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Where did you learn how to write?

Sometimes, when it comes up that I teach literary writing at the University of Leipzig, I'm asked in an ironic voice: "And who taught you how to write?" And I answer: "Gustav Ernst." Normally people look at me with bafflement because they don't know Gustav Ernst. But I insist on this answer because I have learned more from Gustav Ernst than from any other writer in the world. Gustav Ernst was the editor of the Viennese literary magazine "Wespennest," "a magazine for usable texts," as it said in the subtitle. This is where I published my first literary text in the early seventies.

Every writer, I believe, remembers how it felt when he handed over a text for the very first time. But the strange thing is that a text, as soon as one makes the effort of getting it published, gains a completely different significance, a different status. What the author has put into the text seems to recede into the background, and the perspective shifts to what others might get out of it. The mirror of the reader edges in between the writer and his text, so to speak. It is still perfectly possible to maintain one's own relationship to the text, but what appears in the mirror, the way a possible or actual reader might understand the text, cannot be ignored anymore. It becomes part of the text.

With the effort to get a text published, writing gains a new dimension of seriousness. Suddenly it may even appear to be a form of impertinence and hubris to expect of people whom one does not even know and probably will never meet that they should read what one has written out for oneself during lonely hours.

A few days after I had sent my first text to the literary magazine "Wespennest," I received a phone call from Gustav Ernst. He invited me to his apartment in the Josefstädter Strasse where he and his wife, the painter Elisabeth Ernst, ran a *jour fixe*, a regular monthly meeting for young writers. Elisabeth Ernst was responsible for the layout of the magazine.

The apartment served as editorial bureau, typesetting office, distribution department, typing room and studio all at the same time. One could only move around quite awkwardly because there were obstacles all over the place, and it was only possible to sit down by first shuffling stacks of books, picture frames and shoe cartons – of which there was an awful lot.

Only the magazine's editors and contributors were invited to the *jour fixe*. The conversations focused on the texts that had already appeared in the magazine, and on books one should or should not read. And lots of people were sharply criticised. Sometimes the conversations developed the features of a theory seminar, which came as no surprise given the fact that several of the editors, myself included, were philosophy students. As I see it today, I had blundered into a "school" of authors in the sense in which one would call artists pursuing the same program a "school." It was the school of "critical realism."

The word "critical" was merely the residue of "socially critical," a notion that had by then already degenerated into an empty pose. "Critical realism" stood, on the one hand, for a leftist political view. On the other, it was a kind of ideological buffer against "socialist realism." The "Wespennest"-group did not want the communist doctrine to make demands on their choice of "usable texts." At the same time, though, they had quite close ties to (at that time) communist-minded authors such as Elfriede Jelinek, Peter Turrini and Uwe Timm.

Alongside the debates on which texts were "usable" and which were not, Gustav Ernst served beer and wine. On the stove in the kitchen stood a huge pot of *Schweinshaxensuppe*, ham-hock soup, and if Gustav's mother was visiting *Germknödel*, steamed fruit dumplings with tremendous amounts of melted butter were served for dessert.

Other than the *jour fixe* and the editorial board meetings which also took place in his apartment – and later on also in other apartments – I mainly met with Gustav Ernst at Café Hummel. From under the stack of newspapers in front of him he would produce my text in which he had marked certain passages with a pencil. And then he mostly asked questions. In what way does this subplot contribute to the story? Why is this sentence so long? Is it the character or the author that is thinking that? Who is actually talking? Wouldn't it be better to stop here? Or, he

would say: go ahead and read that aloud; it sounds strange. Then he would read it out loud himself and it would sound so funny that he would laugh until he had tears in his eyes and the waiter would warily ask him if he would like another cup of coffee.

Back then I discussed all my stories with Gustav Ernst before writing the final version. A few years later I became a member of the "Wespennest"-editorial staff myself, and now also met with authors to talk about their own texts.

The European literary magazines of those days were largely self-help enterprises. They were founded by authors mainly for the purpose of publishing their own texts. Most of these magazines vanished into thin air again very quickly. They never made it beyond just a few issues. As for the others, the ambition grew with the task. And this ambition led straight into the aesthetic debate. The exceptional thing was that editors and collaborators did not, as is the case today, agree on a certain direction the magazine should take. Instead, the authors – who usually didn't make a dime from the magazines themselves – argued their own literary concepts. In the literary magazines the young generation was nourished, and contradictions (and sometimes also the arrogance necessary to make one's voice heard) cherished. But no money was ever made.

The pressure of professionalization has led to the widespread death of literary magazines. The few that survived were gently taken out of the hands of the authors, mostly by editors – well-meaning rather than wilful – to whom the continuance of the magazine mattered a great deal. As a result, many magazines are nowadays in the position of paying a small, mostly symbolic amount for the publication of a text. But there are almost no aesthetic debates anymore. Those that might still occur every now and then do so under new conditions. First, as is customary among media professionals, a topic is chosen which might find an audience that "likes that sort of thing." And then they look for people who might have something to say about it. **Occasionally, this can be quite interesting but has no longer anything to do with the urge of a writer to draw on his own ideas about life.** The editors simply do their job.

The structural change within the sphere of the literary public has left a vacuum. The only thing that ever comes back from a literary magazine anymore are suggestions for corrections of the text, which one may or may not accept. It then goes on to be printed, author copies are sent around, and maybe there is a small reading to go with the presentation of the new issue at a local literary establishment. And here the story ends. No *Schweinshaxensuppe*, no *Germknödel*, no grilling questions at Café Hummel. And no-one, either, to explain to you the correct use of the conditional clause.

The authors' reluctance to step in front of their readers without being forearmed has not **lessened but rather intensified** with the break-up of groups of authors sharing the same aesthetic program. This may be one of the reasons why, in recent years, creative writing in Europe has been able to establish itself as a separate structure, independent from traditional institutions. Literary houses, adult evening classes, literary societies and foundations, and last but not least universities have begun to organize what now hardly ever takes place in magazines and writers' organizations, namely the exchange of experiences between writers and those who want to become writers.

The scepticism towards the idea that one can actually teach someone how to write is a phenomenon specific to continental Europe. One reason for this might be that here there is a more stringent notion of teaching than in Great Britain or the US. Yet literary writing is nothing stringent, but rather something individual, and in addition something questionable. Interestingly, music and fine arts have had their own educational institutions for centuries but not so literature. Writing was considered the work of a genius. Maybe this is so because the idea of genius was formulated most lastingly in literature. But right now, the situation is starting to change completely.

Twenty years ago the Johannes R. Becher Literary Institute eked out a cloistered existence in continental Europe. The next comparable institute was far away, in Moscow. There the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute had been opened in 1933. By 1955, it had become the model for the institute in Leipzig which had a similar organizational structure but was much smaller. With the end of the GDR the Becher Institute had to close its gates, and this, of all times, just

when the idea of instruction and further education of writers slowly began to take hold in other European countries. In 1995 the Leipzig institute – now following a concept modelled on the Iowa Writers' Workshop – was reopened again under the name “the Leipzig Institute of German Literature” (‘Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig’ or DLL).

Ever since the DLL began to operate as a teaching institution, institutes for creative writing have sprung up at a whole host of European universities, for instance in France, Spain, Italy and Sweden. Other institutes, such as the “Josef Skvorecky Writing Academy” in Prague, have been founded as private establishments. It is only a matter of time until the solitary existence of the Leipzig Institute of German Literature will come to an end in the German-speaking countries too. In Vienna the School for Poetry is striving for academic status. In Switzerland, the Art Academy in Bern, the University of Lausanne, the Music and Theater Conservatory in Zurich and the Applied Arts School in Zurich are just starting up a Swiss literary institute.

This has set in motion a new development. In the course of the European educational reform, creative writing is also entering the universities of continental Europe. Literature is no longer only a subject of academic teaching, but also one of its components. While in the past writers – unless they held an academic position in addition to being writers – only became interesting to the universities after their death, they are now not only accepted as members of the academic community, but also have a specific academic task to fulfil, one whose dimensions are only just beginning to take shape within the European education programs.

Some face the term ‘creative writing,’ imported from the US and often retained in its English form, as cautiously as if it were nothing less than a new facet of Americanization of European cultures. *In doing so they forget that while the term itself may be new, Europe has, at least until quite recently, had its own history of productive literary group engagement of the sort the term refers to.* The literary magazines – and to a different extent also writers’ groups – were the writing schools of the post-war period. Their decline has awakened the desire to create new institutions where literary experiences can be exchanged.

Translated from the German by Sabine Somek

Of Being an "American Writer."

I was born and raised in a suburb of Fukuoka, a city in the south of Japan. After eighteen years in Fukuoka, I went to a university in Kyoto and lived there for seven years. My parents are Japanese. They are both from the region and never left the country except for occasional group tours. My native language is Japanese. Like any other Japanese student, I started to learn English in the seventh grade. I am neither an immigrant, nor a postcolonial subject, nor a refugee. Now I write fiction in English in Japan and submit my stories to literary journals in the United States. I represent a small, but ever increasing group of writers.

In a way, I am a typical product of the American literary education. I never have doubts about being Japanese, but I consider myself a writer of America, if not an American writer. How have I become a part of the contemporary American literary culture? How could a person write in a second language without abandoning her native tongue or land? In my view this phenomenon partly defines today's American literature. Who and what is an American writer today?

So, I call myself a typical American product. To be more precise, I am a typical product of the uniquely American institution called "the Creative Writing Program."

In 1985, when I was a high school sophomore, I spent a year in a small Dutch Reform village in western Michigan as an exchange student because I was eager to see a wider world, and because at the time learning English was my passion. Yes, I saw a wider world there, in that it was so small and therefore so different. For a while I went to church three times a week. It was during the height of the Reagan era, and our chemistry teacher-- politically incompatible yet my favorite--had a sticker on his lab table: "Reagan Brings America Back." I had been writing stories, plays, picture books, poems, and songs, all of course in Japanese. Then I learned that there was such a thing as creative writing class at Hudsonville High School in the spring semester. Wow, do they teach you how to write stories at school? Too good to be true! I signed up for it immediately.

I wrote three stories that semester. We had to turn in three or four revisions per story and those were the pre-wordprocessing days. Boy, did I enjoy that! I still keep all of my handwritten manuscripts with Mr. John Bergraaf's comments in the attic of my mother's home in Fukuoka even though I would never dare to read them today. I was never very impressed with my classmates' stories, and neither were they with mine. Yet I took the challenge of writing in this new language seriously, and took pleasure in its process. Mr. Bergraaf was quite a practical teacher. He introduced us to The Writer's Digest's twenty rules for writers (Show, don't tell. Write what you know. Specific is terrific.), taught us how plot develops, how important revisions are and other basics. Every time we turned in our story, we had to go through the check list of the twenty rules. And he wrote his comments in red on that check list. Sometimes he read student works aloud in the class, and one day he read my story based on a dream of people jumping off a flying trapeze, one after another. In his written comment, he called the story "almost publishable."

Imagine what that did to a sixteen-year old mind! Now here I am, claiming my American authorship. However, years later, I would have to learn the enormous gap between “almost publishable” and “publishable” through experience, after collecting fifty-five rejections before my first story got accepted, but that is another story.

At the year’s end I left America, came home, then graduated from the Japanese high school where I ended up hating English because teachers were agonizingly petty. I left home for Kyoto University where I refused to take English courses and tried to major in Oriental History—learning Chinese, French, and Manchu, while trying out creative endeavors in drama, manga, and fiction in Japanese. But all the while, the experience of the creative writing class had stayed with me, and I knew I would like to try it again. But how? It was an utter “dream” in its original sense.

I found out that my interest lay more in languages than history, and switched my major from Oriental History to American Literature. English was the foreign language I knew best. I continued my studies at the graduate school in Kyoto where I wrote an MA thesis on John Barth. His essays reintroduced me to the creative writing program idea in a more academic sense. Then the creative writing dream started to haunt me again.... But I was too ashamed to share this idea with anyone until I was admitted to the Ph.D. program. You’d better have a sound, strategic plan for your academic career. Advanced degrees usually open up a wide window of opportunities in the professional world, but a Ph.D. in English? Frankly, it does nothing but narrowing down your career choices, reducing your chances on the job market, and on the marriage circuit. So you’d better plan well. It was then I meekly admitted to my advisor Professor Fukuoka that for ten years, I had been wanting to try for creative writing in the United States. She blinked for a moment and said, “But you won’t be able to get a job with that.”

Be that as it may, I started to apply for MFA programs in the United States only to get a rejection after another. It was no surprise—my English writing was poor and I had written few stories in English. My ambition was of such private nature that I could not dare share my work with anyone, meaning, no workshop, no proof-reading by native speakers. Given a chance today, I would visit all the schools I applied to and burn those application manuscripts. Eventually two schools replied with invitations, and I went to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where the admissions committee told me to come as a visiting scholar to, see what the program was like, and improve my English. It was ten years after Mr. Bergraaf’s creative writing class that I left Kyoto for Milwaukee, without the slightest idea of what awaited me there.

The four and a half years in Milwaukee made me what I am today. In the end, I was admitted to the Ph.D. program, worked as a program assistant, edited the literary journal and taught creative writing, British literature and Asian-American literature, published stories in English, completed my creative dissertation, and met my future husband.

My education in Milwaukee was social and ethical as well as aesthetic and academic. I witnessed from inside how the culture of writing and reading is supported by a vast number of other writing programs and nameless aspiring writers, and how the dynamics inside the English Department where writers, critics and theorists cohabit as colleagues have influenced the history of modern American literary education. I became convinced

that the creative writing programs do not raise writers but cultivate readers, and that the Ph.D. programs—a useless degree if you just want to publish books—train creative writing teachers, instead of creative writers. But the best thing I learned there is that writing is a thing you do in your life; it is not an elevated state toward the aesthetic sublime or a way to create a tortured, alienated, genius self that is larger than life. What is most fulfilling to us is to write and therefore we should write. Your desire to write is indeed a decent, earnest desire and you should treat others who have the same desire with sincerity. It sure sounds plain and matter of course, but my experiences in Milwaukee truly shed off all sorts of assumptions and pretenses I had about “Literature.”

I also discovered that writing in English is uniquely liberating for me. I can feel a different part of my brain functioning when I write in English. I write things I never bother to write in Japanese. English slows me down; it is a continuous puzzle. I find a second language is better tuned to explore the dream world since neither of them makes perfect sense. Sometimes it is so humbling that I tell myself I should be happy for every correct sentence I can write in English. Besides, my mother can't read what I publish—this is nice, too. I was fortunate to have the best graduate colleagues I could imagine, whom I could respect and become friends with for life, and professors who may not have been famous writers but whose crafts and personalities I could admire. And when we meet, we talk about writing first of all things. My friends are now all over the United States, teaching. Some of them are now having their first books out. They are my moral support and rivals. Considering how solitary the act of writing is, and considering that the society does not grant recognition to our activities unless one is rich and famous, this friendship has become precious indeed in the long run.

Now I hold a tenured position in Japan, and teach mostly in Japanese, but the language of my creative writing is English, for I am a product of the American experiment called Creative Writing Program. The only way I can respond to everything Milwaukee gave me is to write in English. I am not an intuitive person, but this is one of the few things I hold close to my heart. I do not have faith in the creative writing system per se; my faith lies in the people I've met in Milwaukee, Iowa City, Nebraska City, or Providence. That's why I say my education was social and ethical.

But here's the irony—I would call myself a typical product of the Creative Writing Program not only with sincerity but also with sarcasm. Here's a fact: thanks to the degree I earned in the United States, I have been developing a quite successful career as an academic at the oldest private university in Japan. Here's another fact: no one calls me a “writer” because I do not have a book out, because I do not make a living from writing. I never call myself a writer except in the very limited situation-- like this one, for instance. America is the only nation where one may call oneself a writer just because one writes. In Japan, I may call myself a scholar and a teacher, but the stories I publish in journals may not be counted as academic achievements. Yet the true sense of my occupational identity comes from the fact I write fiction. So what am I? I am one of many Ph.D. holders who teach literature and English, (and I am a writer). Once you drop the statement inside a parentheses, you are nothing but a professor with a writing habit. Many of my graduate colleagues have taken the same path. Today in the developed capitalist nations, when someone asks who you are, you state your occupation. Neither

your birth place, nor your family name, nor your caste defines who you are any more. It is your job and your livelihood that tell who you are.

Once at a conference for creative writers, I was a part of a panel titled “Why Write At All?” and I talked about my choice of writing in English. After the panel, a young woman—an undergraduate or an MA student—came up to me and said in a heavy Chinese accent that she had thought that she was completely alone; she felt like she had encountered a fellow sailor in the solitary ocean. She had apparently felt that her desire to write in English was eccentric, an act of treason to her native culture—she had no strategy for to justifying her desire. Surely we make up a small group, and often get mixed up with second- and third-generation ethnic American writers. I was some years ahead of her, so I could tell her that there are indeed many of us coming up. She just had to imagine there were comrades all over the United States. I've met an Australian poet who grew up in Japan, a Hong-Kong poet of Indian descent, a Hungarian translator writing stories in English, a Muslim scholar in mystic poetry paying homage to the Romantic English landscape.... And here I am, a woman living in Japan who considers herself a writer of America because America has taught her how to write. The experiment of Creative Writing Program in this country has been partly founded on the nation's democratic ideal. I am a skeptic when it comes to the so-called Greatest Democracy in the world. At the same time, I understand and appreciate that many things uniquely American come from this ideal.