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The Signature of Alfred Hornung

MANFRED SIEBALD

When, in 1987, Alfred Hornung submitted his application for a professorship in American studies at Johannes Gutenberg University, I was a member of the appointment committee and was assigned the job of reviewing his publications and the record of his teaching. Being a junior member of the faculty, I was impressed with the range of subjects that he had dealt with so far, and I fully agreed to our putting him on the short list of contenders. Sure, I had some ideas about American Puritanism that differed from his assessments put forth in his habilitation thesis, one of his many studies concerned with life writing. But his central contention—that any autobiographical utterance is a response to a sense of cultural crisis—has stayed with me until today and has surfaced in my own thinking and writing about life writing again and again.

Alfred Hornung's inaugural lecture at Johannes Gutenberg University in May 1990 was entitled "Postmodern—Post Mortem: Der amerikanische Roman der 80er Jahre" and was a tour de force through the theory and practice of novel-writing. The twenty-six titles presented in his voluminous handout covered cultural history, poststructuralist theory, and a good number of primary sources. This handout was a harbinger of the young scholar's wide casting of the scholarly nets that we all would witness in the years to come.

One of Alfred Hornung's first publication projects in the American Studies Department at Mainz was the *Lexikon amerikanische Literatur* (Meyers Lexikonverlag, 1992), which revised and expanded articles that he had written for the monumental lexicon *Der Literatur-Brockhaus* (1988). The entire department was excited to collaborate on such a comprehensive work, and everybody loved the secrecy of the project. We all still remember the code word referring to the book: "steinbec" (not a spelling mistake but a concession to Microsoft's DOS rules which did not allow data designations to contain more than eight characters). "Steinbec" turned out to be a large-scale enterprise indeed—not only absorbing much of our energy but stimulating the powers of everybody involved. Alfred did not need much prodding to move his team—he just lived out his own infectious enthusiasm, and colleagues as well as student assistants were eager to emulate his attitude.

Together with a few colleagues, I was given the opportunity to contribute a number of articles to this work—mainly from such of my research areas as "religion and literature," "music and literature," "popular culture," and "nineteenth-century literature," but I was also asked to write entries about literary figures that I had hardly heard of before. Working on these more arcane subjects naturally broadened my own literary horizon and made me recognize the comprehensive knowledge of the general editor. What was even more impressive—and what was explicitly lauded by one of the book's reviewers—was the fact that our authorship was explicitly acknowledged in the preface. This is not naturally the rule in such projects, and we—the otherwise anonymous contributors—felt valued in our work (which had sometimes continued into the wee hours).

The intense working atmosphere in those days was balanced by the light-hearted stories from his youthful years that Alfred shared with us—for instance, about his jobbing as a bread delivery boy in Franconia. During that time, he claimed, a baker taught him how to manufacture a "Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte"—an icon of the art of German baking. When we prompted him to prove it, he promised that in due time he would prepare one for us. This story and this pledge stuck in our minds and set our imaginations wandering. Thus, late one evening, while doing research on the lexicon entry covering Edgar Allan Poe, I sort of dreamed that, in an early draft of his famous poem "The Raven," the nineteenth-century poet had anticipated our nightly work on "steinbec." I was able to reconstruct his text, originally entitled "The Ballad of the Black Forest Gateau."

> Once upon a midnight dreary, while we pondered, weak and weary,
> Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore –
> while we nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
> as of someone gently rapping, rapping at our office door –
> "Must be Hornung," we all muttered, "tapping at our office door –
> we have heard him knock before."
>
> There he stood, in humble fashion, and he said, full of compassion:
> "You all must by now be starving and your tummies must be sore.
> How I wish I had a platter full of yummy eating matter!
> But, alas, it is too late to find an open bakery store.
> What on earth can keep you going, without dropping to the floor,
> and what can your powers restore?
>
> I once learned the tricks of baking cherry cakes, and started making
> rich Black Forest ones that tasted of the saintly days of yore.
> And since then I have kept feeding multitudes whom I heard pleading
> for an overload of sugar and for cal'ries by the score.

> By and by the crafting of gateaux became my fav'rite chore,
> drawing crowds outside my door.
>
> They all could not help agreeing that no living human being
> ever baked delights more tasty and more luscious heretofore.
> You now need some patient waiting. Just continue salivating
> until I can bring a sample full of savors to explore.
> Trust my word: I will deliver – I will bake gateaux galore.
> You will get one …."

Unfortunately, the text of the draft manuscript broke off at this point, and we will have to be wondering evermore what the last word of that last line was meant to be, and when the delivery of the promised Black Forest gateau is to be expected.

The project *Lexikon amerikanische Literatur* was just one of many at Mainz, the most time-and-energy-consuming being the editorship of the journal *Amerikastudien/ American Studies*. Alfred Hornung served as general editor, and he trained his team to reach new levels of excellence: With my colleague Carmen Birkle being responsible for the reviews, and myself for the articles, every submission went through seven stages of fact- and source-checking as well as proofreading. Thus, in the course of twelve years there were thousands of pages to peruse and countless letters and emails to be exchanged with authors and readers. Our team learned many lessons from observing Alfred—notably planning ahead, absolute diligence in execution, independence from the many volatile academic fashions, and resilience in cases of unforeseen technical glitches.

What will remain of this extraordinary academic life? Will it be the prolific publishing career, with hundreds of books, articles, and reviews? The many scholarly "children" sent forth into university life? The new directions—notably the internationalization and transatlantic orientation—of American studies at Mainz?

Although I admire all these achievements, I will probably remember something else more vividly: the humane atmosphere in Alfred's section of the department—which was not necessarily to be expected in the competitive professional environment of academia. On a quite personal level, for instance, I was not compelled to give up my second time-consuming career—that of a singer-songwriter—but I was given enough room to live out my nonacademic talents. Without wanting to idealize the years in which I had the chance to work in these surroundings, I simply have to testify to an exceptional culture of breathing space on the one hand, and of appreciation on the other—and that culture bore a signature: that of Alfred Hornung.