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Refutation and Desire: European Perceptions of Shamanism in the Late Eighteenth Century*

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Abstract
The article discusses learned debates that evolved at the end of the eighteenth century in Europe about the interpretation of shamanism. Intellectuals, philosophers, and enlightened monarchs engaged in controversies about shamanism that were clearly linked to Enlightenment ideals of rationality and religious critique. The article addresses the ambivalence of 'refutation and desire' in French, German, and Russian responses to shamanism, with special attention to the French Encyclopedists, Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Catherine the Great. The controversies reveal the intrinsic tension of the European project of 'modernity': what was discussed as 'shamanism,' ultimately turned out to be the result of European self-reflection.

Keywords
shamanism, Enlightenment, Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Catherine the Great

1. European Encounters with Shamanism

Shamanism is a recurring topic in European philosophical, religious, and historical discourse since the seventeenth century. When explorers,

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traders, and missionaries published their reports from travels through Asia and North America, an interested audience in Europe soon developed an understanding of shamanism as a religious practice that was both entirely different from European religion and at the same time reminiscent of Europe's own past.[1] Roberte N. Hamayon described the European reception of shamanism and the shaman's behavior during the past four-hundred years in three steps as *devilization*, *medicalization*, and *idealization*.[2] This, however, is too simplistic as the three-step construction advanced by Hamayon obscures the fact that Western attitudes toward shamanism have been ambivalent since the seventeenth century.

To reflect this ambivalence, Karl-Heinz Kohl's notion of 'refutation and desire' is much more suitable for understanding the characteristics of European intellectual appropriation of shamanism. In several publications, Kohl defined this dialectic as the major pattern in the engagement of European culture with everything foreign and unknown, and subsequently also as the constituting dimension of the discipline of ethnology, or cultural anthropology.[3] Each era, writes Kohl, has "what we can call its own

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[1] On this early history of shamanism in European reception see Kocku von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik: Kultur- und wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 35–58; Andrei A. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3–38; Thomas A. DuBois, *An Introduction to Shamanism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12–25. As a general overview see also Ronald Hutton, *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination* (London & New York: Hambledon & London, 2001).

[2] Roberte N. Hamayon, "'Ecstasy' or the West-Dreamt Siberian Shaman," in: Helmut Wautischer (ed.), *Tribal Epistemologies: Essays in the Philosophy of Anthropology* (Aldershot etc.: Ashgate, 1998), 175–187, at 178–181.

[3] Karl-Heinz Kohl, *Abwehr und Verlangen: Zur Geschichte der Ethnologie* (Frankfurt/M. & New York: Edition Qumran im Campus Verlag, 1987); see also idem, *Entzauberter Blick: Das Bild vom Guten Wilden und die Erfahrung der Zivilisation* (Berlin: Medusa, 1981). On the early history of Europe's attempts at systematizing foreign cultures, see Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964); David A. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). See also the standard work of Urs Bitterli, *Cultures in Conflict: Encounters between European and Non-European Cultures, 1492–1800* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989). On Orientalist constructions of India and the East, see Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, 3 vols. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1st ed. 1965ff.]); Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Wilhelm Halbfass,

mark of obsession [*Besessenheitsmerkmal*]"[4] that reveals the main topics in the encounter with the Other in a given period. But while the "marks of obsession" may differ from one period to another, the dynamic of observation and interpretation of the Other has remained the same. What European observers "perceived in the foreign civilization was essentially determined by the limited horizon of experience of their own civilization."[5]

During the eighteenth century, knowledge about northern Eurasian shamanism was gradually established in European intellectual milieus.[6] The reports about shamanic practices—particularly the séances and trances, the costumes, and the drumming and singing of the shaman—where widely read, and European enlighteners felt the need to respond to this religious and philosophical practice. This article looks at the ambivalent manner in which European intellectuals of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century perceived and interpreted the news about shamanism.

These intellectuals based their interpretations on a few influential sources that indicate how important the exchange of information between Russia and western Europe was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One widely-read author was Nicolaes Witsen (1640–1717), a Dutchman traveling the Russian empire and popularizing the term 'shaman' in Europe. Witsen, who almost became the mayor of Amsterdam, had extensive contact with Peter the Great's royal court in Moscow, but also with German intellectuals such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, with whom he discussed aspects of Greek religion and philosophy, theories of metempsychosis, as well as magic and superstition.[7] In 1692, Witsen presented the result of his research, provided to him by Russian servitors such as Andrei Vinius, in his book *Noord en Oost Tartarye*. Here, we find detailed information about the ritual practices of the peoples of Siberia and eastern Russia, as well as a description and an iconography of the shaman that influenced subsequent perceptions of shamanism.[8]

India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

4) Kohl, *Abwehr und Verlangen*, 3 (italics original). All translations in this article are mine, if not noted otherwise.

5) Ibid., 4.

6) See Gloria Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

7) See Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century*, 23–25; Hutton, *Shamans*, 32.

8) Nicolaes Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye, ofte bondig ontwerp Van eenige dier landen en volken, Welke voormaels bekent zijn geweest* […] *in de Noorder en Oosterlyks gedeelten van*

To the same generation as Witsen belonged the Holstein born[9] diplomat Eberhard Ysbrand Ides alias E. Yßbrants Ides. Together with Adam Brand from Lübeck, Ysbrand Ides accompanied a Russian delegation that was installed by Peter the Great. Between 1692 and 1695 this delegation traveled to China, encountering the Siberian 'tribe' of the Tungus on its way, whose word *šaman* provides the etymological origin of our word 'shaman."[10] The reports by Nicolaes Witsen (1692), Adam Brand (published in 1698 and soon translated into several other languages), and Ysbrand Ides (1704) are the first publications that introduced the term 'shaman' into European intellectual circles.[11]

These publications, however, form only the prelude of what this article is about, namely the learned debates about the interpretation of shamanism that evolved in the late eighteenth century. Intellectuals, philosophers, and enlightened monarchs engaged in a discussion about shamanism that was clearly linked to Enlightenment ideals of rationality and religious critique—perhaps the era's most important 'mark of obsession.' These

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Asia en Europa […] *door Nicolaes Witsen*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: François Halma, 1705; 1st ed. 1692). See the illustration of the shaman on p. 663, with the caption saying: "een Schaman ofte Duyvel-priester. in't Tungoesen lant"; for information about the "Priester" who "spreken met den Duivel" and who own an "Afgod," see p. 634.

9) This detail is from Johann Beckmann who disagrees with Voltaire on this; see Johann Beckmann, *Litteratur der älteren Reisebeschreibungen. Nachrichten von ihrem Verfasser, von ihrem Inhalte, von ihren Ausgaben und Übersetzungen nebst eingestreuten Anmerkungen über mancherlei gelehrte Gegenstände*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1807–1809; new edition Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1971), vol. II, 447. Adam Brand calls Ysbrand Ides a man of "Teutscher Nation, gebürtig aus Glückstadt"; see Adam Brand, *Beschreibung der Chinesischen Reise: Welche vermittelst einer Zaaris. Besandschaft Durch Dero Ambassadeur/ Herrn Isbrand Ao. 1693. 94 und 95. Von Moscau über Groß-Ustiga, Siberien, Dauren und durch die Mongalische Tartarey verrichted worden: Und Was sich dabey begeben* […] */ mitgetheilet von Adam Brand* (Hamburg: Schiller [Greflinger], 1698), 6.

10) See Eberhard Ysbrand Ides (=E. Yßbrants Ides), *Dreyjährige Reise nach Chinca, Von Moscau ab zu lande durch groß Ustiga, Siriania, Permia, Sibirien* (Franckfurt: Thomas Fritschen, 1707), Dutch original edition 1704.

11) The relevant passages are quoted in von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 44–45. See already Berthold Laufer, "Origin of the Word 'Shaman,'" *American Anthropologist* 19 (1917), 361–371, at pp. 362–363; Hutton, *Shamans*, 32. Mention should also be made of the biography, written in Old Russian, of the Archbishop Avvakum (written in 1672) who in 1681 or 1682 was burnt at the stake for allegations of 'sorcery'; see Pierre Pascal, *La vie de l'archipetre Awakum écrite par lui-même: Traduite du vieux-russe avec une introduction et des notes par Pierre Pascal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 128–129.

controversies reveal the intrinsic tension of the European project of 'modernity': what was discussed as 'shamanism,' ultimately turned out to be the result of European self-reflection.

The self-positioning of European thinkers that goes along with this perception was by no means unambiguous; rather, the responses reflect a wide spectrum of opinions with regard to the value of the 'irrational.' I will discuss the ambivalence between 'refutation and desire' by focusing on major representatives of Enlightenment debates and their attempts to give shamanism an historical and cultural meaning. A second thread that runs through my argumentation is the observation that shamanism was slotted into an 'Orphic' frame by classically educated intellectuals, and thereby became comprehensible to the European imagination.

2. The 'Orphic Shaman' in French and German Intellectual Circles

Western interpretation of shamanism typically made use of terms that were already present in Europe's own traditions. While such an ethnocentrism is perhaps unavoidable,[12] it is interesting to look at the specific way in which Western interpreters tried to make sense of shamanism. Links to the ancient European past were often made in this debate, with special interest in the Pythagorean, Scythian, and Dionysian traditions of classical Greece.[13] Particularly the mythical figure of Orpheus triggered the imagination of Enlightenment observers of shamanism. Orpheus was the main thread in a matrix of interpretation that was woven from art, music, philosophy, healing, magic—and shamanism. To illustrate this debate, I will briefly address the French Encyclopedists' treatment of shamanism and Johann Gottfried Herder's version of it, before I will turn to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

2.1. Denis Diderot and the French Encyclopedists: Ambivalences and Historical Imagination

Denis Diderot (1713–1784) was one of the most influential thinkers of the French Enlightenment. Throughout his life he was interested in religious

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[12] See Kohl, *Abwehr und Verlangen*, 123–142; Kocku von Stuckrad, "Discursive Study of Religion: From States of the Mind to Communication and Action," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 15 (2003), 255–271, at p. 261.

[13] This historical reconstruction of shamanism entering Greece from the region of the Black Sea and infusing 'irrational' and 'ecstatic' religion into Greek culture and religion has

and historical material that related to Siberian folklore, a topic that he also discussed with Catherine the Great who invited him to St. Petersburg in 1773.[14] As is well known, Diderot was also one of the editors of the most important dictionary of the period, the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts, et des métiers* (17 volumes), published in Paris between 1751 and 1765.

In various entries, the *Encyclopédie* addresses topics that are related to shamanism and its Orphic dimensions, not only "Schamans" (the German spelling was well established in the eighteenth century), but also "Théosophes," "Divination," "Magie," or "Russie."[15] The entry "Schamans" notes that 'shaman' is the name that "the inhabitants of Siberia give to their imposters who have the functions of priests, jugglers, sorcerers, and physicians."[16] The article on Russia depicts in detail the Scythians, Samoyeds, Tatars, and Yakuts, all of them peoples who were deemed to have an old shamanic heritage. As Gloria Flaherty notes: "Throughout the *Encyclopédie*, there are references to such legendary shamans as Abaris, the Scythian priest of Apollo, well versed in the arts of healing, and to Orpheus, around whom so many modern myths had already formed."[17]

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remained a topic of scholarly discussion even into the twentieth century; see von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 106–116.

14) In the beginning, Diderot and Catherine both enjoyed their conversations, but soon Catherine began to get angry about Diderot's loutish behavior, his arrogant lectures, and his critical opinion about any kind of despotism. I will deal with Catherine in more detail in section 3 below. On Diderot's stay in St. Petersburg see Denis Diderot, *Correspondence inedited*, ed. by Andre Babelon (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), 240–245; M. V. Krutikova & A. M. Chernikov, "Didro v akademii nauk," *Vestnik akademii nauk SSSR* 6 (1947), 64–73; S. Kuz'min, "Zabytaia rukopis Didro (Beseda Didro s Ekaterinoi II)," *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 58 (1952), 924–948; M. P. Alekseev, "D. Didro i russkie pisateli ego vremeni," *XVIII vek* 3 (1958), 416–431.

15) The references are: "Divination": vol. IV (1754), 1070–1073; "Magie": vol. IX (1765), 852–854 (it is noteworthy that the term is introduced here as "science ou art occulte qui apprend à faire des choses qui paroissent au-dessus du pouvoir humain"; the fact that besides this entry magic is also discussed in the entries "Mages" and "Magicien" reveals the Enlighteners' interest in the topic); "Russie": vol. XIV (1765), 442–445; "Schamans": vol. XIV (1765), 759; "Théosophes": vol. XVI (1765), 253–261.

16) "[…] que les habitans de Sibérie donnent à des imposteurs, qui chez eux font les fonctions de prêtres, de jongleurs, de sorciers & de médecins." Diderot et al., *Encyclopédie*, vol. XIV (1765), 759. Note the ambivalent evaluation that is revealed in the terms 'priests' and 'physicians' on the one hand, and 'jugglers' and 'sorcerers' on the other.

17) Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century*, 125. See, for instance, Abaris mentioned in vol. X (1765), 276, in the entry on "Médecins anciens." The entry on "Orphée" describes in detail Orpheus' Thracian heritage (vol. XI [1765], 661–662).

Diderot's interpretation of shamanism, and of non-European civilizations in general, is a philosophical fiction that the Encyclopedists used in a conscious way. Like Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Diderot was not so much interested in the 'real' savages but in their ideological potential to serve as a counter-concept to modern civilization. With his own philosophical fiction, however, Diderot contributed to the debate about the value of modern culture and he constructs an unbridgeable opposition between the 'sick' civilization of his time and the utopia of an 'original' life. As Fink-Eitel notes:

> In temporal regard a history of decay mirrors this relation of break [*Entzweiungsverhältnis*]. Diderot's enlightened critique of civilization is the exact opposite of the classical progress optimism of the Enlightener Condorcet [...], who, similar to Voltaire, saw in man of nature already the basis for the educated and rational man of society.[18]

What we can trace in Diderot and the French Encyclopedists is both the ambivalence in the perception of shamanism and the integration of the idealized aspects of shamanism into an interpretational setting that uses Orphic tradition as its main reference.

2.2. *Johann Gottfried Herder: Orphic Desires*

Like other Enlighteners, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) was not so much interested in neutrally describing foreign civilizations but in relating to them in a way that clarified his own position in the discourse of Enlightenment. In his work *Aelteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts* ("Oldest Document of Humanity," 1774) there is a chapter entitled "IV. Aegyptisch-Orphische Politie" ("Egyptian-Orphic Politics") in which Herder addresses the earliest philosophical and religious background of the Orphic mysteries. After having made fun of earlier attempts at making sense of these dark chapters of human history, he describes the ancient hero as follows:

> *Orpheus*, the prophet and law-giver and inventor of Greek antiquity—what a wonder-worker! Exactly the same as the Egyptian *Hermes*. The same

[18] Hinrich Fink-Eitel, *Die Philosophie und die Wilden: Über die Bedeutung des Fremden für die europäische Geistesgeschichte* (Hamburg: Junius, 1994), 162.

> characteristics, writings, and inventions that are ascribed to the first: the *letters*, *music*, the *lyre* with seven strings, *knowledge of nature*, *magic* and *prophecy*, *astrology* and *cognition of the world*, but particularly *theology*, *poetry*, and *law-giving*—all that can be found with *Orpheus*.[19]

A "wonder-worker" (*Wundermann*) as "inventor of Greek antiquity"—indeed an interesting position, particularly if we take into account that in Herder's time the title *Wundermann*, along with *Medizinmann* ("medicine man") and *Zauberer* ("sorcerer") was an alternative name for "shaman."[20] Contrasting other authors of the eighteenth century, however, Herder's intention was not only to construct a dialectical opposite to the European project of Enlightenment; for him—as we can read in the *Ideen* ("Ideas")—those "Angekoks, sorcerers, magicians, shamans, and priests" in fact were a necessary type of religion.[21] This is because only *Enthusiasmus* (German for "enthusiasm," but also for "ecstasy") makes *wahres Sein* ("true being") perfect. Flaherty concludes: "Herder had come to believe that enthusiasm, shamanism, and all aspects of the irrational had to be acknowledged openly and confronted. They were natural."[22]

Herder's work contributed significantly to a combination of shamanism and Orphic tradition, a semantic that not only led to Friedrich Nietzsche's model of the Dionysian and Apollonian, but subsequently also to Mircea Eliade's concept of a true religion beyond time.[23] Consider the following passage:

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19) "*Orpheus*, der Prophet und Gesetzgeber und Erfinder des Griechischen Altertums—welch ein Wundermann! Genau eben derselbe als der Aegyptische *Hermes*. Eben dieselbe Prädikate, Schriften, und Erfindungen, die man jenem zuschreibt: die *Buchstaben*, die *Musik*, die *Leier* mit sieben Saiten, die *Naturkunde*, *Magie* und *Weissagung*, die *Astrologie* und *Weltenkänntniß*, insonderheit aber *Theologie*, *Poesie*, und *Gesetzgebung*—alles findet sich bei *Orpheus* wieder." Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, reprint of the 1883 edition (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), 397 (italics original).

20) On the role of shamanism in Herder's work see Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century*, 132–149.

21) Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. XIV, 23; see also vol. XIV, 57 and 100; vol. VIII, 399–400.

22) Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eigtheenth Century*, 149.

23) See von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 83–135; on Eliade's intellectual context see Kocku von Stuckrad, "Utopian Landscapes and Ecstatic Journeys: Friedrich Nietzsche, Hermann Hesse, and Mircea Eliade on the Terror of Modernity," *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 57/1 (2010), 78–102.

> Be *Orpheus* whatever he was; *all his works, writings, titles, foundations and legends* are known to us already: they are nothing more than after-sounds of barbaric, Thracian, and Greek echoes of the secrets of Asia and Egypt, of the *first original foundation of the world*. […] *Orpheus' hymns*: the collected, furnished songs that we have got, what are they, in their *totality*, other than *scattered pieces of the original song of all beings*: rich glosses and variants of one *blueprint of creation, full of divinity and powers*: thrown away, sanctified, embalmed *bones* of the living *poet* who made heaven and earth.[24]

And he concludes: "The cradle of the human race was covered. The history of all sciences, even among the Greeks, was without a head, and concealed him—where to? *Among the barbarians*! Go there and search."[25]

2.3. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Esoteric Dimensions of Orphism and Shamanism

We can assume that Herder discussed the shamanic and Orphic dimensions of the history of ideas and philosophy with his good friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1823). Not only in his earlier years, but also later on, the work of Herder—together with a number of reports and exhibitions about shamanism—formed an important source for Goethe's interest in shamanism.[26] In 1911, Günther Jacoby even went so far as to claim: "Herder himself is Faust," which means "that we have to see in Faust the compressed result of Goethe's human impression of Herder and a cornucopia of inspirations that in the beginning of the 1770s went from Herder to Goethe."[27]

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24) "Sei nehmlich *Orpheus* gewesen, was er will; *all seine Werke, Schriften, Titel, Stiftungen und Legenden* kennen wir schon: sie sind nichts als Nachklänge barbarischer, Thracischer, Griechischer Echo von den Geheimnissen Asiens und Aegyptens, von der *Ersten Urstiftung der Welt*. […] *Orpheus Hymnen*: die aufgefangnen, zugekleideten Sangweisen, die wir haben, was sind sie, bis auf ihre *gesammte Zahl* anders, als *zerstückte Glieder des Urgesangs aller Wesen*: reiche Glossen und Varianten Eines *Schöpfungsvorbildes voll Gottheit und Kräfte*: verworfne, geheiligte, balsamirte *Gebeine* des lebendigen *Dichters*, der Himmel und Erde gemacht hat." Herder, *Aelteste Urkunde*, 398 (italics original).

25) "Die Wiege des Menschlichen Geschlechts stand verdeckt. Die Geschichte jeder Wissenschaft auch unter den Griechen, war ohne Kopf, oder verbarg ihn—wohin? *unter den Barbarn*! da geh und suche." Herder, *Aelteste Urkunde*, 400 (italics original).

26) See Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century*, 166–175.

27) Günther Jacoby, *Herder als Faust* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1911), 1. On p. 3 he adds: "Faust is only one example of Herder's far-reaching influence on Goethe."

The acquaintance of the great poet and scholar with the phenomenon of shamanism is beyond doubt. Goethe certainly integrated what he came to know about shamanism in an Orphic matrix, but at the same time he linked this reception to a broader esoteric and magical tradition.[28] To get a better picture of how Goethe's reception of shamanism fits into the pattern of refutation and desire, it is helpful to distinguish an explicit from an implicit reference to shamanism. What is more, we will see that it is not primarily the knowledge of shamanism that inspired Goethe, but rather the Western intellectual and esoteric tradition, which, as an important source of inspiration for Goethe's generation, influenced the perception of shamanism around 1800.

If we begin with the explicit aspects, Gloria Flaherty is right when she notes Goethe's acquaintance with the debates about shamanism in his day. We can also assume a personal interest in the topic. For instance, Goethe visited an exhibition that displayed a Tungus shamanic costume in Göttingen. He also chose the name *Abaris* as his secret name when he joined the Order of the Illuminati, thus referring to the legendary ancient shaman and priest of Apollo.[29] Finally, we may assume that Goethe's knowledge of shamanism also influenced his various statements about the mystical journey of the soul, the soul's rebirth, as well as his claims of having divinatory skills himself. The only problem is that Goethe never addressed shamanism directly, which means that the causality of influences could also be turned around, and that it was Goethe's acquaintance with classical mythology, esotericism, and magic that colored his perception of shamanism.

Flaherty, however, sees direct evidence for shamanism in Goethe's writings, particularly in *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young*

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[28] On esoteric dimensions of Goethe's work see Rolf Christian Zimmermann, *Das Weltbild des jungen Goethe: Studien zur hermetischen Tradition des deutschen 18. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. (Munich: Fink, 1969–1979); more references in von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 74 note 106; see also the contextualization in Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London & Oakville: Equinox, 2005), 99–112.

[29] See Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century*, 173. As an example of the nineteenth-century mystification of Abaris as high priest of Apollo and his relation to Pythagoras see Johann Gottlieb Radlof, *Neue Untersuchungen des Keltenthums zur Aufhellung der Urgeschichte der Teutschen* (Bonn: Heinrich Büscher, 1822). On p. 54 Radlof explains that the name "Abaris" referred to "a *highest priest*, *High Priest*, *Pontifex Maximus*, a sort *Dalailama*" (italics original).

Werther, 1774) and in *Faust*. About the first she writes: "The title figure exhibits just about every one of what would have been commonly recognized as shamanic characteristics."[30] In order to present Werther as the prototype of a 'failed shaman,' however, Flaherty has to interpret notions of 'shamanism' quite differently than they were understood in Goethe's time. For instance: "Trees, which have always represented the three cosmic regions—hell, earth, and heaven—through which the shaman flies, provide Werther so much consolation that he often describes them or laments their being chopped down."[31] There is no evidence for such an understanding of trees in Goethe's context. Another example is Werther's presumed shamanic ecstasy: "Goethe also has Werther have many strange, out-of-body experiences. Werther often refers to himself as a dreamer or as hovering above and beyond the real world. He describes the ecstasy he experienced while dancing with Lotte thus: 'I was no longer a person.'"[32] But in Goethe's text there is no mention of out-of-body experiences or ecstasy.

Quotes like these can be used as evidence not only for an (indirect) shamanic background, but also for a pantheistic, animistic, mystical, *naturphilosophische*, or esoteric orientation of Goethe's work. Particularly the philosophical sacralization of nature suggests a much broader background than the focus on shamanism indicates. In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, such a pantheistic theology is most clearly visible in the "Letter from 10 May 1771," in which Werther talks of the "wunderbare Heiterkeit" ("wonderful serenity") that has taken root in his soul, whenever he is exposed to nature.[33] What makes Goethe's works so relevant is the integration and interpretation of shamanism in the light of European philosophical and esoteric discourse. Goethe's works reveal the mélange of sacralization of nature, pantheism, animism, and shamanism that emerged in direct reference to the chances and risks of European Enlightenment.

This is particularly apparent if we take a brief look at *Faust*. There are perhaps not many other literary works with a comparable impact on modern culture than *Faust*. Goethe's tragedy, on which he worked almost his

30) Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century*, 175.

31) Ibid., 176.

32) Ibid., 177. A similar critique could be made concerning the other examples that Flaherty uses (pp. 177–182).

33) Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke in zehn Bänden* (Hamburg: Standard, 1957), vol. III, 155.

whole life, masterfully combines European ideas about science, philosophy, magic, theurgy, metaphysics, and religion. That shamanism also belongs to this referential framework, goes without saying. However, like with *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, we should again be careful with stretching this interpretation too far and singling out shamanism as the main topic. What the *Faust* reveals is the process in which the European Enlightenment conceptualized what subsequently was regarded as 'shamanism.'

About the beginning of the tragedy, the *Vorspiel auf dem Theater*,[34] Flaherty notes:

> What Goethe has done here, with the utmost efficiency, is to shift levels of reality. Brilliantly using the modern arts of performance as the shamanic medium […] he has moved from the realm of wavering forms (*schwankende Gestalten*) to dramatic characters with living actors actually embodying those forms. […] In other words, this play constitutes the shaman's way of communicating to his fellow human beings the knowledge he gained from his trip or trips into other realms of existence.[35]

Referring to the *Prolog im Himmel*[36] Flaherty claims that "[t]he beginning of the first part of the tragedy immediately reveals the status of North European shamanism after centuries of the Christianization process." This statement is a gross exaggeration, as both quotations belong to a broader esoteric discourse of early modern European culture. The topic of the unity of the elements, of heaven, earth, and underworld—visualized also on stage—reveals, just as many other elements in *Faust*, Goethe's intimate knowledge of magical theory and praxis.[37] The ritualized link between

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34) "So schreitet in dem engen Bretterhaus / Den ganzen Kreis der Schöpfung aus / Und wandelt mit bedächt'ger Schnelle / Vom Himmel durch die Welt zur Hölle." Goethe, *Werke*, vol. X, 13 (according to the *Hamburger Ausgabe* [HA]: lines 239–242).

35) Flaherty, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century*, 185.

36) "Das Werdende, das ewig wirkt und lebt, / Umfaß euch mit der Liebe holden Schranken, / Und was in schwankender Erscheinung schwebt, / Befestiget mit dauernden Gedanken!" Goethe, *Werke*, vol. X, 17 (HA: lines 346–349).

37) Similar passages can already be found in Christopher Marlowe's *Faust* from 1591, a time when knowledge of shamanism had not yet spread in Europe. See Reiner Dorner, *"Doktor Faust": Zur Sozialgeschichte des deutschen Intellektuellen zwischen frühbürgerlicher Revolution und Reichsgründung (1525–1871)* (Kronberg: Scriptor, 1976), 19–24. On Hermeticism in the *Urfaust* see Zimmermann, *Das Weltbild des jungen Goethe*, vol. II, 235–286.

changeable aspects of life and the elements, the extraordinary role of love, and the concretization of the metaphysical in philosophy and magic are an established element of Masonic and other secret societies, of which Goethe, too, was a member.

But even if we have to nuance exaggerated 'shamanic' interpretations, there can be no doubt that Goethe himself was aware of a possible link between esoteric tradition and shamanism: Goethe knew Georg Rudolf Widman's *Faust* book (1599), which was newly published by Johannes Nikolaus Pfitzer in 1717, but now with an appendix that explicitly drew a line between the Laplanders' shamanism and the Faust legend.[38] Goethe checked out the book from the library in 1801, but it is probable that he had read the book already before the *Urfaust* was drafted.[39]

In sum, our interpretation of the tragedy has to take the huge esoteric and *naturphilosophische* tradition as a point of departure, which was the major source of inspiration for Goethe throughout his life. Like in the case of Herder, Goethe's reception of shamanism is a clear example of European intellectuals' desire to construct an original foil for the dangers of Enlightenment rationalism. But while Herder found this primordial truth in 'primitive' culture, Goethe linked the positive connotation of shamanism to an idealization of Orphism, magic, and esoteric tradition. It is this specific interpretation of European intellectual history that, in turn, influenced the subsequent reception of shamanism. What we can see in Goethe's work is the transition from earlier Enlightenment discourses to a meta-critique of the 'soulless' enlightened human being. This transition

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38) Georg Rudolf Widman (=Georg Rudolph Widmann), *Das ärgerliche Leben und schreckliche Ende des viel-berüchtigten Ertz-Schwartzkünstlers D. Johannis Fausti* […], ed. by Johannes Nicolaus Pfitzer (Nuremberg: Wolffgang Moritz Endters, 1717). Widman's first edition appeared in 1599, Pfitzer's first edition in 1674. Pfitzer's appendix is entitled "Anhang / Oder Kurtzer Bericht / Von der Lappländer Zauber-Kunst / Hexerey / und Wahrsagerey; Wie auch Von den Merck-Mitteln / die sie entweder zum Wahrsagen / oder zur Beschädigung anderer Leute / gebrauchen." On the context see von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 46–47 and 73 with note 105.

39) See Otto Pniower, "Pfitzers Faustbuch als Quelle Goethes," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 57 (1920), 248–266. It is not likely that Goethe knew Johann Spieß' *Faust* book (printed anonymously in 1587), but he knew *Fausts Höllenzwang* and *Das Puppenspiel vom Doktor Faust* (available since 1746); see Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* 2.10 (in *Werke*, vol. I, 442–443); Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, 23rd ed. (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1948), 140 (conversation from 16 February 1826).

prepared the Romantic counter-movements that mark the next step in the reception of shamanism in Europe.[40]

Having discussed the Orphic and philosophical dimensions of the enlightened discourse on shamanism, in the last section of this article I want to bring in another author whose writings reveal the ambiguity of European perceptions of shamanism in a paradigmatic way: Empress Catherine the Great of Russia.

3. Catherine the Great and *The Siberian Shaman*

Empress Catherine II of Russia, better known as Catherine the Great (1729–1796), belonged to those monarchs that radically subscribed to the ideals of the Enlightenment.[41] She participated actively in the learned conversation of the eighteenth century, and her discussions with Denis Diderot are as famous as those between Frederick II and Voltaire. In both cases we see that "governmental rationalization and modernization often went hand in hand with enlightened progress optimism."[42] Born as Princess Sophie into the German noble family of Anhalt-Zerbst, Catherine was well acquainted with the German and French intellectual milieu. She regarded it as her duty to carry the torch of Enlightenment into all parts of her vast Russian empire. This implied a colonization and Europeanization of the

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40) On Romantic reception of shamanism see von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 83–123; 201–232; idem, "Reenchanting Nature: Modern Western Shamanism and Nineteenth-Century Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70 (2002), 771–799; Znamenski, *Beauty of the Primitive*, 13–38. The Romantic construction of 'India' and the 'mystic East'—in fact a parallel Orientalist movement to the reception of shamanism—can be productively studied with regard to Friedrich Schlegel; see Chen Tzoref-Ashkenazi, "India and the Identity of Europe: The Case of Friedrich Schlegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (2006), 713–734; Robert Bruce Cowan, "Fear of Infinity: Friedrich Schlegel's Indictment of Indian Philosophy in *Über die Sprache und die Weisheit der Indier*," *The German Quarterly* 81 (2008), 322–338.

41) On Catherine's life and works see Joan Haslip, *Catherine the Great: A Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1977); Eugenii V. Anisimov, "The Sovereign of the North (Catherine the Great)," in: idem, *Five Empresses: Court Life in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 239–354; Simon Dixon, *Catherine the Great* (London: Profile, 2010).

42) Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Europa im Jahrhundert der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 206.

eastern provinces—and even the western European countries, given the superiority of Russian civilization.[43]

Catherine definitely belonged to the group of intellectuals that refuted irrationalism and thus also shamanism. The empress felt it was important to be informed about counter-Enlightenment tendencies in her country, which is why she repeatedly supported research expeditions. What she heard was not always encouraging: shamanism, religious irrationalism, and superstition were flourishing widely in many areas of her empire, provoking radical action on the part of the monarch. Thus, she strongly opposed the description of the respective phenomena that Diderot and others provided in the *Encyclopédie*. Instead of simply pointing out how ridiculous this superstition was, those Encyclopedists, as we have seen already, tried to give shamanism, magic, or theosophy a systematic place in human history. Not so for Catherine: she did not limit her activities against what she regarded as superstition to administrative decisions; she also used her literary productions as a tool to educate the Russian people. In three "anti-Masonic comedies"—*The Deceiver*, *The Deceived*, and *The Siberian Shaman*—she attempted to fight irrationalism and the dangers of obscurantism that she saw particularly in Freemasonry and other esoteric orders.[44] Although the comedies were published anonymously, most readers and spectators knew the author's identity.

The Siberian Shaman was a direct response to Diderot's article on "Théosophes" in the *Encyclopédie*.[45] In her writing, Catherine actively participated in the European process of normatization and systematization

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43) See Marcus C. Levitt, "An Antidote to Nervous Juice: Catherine the Great's Debate with Chappe d'Auteroche over Russian Culture," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32 (1998), 49–63.

44) See Ruth Dawson, "Catherine the Great: Playwright of the Anti-Occult," in: Susan Cocalis & Ferrel Rose (eds.), *Thalia's Daughters: German Women Dramatists from the 18th Century to the Present* (Tübingen: Francke, 1996), 17–34. On Freemasonry in eighteenth-century Russia and Catherine's response to it see Andreas Önnerfors & Robert Collis (eds.), *Freemasonry and Fraternalism in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Sheffield: Centre for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism, 2009); Robert Collis, "The Petersburg Crucible: Alchemy and the Russian Nobility in Catherine the Great's Russia," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 5/1 (2012), 56–99.

45) See her letter to the Swiss philosopher and physician Johann Georg Zimmermann, dating 17 April 1785, in: Hans Jessen (ed.), *Katharina II. von Rußland in Augenzeugenberichten* (Munich: dtv, 1978), 325. The comedy was first performed on 24 September 1786 at the Hermitage Theater in St. Petersburg; see Nikolai Platonov Barsukov (ed.), *Dnevnik A. V. Khrapovitskogo* (St. Petersburg: A. F. Bazunov, 1874), 16.

of shamanism from the perspective of enlightened philosophy. Like other observers, the Empress subsumed many forms of religious behavior under one rubric of irrational superstition. During a journey to the Crimean peninsula she expressed her dislike of the behavior that she encountered among the Islamic Tartars: "You want to go far to escape the noise that they make in their mosques. It needs a lot of exercise to endure a howling of this strength. There are people among them who rotate until they fade, shouting 'Allah hue.' These are close to inspiration and resemble the shamans in Siberia and Germany."[46] That Catherine alludes to 'German shamans' here is an indication of her opinion that the Germans are much more susceptible to irrationalism than other peoples. When she learned that the German version of her *Siberian Shaman* was received favorably, she was amazed, because she had expected that nobody would read the piece in Germany.[47]

However, despite her radical fight against irrationality and shamanism, it is interesting to see that Catherine the Great contributed to the perception of shamanism in the eighteenth century in a way that is much more ambivalent than what she may have intended. To reveal these ambivalences, let us turn to the comedy itself. The plot of *The Siberian Shaman* is pretty simple: The Bobins, a family with Siberian background, bring their daughter Prelesta to St. Petersburg in order to separate her from her lover Ivan Pernatov and to find a husband for her who would be more suitable. In their company, the Chinese shaman Amban-Lai is traveling who soon receives some fame in the city of St. Petersburg. He not only performs spectacular healings; he even intends to build up a shamanic school and attracts a lot of attention, particularly from female members of the upper class. In the end, it becomes apparent that Amban-Lai is a deceiver and fraud, and he is punished.

While the plot is very predictable, the way in which Catherine tells the story of Amban-Lai is remarkable.

> That script presents a contradictory interpretation of shamanism, for although Catherine most often shows her title character to be fraudulent and laughable, he sometimes appears to be credible and genuine. While at times the

46) Letter to Zimmermann, dating 1 July 1787 (Jessen, *Katharina II. von Rußland*, 343).

47) Letter to Zimmermann (who reviewed *The Siberian Shaman* favorably), dating 22 April 1787 (Jessen, *Katharina II. von Rußland*, 331). *Der Sibirische Schaman* was published in 1786; in 1788 it was republished, along with the other two comedies, with the radical Enlightener Friedrich Nicolai in Berlin and Stettin (see below).

> spectator is witness to events that clearly indict the shaman as an imposter, at other times the audience is cast in the same role as many of the on-stage characters: that of impressionable onlooker.[48]

But there is even more to it. In a nutshell, *The Siberian Shaman* represents the dialectic of refutation and desire that characterizes the European reception of shamanism. Let me illustrate this with a few examples.[49]

The Bobins, who brought Amban-Lai with them to St. Petersburg, belong to those who honor the shaman as a respectable and serious healer.

> Sanov. Please tell me, is it true you've brought with you some sort of … strange person?
> Bobin. A Siberian Shaman has come with us.
> […]
> Bobin. By profession, he is called a Shaman.
> Sanov. What kind of a profession is that? I've never heard of it!
> Bobin. That's what the Mongols and the other Siberian peoples call their priests. The Shaman I have brought here is named Lai, but to honor him, one must say Amban-Lai.
> Sanov. What does "Amban" mean?
> Bobin. It's a title of respect among the Mongols.
> Sanov. There's a great deal of noise here about your Amban or Shaman. Supposedly he can tell a person's character just by looking at his face.
> Kromov. Some describe him as a wise man.
> Bobin. He is shrewd, perceptive, and virtuous.
> Kromov. Others call him … a sorcerer.
> Sanov. The stupid and ignorant, when they lack common sense, see sorcery everywhere.[50]

In the further development of the play, we clearly see the dynamic of cultural translation at work, in which the Western observers try to make sense of what they see and integrate shamanism and Eastern culture in their own

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48) Lurana D. O'Malley, "The Monarch and the Mystic: Catherine the Great's Strategy of Audience Enlightenment in *The Siberian Shaman*," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 41 (1997), 224–242, at pp. 224–225.

49) For a more detailed discussion see von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 61–66.

50) Lurana Donnels O'Malley (trans. and ed.), *Two Comedies by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia:* Oh, These Times! *and* The Siberian Shaman (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1998), 38–39.

referential framework—very much like in the Orphic interpretational setting that we have seen before. For instance, it looks more like a reference to Masonic high-grade systems than to shamanic initiation when Bobin explains: "Shamans learn such things by degrees; this one has attained 140 degrees. There are rules so that by degrees they can reach this state of trance."[51] Other spectators are reminded of hysterical women that they have encountered at home. In the German version of the comedy (published in 1786), Catherine even added a footnote to one observer's comment that "[i]n many ways, he acts just like village women in hysterics."[52] She explained that "Klikuschen oder Bezauberte" (usually translated as "shriekers") refers to

> people who believe or claim that they are enchanted, in the manner of so-called possessed people in other countries in Europe, who make strange gestures and contort their bodies, or claim to predict future things in a flood of meaningless words, occasionally also imitating sounds of animals and calling out the name of the person who enchanted them or, who, as they put it, ruined them.[53]

Amban-Lai is depicted by the benevolent observers as representative of a *magia naturalis*, as a Pythagorean philosopher, or as a Buddhist mystic—all notions being part of the esoteric tradition that fascinated Goethe, as well; the malevolent observers, however, insist that he is a lunatic, fraud, sorcerer, or dangerous charlatan. Sometimes, the contradictory response is acted out directly:

> Lai. (*speaking quickly*) Our characteristics are made up of ecstasy, of flow, of sustenance, of movement, of warmth, of the bitter root. … Love and hate each have the same foundation, as do salt, action, oil, and density.
> Kromov. What chaos!
> Sanov. What an unusual man![54]

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51) Ibid., 47. See also O'Malley's reference to Catherine's note on the manuscript that explains her idea of this initiatory system (ibid., 47 note 7).

52) Ibid., 46.

53) Translation from ibid., 46–47 note 6. The German original is quoted in von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 64; see Catherine the Great, "Der sibirische Schaman. Ein Lustspiel," in: eadem, *Drey Lustspiele wider Schwärmerey und Aberglauben* (Berlin & Stettin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1788), 209–347, at pp. 234–235.

54) O'Malley, *Two Comedies*, 49.

The Siberian Shaman is both a piece of entertainment and of education. Catherine's audience was the educated elite in Russia and in Europe as a whole. The comedy is meant as a warning for all 'weak' people in western Europe who are not prudent enough in their enlightened endeavor. As we have seen, Catherine found those people particularly in Germany. In the letter to Zimmermann, already mentioned above, she links the German irrationalism to Cagliostro and other esoteric circles:

> I don't know whether Nicolai will be inclined to print the "Shaman," "The Deceived," and "The Deceiver" in the present climate in Berlin. I think that these comedies are running against the *Zeitgeist*. In the Hamburg newspapers I have read the denial that you wrote against the magnetizers from Strasburg, and the mentioning of the "Shaman" in that denial. I flatter myself that one could bring something from here to those countries that show a considerable taste for this kind of charlatans. I can reassure you in advance that this would lead to improvement and that one would do better with this than with Cagliostro and his consorts.[55]

Cagliostro, Freemasonry, and particularly the Moscow Rosicrucians Nikolai Novikov and Ivan Lopuhkin, were the main targets of Catherine's comedy.[56] It is certainly true that, for Catherine, Novikov's "Masonic ideas were just as nonsensical as a dog barking; like a shaman Novikov was capable of entrancing the people—her people—through his strange ideas. In Catherine's view, the shaman Novikov deceived those who wanted to deceive themselves; part of the enlightening strategy of her playtext was to awaken her audience from the trance of his mysticism."[57]

At the same time, and quite against the author's intention, *The Siberian Shaman* is a mirror of various possible receptions of shamanism and Eastern spirituality in Western intellectual milieus. Again, and by way of conclusion, we see that the European encounter with shamanism and 'irrational' non-Western religious practices has from the beginning followed the dynamics of cultural translation, in which the foreign is translated into something that is known from European history. The shaman is a projection screen for European fantasies, fears, and desires. Lovers and haters of

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55) Letter to Zimmermann, dating 1 July 1787 (Jessen, *Katharina II. von Rußland*, 342). Cagliostro's spiritual séances were one reason for Catherine to write the *Siberian Shaman*.

56) On this context see Collis, "The Petersburg Crucible."

57) O'Malley, "The Monarch and the Mystic," 239.

the irrational could fill in the details, whether these details were concerned with a re-invention of pre-Christian Greek philosophy—with Orpheus as a key figure—or with fantasies about the East.

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