ingo Schulze's *Simple Storys*, both from 1998. Klein's allusions to John Le Carré, Graham Greene and John Grisham (and also to Pynchon) also acknowledge a debt to an 'Anglo-American' sensibility, in this case the laconic detachment of the crime thriller, and likewise open up the question of German identity in the age of globalisation. Schulze's gestures towards Hemingway and Raymond Carver do something comparable, inflecting an 'American' matter-of-factness to local circumstances.

It is more or less self-evident that *Die Vermessung der Welt* draws on its international intertexts in order to rethink German identity. What is less obvious, however, is the way its 'imported' humour, usually deployed at the expense of its two German protagonists, as much as its ostensibly 'non-German' lightness-of-touch and 'readability', also points to a certain regret, or rather disillusionment. In the process of bringing German culture to the wider world, it seems that Kehlmann's only option is to render it as cliché. Humboldt and Gauß may achieve global recognition, but at the cost of being styled as 'typically' German. The subtheme of Humboldt's fame thus assumes a greater significance than mere comic value. (Indeed, fame seems more generally to be a key theme for Kehlmann, as evidenced by his 2009 novel *Ruhm* [*Fame*].) The 'German', it seems, is unable to satisfy the demands of the journalists who accompany him for personal details or witty insights. (This may also be a comment on the fact that the real Humboldt's international reception, as Oliver Lubrich puts it, has always 'revolved more around his person than around his work'.)[16] Nor can he tell a good story: 'A hundred pages full of measurements, hardly anything personal and practically no adventures' (239). Previously, I argued that Humboldt's tragedy is not only that he misunderstands the 'natives' but also that his attempts to translate his own culture are so mediated. The wider tragedy, however, and one that Kehlmann's novel, in its self-reflexive poignancy, hints at, may be that Humboldt's science must be reduced to his 'German' attributes of stiffness, (comic) humourlessness

and melancholia: 'the man who has never experienced true metaphysical anxiety will never be a proper German' (21).

As the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries intensify the globalisation of news, scandal and gossip that, *Die Vermessung der Welt* suggests, began in Humboldt's era, it seems that German culture needs to be made 'marketable' to a world audience. As so often, responsibility for the Holocaust may shape the parameters within which this German story can be presented. Hearing of a mass sacrifice at an Aztec temple, Humboldt declares: 'So much civilisation and so much cruelty … Quite the opposite of everything that Germany stands for' (208). The historical irony is obvious, of course, and only serves to underline the fact that the Germans in the novel, in fact, are sadly 'exceptional', out of step with the rest of humanity and lacking empathy. Frenchmen, natives of South America, Russians and Chinese all mingle easily (Germans alone get hung up on whether cross-cultural communication is universal or relative) but the Germans are only 'comprehensible' as the forebears of a nation that would be uniquely capable, in the modern era, of the fusion of civilisation and cruelty that Humboldt identifies but also demonstrates. Indeed, the German scientist adores his own stray dog but feels no compunction about feeding other, 'racially inferior' canines to crocodiles to further his 'systematic' investigations (169).

Kehlmann's international triumph may thus be a pyrrhic victory (and one which the novel perhaps even predicts): Germans must be 'bent' to a clichéd version of their history in order to engage a global readership. Yet the book also engages in a campaign of subversion, concealing an antiquated intellectualism within its modern pop sensibility. The novel's 'overt' story, therefore, depicts two Germans comically fulfilling national stereotypes, employing motifs familiar from today's global celebrity culture. These motifs include spicy innuendos concerning Humboldt's homosexuality, titillating details of Gauß's sex life, including an anecdote concerning his interruption of his love-making to correct errors in astronomical measurements (150), or other gossipy revelations relating to the flaws of the famous or talented (e.g. Gauß's hypochondria, throughout the text; Humboldt's efforts to deceive the world about reaching the top of Mount Chimborazo [181]), all pointing towards Germans' supposed repression, otherworldliness, or self-aggrandising inferiority complex. The novel's 'hidden' story, on the other hand, available only to those – educated, most likely German – readers who understand where its allusions point, styles nostalgia as resistance to the very same processes. In Kehlmann's novel, the 'in-group' consists of those who know, for example, who Marcus Herz

(22), Abraham Gotthelf Kästner (27), Abraham Gottlob Werner (30) and August Ferdinand Möbius (153) were, or, more poignantly, who know that Humboldt, far from being 'typically' German, was, in his time, a much greater influence on other countries than on his own. Indeed, many of his (French) travel texts were translated only very much later (if at all) into German.[17]

The nostalgia that suffuses *Die Vermessung der Welt* relates to the novel's submission, insinuated rather than stated, that German culture, until the early nineteenth century at least, may have been *more* open to the world than, say, France or England. Humboldt and Gauß, then, reject the incipient German nationalism of the post-Napoleonic era. At the start of the novel, Gauß throws his son's copy of *Die Deutsche Turnkunst* (the handbook teaching an anti-French 'self-discipline' published in 1816) out of the window (9); at the book's close, both men are perplexed by the noisy confusion of liberal ideas with calls for national unity emerging from the student associations (banned by the Karlsbad decrees of 1819). More pointedly, allusions – again surely obscure to most non-German readers – to a range of historical figures may prompt the book's 'domestic' audience to resist its 'overt' stylisation of Germans as already always chauvinistic. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, for example, features: the scientist and satirist best known for his 'waste books' of anecdotes, quotations and sketches was a passionate Anglophile. Elsewhere, Schiller yawns when Humboldt's brother Wilhelm praises Wieland's introduction of 'blank verse' to German drama with *Lady Johanna Gray* (1758) (37). It is unlikely that Schiller is mocking Wieland's use of English precursors but rather Wilhelm's nationalistic misreading of what Wieland is trying to do. (Wilhelm later displays a similar naïve chauvinism again when he comments that he would have preferred a German play to a performance of Voltaire [159].) The most telling allusions, however, are contained within Humboldt's response to Bonpland's 'joke' on the subject of 'German humour':

> Only a joke, said Bonpland.
>
> But an unfair joke. A Prussian can laugh as easily as anyone else, thank you very much. In Prussia people laugh all the time. One only has to think of the novels of Wieland or of Gryphius's excellent comedies. Even Herder knew how to land a good joke. (111)

Humboldt is correct, of course, even if it is difficult for foreigners to believe that Germans were ever funny. Wieland, perhaps the foremost novelist of the German Enlightenment, wrote a satire on – of all things – German

provinciality, with *Die Abderiten, eine sehr wahrscheinliche Geschichte* (*The Abderiten, A Very Likely Story*, 1774), but was also extremely important in opening Germany up to the world: *Die Abentheuer des Don Sylvio von Rosalva* (*The Adventures of Don Sylvio of Rosalva*, 1764), for example, is based on *Don Quixote*, whereas *Geschichte des Agathon* (*The Story of Agathon*, 1766–67) 'translates' Fielding's *Tom Jones* into the German *Bildungsroman* (though with a Greek setting). Wieland also produced German versions of twenty-two of Shakespeare's plays, sparking the wave of enthusiasm for Shakespeare of the second half of the eighteenth century (including Goethe's *Im Schäkespears Tag* [*In Shakespeare's Day*], 1771).[18] Gryphius, too, was both a satirist – *Absurda Comica, oder Herr Peter Squenz* (*An Absurd Comedy, or Mr Peter Squenz*, 1649) again lampoons German provinciality – and a great translator of English texts.[19]

It is the reference to Herder, however, that is most intriguing. Long considered to be one of the forerunners both of German Romanticism and an aberrant German nationalism,[20] Herder provides yet another pointer to the cultural relativism that forms a dialectic with Enlightenment universalism throughout the novel: his argument, set out in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (*Yet another Philosophy of History*, 1784–91), is that every nation has its own particular specialty (or 'genius'). Yet Herder's concept of the uniqueness of cultures may best be described as an 'enlightened relativism'.[21] It argues for the validity of *all* cultures, based on certain common human values, even as each possesses its own forms of expression. As Carl Niekerk puts it: 'By assuming a common origin of all human life in spite of its manifest varieties, Herder successfully combines notions of universalism *and* cultural relativism, identity *and* difference.'[22] What Herder rails against is imitation. In *Shakespeare* (1773), he declares that the Bard is a 'genuine' expression of English culture because he does not copy Greek forms. Elsewhere, he argues that Germans should not follow Gottsched's attempt to impose French neo-Classicism and that they should free themselves of the idealisation of Greece fostered by Winckelmann[23] (particularly in *Von Deutscher Art und Kunst* [*On the German Type and Art*], the volume Herder edits in 1773).[24] To this extent, Herder anticipates Nietzsche and his critique of Germany's 'epigonality' (Nietzsche was referring specifically to the period after Goethe's death).[25]

Fear of imitation haunts *Die Vermessung der Welt*, inflecting its fashionably phlegmatic tone with a melancholic edge. Humboldt's plea that 'even' Herder is able to land a joke reveals precisely this, pointing to the tension between an 'authentic' German culture and the need to demonstrate that

'the Germans' can learn to make themselves comprehensible to the rest of the world. Fear of imitation may be what prevents German culture from emerging from the obscurities of the text's allusions to challenge directly, as manifesto rather than nostalgia, its (self-)distortion into cliché. Humboldt's unkind stereotyping of Thomas Jefferson as a 'backwoods president' when he meets him in 1804 (211) thus most likely projects Humboldt's own horror of provinciality and epigonality onto the recently founded United States. (In fact, the real Humboldt was rather taken with Jefferson.[26]) His boastful invocation of Winckelmann, identifying the neo-Classical buildings he sees being built in Washington as proof of the influence of the great German scholar (211), is all the more ironic, therefore, for its failure of self-awareness: the new Republic's imitation of Germany merely commends Germany's imitation of Greece. Indeed, German culture has always taken from elsewhere, as the book's allusions also demonstrate: Gryphius translates English pietism; Gottsched argues for French neo-Classicism; Wieland copies English blank verse and inaugurates a wave of Shakespeare imitators; and Herder, too, admires Greek drama even as he wishes for an 'original' Germanic form; and so on, into the early nineteenth century and beyond. 'Germany? But where does it lie?', ask Goethe and Schiller in their collection of satirical epigrams bearing the (Greek …) name *Xenien* (1797). Lacking a unified state until relatively late, (self-)consciously striving to 'catch up' with the 'national cultures' of France and Britain, and ambivalently open to outside influences, German culture, as it is adumbrated in *Die Vermessung der Welt* at any rate, is as subject to the contradictory impulses of *Fernweh* and *Heimweh* as its two protagonists.

Kehlmann's text, of course, is as much about the present as the past. Indeed, Humboldt's gauche comment to Lichtenberg, that it is a vain exercise when an author sets his work in a distant past (27), humorously confirms this. Today, globalisation appears to 'flatten' the curved horizon beyond which the only apparently parallel lines of cosmopolitanism and provinciality may intersect. On the novel's very last page, Gauß's son Eugen lands in America, a metaphor here, as in so much recent German fiction, for the homogenisation of cultures across the world. (It is surely also significant that the German has already 'forgotten' the achievements of his own tradition: during a stop in Tenerife, Eugen comes across a huge dragon tree but only the most knowledgeable reader would be able to retrieve the cultural reference that clearly eludes him, namely that this is the tree described by Humboldt in his *Atlas Picturesque* of 1810.) The arrival of the land that was so desired, however, merely predicts the end of

fantasy, and of awe: 'this time it is no illusion or sheet lightning' (302). By means of its complex interplay of humour, subversion and nostalgia, it is precisely this one-dimensionality that *Die Vermessung der Welt* resists. By maintaining all of these impulses in a productive tension, it declares its openness to the world and yet also engages creatively with its own traditions. To this extent, the Weimar Classicism of Goethe and Schiller (and Humboldt) is indeed its model. Though indebted to Greece, Italy, France, England, and other places besides, German culture in this period was no less original – and no less German.

NOTES

1 See Klaus Zeyringer, 'Gewinnen wird die Kunst: Ansätze und Anfänge von Daniel Kehlmanns "Gebrochenem Realismus"', *Daniel Kehlmann, Text + Kritik*, 177 (2008), 36–44.
2 Mark M. Anderson, 'Humboldt's gift', *The Nation*, 30 April 2005, www.thenation.com/doc/20070430/anderson.
3 Gunther Nickel, 'Von "Beerholms Vorstellung" zur "Vermessung der Welt": Die Wiedergeburt des magischen Realismus aus dem Geist der modernen Mathematik', in Gunther Nickel, ed., *Daniel Kehlmanns 'Die Vermessung der Welt': Materialien, Dokumente, Interpretationen* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008), 151–68, 158.
4 Daniel Kehlmann, *Die Vermessung der Welt* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009 [2005]), 143. Hereafter page numbers appear in the text in parentheses. All translations are my own. Carol Brown Janeway's English translation appeared in 2006.
5 As reported in Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, ed. Regine Otto (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1982 [1835]), 199.
6 Nickel, 'Von "Beerholms Vorstellung" zur "Vermessung der Welt"', 162–3.
7 Kathryn M. Olesko, 'The world we have lost: history as art', *Isis*, 98:4 (2007), 760–8, 762.
8 See Aaron Sachs, 'The ultimate "Other": post-colonialism and Alexander Von Humboldt's ecological relationship with nature', *History and Theory*, 42:4 (2003), 111–35.
9 Zeyringer, 'Gewinnen wird die Kunst', 43.
10 See Michael Dettelbach, 'Alexander von Humboldt between Enlightenment and Romanticism', *Northeastern Naturalist*, 8:1 (2001), 9–20.
11 See Banesh Hoffmann, *Relativity and Its Roots* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999).
12 See Daniel Kehlmann, 'Göttinger Poetikvorlesungen', *Diese sehr ernsten Scherze: Poetikvorlesungen* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007).
13 See Joachim Rickes, 'Wer ist Graf von der Ohe zur Ohe? Überlegungen zum Kapitel "Der Garten" in Daniel Kehlmanns *Die Vermessung der Welt*', *Sprachkunst*, 38:1 (2007), 89–96.

14 See Alexander Grab, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 107–8.
15 Daniel Kehlmann, '1940', *Der Literaturbote*, 14/15 (1999/2000), 41–2, 42.
16 Oliver Lubrich, 'In the realm of ambivalence: Alexander von Humboldt's discourse on Cuba', *German Studies Review*, 26:1 (2003), 63–80, 63.
17 I am grateful to Oliver Lubrich for information on editions of Humboldt's work and his biographers. See also Oliver Lubrich, 'Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859): Zum 150. Todestag des Naturforschers und Reiseschriftstellers', *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, 2 (2009), 396–402.
18 Otto F. Best and Ulrich Karthaus, eds., *Sturm und Drang und Empfindsamkeit* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976), 29.
19 Eda Sagarra and Peter Skrine, *A Companion to German Literature: From 1500 to the Present* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 29–30.
20 See Robert Reinhold Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York: Octagon Books, 1967).
21 See Sonia Sikka, 'Enlightened relativism: The case of Herder', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 31:3 (2005), 309–41.
22 Carl Niekerk, 'The Romantics and other cultures', in Nicholas Saul, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 147–61, 148.
23 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton University Press, 2007).
24 Nicholas Saul, *Philosophy and German literature, 1700–1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 47.
25 Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek, 'Nietzsche's aesthetic solution to the problem of Epigonism in the nineteenth century', in Paul Bishop, ed., *Nietzsche and Antiquity: His Reaction and Response to the Classical Tradition* (Rochester: Camden House, 2004), 318–28, 320.
26 See Ingo Schwarz, 'Alexander von Humboldt's visit to Washington and Philadelphia, his friendship with Jefferson, and his fascination with the United States', *Northeastern Naturalist*, 8 (2001), 43–56.