

in memoriam Peter Edgerly Firchow (1937-2008)

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Gerald GILLESPIE

in memoriam Peter Edgerly Firchow (1937-2008)

Peter Firchow was born in Massachusetts to a German father and Costa Rican mother as the clouds of war were beginning to gather over Europe. What most of his academic colleagues never learned until obituaries began appearing upon his death in Minnesota, was what hardships this legendarily friendly and hospitable man had experienced when his parents left the United States for Germany with their three children on the very eve of hostilities. Peter's father, Paul Firchow, had been in charge of the Boston office of the North German Lloyd company. When trans-Atlantic shipping from Germany ceased because of the spreading conflict, the German Embassy in Washington employed him, and then in World War II he served as a translator for the German army in the Netherlands. As a boy Peter endured the Allied bombings of Berlin that impelled the family to evacuate to East Prussia, whence they fled again when the Soviet forces approached. Constantly fleeing, the mother and siblings found refuge in Czechoslovakia before making their way to Munich and to a displaced persons camp at war's end. There Peter's father found them and in 1949 was eventually able to resettle the family in Boston. Peter quickly re-assimilated to New England and earned both an A.B. and M.A. in English literature at Harvard University. As an undergraduate he was attracted to British authors of the early twentieth century his predilection grew from strength to strength after he attained his Ph.D. in 1965 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a dissertation on Aldous Huxley and in 1967 joined the English department at the University of Minnesota-Minneapolis.

Although Peter would frequently serve as a guest professor and was an indefatigable symposiast and speaker at conferences in many countries, the University of Minnesota was to remain his lifelong home, a genuine *Wahlheimat*. He shared it with his wife Evelyn Scherabon Firchow, a philologist and medievalist of German, who was sometimes his collaborator, especially in translation efforts. In keeping with the tenor of their life together, Peter was working all morning of the day of his death on a translation into English of her edition of *Gottfried von Strassburg: Tristan und Isolde* (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 2003). As often as was feasible Evelyn would accompany him during guest stints elsewhere. I wish to express my thanks for her generous readiness to provide materials relating to her beloved partner. After Peter arrived at Minnesota not just as a rising star in twentieth-century British studies, but as a completely trilingual cosmopolitan — a fluent speaker of English, German, and Spanish, with knowledge of several more languages — a person of capacious mind who had that precious ability to think critically in and across several different cultural registers. It is this particular Firchow the comparatist whom I want to celebrate. Fortunately, I can refer readers to an important *Festschrift* on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday and a recent *Gedenkschrift* which illuminate the "other" or Anglicist side of his achievements as a major Anglicist-comparatist; these publications concentrate on, among other things, his international standing as a pre-eminent Huxley expert. The *Festschrift*, *Reluctant Modernists: Aldous Huxley and Some Contemporaries. A Collection of Essays by Peter Edgerly Firchow*, edited by Evelyn S. Firchow and Bernfried Nugel, published in 2002 (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2002), includes eighteen choice essays by Firchow and frames this body of work through commentaries by divers hands on his multifarious contribution to our understanding of Conrad, Auden, Waugh, Forster, Housman, Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Orwell, Eliot, Thomas Mann, and others. The *Gedenkschrift*, *In Memoriam Peter Edgerly Firchow*, edited by Jerome Meckier and Bernfried Nugel, appeared in 2009 as volume 7 (carrying the nominal series date 2007) of the *Aldous Huxley Annual: A Journal of Twentieth-Century Thought and Beyond*. The *Gedenkschrift* was as unusual as the *Festschrift* in its way of honoring the deceased. It combined several independent contributions by fellow scholars on modernist authors, an evaluation of Firchow's own criticism, a major new essay of his on the relationship between Huxley and Isherwood, and some forty pieces of as yet uncollected commentary by Huxley. The same issue announced the establishment of the "Peter Edgerly Firchow Memorial Essay Prize in Aldous Huxley Studies."

These yet-to-occur crestings of Peter's renown as an exponent of the British "humanist" crowd of the earlier twentieth century were, of course, beyond my ken at the time when I first met him and had already started thinking of him in terms quite distinct from those which most of his fellow Anglicists habitually applied to him as, in their eyes, foremost a leading professor of English. In 1979, I was in-

vited to Minneapolis for a term to offer a course on Proust, Mann, and Joyce under the auspices of Minnesota's Program in Comparative Literature, which was then chaired by Peter and had recently attracted Wlad Godzich. For me, back then, Peter was primarily the brilliant editor, translator, and explainer of Friedrich Schlegel's "*Lucinde*" and the *Fragments* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1971). As a fan of Romantic literature, I recommended enthusiastically this book to my own students at Stanford both for the way it captured qualities of the original German in English and for its insightful scholarly commentary. I admired Peter also because he was the writer with the requisite critical reach and imagination both to tie together "Conrad, Goethe, and the German Grotesque," *Comparative Literature Studies* 13 (1976): 60-73, and to explore modernist affinities of "Mental Music: Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* as Novels of Ideas," *Studies in the Novel* 9 (1977): 518-35. This range was recognizably that of a seasoned international comparatist. Peter's pleasure in probing a complicated topic in conversation, his sometimes whimsical, sometimes sardonic wit, an undogmatic openness, and an undisguised skeptical stance toward current fashionable theories and pieties made a combination that obviously discomfited some colleagues of strong ideological bent but I found congenial.

Inside the walls of their home Peter and Evelyn observed what they expressly called old-fashioned German hospitality, which included providing the guest with comfortable slippers as well as a good choice of drinks. Their daughter Pamina, today an accomplished adult, then just a child, was included unobtrusively in our intimate circle of 1979 — I remember fondly the heartwarming familial atmosphere, a sense of human contact which so many colleagues and former students have attested to (e.g., in the mentioned *Festschrift* and *Gedenkschrift*). Peter liked to talk with people in any comfortable setting, and that applied especially to his cultivation of aspirants to literary and cultural studies whose views he would elicit over suitable potations in a tavern or restaurant in the U.S., Europe, or Asia according to the circumstances. He cared about his students. He was the sort of person Erasmus definitely would have invited to the banquet. Over the years it seemed that Peter and I readily fell back into our own far-wandering conversation whenever I had the privilege of meeting him again somewhere at a conference, usually at a gathering of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) or of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). A typical recollection is that of observing Peter as he held some of my most discriminating European colleagues spellbound at the ICLA Congress in München (1988) with a version of his classic essay "Sunlight in the Hofgarten: *The Waste Land* and pre-1914 Munich," *Anglia* 111 (1993): 447-58. One especially memorable occasion was during the ACLA conference in Puerto Vallarta (1997) when Evelyn and my wife Adrienne were accompanying us, and we enjoyed getting away from the huge convention hotel and exploring the local scene together. Our conversation rambled over topics domestic, academic, and philosophic, and would momentarily veer into Spanish or German because of engagement with a particular subject matter or because of some local business to transact.

As one quickly discovers, for example in checking through the "Bibliography" of Peter's publications appended to the 2002 *Festschrift*, parts of his books were frequently reprinted as classic pieces, so fine was the writing and substance. But two books of his especially stand out in my mind as great achievements in comparative literary studies; indeed, today they represent a gold standard. One is *The Death of the German Cousin: Variations on a Literary Stereotype, 1890-1920* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1986), the other, building upon and transcending the first, is *Strange Meetings: Anglo-German Literary Encounters from 1910 to 1950* (Washington: Catholic UP of America, 2008). Obviously the two studies form a continuum carrying us from early stirrings to the aftermath of modernism. But they are much more than that as contributions to cultural history. What is so impressive in the case of both books is the union between the analyst's depth of empathy for the players on the scene — one searches for a term like Wilhelm Worringer's *Einfühlung* — and his passionate refusal to embrace cliché ideological labels, although such markers are a very important part of the story and their varying power is seriously acknowledged in Peter's analyses. The historical spread of the two books dictates that an overlapping of successive generations will pass before our eyes; yet a deep tragic thread binds the destinies of many who were caught up in the flow of their times. *The Death of the German Cousin* examines a profound sea change in cultural relations as the British Empire and its newly emerged rival, the German Empire, move into confrontation and face off in the madness of World War I. To anyone who understands the mutual admiration and cultural sharing between Ger-

mans and Britons in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — and no one surpasses Peter in this regard — the transformation going into modernism is gripping. We can apply the term "imagology" to categorize a major accomplishment of this eloquent book, because it traces in convincing details how the cultural picture of each other which two peoples had enjoyed underwent an often painful reconstruction. However, Peter takes us to deeper levels, because he ferrets out the all-too-human prevarications and foibles of some key tastemakers involved in the drift on the British side and shows the genuine puzzlement and anguish of others who grasp the senselessness of this cultural divorce. In many instances, British writers — notably the prominent "secular" types like Forster, Huxley, and Auden — experience the "death" of the German cousin as a cultural self-mirroring, and as paradigmatic of the profound trauma loosed in Europe's baleful civil war, rightly called the Great War. I believe that scholars of cinema have yet to discover the usefulness of Peter's book as a foil against which to project the thematics of death, madness, and enchantment in many films of the 1920s. *The Death of the German Cousin* plumbs a mystery of terrifying epochal proportions, the eros-thanatos eruption and great sickness of soul which Marcel Proust confronts in *Le Temps retrouvé* and Thomas Mann in *Der Zauberberg*.

Strange Meetings not only continues the direction established in *The Death of the German Cousin*, but adds further dimensions to the drama of cultural struggle which are part of the legacy of the horrors of World War II and the era of the Cold War. Peter must have felt a satisfaction mixed with sorrow in holding this product of long reflection in his hands just weeks before his death, because the "lessons" or "findings" carry all the pain that truth-telling can bring. Because I have reviewed *Strange Meetings* at some length in *Recherche Littéraire/Literary Research* 25 (2009): 98-100, I restrict myself here to a mere outline of what this masterful book achieves. Clearly, *Strange Meetings* merits being read alongside the work of eminent experts on the literary world of the Third Reich and DDR like J.M. Ritchie; and for reasons I note, it will be appreciated by readers who follow the work of eminent historians of international intrigue and cultural subversion in the twentieth century like Nigel West. In *Strange Meetings*, Peter broadens his canvas to include symptomatic American and Irish writers, such as Pound and Shaw, who were attracted fatefully to, or seduced only for a while in happier cases by, strains of fascist ideology. The much greater attraction among the British intelligentsia was to communism, and as we now know retrospectively through accumulated documentary evidence (presented, e.g., in the work of Nigel West), whereas the nazi threat lasted roughly one decade, the Soviet state apparatus was far more successful, and over a far longer stretch of decades, in recruiting educated Britons (plus US-Americans such as Alger Hiss) to be traitors and moles. The confusion of allegiances and impulses following World War I, as Peter shows, built serious dangers into the historical dynamics following World War II. While Peter clearly admires the positive core values of the British, he rises above mere partisanship or advocacy and will not gloss over the sadder facts of actual lives as lived, often replete with unpleasant moments of dishonesty or weakness.

One of the factors he faces squarely is the sheer number of British homosexual writers and well-placed officials who felt themselves to be outsiders in their own world. Many of these construed a kind of insider-outsider superiority to ordinary citizens who, in their view, could or would not "reform" their decadent and/or unjust society. Feeling sympathy with external forces such as the Comintern which promised to reshape human affairs gave them a substitute attachment. While Peter salutes instances of moral courage and clarity on the part of British authors facing the complexity of their age, he refuses to avert his eyes from the myriad failures by literary figures to acknowledge how their own lives exhibited or were interwoven shamefully with the cultural sicknesses of their age. Several further points add an admonitory value which some readers will accept as having crushing moral implications, whereas others naturally will resist because they cannot fail to see themselves implicated. Peter notes how the demonization of German culture in the cause of winning World War II afterwards helped perpetuate the willful blindness of many still eager to subvert their own western heritage. It not only bolstered excuses for perpetuating the anti-humanist strains in modernism and obfuscating distinctions between social-democratic, conservative, vitalist, and fascist thought; it also blocked really serious attention to the suffering of the putative collective "enemy" as a humanitarian issue. He spotlights the all-too-human efforts of many surviving figures to rewrite their own personal stories, in too many cases without remorse or admission of their own attack on western culture, but in some cases (e.g., Auden's) a late mellowing and deeper insight. Naturally, what Peter depicts has its place in a larger mo-

saic of cultural polarities and attractions that comparatists need to grasp as occurring in the dimension of time. Processes by which a culture like that of Britain tends now toward being more Francophile, now more Germanophile finally cannot be represented only by one synchronic slice or through one ideological optic. Peter's cosmopolitan background allows him to contextualize the British-German interaction in a way that makes his contribution stimulating for scholars who concentrate on other significant axes and polarities across Europe and its extensions in the immigrant nations.

What I celebrate in Peter is his synthesizing power that draws on a lifetime of deeper thought about human behavior as this appears captured in imaginative works and in the lives of creative artists conditioned by specific historical circumstances. On balance, Peter was like the "old-fashioned" British whom he so admired, in general suspicious of ideologies, those complicated rationalizations with an agenda behind them, hence also suspicious of "theories" beyond recognizing their limited heuristic usefulness; yet also aware that he personally valued the deeply rooted tradition of liberty as it had evolved in Britain, an honesty in "muddling through" on a provisional basis. Peter's way was to live a good life, and that meant pursuing a life of decent practice as an honest critic. We are the richer for having been touched by his example.

Selected Publications of Peter Firchow

- Firchow, Peter E. *Strange Meetings: Anglo-German Literary Encounters from 1910 to 1960*. Washington: Catholic U of America P, 2008.
- Firchow, Peter E. *Modern Utopian Fictions from H.G. Wells to Iris Murdoch*. Washington: Catholic U of America P, 2007.
- Firchow, Peter E. *Reluctant Modernists: Aldous Huxley and Some Contemporaries. A Collection of Essays*. Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2002.
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- Firchow, Peter E. "Literary Multilingualism and Modernity: The Anglo-American Perspective." *Multilinguale Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert*. Ed. Manfred Schmeling and Monika Schmitz-Emans. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002. 59-67.
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- Firchow, Peter E. *The End of Utopia: A Study of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1984.
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