Scrabbling Mice, a Visit from Hades and Thoughts of Death

*The Autobiography of Lucas Forcart-Respinger, a Merchant from Basel (1789–1869)*

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Imagine my feelings and my inclination on this 37th birthday – I had lost my health, was suffering, frail and weak, my fortune was lost, my wife and two children passed away before me, the weak one. Thus I was like Job, sitting on ruins and eating my own tears, but I could also say: the LORD has given this, the LORD has taken it, let the name of the LORD be praised!²

With these words, Lucas Forcart-Respinger described the state of his feelings after the deaths of his wife and two sons, which had occurred within two years of each other. This passage leads directly to the topic of this article: death and dying.³

This article will not only investigate representations of death and dying in the text, but, in following arguments advanced by Silvia Serena Tschopp,⁴ it will also examine the dominant religious modes of understanding death

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¹ This article was translated by Hannah Elmer. It is based on a paper I read at the workshop “Frühneuzeitliche Selbstzeugnisse: Kategorien, Gattungsgrenzen, aktuelle Forschung” at the University of Basel (August 29–30, 2005). It is a workshop account of my dissertation, which has been published in the meantime: Patricia Zihlmann-Märki, "Gott gebe das wir das Liebe Engelein mit Freüden wieder sehen Mögen." Eine kulturgeschichtliche Untersuchung des Todes in Basel 1750–1850 (Zurich: 2010). I would like to thank Rebekka Schifferle for her valuable comments and for editing the original German text.

² Staatsarchiv Basel-Stadt (henceforth: StABS) Privatarchiv (PA) 678 C 1, o. T. (Autobiography of Lucas Forcart-Respinger), 177–178: "Denke man sich meine Gefühle und Beugung an diesem 37.[.] Geburtstage, – die eigene Gesundheit hatte ich verloren, war leidend gebrechlich schwachlich, mein Vermögen war dahin und verloren, Frau und zwei Kinder waren mir dem Schwachen vorangegangen so dass ich wie Hiob auf den Trümmern sass und ass die Tränen in mich hinein, konnte aber auch dabei sagen: Der her [!] hats gegeben, der herr hats genommen der Name des herrn sei gelobet!"


⁴ In following Roger Chartier, Tschopp has made the case for perception (*Wahrnehmung*) to be included in cultural-historical research. Cf. Silvia Serena Tschopp, “Das Unsichtbare
and dying, since these may have influenced basic perceptions and thus the formation of the text. In what follows, I shall first introduce the author and autobiography, then I shall outline how death and dying are thematized in Lucas Forcart-Respinger’s autobiography. I will first investigate how the author describes the deaths of others and the meanings these have for him. I will also look at the author’s reflections upon his own death. In third place, I shall search the text for representations of the author’s conceptions of the hereafter. Fourth, I shall address the question whether Forcart-Respinger’s actions, language and writing were still guided by the artes moriendi, the art of dying, which was a practice originating in the Middle Ages for preparing both the dying and living for the deathbed and strengthening them against the devil’s temptations that would take place there. More specifically, I will try to find out whether the influence of the artes moriendi consequently helped create a mode of perception that structured the representations of death and dying.5 I shall conclude by questioning the author’s self-construction and motivations for writing and by presenting different possibilities for interpreting the text – for sources are always an “ambiguous construct of actual experience”; they