

THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN HUBERT FICHTE'S ETHNOPOETICS

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to analyze Hubert Fichte's concept of spirituality as it is reflected in his creative nonfiction books about Afro-American syncretic religions. Hubert Fichte (1935-1986) is generally celebrated as one of the most influential pop authors in German literature as well as the first postwar German writer to transcend the national boundaries in his subject choice. Insofar critical approaches have focused mainly on Fichte's innovative prose style and on his critique of the Eurocentric stance adopted by classical ethnological research as well as on his engagement with "subordinate" cultures and identities. Less attention has been paid to his understanding of religious ideas and practices. My thesis is that in his deeply transgressive writing Hubert Fichte has managed to challenge both the Western dissociation between nature and spirituality (which renders nature as the other to be subjugated by reason) as well as the cultural materialist approach to religious beliefs. In supporting my point I draw mainly on Fichte's so-called "ethnopoetic" works *Xango*, *Petersilie [Parsley]* and *Explosion*, also taking into account his autobiographical novel *Versuch über die Pubertät [Essay on Puberty]*.*

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Reading Hubert Fichte (1935-1986) can be very disquieting if we adopt the materialist perspective of current cultural theory. While a postcolonial approach seems to be most illuminating for his documentary works – especially for his travelogues dealing with Afro-American religious syncretism, but also for his accounts of different German subcultures in his novels – there is still a certain dimension of Fichte's writing which escapes the discourse of cultural determinism.

Firstly, what stands out in Fichte's approach to the so-called "exotic" cultures is his refusal to adjust them to fit into Western epistemological categories. Therefore, it would be untypical of Fichte to reduce religious experience to political or ideological formations. Furthermore, it seems to me that there is a diffuse, heterodox religiosity

which informs Fichte's texts and can hardly be accounted for only by the author's respect for the otherness of the depicted rituals. It is precisely this refusal to accept an unquestioned Eurocentric stance, including its theoretical predilections, as well as Fichte's familiarity with magical practices and psychedelic states in Afro-American religions that many commentators find uncanny. Peter Laemmle, a German critic who knew the writer personally, recalls the ambivalence in Fichte's personality that became even more striking in his later years. Beside a strong commitment to ideas of the Enlightenment Laemmle notices something about Fichte which he describes as "unheimlich" and sees as the result of a very close contact to shamanistic initiations¹. In his turn, Thomas Meinecke², the younger German author with a similar interest in religious phenomena of contemporary Afro-Americans, discovers an unspoken "realistic" assumption underlying Fichte's attitude towards spiritual practices and beliefs, something which Meinecke calls a "non-Protestant view" on religious signifying acts³.

To be sure, such traits would have qualified Fichte either for a somewhat untypical⁴ representative of the hippie movement⁵ or rather for the German forerunner of recent esoteric and New Age trends. If this did not happen and Hubert Fichte made it into the mainstream and managed to be taken seriously by academics it is largely due to the ambivalence mentioned above. He never abandoned a certain rationalism that enabled him to avoid any form of fanatic conviction. Further, his repeated claims that his research is by no means a mirror of objective truth⁶ as well as his

¹ Cf. the TV documentary by Thomas Palzer: *Hubert Fichte, der schwarze Engel* [Hubert Fichte, the Black Angel], SWR / S. Fischer Stiftung 2004.

² Ibid.

³ That is a belief in the actual efficacy of such acts, not only in their memorial function.

⁴ Because keeping distance from any identifiable underground movement and maintaining a bourgeois appearance

⁵ Significantly enough, Mircea Eliade regards the hippie movement as a deeply religious phenomenon. Cf. Andrei Oișteanu: *Religie, politică și mit. Texte despre Mircea Eliade și Ioan Petru Culianu* [Religion, politics and myth. Texts about Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu], Polirom, Iași 2007, pp. 57-61.

⁶ In this respect, Fichte quotes ancient sources against what he perceives as the long European tradition of scientific colonialism: „Es gibt bei Hekataios ein schönes Fragment, in dem er ein für alle Mal um das Jahr vierhundert festgestellt hat: „Ich schreibe, was mir die Wahrheit zu sein scheint, die Wörter, die Erzählungen der Hellenen scheinen mir viele und lächerliche zu sein.“ Das ist eine Aussage gegen Wissenschaftsjargon, gegen eine elitäre Literatur und gegen den Imperialismus, auch den kulturalen Imperialismus.“ [There is a nice fragment by Hekataios who, around the year 400, made a statement once and for all: „I write down what I think it's true. The stories of the Greeks seem to me varied and ludicrous.“ This is a statement against scientific jargon, against an elitist

insistence on the heuristic value of the incoherent, the untruthful, the artificial⁷ are congruent with postmodern relativism and its repudiation of authenticity. And if Fichte hasn't attained the popularity of other major German writers, in spite of his professed anti-elitism⁸, this is mainly because of his startling, experimental use of language and the complex, carefully structured orchestration of heterogeneous material (excerpts from interviews, fragments of narrative, diary jottings, lists of words and names, inter-textual references, statistics and research reports).

This paper will consider the central aspect of religion as it emerges from Fichte's auto-fictional novel *Versuch über die Pubertät* (*Essay on Puberty*) (1974)⁹ and his travelogues *Xango* (1976), *Petersilie* (*Parsley*) (1980) and the posthumous *Explosion* (1993). In doing so it will necessarily explore the multiple connections between religious experience and other interrelated topics of major importance in the analyzed works such as linguistic and scientific colonialism, i.e. the totalitarian potential inherent in the way the scientific establishment uses language to annihilate otherness, the dialectic between magic and rationalism, centers and margins, dominant and subordinate cultures as well as the core issue of gender and sexuality which recurs in constant resistance to the heteropatriarchal order, informing all Fichte's works.

My reading of Fichte works in two directions. Thus, the main concerns will be firstly to identify the religious elements in the texts, their function within the narrative and their interconnections with other central themes and secondly to show how the literary discourse conveys the otherness of the depicted rituals as well as its critique of colonialism stylistically and structurally. After having defined the notion of religion on

literature and against imperialism, also against the cultural imperialism. Transl. mine, M.I.] Cf. Rüdiger Wischenbart: "Ich schreibe, was mir die Wahrheit zu sein scheint". *Ein Gespräch mit Hubert Fichte*. In: *Text und Kritik* 72, Okt. 1981, p. 80.

⁷ According to Hubert Fichte, literature which also aims at a documentary value should not follow false ideals of harmony and unity: "Widersprüche, Lügen, das Unechte, die Übertreibung, das Inkohärente stehen lassen, nicht wegkitten – Zweifel, Niederlagen." [Accepting, not doing away with contradictions, lies, the artificial, the exaggeration, the incoherence – doubts, defeats. Transl. mine, M.I.] Cf. Hubert Fichte: *Versuch über die Pubertät*, Hoffmann und Campe, Hamburg 1974, p. 294.

⁸ Fichte says in an interview he wants "Facts so schildern, dass auch Frau Meyer sie versteht" [to depict facts so that Mrs. Meyer should understand them too. Transl. mine, M.I.]. Cf. Helge Lange: *Exotisches für Frau Mayer. Interview mit Hubert Fichte*. In: *Münchner Abendzeitung*, 13. Juni 1973; quoted by Dirk Linck: *Kontext Pop. Zur Produktivität der Beliebigkeit. Anmerkungen zu Hubert Fichte*. In: Jan-Frederik Bandel und Robert Gillett: *Hubert Fichte. Texte und Kontexte*, Männerschwarm Verlag, Hamburg 2007, p. 107.

⁹ Referred to in the abbreviated form *VüP*.

theoretical premises that are pertinent to this reading and briefly introduced the author and the three novels, the article will turn to a discussion of the interleaving of religious experience, race, gender, (deviant) sexuality, mental illness, knowledge and ethics also tackling topical subjects such as the conflict between essentialism and anti-essentialism, authenticity and mimicry and its relevance for the idea of freedom. Finally, the paper will consider some formal aspects of Fichte's prose style, especially his use of paratactic syntax, baroque conceits (conceits) and multiple narrator voices, in order to show that the author's contact with Afro-American rituals is central to his transgressive poetics and conception of language. It will be argued that the analyzed works offer an innovative writing of the dialectics of same and other in which aesthetic representation is deeply imbued by religious discursive patterns ("ideogrammatical", non-chronological narrative, the exploration of archaic, pre-rational levels of language), while also formulating a stance that aims to challenge the dominant responses to science, literature and spirituality.

To begin with, we should make clear that the term "religious" in the present article has nothing to do with institutionalized religion. It is conceived of as a thoroughly psychological reality in the sense that has been described by Rudolf Otto in his definition of the numinous experience and then largely used by Jungian psychology and archetypal theory. In his groundbreaking study on the sacred and the irrational – *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* – Rudolf Otto identifies the corner-stone of any religion in what he calls the numinous experience, i.e. a tremendous, overwhelming state of consciousness which occurs independently of the subject's will and is attributed to an imperceptible cause that cannot be comprehended by rational categories. His attempt to highlight the radical otherness of the numinous leads Rudolf Otto to describe it in terms of *tremendum* and *fascinans* which he dissociates from such ethical categories like good, evil, justice, love, compassion as well as from the aesthetic category of the sublime. Following Otto and also drawing on a huge amount of empirical data provided by comparative religious and mythological studies, Carl Gustav Jung argues against Freud's semiotic conception which sees religion as a manifestation of neurosis and conceives of it as a particular attitude of the human mind rooted in universal psychic processes and characterized by an utterly intense worshipping of an incomprehensible highest value. To sum up, for my discussion of Fichte's novels some characteristics of the religious experience as they have been theorized by Otto and Jung are of major importance. First and foremost, the religious is understood at the level of

personal experience with no necessary connection to institutions and traditions. The emphasis placed on the experiential – Jung argued repeatedly throughout his lifework that psychic phenomena should be taken as no less empirical evidence than material facts – disables any metaphysical assumptions about the existence and/or the true nature of God. Another important aspect to be taken into consideration about the religious experience is its vexed relationship to representation which raises interesting questions regarding the limitations of language and the challenges to the literary discourse. Last but not least, there is a subversive potential which, according to Habermas¹⁰, is intrinsically linked to the mystical experience and capable of displacing the dominant/subordinate binaries of conventional thought. Therefore, an approach to Fichte based on such an understanding of religion is not incompatible with previous and more popular readings combining postcolonial, feminist and queer perspectives. The notorious and well-founded antipathy all these lines of thought share towards religion is directed at its dogmatic and oppressive forms and should not make us oblivious to Fichte's complex and intricate worldview, including its spiritual component.

Hubert Fichte is the great outsider of German literature of the postwar period. "Maverick" is the word Robert Gillett – one of the few scholars outside Germany who have offered insightful analysis of Fichte's literature – uses to describe him¹¹, and not without a good reason. Fichte's non-conformism has to do with both life and work and permeates the latter in content, structure and style. Gillett also emphasizes the pioneering character of much of Fichte's writing in the way it "prefigures post-colonial debates about hybridity, subaltern speech and the third space."¹²

The illegitimate son of a German mother and a Jewish father whom he never met, Hubert Fichte left high-school without the final exam. As a

¹⁰ „Mystische Erfahrungen konnten in jüdischen und christlichen Überlieferungen ihre Sprengkraft, ihre die Institutionen und Dogmen bedrohende Kraft der Liquidierung nur entfalten, weil sie in diesen Kontexten auf den einen, verborgenen, die Welt transzendierenden Gott bezogen blieben.“ [In Jewish and Christian traditions mystical experiences could preserve their explosive force, their power to unsettle or even liquidate institutions and dogmas because within those contexts they remained focused on the one, hidden and transcendental God. Transl. mine, M.I.]. Cf. Jürgen Habermas: *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1985, pp. 216-7.

¹¹ Cf. Robert Gillett: *Love-sick Laughter, Porridge and Straw Men. Notes on the Queer Polemics of Hubert Fichte*. <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/aurifex/issue2/gillett.html> (seen on May, the 11th, 2013).

¹² Cf. <https://sites.google.com/site/germanliterature/20th-century/fichte> (seen on May, the 11th, 2013).

child and teenager he enjoyed some success on the stage, a fact that may account for the inherent theatricality of his narrative. A momentous event of Fichte's life is the acquaintance he made as a teenager with Hans Henny Jahnn (1894-1959), one of the greatest but also most controversial authors of German modernism. Throughout Fichte's career, Jahnn continued to haunt the younger man's imagination, both as a literary mentor and as a writer whose style needs to be overcome. Jahnn's central themes – the intimate link of Eros and Thanatos, the ideal of androgyny and the focus on love between men, the esoteric Pythagorean worldview gleaned from Hans Kayser's theories of cosmic harmony, the all-encompassing love of nature and its creatures – as well as his engagement with the poor, the outcasts and the pacifistic movement are also Fichte's preoccupations. After spending a few years as a shepherd in Provence and roaming about in France, Italy and Sweden, Fichte eventually settled down in Hamburg as a freelance author. He married the much older photographer Leonore Mau with whom he shared a keen interest in anthropology and non-European cultures. In 1963 he published his first book, the collection of short stories *Der Aufbruch nach Turku (Escaping to Turku)*. His novel *Das Waisenhaus (The Orphanage)*, published in 1965, is the first of what would be subsequently regarded as Fichte's autobiographical tetralogy – also consisting of *Die Palette (The "Palette")* (1968), *Detlevs Imitationen. Grünspan (Detlev's Imitations)* (1971), and the already mentioned *Versuch über die Pubertät*. Until 1986, when he died of an AIDS-related illness, Hubert Fichte produced an impressive number of books, articles, radio features and interviews with an extremely wide range of people, from politicians and scientists to pimps and prostitutes, from all over the world.

In the late sixties, when Fichte started to explore cultures outside Europe, the German literature was mainly concerned with local subjects and the theme of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (i.e. overcoming the National Socialist past). The political involvement of the writer was a central question, especially in Western Germany. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in his essay on politics and crime (*Politik und Verbrechen*, 1964), drew a parallel between the Nazi "final solution" and the imminence of atomic death, arguing that fascism had become a daily threat lurking everywhere. Prominent writers like Günter Grass and other members of the *Gruppe '47* got involved in the campaign that would make Willy Brandt and the socialists win the elections against the conservatives. In 1967, while Che Guevara was being murdered in Bolivia, West Germany witnessed massive demonstrations of the students against the political and academic establishment. The same year the most prestigious literary circle

of postwar Germany, the *Gruppe '47*, disintegrated and their last meeting was troubled by the protest of leftist students.¹³ Influences coming from US theorists of postmodernism and pop culture, like Leslie Fiedler, and the beat generation began working their way into German literature. While mainstream writers close to the *Gruppe '47* like Martin Walser or Helmut Heißenbüttel harshly rebutted Fiedler's alleged anti-rationalism and saw in his theories a dissolution of the autonomous work of art, younger authors as different as Peter Handke or Rolf Dieter Brinkmann became increasingly critical of what they perceived as the "obsolete" humanism of the older generation.¹⁴

That was, in short, the cultural and social atmosphere in West Germany when Fichte and his wife Leonore Mau set on to their first trip that took them from North Africa (Morocco, Egypt) to South America (Brazil). Later on, they would spend much time in the Caribbean as well as in South and Central America. Fichte's minutely researched depictions of magical and religious practices in the Afro-American communities are mainly collected in the two multi-media projects he produced together with Leonore Mau: *Xango: Die afroamerikanischen Religionen: Bahia, Haiti, Trinidad* and *Petersilie: Die afroamerikanischen Religionen: Santo Domingo, Venezuela, Miami, Grenada*. These ambitious projects which combine literature and visual arts are best described by Robert Gillett as an "open montage which seeks not to recolonize the ritual remains of the religions of Africa as preserved in the black diaspora, but to document the process by which a white writer and a white photographer seek to come to terms with the experience of researching them."¹⁵

Nevertheless, references to exotic magical practices and initiation rituals are not confined to the two books but find their way into Fichte's texts beginning with his novel *Versuch über die Pubertät* and continuing well into his posthumously published *Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit*. Initially planned as a "roman fleuve"¹⁶ in 19 volumes, Fichte's *History of Sensitivity* is a collection of heterogeneous texts – essays, pamphlets, reviews, features, interviews – which can be regarded as the epitome of

¹³ Cf. Norbert Niemann, Eberhard Rathgeb (Eds.): *Inventur. Deutsches Lesebuch 1945-2003*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München / Wien 2003, pp.121-4.

¹⁴ Cf. Thomas Ernst: *Popliteratur*, Rothbuch 3000, Hamburg 2001, pp. 30-41.

¹⁵ Cf. <https://sites.google.com/site/germanliterature/20th-century/fichte> (seen on May, the 11th, 2013).

¹⁶ This is how Fichte describes his ambitious project using precisely the phrase coined by G. R. Hocke to define the labyrinthine, carefully wrought and intertextually connected structure of the mannerist novel. Cf. Hartmut Böhme: *Hubert Fichte. Riten des Autors, Leben der Literatur*; J. B. Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart 1992, p. 407.

their author's worldview and poetics. Although unfinished and largely tainted by imperfections – explainable by the fact that Fichte did not live to edit them himself – these texts are a most valuable testimony of Fichte's ultimate view of life and art. His posthumous writings show Fichte increasingly estranged from the *mimesis* of realistic narrative and ever more committed to a baroque *poiesis* based on such literary techniques as montage, permutation, combination but also – as it has been thoroughly demonstrated by Fichte's assumed model, Gustav René Hocke – on underlying esoteric elements like the correspondence between micro- and macrocosm or the mystics of letters. Fichte's indebtedness to an "anti-classical" tradition of European cultural history is also attested by his intense preoccupation with such authors like Herodotus, Sappho, Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, Quirinus Kuhlmann, Marcel Proust, Antonin Artaud or Jean Genet. Moreover, the *History of Sensitivity* can be arguably seen as an endeavour similar to Mallarmé's "Le Livre" (The Book) or "L'Oeuvre" (The Work), an eccentric and immense opus the French poet imagined but never wrote and which should have become a synthesis of all other books and a final explanation of the world.¹⁷ Interestingly, Jean Genet¹⁸ was also fascinated by Mallarmé's project and attempted to provide his own version of The Book. Genet's never completed work, which he intended to call *Death*, is very much like Fichte's *History of Sensitivity* a mixture of autobiography, aesthetic reflections and abstract speculations.¹⁹

VüP is a turning point in Fichte's literary career. It marks the departure from an almost exclusive preoccupation with the self towards an "ethnopoetic" exploration of racial, cultural and religious otherness. As the last volume of Fichte's autobiographical tetralogy and the first book in which Fichte makes use of explicit references to myths and religious rituals, *VüP* offers interesting insights into the author's understanding of the psyche and the way self-exploration and religious patterns interleave in his writing. As Hartmut Böhme has suggested²⁰, the cover of the novel's first edition – Leonore Mau's photo of Hubert Fichte posing in a way which strikingly resembles Albrecht Dürer's self-stylization as Jesus Christ – is a very good illustration of Fichte's literary project. We see a white male

¹⁷ On Fichte's relationship to Mallarmé's concept of "Le Livre" as well as the profane religiosity of his attempt at transforming the perishable body into an immortal text, see Hartmut Böhme, *ibid.*, pp. 405-413.

¹⁸ Genet was one of Fichte's favourite living authors and there is a famous interview Fichte did with the French writer.

¹⁹ Cf. Edmund White: *Genet. A Biography*, Vintage Books, New York 1994, p. 389.

²⁰ Hartmut Böhme: *Hubert Fichte*, p. 207-8.

body wearing a leather jacket (a possible allusion to the rites of passage where men identify with certain animals) with his head half covered by a ritual African mask and holding in front of him, as a sort of protective shield, the wooden upper body of an African goddess. The image is highly suggestive not only of the postmodern literary techniques Fichte employs in this novel – collage, montage of apparently disparate elements, parody – but also of the main ideas nourishing Fichte’s literature: going beyond binary logic, metamorphosis, “gender bending” and the convergence of the modern and the archaic.

As it has already been suggested, *VüP* is among Fichte’s novels the one which best illustrates the conjunction of the personal and the ethnological. It focuses, like Fichte’s previous books, on the narrator’s search for identity triggered by traumatic experiences in early childhood – separation from the mother, the estrangement felt by the half Jewish, Protestant child in a Catholic orphanage, witnessing the bomb attacks – and by conflicts caused by the teenager’s coming out as a homosexual during the Puritan postwar restoration era and his growing discomfort in a world ruled by bureaucracy and technology.

Most importantly, in this novel the religious elements are not presented in a descriptive manner – like it is the case in the documentaries *Xango* and *Petersilie* – but rather underlie the narrative, providing the patterns by which figures and motifs are organized. That’s why Hartmut Böhme suggests²¹ reading *VüP* after or in parallel to *Xango* in order to understand Fichte’s allusions to religious practices and the analogies he establishes between shamanistic initiation rituals and psychological transformations during adolescence.

The opening scene of the novel shows the narrator – who could be seen as an alter ego of the author²² – and his companion, the photographer Irma, attending a dissection in the morgue of San Salvador.

The scene – which is reiterated in a slightly altered form at the end of the novel, thus conveying a certain symmetry to the narrative scheme – brings together in an extremely rich and convoluted web of thoughts, associations and intertextual references almost all important themes in Fichte’s literature. First and foremost, it summons up again the

²¹ Ibid., p. 203.

²² The question of the narrator in Fichte’s novels is too complex to be handled here. Suffice it to say that the “I” of the novels should most probably be regarded as a sort of implied author, a text-generated self having different names in different texts – Detlev/Jäckel/Hubert – and focusing alternately on different autobiographical aspects. In *VüP* where Fichte’s self-exploration reaches its final stage, as well as in the subsequent travelogues, the narrator is called Hubert.

fundamental trauma – the individual conscience facing the peril of extinction through a dismembering of the body – which lies at the heart of all Fichte’s previous books and functions as a trigger of the narrator’s inquiry into the hidden layers of his own subjectivity. For the first time, in *VüP* this fear of dismembering, which had appeared in *The Orphanage* and *Grünspan* in form of the child’s anxiety caused by the horrors of war and augmented by the newspaper reports about the mutilated victims of the bomb attacks, is experienced directly, as a real fact. The dissection scene in *VüP*, which is also alluded to in *Xango*, is based on experiences Fichte and Leonore Mau had during their stay in Bahia in 1971. Therefore, beside the topic of personal anguish, the dissection scene also evokes the violence and terror dominating Brazil at that time of military dictatorship. Both *VüP* and *Xango* deal with Carlos Lamarca’s death at the hands of Brazilian authorities, relating it to the social and psychological mechanisms of totalitarian regimes. In order to mask the traces left by torture on the body of the famous revolutionary, the police bring Lamarca’s corpse to the Institute of legal medicine “Nina Rodrigues” where Fichte and his wife had been allowed to attend autopsy procedures. This indirect encounter²³ with the victim of a political murder – preceded by the rumors about Lamarca’s fiancée having killed herself for fear she could betray her lover under torture or about the journalist having been arrested after he took pictures of Lamarca’s bruised body – all these references to contemporary events add a new dimension to the text, opening up a space for reflection on the status of the individual under tyranny and turning the narrator’s questioning of his own fears and impulses into an ethical dilemma. How comes that someone becomes able to torture another human being? What is the relationship between truth, intimacy and physical pain? What lies behind the so-called objectivity of the scientific investigation of violence and death? These are the central questions in Fichte’s work as a whole but they arise here more overtly along with an acute awareness of Brazil as a shocking theatre of mortality, the perfect illustration of Baroque *vanitas*. Indeed, the first part of *Xango*, focusing on Bahia, abounds in scary stories about violent and other unnatural deaths. Murder, starvation and disease are recurrent motifs and every particular case seems to be an illustration of the *vanitas* idea emerging in *VüP* like a sort of Baroque inscription from the words of the pathologist performing the autopsies in the “Nina Rodrigues”-Institute: “O homem e nada.” (p. 12). This very same phrase attesting the familiarity

²³ Fichte and Leonore Mau didn’t see Carlos Lamarca but they were in Bahia in September 1971, when his body was brought to “Nina Rodrigues”. Cf. *Xango*, p. 105-107.

with death and a hopeless fatalism in the Brazilian society is repeated in *Xango* (p. 111) after the absurd killing of the gentle and pacifist priest Pedro: “Hier gilt der Mensch nichts.” Against that background the author places his accounts of funeral and initiation rituals in the Candomblé, including the overwhelming ceremony of “desounin” which means separating the personal god from the earthly remains of the initiated person. The central position occupied by this ritual – e.g. in *Xango* within the detailed accounts of the *axexe*-ceremony for the recently deceased “King of the Candomblé”, Joazinho da Gomeia – becomes apparent in its biographical motivations when we take a closer look at the dissection scene in *VüP*. The dissected body of an elderly and corpulent black man reminds the narrator of Werner Maria Pozzi, the first and most important in a series of “zauberigen Männer (...) mit mächtigen Hüftpartien” (*VüP*, p. 16) who somehow subjugated him through their magical force, thus contributing to his identity formation. The very name of the character alludes to Hans Henny Jahnn especially through the combination of a male and a female forename, thus highlighting the androgyny Jahnn attributed to himself by changing his initial name Henry into Henny.

As Hartmut Böhme has convincingly argued²⁴, the dissection scene, intertextually linked to the Egyptian rituals for the dead and to Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson* which carries in itself a reference to the iconic representations of Christ, conjures up elements of both anatomy and sacrifice and functions as the allegorical equivalent of an exorcism. Mediated by a double of the Pozzi-Jahnn figure, the mental image of the dead writer is dissected and erased, freeing the narrator from the “possession” through the “ghost”. In a strange process of contamination both the white pathologist and the black defunct come to impersonate the same figure of the “wizard” Pozzi-Jahnn who had haunted the mind of the narrator for twelve years since his death. It is this disquieting, ghost-like resemblance – “Sezierer und Sezierter sehen sich so ähnlich, daß es wirkt, als schneide ein bleiches Double des Toten sich auf“ (*VüP*, p. 306) – which makes the whole novel function as a ritual of *desounin*. The spirit of Pozzi that used to be an integral, but troubling part of the narrator’s personality structure – “Werner Maria Pozzis Name ist in mir aufgewachsen wie Rilkes Baum im Ohr – mit Nägeln und Rasierklingen in der Rinde” (*VüP*, p. 23) – is being exorcised through a painstaking recollection and reorganizing of memory layers. At the end of this process, on the last pages of the book, the imaginary double of the self acquired through the early identification with the spiritual mentor falls apart and is transferred into

²⁴ Hubert Fichte, p. 204.

the imaginary body of letters: “Teil um Teil fällt jedes Organ, das ich mir einverleibt hatte zu dem rituellen Körper meines sinnlichen Bewusstseins, wieder ab und heraus.” (*VüP*, p. 305). Hartmut Böhme points to the profound religious signification of this process:

Das Double ist (...) eine Epiphany: Erscheinung von etwas, das anders als gebunden ans Double, in Erscheinung nicht treten kann – so wie der tote Jahnn in die Erscheinung, in die Erinnerung Fichtes nicht anders als durch seine Doubles hervortreten kann. (...). Das Double enthält damit Bezüge: (1) zur rituellen Vergegenwärtigung des abwesenden Göttlichen in der Religion, (2) zur theatralischen Vergegenwärtigung der spirituellen Substanz einer Figur in der Rolle und (3) zur Szene des Erinnerns. Eine gegenwärtige Konfiguration, wie hier Sezierer und Leiche, wird durchscheinend für ein Vergangenes und ermöglicht somit den für das Religiöse und Theatralische grundlegenden Vorgang der Wieder-Holung und der Wiederkehr, griechisch: ἀνάμνησις und αναγνώρισις; Erinnerung und Wiedererkennen.²⁵

The psychoanalytical dimension of the novel is given by the subsequent reworking of personal material brought to the surface by this initial experience of shock. Nevertheless, the narrative defies any strictly psychoanalytical interpretation. Fichte’s uneasiness with Freudian psychoanalysis is a large and intricate topic which cannot be addressed here. But an edgy remark he made in respect to Sartre’s bulky (psycho)analytical study on Jean Genet suggests that Fichte’s critique was leveled at the moralist appropriation of Freud’s theory rather than at its originator himself. In his polemics against what he perceives as Sartre’s falsifying of Genet’s thought through an inadequate use of language, Fichte describes Sartre’s considerations on Genet as “der litaneihafte Schmääh des Wissenschaftsbetriebs in der Nachfolge von Freud”.²⁶ Anyway, what

²⁵ The double is an epiphany: the appearance of something which cannot appear but bound to the double, so as the dead Jahnn cannot show up in Fichte’s memory but through the mediation of his doubles. (...). Therefore the double refers to (1) the ritual conjuration of the absent god in religious practice, (2) the theatrical conjuration of the spiritual substance of a character on the stage and (3) to the scene of remembrance. A present configuration – here the pathologist and the corpse – becomes transparent for a past one and thus enables the fundamentally religious and theatrical process of repetition and recurrence, in Greek ἀνάμνησις and αναγνώρισις; remembrance and recognition. (transl. mine, M.I.), *ibid.*, p. 188.

²⁶ I.e. „the gobbledegook litany of the post-Freud theory industry“ – translated and quoted by Robert Gillett in *Love-sich Laughter, Porridge and Straw Men: Notes on the*

Fichte rejected seems to have been first of all that “residual teleology” which, according to Jonathan Dollimore, psychoanalysis shares with metaphysics and which becomes apparent in the “idea of a normative sexuality achieved by passing through the sequential stages of a universal psychosexual development”²⁷.

In distancing himself from the so-called “post-Freud theory industry”, Fichte turns to a more inclusive understanding of the complex relationships between the individual psyche, the social structures, history and that elusive category which Rudolf Otto calls the “numinous” and which is generally counted out from any scientific discourse. To sum up, we can conclude that, given his problematic identity, Fichte commits himself to a threefold dissidence: a sexual, a theoretical and a religious one. In his attempt to create his very own technique of combining science and poetry, Fichte explores the limits of literary representation and develops an acute awareness for the (mis)use of language. Without embracing any constituted theoretical framework or poetics, he acknowledges his indebtedness to various authors by making frequent use of a trope which is characteristic of his prose style: the list of nouns. Along with the multiplicity of meanings arising from the polysemy of words, the evocative power of names is highly indulged to conjure up the author’s affinities while building a sense of utter indefiniteness which baffles any centered discourse. In the following example the name of Carl Gustav Jung, whose archetype theory plays a certain role in Fichte’s work as it will be shown below, is also placed before a list of Voodoo gods which, to some extent, reads like an exercise in alliteration and assonance:

Vor Lautréamont und C. G. Jung, vor Antonin Artaud und
Burroughs, vor Genet, vor Janov, vor Foreman, vor Lil Picard hat der
haitianische Vaudou eine *surreale Schicht der Sprache* (my
emphasis, M.I.), eine Popschicht, mit seinen Litaneien,
Götterkatalogen und Tranceperformances eröffnet:
Damballah Ouedo
Aida Ouedo
Ogum Badagri,
Ogum Balindjo,
Ogum Yamsa,

Queer Polemics of Hubert Fichte. The quote is to be found in Hubert Fichte: *Der Autor und sein Double. Anmerkungen zu Jean Genet*. In: H. F.: *Homosexualität und Literatur*, Fischer, Frankfurt/Main 1988, vol. 2, p. 32.

²⁷ Jonathan Dollimore: *Sexual Dissidence. Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, Oxford University Press 1991, p. 173.

Ogum Chango,
Ogum fer,
Ogum Feraille – Ogum Blech,
Agoué,
Agaou – Tonnerre – Donner Agaou,
Agassou etc. (*Xango*, p. 140)

So, Fichte's interest in Afro-American religions is largely due to his preoccupation with the performative power of language. For him the magic of language, which is also the corner stone of modern poetry, goes beyond the mere musicality of words and has to be taken at face value. Within the context of the present paper this is an important point to make because Fichte's attitude to language is intimately related to his understanding of the religious practices. Well aware of the use of psychedelic plants during Afro-American religious ceremonies, Fichte was very interested in learning their names and effects. He set out to make an inventory of the magic plants delighting in writing down and spelling their names. In so doing, he seems to rediscover an orphic, Cratylid view of language where sound and meaning are interrelated. It is a standpoint he shares with the French ethnographer Pierre Verger²⁸ whose personal involvement in the Afro-Brazilian syncretic cult Fichte knew and appreciated: "...the names given to the plants, the formulae, the *odu* of the *Ifa* under which they are classified, and the effect expected from them, show verbal links."²⁹ In his turn, Fichte notes:

Für jede Pflanze gibt es eine oder mehrere Zauberformeln,
Silben, die auch im Namen der Pflanze enthalten sind. Für

²⁸ Pierre Verger (1902-1996) was initially a French photographer and journalist who travelled around the world trying to document so-called "exotic" cultures. Some of his trips took him to Africa where he became familiar with African religions. In the forties he settled down in Brazil and eventually became a *babalawo*, i.e. a initiated priest of the Yoruba religion. That allowed him to celebrate rituals in the *Candomblé*, the Afro-Brazilian sanctuary. Fichte met him personally and his reflections on magical plants and other aspects of the Yoruba religion are largely based on his discussions with Verger. In spite of their common interests and Fichte's actual admiration for Verger, there was a growing tension between the two men nourished by a latent rivalry and also by Fichte's occasional ironical remarks exposing Verger's homosexuality. (For instance, as Thomas Meinecke maintains in an interview, Fichte ridiculed Verger as "Stefan George in Trance", cf. Thomas Meinecke: *Auf den Spuren Hubert Fichtes in Salvador da Bahia* <http://www.goethe.de/wis/bib/prj/hmb/the/157/de9543232.htm>, seen on the 3rd of October 2013)

²⁹ Pierre Verger: *Ewe. The Use of Plants in Yoruba Society*, Sao Paolo 1995, p. 53

die Heilwirkung scheint die Zauberformel wichtiger zu sein als der Chemismus der Pflanze. Der Zauberspruch kann die Wirkung der Pflanze angeblich modifizieren. (*Xango*, p. 21)

Thus Fichte carefully avoids both forms of reductionism usually encountered in modern scholarship dealing with religious phenomena: the materialist and the poetic reductionism³⁰. Without denying the capacity of the religious practices to bring about non-ordinary states of consciousness, he does not ascribe this effect entirely to the influence of hallucinogenic drugs on the human brain. In outlining the importance of the magical incantations used in the Candomblé during initiation or healing rituals, Fichte points to some intrinsic and irreducible reality of the human psyche which could be generally described as *transcendens*, i.e. the capacity to get beyond corporeality and any fixed limit of thought. On the other hand, in spite of the reiteration of his deeply aesthetic interest in the Afro-American religiosity – “ Ich glaube (...), dass die enorme Poesie und das enorme ästhetische Kalkül – von dem psychiatrischen Gehalt jetzt gar nicht zu reden, oder von den Chemotherapien dieser Religionen - ,dass da allein das Ästhetische etwas so Wichtiges ist”³¹ - , Fichte never seems to regard the magical formulae, the prayers and the incantations solely as a fertile source for literary innovations. Moreover, he draws somehow startling parallels between the Afro-American syncretic religions, ancient Egyptian cults, European mannerism and modern apparently secular phenomena like Antonin Artaud’s *théâtre de la cruauté* arguing that all these forms of numinous experience reflect a universal tendency of the human spirit to transcend bodily boundaries and the fear of death. Unlike most ethnologists Fichte contends that Afro-American rites are by no means archaic or primitive and counterpoints their practices of spiritual healing with the frequently brutal methods of modern psychiatry:

³⁰ As it has already been suggested by critics, these forms of reductionism have to do with Eurocentrism: “Die materialistische wie die poetische Reduktion sind europäische Deutungswege, welche das komplexe Phänomen der rituellen Trance vereinfachen, indem materielle und geistige Aktionen wie alltägliche und religiöse Absichten und Gedanken unauflöslich verbunden sind.” Cf. Hans Esselborn: “*Das Bewusstsein als Blätter, die Worte als Gifte*”. *Hubert Fichtes Darstellung der Trance in den afroamerikanischen Religionen in Brasilien*. In: *Zeitenblicke* 8 (2009), nr. 3.

³¹ Rüdiger Wischenbart: “*Ich schreibe, was mir die Wahrheit zu sein scheint*”. *Ein Gespräch mit Hubert Fichte*. In: *Text und Kritik* 72, Okt. 1981, p. 83. (I think (...) that the tremendous poetry and the tremendous aesthetical refinement – not to mention the psychiatric implications and the chemotherapy designed by these religions – that merely the aesthetic element is enormously important. Transl. mine, M.I.)

Wir in unserer sogenannten aufgeklärten, säkularisierten Zeit entwickeln in hohem Maß eine Nostalgie, ein Unbehagen in der Kultur nach sogenannten archaischen, primitive Riten. Ich glaube, sie sind nicht archaisch, sie sind auch nicht primitiv.

Die materialistischen Betrachtungsweisen, die Demokratie versagen, haben in der letzten Zeit versagt. Modern Psychologie und Psychiatrie versagen, die Psychiater haben heute keine Zeit mehr, sich mit den Kranken zu befassen, oder sie nehmen überhöhte Honorare, dass sich kaum einer eine humanere Behandlung leisten kann. Das ist in den afroamerikanischen Religionen anders. Auch Weiße werden dort sehr gründlich von den Priestern nach ihren Lebensumständen befragt und man versucht, sie zu heilen und ihnen zu helfen. Das ist zum Beispiel ein großes Argument für den Massenerfolg der afroamerikanischen Religionen.

Und dann was wir in den Abonnementsvorstellung als Absurdes Theater, als *théâtre de la cruauté*, was wir im Kunstverein als Assemblagen, Environment, Minimal Art, Land Art und so weiter vorgeführt bekommen, das verarbeiten die afroamerikanischen Religionen in einer viel grandioseren Form. Also wir haben einerseits sehr humane Formen der Psychiatrie, andererseits eine sehr virulente Form moderner Kunst.³²

Besides, what Fichte identifies in the passage quoted above is the politically subversive force represented by forms of religiosity not yet

³² Ibid., pp. 84-5. We, in our so-called enlightened and secular times, develop a deep discomfort within our culture and a sort of nostalgic yearning for archaic, primitive rites. I think they are neither archaic nor primitive. Materialist conceptions as well as democracy fail altogether, they have frequently failed in recent times. Modern psychology and psychiatry also fail, nowadays psychiatrists don't have time for their patients or they demand huge sums of money so that there is hardly anyone who can afford a humane treatment. That's different in Afro-American religions. Also white people are patiently and thoroughly asked about their life conditions by the Afro-American priests who try to help and cure them. That's an important reason for the enormous success Afro-American religions enjoy with the masses. And then what we get in theatre shows as absurd theatre, *théâtre de la cruauté* or in exhibitions as assemblage, environment, minimal art, land art and so on an so forth, that's what Afro-American religions give us in a more grandiose form. So, we have on one hand very humane forms of psychiatry and on the other hand brilliant and vehement forms of modern art. (transl. mine, M.I.)

enslaved by religious institutions. Thus, without any arguable influence from their writings, he agrees with such different contemporary thinkers like Michel Foucault who was deeply preoccupied with the “astonishing convergence between the spiritual struggle of the individual to escape from the grip of power and the political struggle of a collectivity to change the outward institutions of government”³³ and Jürgen Habermas who viewed mystics as endangering institutions and dogmas³⁴. This fact has been outlined precisely by critics who are well aware of the danger of reductionism lurking behind any positivist, Eurocentric approach to spirituality: “ So wie in den Werken *Xango*, *Petersilie* und *Explosion* beschrieben, dient das hybride Gemisch auf afrikanischen Naturreligionen wurzelnder Kulturen als Beispiel der Flucht vor unterdrückender Zivilisation und moralischen Ansprüchen.”³⁵

Syncretic religions – and that’s precisely what Fichte finds so attractive – are not based on the idea of original sin. There is no prescriptive metaphysics and no Augustinian notion of “evil as a turning away from good”, of perversion as “norm for a fallen human nature to be ceaselessly policed within both self and other.”³⁶ In its worldview and practice Afro-American syncretism comes very close to what could be described as a postmodern revival of spirituality. Among the traits of postmodernism identified by Virgil Nemoianu there is a special form of religiosity he calls “spiritual/mystical” and characterizes as and deeply anthropocentric³⁷. Postmodern relativism has freed spirituality from dogmas, favouring experience and personal insight over received traditions. That’s why New Age trends with their focus on attaining psychological and physical well-being through self-therapy enjoy such a great popularity within individualistic Western societies.

The fact that healing by harmonizing body and psyche is central to Afro-American religions becomes apparent in their understanding of the “orixas”. As non-material forces, the “orixas” are at the same time collaborators of the Supreme Being on the creation of the world and a sort of inner presence in every individual, similar to Jungian archetypes. On one hand, these deities have to be incorporated into certain devotees in

³³ James Miller: *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York 1993, p. 305.

³⁴ Cf. Jürgen Habermas: *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, as quoted above.

³⁵ Hans Esselborn, *ibid.* : “As described in the works *Xango*, *Petersilie* and *Explosion*, the hybrid cultures based on African natural religions illustrate a possible way of escaping oppressive civilization and rigid standards of morality.”

³⁶ Jonathan Dollimore, *ibid.*, p. 136.

³⁷ Cf. Virgil Nemoianu: *Notes sur l'état de postmodernité*. In *Euresis* 1-2/1995, p. 17.

order to manifest themselves. On the other hand, there is a strong connection between the person's higher self and his or her "orixa". A deep unconscious level is revealed in trance when people lose the sense of the ego, of who they are in an ordinary state of consciousness and get in touch with their "saint". Thus, people can get to know their tendencies, including their "shadow", without being blamed for them.

One of Fichte's most revealing statements concerning the nexus of psychiatry, consciousness and spirituality is to be found in the following passage from *VüP* (pp. 236-7). There is a scene which seems to be a dialogue between the narrator and the French scholar Montignan but which could be read as well as an inner monologue of the narrative voice. As a reply to Montignan's confidence in the efficacy of psychopharmaceuticals, the narrator broaches the highly controversial issue of lobotomy:

Auch ich sei nichts andres als jene Katze mit freigesägtem Gehirn, voller Elektroden, in Schraubstöcke gespannt, mit einem hoffnungsartigen Lächeln, die ihren Zustand nicht mehr erkennt?³⁸

Montignan's reaction is a celebration of positivism which also posits the question of suffering and compassion as mental constructs:

Sie setzen den Begriff des Mitleids voraus. Auf Grund chemischer Prozesse produziere ich, reproduziere ich. Gestische Entsprechungen. Correspondances. Anverwandlung. Es gibt kein Leid, sondern nur das, was man sich als Leid aufzufassen angewöhnt hat.³⁹

The answer to this cynical view reasserts Fichte's fundamental conviction that the basis of all ethics is compassion: "Damit geben Sie den Schindern Lamarcas recht." The climax of this dialogue is reached when the psychiatric treatment is compared to the spiritual approach to the human psyche in the Afro-American religions:

³⁸ I am nothing else than that cat with her skull cracked open, full of electrodes, pinned down by a yoke, hopefully smiling and no longer aware of herself. (transl. mine, M.I.)

³⁹ You always take into account the concept of compassion. Based on chemical processes, I produce, I reproduce something. Gestures. Correspondences. Metamorphosis. There is no suffering but only that we are used to call suffering. (transl. mine, M.I.)

Wer sagt Ihnen, dass durch Chlorpromazin and Reserpin Heilungen erreicht werden und nicht nur Erstickung von Symptomen?

Yoruba, Ewe, Fon rufen Symptome hervor, die fälschlich Hysterie genannt werden – sie legen die Unruhe nicht still. (...)

Diese oberflächlich als Syndrom diagnostizierten Verhaltensweisen sind vielleicht nur die Anzeichen einer Therapie für ein tieferes Ungleichgewicht. (...)

Was für ein Wunder, meine Krankheit!⁴⁰

In emphasizing the cathartic role of the shamanistic rituals, Fichte not only endorses contemporary criticism of psychiatry but also anticipates insights of the transpersonal psychology. As a matter of fact, *VüP* could be read following Stanislav Grof's concept of "spiritual emergency"⁴¹. In short, the narrative scheme in *VüP* comprises three different stages fairly corresponding to those experienced in cases of psychospiritual crisis. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's theory of the "rites of passage", Grof describes the transformations undergone by patients experiencing spiritual emergencies in terms of shamanistic initiation. The first stage of this process is characterized by a separation of the individual from his/her familiar environment imposed by an inner voice and by the sudden surfacing of unconscious material. The second phase supposes a direct experience of transition catalyzed by so-called "techniques of ecstasy"⁴² like the ingestion of psychedelic substances, the deprivation of food and sleep or the infliction of almost unbearable pain. The final stage which is also the goal of the whole process is described as a sort of psychospiritual

⁴⁰ Who tells you that chlorpromazine and reserpin can really heal and not only suppress symptoms?

Yoruba, Ewe, Fon provoke symptoms which are falsely called hysterical – they don't silence trouble.

These behaviours superficially diagnosed as a syndrome may be only the signs of a therapy for a deeper disequilibrium.

My illness, what a wonder! (transl. mine, M.I.)

⁴¹ Cf. Stanislav Grof: *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*, Los Angeles, California, J. P. Tarcher 1990 and *The Ultimate Journey: Consciousness and the Mystery of Death*, MAPS, USA 2006, especially the first two chapters: *Shamanism. The Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* and *Rites of Passage: Death and Rebirth in Ritual Transformation*, pp. 29-43.

⁴² A term that has actually been used for the first time by Mircea Eliade in his famous work *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1951).

renaissance and means the reintegration into the community on a higher level of consciousness. By facing personal annihilation and surviving it, the individual transcends the fear of death and attains a higher, more inclusive understanding of the world based on a direct experience of the numinous dimension. Mutatis mutandis, in the morgue of San Salvador the narrator of Fichte's novel has a shattering experience which pushes him into a state of spiritual emergency. What follows is a brutal unleashing of disturbing feelings and memories deeply buried in his mind that typically – like all rites of passage – have to do with birth, sex and death. Facing the horror of torture and death in the morgue, Hubert experiences his body as an archive of personal and collective memory and goes back in time to his teenage years trying to understand the mysteries of his own origin and of his dissident sexuality. In so doing, he recollects the (pseudo)shamanistic initiations he received from older men, starting with Werner Maria Pozzi who first related the teenager's creativity to his androgynous hormonal constitution and his homosexuality⁴³ and whose ghost is now finally expurgated. The non-chronological narrative which reads like a puzzle of micro-stories or prose poems interspersed with quotes, literary and philosophical references, allegories, Baroque tropes (*versus rapportati*), litanies, repetitions, lists of symbolic names etc. also contains the life stories of other two gay men. The chapters dedicated to the puberty of Rolf and Hans (the "Leatherman") are based on interviews Fichte did with these real persons and their different personalities are reflected stylistically.

In the novel there are repeated hints at the interconnections existing between these cases of modern European psychosexual development and the rites of passage present in so-called primitive cultures. Such as the Afro-American ceremonies in Bahia and Cuba are pretty much the same although there is hardly any relationship between the two regions, there are striking similarities between certain experiences of European teenagers and those of novice shamans. Although Fichte doesn't do this explicitly, the parallels he draws between these common patterns of behavior can be seen as an endorsement of the Jungian theory of the archetypes and the collective unconscious.

⁴³ In his later years Hans Henny Jahnn had become increasingly interested in biological determinism and even did some amateurish hormone research using the urine of horses and adolescent boys. This is how he met Hubert Fichte who was then a high-school pupil. The scene when Jahnn/Pozzi shows up in classroom to collect urine from the pupils is almost identically depicted in *VüP* (p. 21) and in the standard biography of Hans Henny Jahnn written by the American scholar Thomas Freeman (p. 523 in the German edition).

The end of the novel reiterates the strange mingling of Eros and Thanatos already present in the initial scene. While watching the autopsy of the black old man which becomes ever more a ritual of *desounin*, of separating from the ghost of Werner Maria Pozzi, the narrator's mind drifts away to a sort of erotic utopia, remembering a recent sexual experience with a Brazilian man called Luis and imagining the erotic fusion with a prototype of masculine attractiveness – “der Neger aus den Romanen von Genet und Melville und Pozzi” – which functions (in a Freudian manner) as a provisional antidote to the fear of death. This illusion dissipates in the last lines of the novel where it becomes clear that the ecstatic merging of the two lovers depicted in terms of disintegration of the ego and metamorphosis (both Ovid and Rimbaud, “moi – c'est l'autre”, are quoted in *VüP*) as well as the whole genealogy of the self accomplished by the narrative are the result of a psychedelic trip and now the moment has been reached when the effects of the magic drink Abó for the androgynous god Xango ⁴⁴ start to fade away. Just a few lines above, the narrator had experienced a mystical identification with the tree Loko. A discussion of the complex mythology of the tree would go far beyond the scope of the present paper. Suffice it to say that this experience of a human identifying in trance with a tree points to a transpersonal knowledge frame, i.e. to an empirically founded worldview which displaces the idea of a stable, unified self inhabiting a deterministic Universe governed by mechanical laws of cause and effect and compounded by separate material elements. While concurring with the postmodern critique of such notions as essence and self-containment as well as of absolute, unchanging standards of human behavior, the transpersonal psychology goes beyond the mere deconstruction of the historically and culturally constituted subject. A transpersonal experience, as its name suggests, means abandoning any cultural conditioning as well as the “normal” boundaries of the self and accepting the spontaneous visions emerging during non-ordinary states of consciousness, including a mind-blowing identification with a mythical figure, an animal or a plant. Psychedelic self-exploration, as it is conceived of by transpersonal psychology – and this is also a core tenet of Fichte's approach to Afro-American rituals – is not about the chemical alteration of normal brain functions but involves setting in motion a psychic force of healing and transformation deeply hidden within every individual.

The last sentence of the novel – “Ich lebe weiter in einer ganz säkularisierten Welt” – reads apparently as a sober conclusion admitting

⁴⁴ “Ich habe das Getränk für den Gott Xango getrunken” (*VüP*, p. 308)

the failure of the magic to change the every day reality. In fact, if we take into account Fichte's subsequent literary activity, i.e. his travelogues and the unfinished project of the *History of Sensitivity*, we can conclude that the third level of the rite of passage depicted in *VüP* has been successfully achieved. Fichte's later books adopt the perspective of a first person narrator who is no longer obsessed with his past and therefore can focus more intensely on the Other in distant cultures, outside the Western tradition. Although his ethnographic work had begun earlier, with Fichte's investigation of domestic otherness in the novel *Die Palette*, a real turning point was brought about only by the encounter with Afro-American syncretism. To a certain extent *VüP* is also an answer to the reproach that the author is only concerned with himself. By making the investigation of his own puberty paradigmatic for the entire humankind, Fichte develops a unique interconnection of social critique, poetics, ethics, research skills and spiritual awareness. His writing after *VüP* becomes thoroughly ethnopoetical in the sense defined by such practitioners like Dennis Tedlock or Jerome Rothenberg⁴⁵. Ethnopoetics is a creative practice focused on performance, valuing features that cannot be accounted for by normative poetics, dealing with ethnically distant people but, at the same time, bringing "our own ethnicity, and the poetics that goes with it, into fuller consciousness."⁴⁶ And, most importantly, ethnopoetics recognizes the religious dimension underlying poetic expression. By making use of stylistic devices which are part of an oral tradition in which "the speaking, chanting or singing voice gives shape" to the text, Fichte decolonizes his writing and gives it a "dialogical dimension", turning it into a "multivocal discourse"⁴⁷.

As an outsider to the discipline of ethnology, Fichte tried but never succeeded to establish himself in the academic world. Nevertheless he continued to work tirelessly on developing a most appropriate way to write about otherness at the intersection of literature and science and directing his virulent critique at the "ugly" academic language. For him the positivist approach with its sole concern for naked facticity and its indifference to language is not only naïve and obsolete but also a dangerous continuation of colonialism in the humanities.:

Die Unmenschlichkeit, die Verachtung des Sprachlichen
gehen in den Wissenschaften vom Menschen so weit, dass es

⁴⁵ Cf. <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/rothenberg/ethnopoetics.html> (seen on 30th of May 2013).

⁴⁶ Dennis Tedlock: *Ethnopoetics*, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Forscher gibt, die ohne auch nur Portugiesisch zu sprechen, über den brasilianischen Synkretismus arbeiten, die von afrikanischen Geisteskranken publizieren, ohne eine afrikanische Sprache zu beherrschen – oder gar zu verstehen. Da wird der wissenschaftliche Jargon zur Ausdrucksweise des blanken Neokolonialismus. Er verhüllt Zusammenhänge, anstatt sie aufzudecken, er verdrängt seine ideologischen Reflexe, anstatt sie zu reflektieren. (*Petersilie*, p. 360)⁴⁸

In a manner which reminds of the insights offered by quantum physics, Fichte rejects the idea of absolute objectivity: “Wären Wissenschaftler Pennyautomaten für Wahrheit, Ehrlichkeit und Integrität? Warum beichten in den Wissenschaften immer nur die anderen, wie beim Pfaffen?”⁴⁹ (*Petersilie*, p. 362). Reflecting on the fundamental incapacity of language to fully grasp reality, Fichte explains his preference for a non-chronological narrative by admitting the reductionism of a linear cause and effect thinking:

Meine Sprache ist an die Zeit ihres grammatischen Ablaufs gebunden. (...) Hieroglyphen würden das Miteinander der Tatsachen vollständiger abbilden. Ich muss also eine Reihenfolge festlegen, auswählen, und das heißt – den Denkgewohnheiten nach – werten. (*VüP*, p. 48)⁵⁰

Conclusions

What makes Hubert Fichte so exciting for a critique interested in widening the scope and refining the instruments of contemporary cultural theory?

⁴⁸ The scientific lack of humanity, the disdain for language go so far that there are researchers who work on Brazilian syncretism without speaking Portuguese or who publish articles about African psychiatric patients without even understanding an African language. Hence, the scientific jargon becomes an expression of pure neocolonialism. It masks interconnections instead of uncovering them, it represses its ideological reflexes instead of reflecting upon them. (transl. mine, M.I.)

⁴⁹ Are scientists by any chance automatic machines for truth, honesty and integrity? Why is it in scientific papers always the other who must confess, as with a priest? (transl. mine, M.I.)

⁵⁰ My language is tied to the time of its grammatical tenses. (...)

Hieroglyphs would represent the convergence of facts in a more complete manner. So I must establish an order, I must choose and that means, according to the common thinking habits, I must evaluate every fact. (transl. mine, M.I.)

As we have seen, the narrator in Fichte's novels challenges the autonomous subject-position of the white heterosexual male and the Eurocentric stance. Never abandoning the first person narrative and writing a deeply autobiographical prose, Fichte gradually develops a very personal form of ethnopoetics and opens up his works for multiple voices, by incorporating excerpts from interviews into his texts. He focuses first on domestic otherness (e.g. the outcasts of German society) and then goes on to investigate the racial and religious Other. The syncretic Afro-American rituals based on psychedelic states interest him mostly because of their transformative potential and because they enable the subject to go beyond the limits of binary logic and normative frameworks.

This paper has shown how Fichte's virulent critique of the academic discourse as well as his rejection of a purely aesthetical and experimental literature have contributed to the development of an acutely self-aware writing, which ceaselessly relativizes its statements never allowing a point of view to become dogmatic. Thus he not only argues against conservative views on human sexuality or the Eurocentric approach to so-called exotic cultures. By direct culture contact and by taking the indigenous religious practice seriously, Fichte also manages to challenge the precast mindset of post-colonial and gender theory with their materialistic-positivistic model for knowledge that excludes any reference to the numinous from their discourse and refuses to grant ontological reality to any non-material phenomenon.

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