

Fasnacht, Schnitzelbängg and Hebel

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No institution illustrates the importance of the dialect for the identity of Basel more clearly than the Fasnacht, the carnival that begins with the *Morgestraich* at four o'clock in the morning of the Monday after Ash Wednesday and lasts for exactly seventy-two hours. Part C described the social role of the Fasnacht and its cliques. In the present context, its interest lies in the fact that its literary forms are composed in dialect.¹ The lanterns of the cliques carry satirical verses in Baseldytsch, while the *Zeedel* distributed to spectators comment on the theme of a clique in verse. The *Schnitzelbängg*, sung verses that comment on the events of the past year, are performed in restaurants and cellars by singers whose masks preserve their anonymity.

The *Schnitzelbängg* is a demanding literary form. Each verse consists of a short sequence of lines that leads to a punch line, often presented with a painted picture board, the *Helgen*, which the singer reveals at the decisive moment. Since the verses must be in Baseldytsch, the associations that organise the performances have traditionally paid attention to the correctness of the dialect.² The targets of the satire include politicians, banks, pharmaceutical groups and international institutions. Bank failures, regulatory scandals and the turbulence of the Swiss financial centre have regularly appeared in the verses. The collapse of Credit Suisse in 2023, for instance, provided material for numerous *Schnitzelbängg* in the following year.³

The Fasnacht thus fulfils a function that a financial centre needs but rarely finds: it provides a public forum in which the powerful of the city are criticised in a ritualised form, without legal consequences and with a humour that relieves tension. Since the singers remain anonymous and the verses are composed in a dialect that outsiders understand only in part, the criticism stays within the community. The international employees of the BIS and of the pharmaceutical groups watch the processions with interest,

yet the satirical content of the verses remains largely inaccessible to them.⁴ The dialect therefore draws a line between those who belong to the city and those who merely work in it, a line that is permeable for those who learn the language but clearly visible for those who do not.

The most famous literary figure of the Alemannic dialect is a native of Basel. Johann Peter Hebel was born in Basel in 1760, the son of a father from the Palatinate and a mother from Hausen in the Wiese valley, which today belongs to the German district of Lörrach. He grew up partly in Basel and partly in Hausen, studied theology in Erlangen and later rose to the highest offices of the Protestant church of Baden.⁵ His *Alemannische Gedichte*, published in 1803, were the first significant collection of poetry in an Alemannic dialect and established the dialect as a language of literature. Goethe reviewed them favourably in 1805, which secured their reception in the German-speaking world.⁶

Hebel is a figure of the whole Dreiland. He wrote in the dialect of the Markgräflerland, which differs only slightly from that of Basel. Today he is honoured on both sides of the border. The *Hebelstiftung* in Basel organises an annual *Hebelmähli*, a commemorative dinner, while the state of Baden-Württemberg awards the Johann-Peter-Hebel-Preis for literature from the Alemannic region.⁷ His prose stories in the *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes* of 1811, written in Standard German, belong to the classics of German literature. Hebel thus embodies the dual linguistic identity of the region: a dialect that connects the neighbours across the Rhine and a standard language that connects them with the German-speaking world as a whole.

The cultivation of the dialect has also found institutional forms outside the Fasnacht. Associations dedicated to Baseldytsch publish texts, organise readings and maintain the tradition of dialect theatre, while the *Christoph Merian Verlag* and other local publishers have produced dialect literature, dictionaries and recordings.⁸ The *Basler Mundart* is also present in the songs of local musicians and in the comedy of cabaret artists, who play with the contrast between the old city dialect and the speech of younger generations. These cultural forms keep the dialect visible and give it a prestige that supports its survival under the pressure of migration and international business.

1 Notes

1. On the Basel Fasnacht, its course (Morgestraich, Cortège, Gässle) and its social role, see Part C, Chapter II; on the inscription of the Basel Fasnacht on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible

Cultural Heritage of Humanity in December 2017, see UNESCO, decision of the Intergovernmental Committee, 12th session, Jeju 2017. To be verified. ↩

2. On the Schnitzelbängg as a dialect verse form and the associations of Schnitzelbängg singers in Basel (e.g. the Schnitzelbängg-Comité), see the publications of the Fasnachts-Comité Basel and the literature on the Basel Fasnacht. To be verified. ↩
3. On the treatment of the banking crisis of 2023 and the takeover of Credit Suisse by UBS in the Schnitzelbängg of the Basel Fasnacht 2024, see the reports of the Basel press. To be verified. ↩
4. On the Fasnacht as a ritual of criticism and social cohesion, see the anthropological literature on carnival and the studies on the Basel Fasnacht by Eugen A. Meier and others. To be verified. ↩
5. On Johann Peter Hebel (born 10 May 1760 in Basel, died 22 September 1826 in Schwetzingen), see HLS, article "Hebel, Johann Peter"; Neue Deutsche Biographie, vol. 8, 1969. To be verified. ↩
6. Johann Peter Hebel, Allemannische Gedichte. Für Freunde ländlicher Natur und Sitten, Karlsruhe 1803; Goethe's review appeared in the Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung in 1805. To be verified. ↩
7. On the Basler Hebelstiftung, the Hebelmähli and the Johann-Peter-Hebel-Preis of the state of Baden-Württemberg, see the information published by the foundation and by the Ministry of Science, Research and Arts of Baden-Württemberg. To be verified. ↩
8. On associations and publishers dedicated to the Basel dialect, including the publications of the Christoph Merian Verlag and the dialect theatre tradition (e.g. the Baseldytschi Bihni), see the information published by these institutions. To be verified. ↩

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