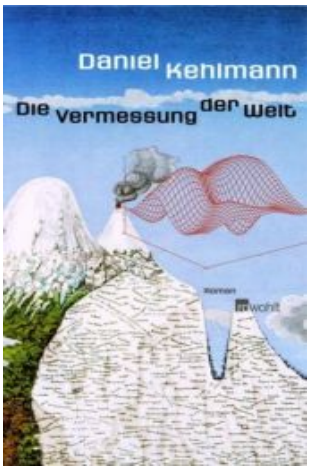
Daniel Kehlmann *Het meten van de wereld*, Querido, Amsterdam, 2006 (289 p.) ISBN 90-214-7030-6. *Die Vermessung der Welt*, Rowolt, Rembek, 2005.



Het meten van de wereld



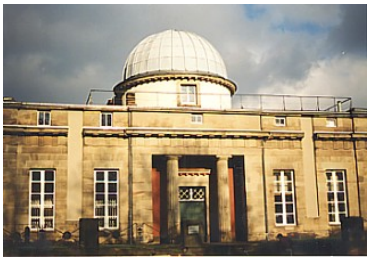
This book has been a hit in Germany since it appeared in September 2005, and the Dutch translation that appeared shortly after in February 2006, has also triggered some very positive reviews. This may be surprising, given that the novel is about two scientists: Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Friedrich Gauß. The title refers to the fact that both of them contributed, each in his own particular way, to the boost of scientific exploration of the world around the turn of the eighteenth-nineteenth century. Science brought order and structure in a chaotic world. Delambre and Méchain were measuring the meridian from Dunkerque to Barcelona for Napoleon to install the metric system (see review of *The measure of the world* by Denis Guedj in this Newsletter, issue 45, November 2003, which may not be confused with the present title). Diderot and d'Alembert were publishing their *Encyclopédie*, and Kant published his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.

Humboldt and Gauss were two, very German, exponents of this time. They are sketched as two totally different caricatures of the typical German character. Probably, this is what made this novel such a success: the humor in describing the total lack of humor or the ability of seeing the relativity of themselves and the world around them of the idiosyncratic scientists.


C.F. Gauß 1777-1855

The first part of the book describes in alternating chapters the two characters in their own doings. Humboldt is the one passionate about collecting, observing, classifying, cataloging everything and everyone he meets on his way. He arranges for himself and his companion Aimé Bonpland a mission to South-America. Like Don Quichote and Sancho Panza they conquer the South-American jungle. Humboldt is a passionate collector of data and knowledge, restless and fearless. He is totally detached from human feelings and especially those concerning female beings, except when considered as a study object, but on the other hand, he gets very sentimental over his dog that is lost in the jungle. Bonpland is his antipode, a lover of alcohol and women with some down to earth common sense. On this journey, Humboldt collects and categorizes everything and takes notes: flowers, plants, rocks, insects, people, temperature, magnetism, wind,.... He measures whatever can be measured. He undertakes an expedition to uncover a channel connecting the Orinoco and the Amazon river. He climbs volcanos, crawls into grottos, travels through the jungle, he tastes curare to prove that it can kill an animal but does not hurt when swallowed. The fact that he makes this journey through the jungle in a uniform of a Russian mine inspector is funny as such, but there are many other hilarious situations. For example when he corrects the calculations of the captain when they cross the Atlantic, his surprise that he can not find a guide when he takes some ancient Indian corpses along on his journey, or

his total bluntness when he has to deal with women, or when he meets another bewildered German deep in the jungle and they decide not to spend too much time together: they had seen enough Germans already.


Observatory in Göttingen where Gauß was director

While Humboldt takes himself too seriously in a very German way, and he does not understand the others, he remains polite and tries to be friendly, Gauß on the other hand, being a mathematical genius, is obsessed by mathematics but also science in general. He turns out to be an impatient, grumbling, man but unlike Humboldt he is attached to women even though he does not understand them either. He hardly realizes that he is married and he is surprised that his wife had given childbirth when he comes home. During the wedding night he interrupts love making to scribble his idea about least squares down on a piece of paper. He has a very big ego, is dogmatic and without feeling. He is very unwilling to leave his home and feels like being physically tortured, and sick whenever he has to travel in a coach. So both figures somehow measure the world: Humboldt by traveling around the globe, and Gauss from his ivory tower, without ever leaving home. Humboldt wrote a report of his expedition with 34 volumes, Gauß wrote his *Disquisitiones arithmeticæ*.

It is at the occasion of a congress in Berlin in 1828 that the two men do meet, both old and famous. Science has lived beyond them. When Humboldt, visits Russia as an older man, he measures the width of the river Volga with his sextant: 5240.7 feet he concludes. Of course, they reply him, it is 5240.9 feet to be precise, but, given this old fashioned method of yours, you did amazingly well.

The end of the book is about Eugene, Gauß's oldest son with his second wife. Eugene was imprisoned because he had taken part in a secret meeting where presumably F.L. Jahn, author of the *Deutsche Turnkunst* (Gauß thows this book out of the window) was supposed to lecture. When Humboldt did not understand that some official was suggesting to bribe him to set Eugene free, Gauß bluntly said it, upon which the official denied, and pretended to be offended. Anyhow, Gauß, not making any compromise brings it to an argument, and not knowing how to tread his son anyway (he wrote poems and such crap), makes it worse for Eugene and eventually leaves him to what he has put himself into. It turns out that it is Humboldt who arranges Eugene's escape to America, which, as so many other things refer to current issues, in this case, where science has escaped to.


Daniel Kehlmann

Daniel Kehlmann, (born in München, 1975) studied philosophy and literature. He lived for a longer time with the idea to write something about Gauss, but it was only after a visit to Mexico, where reading about the adventures of Humboldt, he learned that Gauß and Humboldt had met in 1828, and it was only then that the current project took form. He extends the caricature of the German nature to himself by using an indirect style: there are no direct dialogues, and he lets his main characters display their disgust for novelists and story tellers. For instance Gauss is not taking the philosopher Kant very highly.

It is a novel in the first place, so do not read it for its historical content, which no doubt is probably correct, but to me it was a rather amusing comedy sketching an idiosyncratic caricature of what German scientists as supposed to be.

Adhemar Bultheel