

William Fetterman

Pennsylvania German Dialect Verse and Its Criticism

This essay is concerned with the intersections, and the lack of intersections, between Pennsylvania German dialect poets and Pennsylvania German dialect literary scholars and critics. Since the 1860s there has been no real lack of verse production—dialect verse, as well as prose and plays, continues to be written today. The poets I take as being both the most aesthetically significant as well as historically representative are Henry Harbaugh and Henry Lee Fisher in the second half of the nineteenth century; John Birmelin and Ralph Funk from the mid-twentieth century; and Russell Gilbert and Anna Faust from the latter twentieth century.¹ The major published scholastic and critical studies of Pennsylvania German dialect verse are by Harry Hess Reichard (1918; 1940; 1942), Preston A. Barba (1938; 1951; 1968; 1970), Earl F. Robacker (1943), and Earl Haag (1988).² The complete list of contemporary dialect literature scholars is difficult to cite, for my experience is that most dialect literature criticism by authorities such as Richard Beam, Richard Druckenbrod, Susan Johnson, Eugene Stine, and Don Yoder exists primarily in personal conversations and letters rather than in a more formal written context.

What past criticism has been, and what present criticism has become, is directly influenced by the historical and aesthetic, as well as personal and social content and context of the dialect poets themselves. Scholarly criticism has also had a reciprocal influence with the direction of dialect poetry (beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s), particularly in the latter twentieth century; however, historically this has been at best a minimal influence on verse production. Given the relative rarity of Pennsylvania German dialect writers and their readers, it may or not be that the future of the dialect literature will depend more upon academic input, but this is as yet an unanswerable question.

My writing about Pennsylvania German dialect literature is concerned almost exclusively with the theatre; and have, in consonance with Reichard, Barba, Beam, and Haag, been concerned more with

biography, and appreciative aesthetics within a historical context, than with actual literary criticism. This is a direct result of the pioneering work by Reichard, which has significantly influenced all dialect scholars from Barba through the present; and in turn, both enriched as well as circumscribed literary dialect activity.

Before addressing criticism of Pennsylvania German dialect poetry, an abridged review of the six mentioned poets follows since for many readers, their work is often obscure or unknown. It is for that exact reason that the tradition of Pennsylvania German critical scholarship has been concerned with biography and appreciative aesthetics within a historical context.

Henry Harbaugh (1817-67) grew up on a farm in Franklin County and worked his way through school as a carpenter, millwright, and teacher. He was ordained as a minister in the Reformed Church (now United Church of Christ) in 1843; served as pastor at Lewisburg, Lancaster, and Lebanon; in 1863 became the chair of didactic and practical theology at the Mercersburg Seminary (which he taught until his death); and in 1850 founded *The Guardian*, a monthly Reformed Church magazine which he edited and wrote for until his death. It was in *The Guardian*, beginning in 1861, that Harbaugh published his seventeen dialect poems. After his death, the Reformed Church Publication Board issued fifteen of these poems (four with Harbaugh's English versions) as *Harbaugh's Harfe* (1870; revised and reissued 1902). I would characterize Harbaugh's verse as being very nostalgic and sentimental, sincerely heartfelt but not intellectually insightful or profound and as such is very typically Victorian American in content and tone.

Henry Lee Fisher (1822-1909) was a distant relative of Harbaugh. Born in Franklin County, he attended the same one-room school house that Harbaugh later mythologized in "Das Alt Schul-Haus an der Krick" (The Old School-House at the Creek). After teaching in Ohio and his native county from 1846-48, he took up law, and was admitted to the bar at Chambersburg in 1848; at Gettysburg in 1850; and in 1853 at York, where he worked and lived until his death. In 1875 Fisher became sick and in convalescence wrote one hundred stanzas related to the York marketplace in preparation for the United States of America centennial, titled "'S Marik-Haus Mittes in d'r Schtadt" (The Marketplace in the Middle of the City). Encouraged by these first attempts at versification, Fisher wrote "Die Alte Zeite" (The Olden Times), which was published with "'S Marik-Haus" in 1879. Fisher would later rework his dialect poems from "Die Aldte Zeite" and publish them in English as *Olden Times, or Pennsylvania Rural Life, some fifty years ago* in 1888. His later poetry was more formal, with the publication of *Kurzweil un Zeitfertreib* (Leisure and Amusement) in 1882 (republished 1896); while the title points to Fisher's conception of writing poetry as an occasional, fun activity, it is a very self-

consciously literary work, comprised of many translations into Pennsylvania German dialect from poets such as Longfellow, Hebel, Burns, Whittier, Felner, Bryant, Poe, and Byron. I would characterize Fisher's best work as being "'S Marik-Haus" and particularly "Die Alte Zeite" and *Olden Times*, for their documentary value of everyday life—the folklore recorded by another reluctant artist.

John Birmelin (1873-1950) was born in Long Swamp Township, Berks County, and moved to Allentown, Lehigh County, in 1901. Although he did not formally graduate from high school, he studied music privately, and became choirmaster and organist for the Church of the Sacred Heart in Allentown, in which he served shortly before his death. His verse was published in Preston Barba's weekly newspaper column "'S Pennsylvawnish Deitsch Eck" (The Pennsylvania German Corner), and collected in *Gezwitscher* (Bird-Peeps) (1938), and the two posthumous publications *The Later Poems of John Birmelin* (1951) and *Mammi Gans* (Mother Goose) (ca. 1952). I would characterize Birmelin's most masterful work to be his dialect translations of the English "Mother Goose" rhymes and selected poems from Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*. The musicality of his verse, in both meter and rhyme, is of a quality I don't foresee ever being surpassed by later dialect poets; and Birmelin is considered to be the greatest Pennsylvania German dialect poet.

Ralph Funk (1889-1969) was born in Stockertown, Northampton County. He attended Muhlenberg College for two years, but discontinued his education to work with the engineering corps of the Lackawanna Railroad. He was granted a certificate of registration in civil engineering, and later worked for the Lehigh and New England Railroad and the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company. His poems were often published in Barba's "Eck" column, and shortly before his death he selected 112 poems for publication by the Pennsylvania German Society in 1968. I would characterize Funk's verse as being conservative both technically and with content. His meter and rhyme suffers in comparison with Birmelin, but he shares a common sensibility with all the previously mentioned poets in small themes of nostalgia, everyday life, or personal, simple fun. Funk was also, of all the poets discussed, the most meticulous as a scholar. His thousands of notecards, cataloging individual poems and authors, is now housed in the Pennsylvania German Archive at Muhlenberg College.

Russell Gilbert (1905-85) was born in Emmaus, Lehigh County, and received his doctoral degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1943. He taught as a professor of German at Susquehanna University from 1930-70, and died at Selinsgrove. His two books of verse are *Bilder un Gedanke* (Pictures and Thoughts) (1975) and *Glutz un Schliwwere* (Clump of Tree and Splinters) (1987); and a selection of dialect hymn versions

appears in *Der Reggeboge* (1975). Apart from his dialect hymns, Gilbert is not as widely read or appreciated as are the other poets discussed. His best work dates from his last twenty years, and is primarily intellectual rather than emotional in content.

Anna Faust (1918-89) grew up on a farm near Bernville, Berks County, and lived in Bernville from age eleven until her death. She had a high school education, but was an avid reader throughout her life. She worked as a housekeeper, and in a hosiery mill; married in 1941 and was a housewife and mother. In 1966-78 she returned to work as a receptionist at a local medical center. Her poetry, produced in the mid-1980s, was published in newspaper columns edited by C. Richard Beam; and in *Da Ausage* and *Der Reggeboge*. Her complete poems, with full English translation by the author, were edited by her niece Betsy Reifsnyder and privately published by her family. I would characterize the best of her work to be her many poems concerning life on the farm when she was a little girl. While not experimental with structure (like Gilbert), Faust's verse has the ease and polished "just right" feel of Birmelin, with the documentary value of Fisher, and the nostalgic flavor of Harbaugh, all told through an individual voice.

Of these poets, Reichard and Robacker wrote of Harbaugh through Funk; Barba and Haag of Harbaugh through Gilbert; Johnson on Gilbert; Beam and myself on Gilbert and Faust. By far it is Reichard who established Pennsylvania German dialect literature criticism, and with the exception of Johnson, there remains no real alternative point of view or methodology.

Reichard stated in 1918 that the "poetics of dialect literature has never been written . . ." and uses Karl Weinhold's designation of folk literature as being the "Feelings, Thoughts, and Expression of the People" (1918, 37-38). Of the poets and content of typical poems, Reichard succinctly states: "They have lingered long and lovingly around the old homestead . . . literally from the cradle to the grave and the new home beyond the grave . . .", with childhood, chores, the seasons, festivals and seasonal events, and character sketches as common themes (1918, 38-41).

This line of thought is continued in the work of Earl Haag, who follows Reichard by stating that the Pennsylvania German dialect truly "presents the folk- and family life of the Pennsylvania Germans," revealing "pictures of how the Pennsylvania Germans live, think, and feel," thus truly mirroring "the soul of the people" (1988, 26). Haag also follows Reichard in his general evaluation of the actual quality of the verse. Reichard would write in 1940: "There is much good [literature] here, when judged by the standards that should obtain in judging any dialect literature" (1940, xviii). Haag echoes this in 1988 when he writes: "In fact, I believe the critic will find that the best of the good is superb" (1988, 25).

But, what real critical standards do Reichard and Haag employ? First of all, Pennsylvania German culture is historically a trilingual society—High German or "Bibel Deutsch," the dialect or "die Mutterschproch," and English. With the exception of Robacker, Reichard and all the later scholars concentrate only on the dialect as being the most valid "folk" expression of the culture. It is certainly a unique language, however lurking behind the focus upon the dialect is the very real lessening of dialect usage in favor of English in everyday conversation. When Harbaugh wrote his dialect poems in the 1860s, this was originally viewed as the swan song of a dying language. We now know that Harbaugh was instead the touchstone for more prolific developments.

The written dialect literature thus has had, from its very beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, a sentimental, nostalgic caste. Preston Barba would write in 1938 that "the dialect dislikes general and abstract conceptions, and prefers more direct imagery" (1938, v). Only a few years before his death, Barba would write in 1968: "Dialects are the untutored voices of the heart—simple flowers of field and meadow, growing close to the soil and glowing with unrestrained warmth and passion. In them we listen to surging primeval tones, multitudinous heartbeats, age-old voices dimly calling from blood to blood. Let us listen reverently!" (1968, 124).

What is disturbing is the fact that, while much dialect verse is admittedly sentimental and nostalgic, this is basically the same point of view employed by the critical scholars. With such a critical view, how can one then differentiate mediocre from exceptional literature? While a poem may be very trivial in its structure and content, if it is a "typical" expression of "thoughts and feelings of the people," it is thus a "good" poem. Behind this critical view is the latent academic patronization of "low" versus "high" literature, where one employs different standards to the poetry of, say, Robert Frost and Edgar Guest. The patronization held in academic circles towards folk or popular culture is deeply ingrained and understandable, but is no longer a viable methodology. What is required is to remove this double standard. In doing so, much of Pennsylvania German dialect verse is, I think, only of sentimental, nostalgic, personal value in terms of shared communal expression, and thus its real value is more sociological or linguistic rather than literary in importance.

The exclusion of Pennsylvania German High German and English literature thus presents a very biased view of Pennsylvania German consciousness. The dialect is, among the "worldly Dutch" (i.e., Lutheran and Reformed in the greater Lehigh Valley), now used more as a special expression for Grundsow Lodges, Fersommlinge, and dialect plays or church services, rather than for everyday conversation. The Amish continue to use the dialect regularly in everyday discourse, but as the

studies of Lois Huffines have shown, while theirs is not as a linguistically "pure" form as found among the worldly Dutch of the Lehigh Valley, it is still a living language, being increasingly influenced by English syntax and vocabulary (Huffines 1980).

Robacker (1943) presents the (to date) only general historical and aesthetic study of Pennsylvania German literature as found among all three linguistic formats. It is primarily a chronological summary of important writers and works, divided into five eras:

1. The Period of Greatest Religious Significance (1683-1800), characterized by travel literature, and in particular the religious work of Pastorius, Kelpius, and Beissel, the prevailing language being High German.

2. The Period of Transition (1800-61), characterized by the decline of literary work in High German, a preoccupation with the affairs of everyday life with a "constant disinclination on the part of the people to alter their way of life for any circumstance not of their own creating," a resurgence of primitive superstition; and with the enactment of the 1834 school act guaranteeing children a public education in English, the gradual emergence of Pennsylvania German as a literary language.

3. The Language-Conscious Period (1861-1902), characterized by the rise of Pennsylvania German dialect in written form primarily restricted to short topics in verse or newspaper columns and letters to the editor, with themes "near to the heart of the common people"—nostalgic, backward-looking material "which serves to perpetuate Pennsylvania German language and traditional culture, in the face of an impending amalgamation."

4. The Local-Color Period (1902-28), characterized by the continuance of dialect writings "without any marked degree of change," the appearance of English language "local-color" writings about the "Pennsylvania Dutch" in novels and short stories and essays, the effect of World War I putting a stop to dialect writings as well as "all save the most prolific of the local color artists," and then after the war a lack of direction through the latter 1920s.

5. The Folk-Conscious Period (1928-[1942]), characterized by a proliferation of English language interest in folk art in America and the "Pennsylvania Dutch" (typically represented as curious and amusing), and the revitalization of dialect literature, particularly with the new forms of the play, novel, and literary essay, which usually overemphasize the Pennsylvania German cultural heritage in self-defense by combining "at once the good,

bad, and indifferent qualities" of thought from the earlier periods (Robacker 1943, *passim*).

While Robacker deals with a great volume of material, he does not present a complete picture of "literature"—for instance, "How-to" works such as manuals on beekeeping, cookbooks, and children's books are excluded from his range of materials. Also, for Robacker, as well as Reichard, Barba, Beam, and Haag, "literature" excludes "oral literature" which, while a seemingly self-destructive term, exists both on the tongues of speakers as well as in the pages of folklore studies. Again, an academic double standard exists between "high" and "low" literature, which obscures a more objective basis of material for scholarly and critical consideration.

The dialect literature has become more flexible in subject matter yet is still self-conscious, and what will happen in the future, no one can say. Russell Gilbert is the only poet thus far who transcends Barba's view that the dialect does not deal in generalizations or abstractions. Gilbert's verse, particularly during his last twenty years, was a rather philosophical and often fragmentary tone of voice in comparison with other dialect poets before or after. This brings up the question, is Gilbert really a "folk poet"? While written in Pennsylvania German dialect, his work does not adhere to the standards of Reichard and the later dialect literature scholars, yet Barba, Haag, and Beam all share a deep admiration for Gilbert's verse. Related to this is Gilbert's rather conventional, but still viable, definition of "folklore" as being "the superstitions, beliefs, traditions, and customs of a people" (1971, 62). Gilbert wrote on common, communal themes such as the Christmas tree, the Easter rabbit, *Faasnachtkuche*, and pretzels, but in practice much of his own definition of "folk"-related material is only occasionally found in his poetry. Much of his mature verse was purposefully not designed as a communal but as a personal expression. In his often difficult language usage and philosophical content, he was not necessarily a spokesperson for "the people." In turn, if one takes Gilbert's definition of folklore and applies it to the other mentioned dialect poets, the work of Fisher, Funk, and Faust would most closely adhere to this documentary conception. By contrast, the work of Harbaugh and Birmelin is really more an artistic expression of the emotionally ambient character of the Pennsylvania German community.

Who were these six poets? All came from rural or small town environments, and grew up learning the dialect as their first language. All were, with the exception of Anna Faust, highly esteemed professionals within their respective communities. They were not necessarily "ordinary people" but rather, all exceptional individuals. Most important is that all six poets shared a very stable, middle-class economic social status, and so it is not surprising that they share a "bourgeois" sensibility. They took

poetry to be a personal leisure activity—reluctant artists who took their poetry seriously, but didn't take themselves seriously as artists. All of them, also, began earnestly writing verse only during the later years of their lives, which perhaps explains why their work so cogently informs and reveals, in various ways, the Pennsylvania German psyche as filtered through the mature life experiences from middle-to-advanced age.

What is disturbing about the scholarly critics is that, while all are also middle-class, there is no questioning of these values, only an acceptance and—through positive appreciation of the dialect poets—a reinforcement of such values. Yes, I am also middle-class, but middle-class is not necessarily synonymous with middlebrow. I do not insult the Pennsylvania German poets nor the scholars, and indeed my previous studies are also in line with Reichard's work. What I address are the fundamental assumptions of definition and methodology. With the exception of Susan Johnson's 1988 paper on Russell Gilbert, there has been no real "in-depth" literary reading and criticism of the Pennsylvania German dialect poets or their work.

In conclusion, I have only unanswered questions. What I am hoping is that future critical studies will not rely merely upon the positivistic, appreciative approach, but seriously rethink the previous, and currently ingrained viewpoint, which is inexact, ill-defined, and ultimately acritical in content. I do not know if there is truly any place for hard-nosed literary criticism with Pennsylvania German dialect poetry. Few people actually read the poets; and the poets and their work are not regularly included in college or university curricula. The dialect is dying out, and all scholars from Reichard onwards have used their authority to encourage the continued production of dialect literature. Yes, those who do write anything in the dialect, I believe, should be encouraged to do just what they want to do. That is one matter. But, I ask again, is there any place for real literary criticism of Pennsylvania German dialect poetry?

Allentown, Pennsylvania

Notes

¹ This brings up the matter of which poets to include or exclude. There is no consensus by contemporary dialect scholars as to who and how many to include as being "most important." My list of six covers the three major periods of dialect creativity, but obviously reflects my own personal taste as well. I omit the latter nineteenth-century poet Eli Keller in my focus on verse; but within the tradition of playwriting and amateur theatrical productions, his Sunday School Christmas Program poems, and his verse dialogue "Mer Wolle Fische Geh" certainly place him in the forefront of the dialect literature in general, and in particular importance with the development of dialect plays. Don Yoder has expressed to me his own personal interest in Keller's contemporary, Calvin Ziegler; Ziegler was also

a favorite of Reichard. With living poets, one must especially mention Gladys Martin of Ephrata, and William Betz of New Tripoli. Obviously, for the purposes of this brief article, I can not attempt an all-inclusive survey of dialect poets.

² The omission of Elizabeth Kieffer's book on Henry Harbaugh (1945) is because it is a biography and not a literary critique. Kieffer, however, provides a useful appendix printing Harbaugh's original versions of his poems, several which were heavily edited and altered by Benjamin Bausman for publication in the posthumous *Harfe* (1870).

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