'German' Literature and Rotwelsch: Looking at Oneself by Looking at a Self-Constructed Other

Benedikt Wolf

Introduction

Rotwelsch has been understood for centuries as a secret language used by criminals to deceive common people. This view is still held by linguistic research into Rotwelsch, which has also quantified proportions of 'foreign' vocabulary both in early Rotwelsch as documented in the *Liber vagatorum* (1509/10) and in 20th-century Rotwelsch dialects. Chief among these proportions are Hebrew and/or Western Yiddish and Romani words.

However, it has become clear that the production of information about Rotwelsch and its speakers was a *literary* project conducted by learned writers from the late 15th century onwards (Reich 2021, 70–71, 72, 96–98). Literary authors used this material and integrated it into fictional narratives well into the 19th century (Riecke 1990) or created poems in Rotwelsch (Wolf 2023). Puchner criticizes the traditional view of Rotwelsch as a secret language, points to the role of antisemitism in the history of writing about it, and posits that "Rotwelsch kept haunting German national identity" (Puchner 2020, 143).

Rotwelsch I as documented in the *Liber vagatorum* (1509/10) (proportions after Jütte 1988, 147)	
German	22,1 %
Hebrew	6,8 %
Dutch	6,4 %
Latin	1,7 %
French	1,7 %
Romani	1,4 %
Spanish	0,3 %

Rotwelsch dialect Masematte (proportions after Siewert 2003, 382)	
(early) Rotwelsch	29 %
Western Yiddish	28 %
Romani	17 %
(standard) German	9 %
Westphalian German	9 %
Romance languages	0,7 %
Slavic languages	0,3 %
uncertain	7 %

Objective

This project turns away from the search for 'authentic Rotwelsch' and instead focuses on the most 'un-authentic' Rotwelsch as transmitted from literary writer to literary writer. It examines the purpose of writing about and in Rotwelsch in these texts and advances the hypothesis that Rotwelsch was utilized as an object of projection. In this constellation, both antisemitism and antigypsyism played pivotal roles. In the texts examined in this project, 'German' literature came to perceive itself as German by projecting traits onto Rotwelsch that appeared to conflict with such a self-image. Rotwelsch was not only understood as linguistically hybrid but also as playfully poetic. Thus, it simultaneously served as a reference point for the literariness of German literature. In looking at Rotwelsch, German literature looks at itself as both *German* literature and German *literature*.

fig.: Hoffmann von Fallersleben 1854, 341–42

Texts studied

Liber vagatorum (1509/10)

Hans Michael Moscherosch, *Wunderliche und warhafftige Gesichte Philanders von Sittewald* (1640–1665)

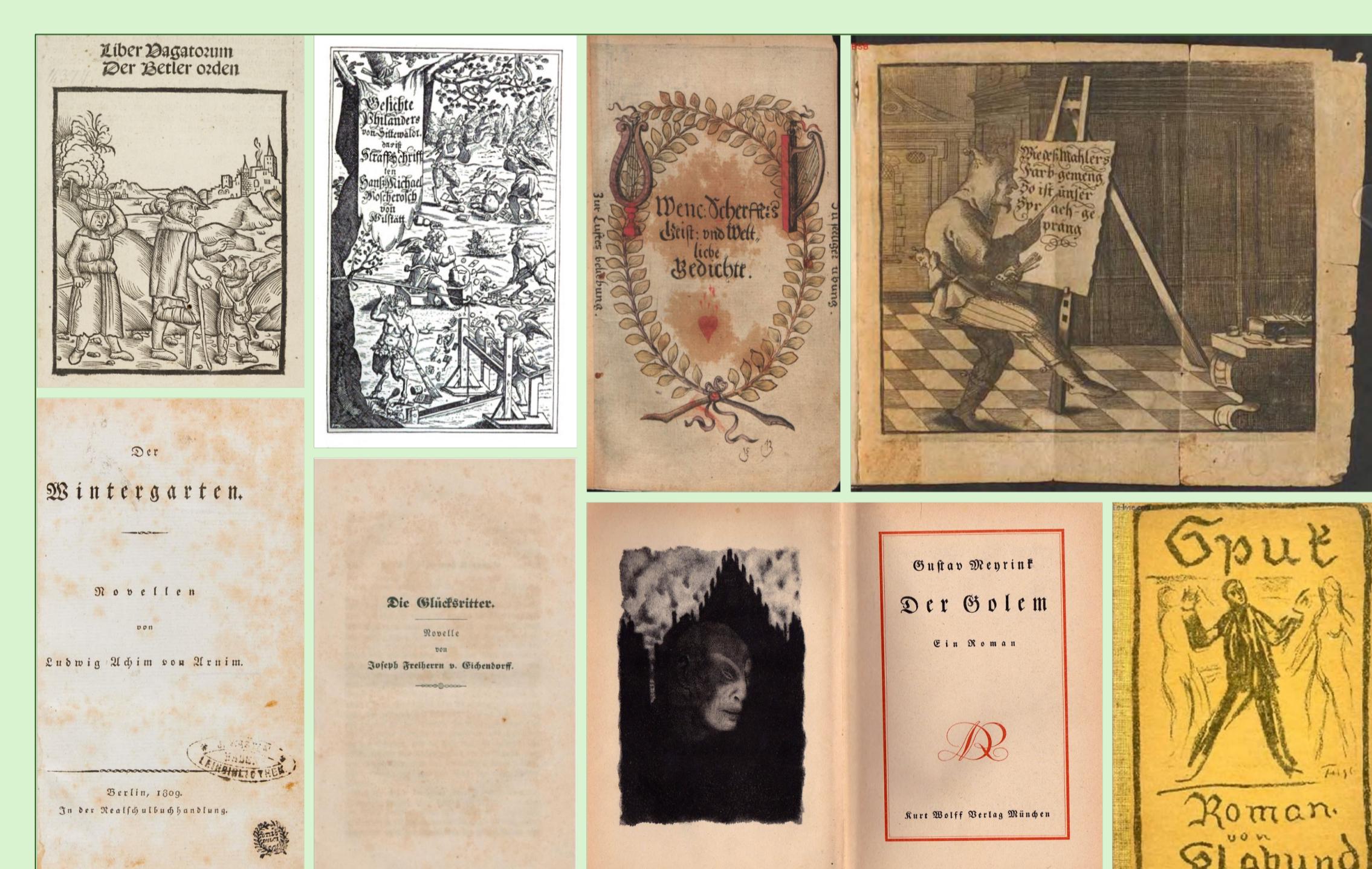Wencel Scherffer, *Geist- und weltliche Gedichte* (1652)

Hans Jacob Christoph von Grimmelshausen, *Deß weltberuffenen Simplicissimi Pralerey und Gepräng mit seinem Teutschen Michel* (1673)

Achim von Arnim, *Philander unter den streifenden Soldaten und Zigeunern im Dreißigjährigen Kriege* (1809)

Joseph von Eichendorff, *Die Glücksritter* (1841)

Gustav Meyrink, *Der Golem* (1913/1914)

Klabund, *Spuk* (1922)

References

Jütte, Robert. *Abbild und soziale Wirklichkeit des Bettler- und Gaunertums zu Beginn der Neuzeit. Sozial-, mentalitäts- und sprachgeschichtliche Studien zum Liber Vagatorum (1510)*. Köln: Böhlau, 1988.

Hoffmann von Fallersleben, August Heinrich. "Rotwelsch." *Weimarisches Jahrbuch für deutsche Sprache, Litteratur und Kunst* 1 (1854): 328–43.

Puchner, Martin. *The Language of Thieves. My Family's Obsession with a Secret Code the Nazis Tried to Eliminate*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.

Reich, Philip. *Der Fahrende Schüler als prekärer Typus. Zur Genese literarischer Tradition zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit*. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021.

Riecke, Jörg. "Zum Fortleben einiger alter Wörter des Rotwelschen in der deutschen Literatur. Zugleich Ergänzungen und Berichtigungen zum 'Wörterbuch des Rotwelschen' von Siegmund A. Wolf." *Zeitschrift für Dialektologie und Linguistik* 52, no. 2 (1990): 186–92.

Siewert, Klaus. *Grundlagen und Methoden der Sondersprachenforschung. Mit einem Wörterbuch der Masematte aus Sprecherbefragungen und den Schriftlichen Quellen*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003.

Wolf, Benedikt. "Inverted minor literature: August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben's poem 'Rotwälsch' and the naturalization of the German language." *The German Quarterly* 96, no. 1 (2023): 22–38.