

Sarah Pourciau: THE EMPTY CANVAS: Daniel Kehlmann's "Tyll" and the Origins of Modernity

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At the exact midpoint, to the page, of Daniel Kehlmann's 2017 novel *Tyll*, there appears, for the first time, the figure of an empty canvas, which will come to govern the remainder of the work. The canvas is a gift bestowed by the eponymous fool-artist, Tyll Ulenspiegel—whom Kehlmann has transplanted from the 14th to the 17th century, from Germany's medieval literary tradition to the baroque—upon his recently-acquired patron, the exiled Elizabeth Stuart of England, "Winter Queen" of Bohemia, wife of the "Winter King" Friedrich V of the Palatinate. Friedrich's decision to proclaim himself King of Bohemia, a title he held for only a year (hence the derisive nickname "Winter King"), marked the beginning of the Thirty Years War that tore up much of Europe between 1618 and 1648; it is against this backdrop of historical chaos that Kehlmann narrates Tyll's trajectory, in a series of isolated, chronologically disordered episodes.

Zum Einstand hatte er ihr ein Bild geschenkt. Nein, ein Bild war es nicht, es war eine weiße Leinwand mit nichts darauf.

"Lass es rahmen, kleine Liz, häng es auf [...]. Es ist magisch, kleine Liz. Wer unehelich geboren ist, kann es nicht sehen. Wer dumm ist, sieht es nicht. Wer Geld gestohlen hat, sieht es nicht. Wer Übles im Schild führt, wer ein Kerl ist, dem man nicht trauen kann, wer ein Galgenvogel ist oder ein Stehvieh oder ein Arsch mit Ohren, der sieht es nicht, für den ist da kein Bild!" (Daniel Kehlmann: "Tyll," Reinbek 2017, p. 237)

On the surface, there is nothing strange at all about Kehlmann's decision to integrate this overdetermined image of imagelessness into his story of a fool surviving the Thirty Years War. In fact, it would almost be stranger if the figure didn't appear. For one thing, the empty canvas belongs to the arsenal of gags traditionally attributed to the character of Tyll Ulenspiegel, and not only to Tyll: the trope of the imaginary artwork is a fixture of trickster literature from the middle ages (the invisible portraits of kings in *Der Pfaffe Amis* and *Till Eulenspiegel*) to the baroque (the invisible puppet theater in Miguel de Cervantes' *Retablo de las maravillas*) to the mid-19th century (the invisible royal robes in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*).

For another thing—and in close proximity to this longstanding literary tradition of fools making fools of kings—the figure belongs *equally* firmly to the political-theological discourse of disenchantment, whose point of origin is invariably located, by theorists of secularization like Hegel, Marx, Weber, Schmitt, Kantorowicz, Marin, and Agamben, in the baroque era's twin crises of faith and sovereignty. Within the context of this discourse, the unpainted canvas, the unpopulated stage, and the undressed royal body gesture toward the "unadorned reality" of a proto-modern, proto-bourgeois worldview which emerges, in the wake of the Reformation, to lay bare the inherited mechanisms of divine and kingly

power. The members of the court or the credulous citizenry, upon discovering that they have been duped, experience an epiphany of disillusionment, a revelation of nothingness that “enlightens” them to the “emptiness” of the feudal-monarchical spectacle, and in doing so paves the way for a new political imaginary.

Given the pedigree of this aesthetic, political, and theological nexus, and assuming that Kehlmann makes substantive use of it, which he does (more on this below), one might expect the most common criticisms of the novel to involve accusations of ideological heavy-handedness or at least motivic tendentiousness. A novel about the relationship between desacralization and art, which is set in the epoch credited with originating both the modern novel and the secular worldview, cannot help but run the risk of sacrificing narrative to “message,” historical specificity to contemporary “relevance.” The vast majority of reviews, however, take precisely the opposite tack:

“Worauf will der Autor mit dieser pittoresken Geschichtsfiktion denn nun eigentlich hinaus? Müsste sich nicht irgendwo ein Türchen auftun in Problematiken der Gegenwart?” (Süddeutsche Zeitung).

“Doch scheint es manchmal, als sei Kehlmann der zitastische Erzählspaß, das literarische Spiel wichtiger als ernsthaft ‘eine aus den Fugen geratene Welt’ zu porträtieren” (Tagesspiegel).

“*Tyll* ist Historien- und Fantasieroman in einem, der es seinem Helden gleichtut: [...] Ein Schweben-Roman, der geschickt mit seinen Einfällen jongliert und über die historischen Abgründe balanciert” (Berliner Zeitung).

“*Tyll* wäre dann nur mehr eine Empfehlung für diejenigen, die sich dem Grauen einer grauenhaften Zeit nicht völlig aussetzen wollen, sondern es ein bisschen leichter nehmen wollen” (Die Zeit).

The implicit claim, here, is that Kehlmann does not treat his material seriously enough. And since his material is the quasi-sacred “stuff” of the desacralization theorem, the implicit conclusion is that he does not treat his own, desacralized moment—which is also our moment—seriously enough either. The underlying worry, in other words, is that Kehlmann is laughing at us and our crises, turning our hard-won *Bildung*, our enlightenment, our disillusion into the pretext for a frivolous, and perhaps even mean-spirited, display of artistic dexterity: „Manchmal vermeint man Kehlmann wie ein vergnügtes Rumpelstilzchen kichern zu hören über eine neu gelegte Rätselspur” (*Die Zeit*). The fact that these kinds of objections fall into a centuries-old pattern of criticisms leveled at Austrians by Germans (Kehlmann, the son of a prominent Viennese theater director, was born in Munich but raised in Austria) does not necessarily mean that they are entirely unfounded. For while it is true that Kehlmann’s style elicits from German reviewers (in marked contrast to Austrian and Swiss ones[1]) nearly the entire pantheon of quintessentially “Austrian” adjectives, including but not limited to “polished,” “elegant,” “witty,” “agile,” “civilized,” “cosmopolitan,” “distanced,” “ironic,” “smug,” and, by implication, “superficial” (“ein bisschen leichter”), it is also true that Kehlmann, or at least his *Tyll*, is laughing at us.

It seems unlikely, however, that we will be able to get to the bottom of why he is laughing—and in what tonal register, and for what purpose—so long as we remain within the stereotypical paradigm of “Austrian frivolity.” Lightness is everything, for Tyll, who dreams from childhood onward of flying, and compensates with tightrope-walking. Lightness is everything, also, for Kehlmann’s novel, which tells the story of this childhood under the section title “Herr der Luft,” and concludes by allowing his hero to vanish into thin air. What does this lightness, which is less that of “light fiction” than it is of transcendence—“Herr der Luft” is a traditional epitaph for both God and Satan—have to do with the *weight* of the Thirty Years War and its aftermath, around which the novel simultaneously revolves? Is there a way of responding to this disjunction that makes the irritation it generates more productive?

In his contribution to this blog, entitled “Zur Aktualität des Dreißigjährigen Krieges (II): ‘Denn es ist alles nicht lang her’? Daniel Kehlmanns Roman *Tyll*,” Claude Haas traces his own quite considerable annoyance with Kehlmann’s novel to the existence of two disparate “Textschichten,” which cannot be synthesized into a unity. This structural intuition seems to me exactly right, and profoundly significant, though I would be inclined to characterize the relevant levels differently than he does. Where Haas sees the narrative dividing into “Streberwitz” and “Kriegsdarstellung”—his examples from the former category include the empty canvas motif, along with Kehlmann’s treatment of the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher, whose monumental optical treatise gives its title to one of the novel’s eight sections (“Die große Kunst von Licht und Schatten”)—I see something more like a division between *Witz* and *Krieg* per se. The point and the provocation of the novel, in my view, is that Kehlmann declines to bring these two strata together, or rather: that he first *insists* on bringing them together, by forcing Tyll and the Thirty Years War to inhabit the same work, and then *refuses* to synthesize them into anything like a higher unity. The irony of the fool, in *Tyll*, does not acquire gravity or depth by virtue of its relationship to a reality whose hidden truths it emphatically does not reveal; and the reality of war does not find redemption or sublimation in art.

The brutal prologue “Schuhe,” which opens the novel, condenses this structure of co-existing without co-mingling into an emblem. Tyll and his small travelling theater troupe visit a village that has remained thus far untouched by the war. They perform, and Tyll collects money from the villagers with the promise to show them something even better if they are generous. The “something better” is explicitly framed as a “test” of whether the villagers are in fact “good people,” who help and understand each other. It turns out to involve nothing more than Tyll on a tightrope, commanding his rapt audience to throw their shoes into the crowd and then, under insults, to collect them again. This exercise in mass frustration incites them to turn on each other in a violent frenzy, as Tyll, now turned spectator, or perhaps better, director of spectacle, looks on laughing from above. Unlike its forbears in the genre of tricksters pretending to make art, Kehlmann’s theater of disillusion does not culminate in a moment of insight. It is, however, preceded by one, an epiphany about the unbridgeable gap that separates the villagers from Tyll:

“Und wir alle, die wir hochsahen, begriffen mit einem Mal, was Leichtigkeit war. Wir begriffen, wie das Leben sein kann für einen, der wirklich tut, was er will, und nichts glaubt und keinem gehorcht; wie es wäre, so ein Mensch zu sein, begriffen wir, und wir begriffen, dass wir nie solche Menschen sein würden” (20).

Gravity vs. lightness, obedience vs. freedom, law vs. grace, *Prügeln* vs. *Schweben*, the lowing of the villagers’ un milked cows vs. the dance of the swallow who shares Tyll’s tightrope: these oppositions will not get sublated, either in the prologue or the rest of the novel. There will be no cathartic purification of the viewers, no dramatic turning point of self-recognition, no art-propelled transformation toward higher things. The villagers, no matter how many more plays they see, will never rise to Tyll’s level. They will simply continue to live, now in the new consciousness of their own baseness and the emptiness of their heaven (“als wäre der Himmel, seitdem das Seil in ihm gehangen hatte, nicht mehr derselbe”, p. 27), until the war arrives to erase them from memory.

A blog entry is not the place to try to unpack all the layers of reference that Kehlmann manages to integrate here, each of which is tied to a different intertext. But even if we confine ourselves only to the most obvious parallels—the way that Tyll’s “test” rewrites an earlier episode in his life, which we read about later in the novel, when the witchcraft trial staged by Athanasius Kircher incites the villagers of Tyll’s childhood to turn on his father; the way that this earlier episode of “Jesuit theater” operates, in the context of Kehlmann’s Frankfurt poetics lectures *Kommt, Geister*, as a cipher for the fascist theater that incites 20th century German villagers to turn on their Jewish neighbors; the way that the prologue *also* rewrites the baroque brutality of Cervantes’ *Retablo de las maravillas*, which links the punishing violence of disillusion to the villagers’ attitudes toward the Jewish *conversos*—it becomes clear that Kehlmann’s dexterity, virtuosic as it is, could not be less frivolous or genteel. Tyll, and by extension *Tyll*, takes our modern, secular expectations for the role of art in a disillusioned world extremely seriously. He also thwarts them brilliantly, with more than a trace of angry pleasure. The effect is irritating, to be sure. But if we don’t do the work to figure out what alternative is here on offer, the joke really will be on us.

[1] A notable exception within the German context is Tilman Spreckelsen’s review for the [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#).

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