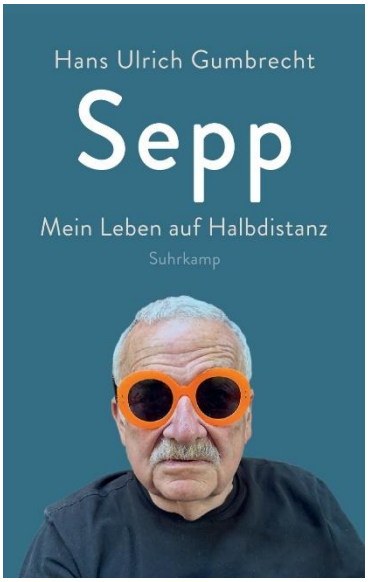

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UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

Several Warnings

A passionate reader I have never been, for all my loud and lifelong affirmations in the opposite sense. The earliest example for this deficiency was my relation to the dark green volumes of novels by the nineteenth century author Karl May, with their suggestive drawings on the covers. As it belonged to the individual ambitions and social obligations among junior high school students in Germany around 1960 to have read the largest possible number of them, I could rightfully claim to know more than sixty Karl May books, which almost corresponded to the total number which their ongoing republication had reached at that point. But to be honest, I had just spent enough time leafing through them to maintain a casual conversation with more patient Karl May-addicts. If ever any of those books captivated my specific interest, this was less the case with the proverbially famous novels about sachem “Winnetou,” about “The Treasure of the Silver Lake,”

or about the oriental adventures in “Across the Desert” than with stories from the homey Southern Bavarian world with protagonists like the “Miller with the Whip” or the “Silver Peasant” that the clever publishing company had just rediscovered and recycled.

Sixty years later and just retired from the “Albert Guérard Chair in Comparative Literature” at Stanford University, not much had changed. When my colleagues benevolently asked how I planned to use the time that I would no longer have to invest into teaching I obliged, in conventional academic style, by referring to my good intention of finally reading all the literary texts written by the Swiss classic Gottfried Keller whose biographical fiction “Grüner Heinrich” had impressed me during early semesters as a university student. During a cozy vacation morning in a deckchair on the Hawaiian island Maui, however, and with the best existing edition of Keller’s “Complete Works” in my hands, the idea’s mild fascination quickly evaporated.

There seems to be no way to get me excited about reading for reading’s sake. What reminds me of this shortcoming every evening is a pile next to my wife’s bed of bulky softcover novels, as travelers find and buy them in airport shops before long transatlantic flights. It matters to Ricky that nobody would ever confuse them with “good literature.” For without half an hour of relaxed speed-reading in such unqualified page-turners she will not fall asleep, which is why she has consumed many hundreds of them over the years. “Division of labor, I read and you write,” she says with her usual irony and adds, also rather ironically, how she envies my capacity “to absorb books or essays by merely looking at their covers or titles.” Her ambiguous compliment captures what may be the main element of my strange reading habits. I hardly ever need to make it through a book cover to cover, and if it occasionally happens, I congratulate myself on “work well done” with childish pride.

One of the few exceptions from this attitude was a recent, quite painful moment when, at the bench of a Frankfurt bus stop, I had arrived at the concluding sentences in my second entire reading of Theodor Fontane's master-novel "Effie Briest." I would have loved the book to be much longer. As another cherished literary experience, I can mention the evocation of specific social moods prevailing in Madrid during the late 1940s throughout the chapters of "Tiempo de Silencio" by Luis Martín-Santos. After all, I do have an inkling of what passionate reading may feel like. But I normally stop concentrating on a book as soon as I find what I expected to get from it or when I hit upon a passage that triggers my own thinking. On top of things, I am very slow at following a text word by word, which makes it difficult to integrate reading sessions into my always tight working schedules The chair that I have reserved for such moments in my Stanford library carrell has long remained empty.

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Such behavior seems to contradict the status of a retired literary scholar at Stanford University, and it is removed enough from the corresponding expectations to have caused both embarrassment and a self-prohibition to talk about my flagrant lack of book experience, especially among members of the educated American middle class who love to canonize "close reading" as a form of existential fulfillment. I thus reacted with utter relief and joy to the provocation of my colleague Franco Moretti who introduced the concept of a comprehensive "distant reading" into the debates of literary studies. At the same time my life as a literary scholar implacably confronted me with a both parallel and even steeper challenge. For I do not only lack the passion and patience for reading; writing does not belong to my natural or acquired strengths either. Although I have never stopped to produce texts since my adolescent years, including those poorly manufactured avantgarde poems typical in the careers of future literary scholars, the first mildly positive

reactions to my writing style only began to emerge once I had reached a certain level of prestige in the hierarchies of academic life. Much earlier, an intellectually rather positive review of my doctoral thesis on medieval epic published in 1972 had ended with an explicit recommendation to attend "dyslexia treatment" with the goal of bringing the author's prose to a more acceptable level. While such brutal directness is hard to imagine on the pages of an academic journal today, I tried to take it seriously, without any notable success.

As I started these pages with self-deprecating revelations, I should also admit that, from an emotional standpoint, I have never cared much about teaching. While I used to receive surprisingly positive students' evaluations, which helped to increase my salary, and while I am of course familiar with those rare moments when debates with younger minds inspire new ideas, enthusiasm about teaching or an urge to teach have always been alien to me. I ended up in the Humanities and Arts as my professional world because they astonishingly made it possible to earn a living with activities that entertain me well without having any palpable social function, and in this larger context I did accept teaching as a plausible component of my obligations. But when I am obliged to describe certain results of my thinking I care less about reaching people than about giving coherence, transparency, and complexity to what is going on in my mind. Why then, without any passion for reading, special writing skills, and pedagogical vocation, I chose literary studies as my university career has always been an enigma to me. All I knew was that I was even less talented in mathematics, scientific thought, and manual practices. Nor have I ever cultivated any of the so-called "elevated hobbies" because I could not find the forms of competence that they require. Attempts at philately and chess, at horseback riding and sailing ended in different states of depression. Had my choice of study after all been a decision for the least visible lack of talent? Unfortunately, this question does not emerge from any respectable modesty. On the contrary,

"modesty is not my main problem," as Ricky never ceases to remind me. And she is right. Based on undeserved immodesty, an aggressively critical view of the Humanities' potential to enlighten society has become part of my academic profile. Since the earliest professional beginnings, I have also been skeptical about the claim that the work in disciplines like "History" or "Literary Studies" can be considered the equivalent of research performed in the natural sciences. With so many negative premises, it is quite surprising how well I have altogether done in the Humanities.

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Each retrospective on my life also makes visible traces of an ambition which, quite different from the intellectual and practical gifts, seems "endless," as my mother liked to say with a surprising tone of alleviation. This ambition has manifested itself in an obsession to hold on to measurable marks of professional progress. The early appointment to a full professorship was an encouraging start in this direction, followed by a number of further outside offers and by the growing group of former students in whose successful academic careers I had played a role. Even more addictive is the permanent concentration on my list of publications that I meticulously supplement although I have long become its only reader. The present state is 2372 individual essays and books, including texts about my work that I only include to increase the number or, even more narcissistically, a total of 3575 bibliographical references, taking into account translations and re-publications. Close to two hundred monographic book units in almost twenty languages have my name on their cover. I simply cannot resist the temptation to share these statistics as early as possible in this book, however little they have to do with intellectual quality or true significance. For they provide me with an apparently solid reference to hold off attacks of insecurity about my "lifetime achievement," an insecurity that I expect to continue until the last day of my existence. The recent and indeed surprising discovery that my six weekly working days of at least fifteen hours turn out

to be quite entertaining for me and make the question superfluous what else I should do with the available time, has never really neutralized the ambition and lack of confidence that permeate my psyche. I also notice with pain when celebrity figures who once seemed to care about my opinions no longer react to end of the year-greetings or to occasional e-mails – a former American Secretary of State and the German-born coach of the English national soccer team being only the two most recent among such cases.

Different from my belief in printed output and in public resonance, I had long interpreted rituals of academic self-celebration as symptoms of bad personal taste and did consider the tendency of retired professors to get engaged in autobiographical writing as a cheap form of occupational therapy. Then, some four years ago, Jonathan, the director of Suhrkamp, my German publishing company, and Eva, the non-fiction editor, surprisingly asked for a two-hour online meeting. Our exchange bluntly started with the commission, formulated by Jonathan in a friendly tone of sobriety, to write an intellectual autobiography in German, rather than in English, as most of my books during the past decades. The implied intellectual appreciation reached my fragile self-image as a jolt of positive energy. And yet I first kept up the aesthetic prejudice against the genre of academic autobiography because I found the concept overwhelmingly heavy. Would there be any readers, I asked back with untypical modesty, for a narrative about my working life in its daily regularity and lack of drama, unperturbed by any major private problems and long finished as an institutional career? The answer continued to be decided with only a slight undertone of impatience: “This is just a problem for us to take care of, not for you.”

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As a consequence, I indeed wrote the first pages of this book on one of the not so infrequent rainy days of a Californian spring, still in awe with the challenges of the genre. I had not yet come up

with any clear imagination about potential readers, as it belongs to the rules of texts about one's own life since the "Confessions" of Saint Augustin who, as my dauntingly magnificent first predecessor, had addressed his words directly to God. What did I possibly have to offer, and who would be interested in the potential "confessions" of a Humanities scholar? I had of course asked some friends about their expectations and received partly temperate and partly encouraging, but above all thoroughly centrifugal answers. It could be worthwhile, suggested one of them, to describe the world of the Humanities as a profession to outsiders, who might find it exotic as a way of earning an income just by thinking and talking about objects of one's own fascination without fulfilling any obvious social functions as they are natural in the world of doctors, lawyers, or engineers. This proposal had too much of a Sunday morning rhetoric in defense of the Humanities for my taste, predictable and bland, like sparkling wine mixed with orange juice. Some former doctoral students thought of a narrative explaining how I had become a successfully motivating "coach" in the academic world. I did enjoy the athletic connotation but who, except my own advisees, would buy and read such a book? And who would possibly relate to the other idea, in the style of mid-twentieth-century Existentialism, of relating all my memories, private and public, to the no longer so distant future moment of my death? The idea of such a writing process not only triggered fits of depression but also the fear of a potential competition with some eminent authors who had confronted themselves with this precarious task.

It finally was my friend, the great historian Dan Diner, who, during a breakfast conversation at the Hebrew University, came up with an idea that appeared not only grandiose enough for my complicated immodesty but also potentially synchronized with those readers whom the publishers probably had in mind. As my life had been taking place to almost equal parts on two different continents with their diverging intellectual atmospheres and in an ongoing conversation with

thinkers from different South American countries, I had become an unusually qualified observer of the Spirit, Diner quite literally said, an observer capable of tracing its complex movements in a variety of places since the middle of the past century. He went so far to even confront me with the most fearful implication of this idea, that is with the need to invent a discourse that would renew, under present-day conditions, the Hegelian legacy of thinking and writing. It was precisely this impression of a grotesquely overwhelming task that gave the until then shallow project of my intellectual autobiography an individual focus and traction. More than all too differentiated reflections regarding the history of the Humanities, the question about the movements of the Spirit and their traces would make up for the substance of the book. In other words: I engaged in the bet to awaken to new life the much frowned upon "History of the Spirit" with everyday memories and from the first-person singular perspective of a retired literature professor.

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It thus became the goal to describe certain moments of my intellectual life as precisely as possible against a larger Hegelian background, but I needed to keep such precision from turning into a Freudian kind of self-analysis or into a self-fashioning along ethical principles, as it has become popular in the academic Humanities. There was no time left in my life for attempts at therapy or at moral improvement. On such a strictly memory-oriented path of writing, it is impossible to avoid a quite familiar problem which, in my case, had reached an uncanny proportion. We all know the difficulty of distinguishing between the reality of past situations or events and the sediments of narratives with which we have often been referring to them. My body has so well preserved the feelings of humiliation and pain through which I suffered during the early days of elementary school that it sometimes makes them present in strong emotions that are out of control. Whenever by contrast I try to talk about the origins of this trauma, the words transition into a scene where

Ms. Fruh, the first-year teacher, communicates to my parents that she plans to transfer me to a school of special education, “Hilfsschule” in the German language of 1954, and they continue with a conversation at home whose urgent seriousness may have locked me into a lifetime habit of unconditionally strenuous learning. I cannot decide, however, whether I did experience these moments myself or whether they have stayed with me as the remnant of stories told and conjured up with lasting effects by my parents.

As I so very much enjoy the role of a solo entertainer, I have over the years produced a large repertoire of such narratives with uncertain reference. For most of them I can quite easily discern between invented plots and those tales whose content is most likely real, and this capacity informs my good intention to operate as a reliable author. Occasionally that vast pile of traces from the past also helps me to keep at bay the fear that my memory may fade away with old age. At any event, a residue of passages will remain on the pages of my book whose authenticity I cannot guarantee. This means that I am an unreliable narrator in the literal sense, not only because of my fragile self-image and the specific ambitions it incites, but above all because of a loquaciousness that likes to ignore problems of truth and responsibility. What I am talking about only marginally overlaps with the notion of the “unreliable narrator” that the literary critic Wayne Booth invented for intentional strategies with which authors of Western Literary Realism used to deceive their readers. Like most authors today, I have no specific wish to delude my readers. Above all I wish to bind them to my every word, if necessary, I admit, at the expense of full reliability.

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While I could not quite figure out philosophically how to convey an ultimate basis of reality and realism to my recollections, the diversity and the sheer amount with which, once activated, they emerged, was surprising and at first glance overpowering. What criteria were available to reduce

this untamed complexity and to give it a comprehensive form? How could I process those hundreds of white file cards filled on both sides with memory notes in my tiny handwriting? For all of my attempts to be an excentric character within the world of the Humanities, I first reacted in the most typically academic way, that is by playing through particularly counterintuitive narrative forms, among them an inversion of the primary chronological order and a condensation of the running autobiographical time into the synchronicity of a historical period. At the end of some weeks with similarly erratic thought experiments, I understood that such ambitious variations would inevitably undercut the clarity of what I had to say and thus the potential appeal of my book for its potential readers. This is why I will simply start with the earliest impressions that I believe to remember and then progressively narrate along the course of my intellectual life until its present moment.

Each of the chronologically subsequent chapters will be connected to a particular place that I associate with specific ideas and their cultural flavors: Würzburg, Paris, München, Salamanca, Konstanz, Bochum, Rio de Janeiro, Berkeley, Siegen, Dubrovnik, Berlin as former Eastern German capital city, Stanford, Santiago de Chile, Kyoto, Moscow, and Jerusalem. Eva Gilmer, my editor and friend, speaks of an "archipelago of intellectual islands," each of which, in its impact, transcends the corresponding years of my life. One of the earlier chapters for example refers to Paris because several stays there were a decisive part of my final high school years, but the contents go far beyond that time and include my most recent stays as a lecturer at Collège de France. There were some other reasons that suggested to connect different parts of the narrative to different places and thus to the category of space. One was the observation that the never premeditated line-up of towns where I lived has certainly shaped my way of experiencing the movements and the possible progress of the Spirit. Even more important for the emphasis on space was the status of "presence" as a conceptual ground and somehow as a telos of my thinking over the years. I am referring to

"presence" in the phenomenological sense of one among two modalities by which the human mind processes our perceptions. It attributes meanings to all perceptions as intentional objects, but it also relates them—and this is what matters here -- to presence as the space occupied by the observer's body. Spatial presence as a philosophical motif drew my attention to a recurrent but often overlooked concern in the thinking of Hegel, that is to the question of how specific places where ideas occur contribute to the conceptual and material ways in which they articulate themselves.

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Reviewing some initial thoughts about the form of this book may have drawn me back too far into an insider discourse of the academic ivory tower. I should therefore return one final time to everyday life in its possible relations with the history of the Spirit. As I have lived and worked at so many different places, I am lacking a clear sense of what may be the center and the stable ground of my existence. Each time that I moved to a new environment, parts of my world configuration had to change and ended up settling into new forms. This must be one reason why the first steps of immersing myself into foreign cultures have always been relatively easy for me. Some Brazilian friends like to describe me with the idiomatic expression "trocar de pele," that is as one of those persons who constantly "change their skin" without losing identity. Whether I think and dream in English, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and sometimes in Italian depends on fluctuating contexts. On the other hand, only my German speaking -- and on a good day also my Brazilian Portuguese tone -- are free of accent, whereas in California everybody recognizes me as a linguistic alien after more than thirty-seven years of living close to the Pacific. Without trying to cultivate any eccentricity and without really missing a non-ambiguous status of belonging, I used and I continue to spend most of my life in contacts and situations of half-distance. Only with my wife, with my

four children, and with my five grandchildren I cannot imagine half-distance. This is why their presence has no place in my archipelago of intellectual islands.

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Half-distance, however, does suit an unreliable narrator who never quite achieves the union with his memories and with the languages in which he evokes them. It is the one mediating perspective from which I can relate stories of my life to the History of the Spirit. As I have accepted the commission to write this book, I should now rather start than think further about the conditions of its discursive possibility. Addressed to imagined readers, the previous paragraphs, and pages have helped me to sense a tuning. For the first time I also feel a pleasant impatience to start.