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Alfred at Eighty—Really?

SUSANNE BECKER von DADELSEN

This birthday instantly sends me back to Mainz in 1989, to a half-written PhD thesis and a swirl of intellectual longing. I had just returned from my Government of Canada Award in Toronto, where Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was wrecking the nerves of the literary world. And there, in the American Studies Department of JGU Mainz, a young professor named Alfred Hornung had just started out. We aspiring women students had campaigned for him during the hiring process. We wanted Postmodernism! Feminism! Poststructuralism! He—coming from Würzburg, Bamberg, and most importantly Columbia University in New York—promised all that. Would he establish it in Puritan Mainz?

More urgently: Would he take me on as one of his first doctoral students?

When I asked, I encountered—never to forget—Alfred's signature style: absolute focus, attentive listening, and a pinch of dry, nonchalant humor. "Of course," he said to supervising my dissertation on Atwood, Canadian postmodernism, and the feminist Gothic. This was more than acceptance; it was an act of confidence in my work that startled me. That early and generous respect gave me room to grow, to dare.

It was all the more remarkable because Alfred Hornung was already a renowned professor, energetically reshaping American studies in Mainz. He brought not only the up-to-date theories we craved, but also ambitious connections, intellectual independence, and an assertive spirit that elevated the field to new levels. And his openness felt all the more striking in the context. In those days, my generation's image of female university careers was shaped by an excellent female research fellow in our department who, for every lecture, had to carry her professor's enormous tape recorder, switch it on, sit through the hour, then switch it off—winter term, summer term. —But perhaps that memory is just a figment of my Gothic imagination—?!

Don't we know all about the versatility of memory?

I still have my notes from Prof. Hornung's 1991 lecture on Postmodern Fiction and Autobiography. I later wrote about the experience of it in *Living American Studies*, a 2010 volume dedicated to him by his former students—many women, now influential professors. "Light dawned that morning," I wrote then, fifteen years ago. We have learned that memory changes with our present disposition, but that image of light, enlightenment, brightness stays with me. So do the Hornungian discourses on the processes between art and life, which shaped my reading of the feminine Gothic—especially the dynamics of experience, excess and escape—and informed the ways I taught it.

Most importantly, they framed my courses at Columbia University. The Columbia connection was another signature asset of this famous Americanist. In 1991, he offered me the next visiting professorship in Columbia University's English Department, where he was establishing the exchange with Mainz. The deal: I would teach in New York and finish my dissertation. I did both—and soon after, earned my PhD.

Alfred's confidence in my work continued even when my path veered toward journalism. I loved academic life, especially teaching, but I knew early that my future was in journalism. After an internship, I had been offered the chance to work as a freelance reporter for German public television. From my early interviews with figures from the worlds of culture and science—sometimes with literary stars like Paul Auster, in 1994 Berlin—my career in journalism has had a particular focus on American themes. Alfred's immense knowledge, his vigorous extension of American studies, and his capacity to expand questions from theory in cultural interpretation have influenced my work throughout. His comments have always mattered to me. Considering my ZDF documentary *Stars vs. Trump* with well-known representatives of US culture commenting on the first year of Trump's presidency in 2017, the prominent Americanist recently urged—with characteristic irony—that I produce a sequel "to prevent the return …." Attention and liberating humor: Always his way.

This relationship—part mentorship, part ongoing dialogue—is one of the rarest in my life.

As I write, it is close to the thirtieth anniversary of my *Rigorosum* in American studies, August 17, 1995. The writing workshop standard would be to start my final sentences with "I remember …." But more precisely: I am thankful.

Thankful for our exchanges about art and life. About life—for his encouragement to take my children to North America, as he and Beate Neumeier had once done with Alexander. About art—for his fine, precise life writing on Jack London and Al Capone—"unrivaled" biographies in the eyes of German critics. And about death—for the quiet solidarity of mourning Paul Auster's passing together.

Thankful for his early recognition of the feminine Gothic, which I remain convinced is vital in a world scarred by hate, bloodshed, and so-called domestic violence.

I am thankful, too, for our ongoing conversations about new currents in American studies, especially the transnational turn. In my view, the *Journal of Transnational American Studies,* with Alfred as editor in chief, represents a powerful case for the

necessary connectedness of scholarly and journalistic criticism—vital, for example, in examining Trumpian authoritarianism.

At this dark moment for America—as universities and museums face governmental attack and the erosion of history and knowledge—light dawns in Mainz. Here, we will turn to the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies, which offers a forum for analysis, resistance, and intellectual enlightenment. I am convinced that the American brain drain will strengthen the transnational community.

Thank you, Alfred, for your early faith, for New York, for space to grow, for the blend of rigor and humor, and for the decades of conversation.

Beyond thankful—and still inspired.