

A Consistent Man

Jehane Kuhn • jehanekuhn/at/gmail.com

> **Upshot** • Jehane Barton Burns (now Jehane Kuhn) worked with Ernst von Glasersfeld in the 1960's on semantic analysis for machine translation at Silvio Ceccato's Centro di Cibernetica at the University of Milan. Among subsequent formative experiences, she lists Italian travels with Howard Burns, historian of architecture (who first told her about Vico), and a decade in the Office of Charles and Ray Eames (where Constraints was a talismanic word). She and Thomas Kuhn married in 1982; she still considers the English language her *raison d'être*.

“I HAVE ALWAYS STRIVEN TO REMAIN a foreigner no matter where I happened to be living.” That declaration, closing the preface to Ernst's *Partial Memories* (2010), has an undeclared but unmistakable mirror image: his friends, and the readers of his memoir, can have no doubt that no matter where he happened to be living, he had a genius for finding himself thoroughly at home. Trying to frame my sense of Ernst as a character, I reached for the company of Joseph Conrad: for his improbable, disjunctive life, of course, and his happy engagement with the English language. Then, in Conrad's preface to his *Personal Record* (1912), I came upon a clue to something more inward: a declaration that the quality of character he values above all others is Self-possession. I construe both Ernst's detachment (which was never ungenerous) and his capacity for engagement (which, as far as my knowledge extends, was always clear-sighted) as versions of self-possession: the temperament that prepares one for unprepared-for contingencies.¹

I first met Ernst in early 1961, at the *Centro di Cibernetica e di attività linguistiche* at the University of Milan, thanks to a mysterious letter of recommendation from Margaret Masterman, the leading spirit of something called the Cambridge Language Research Unit.² I arrived in Milan as

a neograduate, and although Margaret had sketchily mentioned a research project on mechanical translation, I had no idea what capacities she had attributed to me other than literacy in English. I had cause perhaps for some puzzlement, but I recall no anxiety; I cheerfully considered literacy in English an adequate *raison d'être*, and I already took for granted that the business of translating sentences from one language to another is highly problematic, and in interesting ways. The director of the Centro, Silvio Ceccato, though benign, was somewhat opaque. If I quickly recognised my good fortune, it was thanks to the prompt humanity and the shrewd perceptions of the two associates who best understood Ceccato and the research project in hand: Ernst, and Bruna Zonta.

Ernst, initially, I found charming but enigmatic: there could be no doubt that he was a man of the world, probably of a diversity of worlds; but unlike Ceccato, he had no investment in self-presentation, and one's impressions had to be collected from glints, from remarks *en passant*. My collection began to take shape when he and Isabel found an airy rental apartment for me, just round the corner from their own. Their hospitable living-room was full of clues, and any object led to at least one story; by fragments, then, I heard of some of the places, people and projects that had gone to the making

of this cultivated quizzical person. He had the poise of a diplomat, but not always, I'm glad to say, the discretion. His humour was all quiet irony; often with an Irish edge, and occasionally – when called for – with a bite.

He would probably have snorted at the term “mentor”; but by example and forbearance he began my socialization into collaborative work. As a new recruit I needed, of course, a great many explanations – of matters of procedure and of principle; Ernst's explanations were effective because he conducted them as conversations. In the following six years he made opportunities for me, and ensured that I took them; he, Bruna and Isabel looked after my interests in ways that often, probably, escaped my notice. At the end of those years, I again had no idea of plausible next steps in life; but I had learned from Ernst that – provided I could cultivate rather more self-possession – I could probably find my way.

References

- Conrad J. (1912) A personal record. Harper & Brothers, New York. Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/687>
- Glasersfeld E. von (2010) *Partial Memories*. Sketches from an improbable life. Imprint Academic: Exeter UK.
- Masterman M. (2005) *Language, cohesion and form*. Edited by Yorick Wilks. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

RECEIVED: 18 FEBRUARY 2011

ACCEPTED: 21 FEBRUARY 2011

1| Pages of Ernst's *Partial Memories* have shown me that skiing is probably the art of self-possession *par excellence* – and doubtless there are pages of Conrad's on the management of sail under difficulties that would stand comparison.

2| The CLRU had begun as “...an informal discussion group with a very heterogeneous membership interested in language from philosophical

and computational points of view” (Yorick Wilks, in Masterman 2005: 3). She had met me, perhaps, twice; her husband, Richard Braithwaite, was Chairman of the Moral Sciences Faculty (University of Cambridge) at the time of my unsatisfying bachelor's degree and (knowing his wife's eye for difficult cases) had invited me to family supper.