Gott Sprach: Es Werde Newton... Mathematisch- Physikalische Lehr- und Leergedichte

by Manfred Stern

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REVIEWED BY OSMO PEKONEN

Halle-an-der-Saale is one of Germany's ancient places of learning. Georg Cantor lived there, and so did Eduard Heine, the mathematician of the Heine-Borel theorem. Manfred Stern, also a resident of Halle, has devoted to their memory the following poem in which he seems to have become another sharp-witted mathematical musketeer himself:

„Einer für alle, alle für einen!“
Die drei Musketiere, so will es mir scheinen.
„Einer für Halle, alle für Heine!“
Zwei Mathematiker ich damit meine.
Georg Cantor und Eduard Heine die beiden,
Um die alle die Stadt Halle beneiden.

Stern is a mathematician who has worked in lattice theory [1] but who has also made another career as a translator of science books from six languages (English, Finnish, French, Hungarian, Italian, Russian) into German. He is a language prodigy, and he also has translated poetry from all those languages.

The present book is an amusing and astonishing retelling of the entire history of mathematics through poems, anecdotes, jokes, cartoons, and stamps that Stern has collected through the years. There are dozens of limericks that the author has either composed himself or has translated from other languages. The bulk of the book is in German,

but the following is an example of a limerick in English composed jointly with Chandler Davis:

Georg Cantor invented his dust,
Which for us is a must and a lust.
He's become quite a hero,
For his dust measures zero,
Yet exceeds old Sandreckoner's thrust.

Many of the anecdotes revolve around Halle or Göttingen, thereby perpetuating the German lore of mathematics and culture. There is a lot of international material, as well, and a special virtue of Stern's florilegium is that it takes into account smaller language areas, such as Finland and Hungary. At places, the author's tone becomes a carnivalesque celebration of the possibilities of language as such: one thinks of Lewis Carroll whose Humpty Dumpty he translates as Goggelmoggel. You need to be a European and know as many languages as Stern does to appreciate fully all the puns hidden in the book. Some of his footnotes are treacherous: they appear learned but they are actually jokes at the expense of a credulous reader.

Among the many academic jokes at the expense of colleagues in other disciplines, I liked this one (my translation): "The biologists think of themselves as biochemists. The biochemists believe themselves to be physical chemists. The physical chemists consider themselves as physicists. The physicists take themselves for God. But God, he always mathematizes." Despite the overall humorous tone, there is something of Pascal in this book. Toward the end, it veers on transcendental issues such as the existence of an Almighty and the meaning of a life spent in science.

A new poem by Manfred Stern, "Genie und Wahnsinn," appears in this issue of *The Mathematical Intelligencer*.

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REFERENCE

- [1] Stern, Manfred (1999). *Semimodular lattices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.