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Individuation and Disindividuation

Karoline von Günderrode's Aesthetics of *Naturphilosophie*

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Karoline von Günderrode's works can be read as individuation and disindividuation experiments within an ontology informed by Friedrich Schelling's naturephilosophy. Günderrode places this naturephilosophical ontology in the service of an ethical and political problematic, namely, how to dissolve the normative claims of oppressive political-erotic categories that seek to regulate and channel the desires of everyday life into prescribed and delineated forms. Günderrode's work does not, however, culminate in a substantive ethics of *Naturphilosophie*, but rather, effectuates a wholesale transvaluation of ethical and political fields of sense, one in which seemingly stable concepts of virtue, the good, and political order are rendered contingent. Her naturephilosophical aesthetics ultimately authorizes and affirms non-standard forms of individuation and disindividuation as legitimate sources of transformation.

Keywords: aesthetics, individuation, *Naturphilosophie*, ontology, politics

RÉSUMÉ

L'article soutient que les écrits de Karoline von Günderrode peuvent être lus comme un terrain d'expérimentation de l'individuation et de la désindividuation au sein d'une ontologie inspirée de la philosophie de la nature de Schelling. Günderrode met cette ontologie relevant de la *Naturphilosophie* au service d'une problématique éthique et politique : celle de savoir comment dissoudre les attentes normatives impliquées par des catégories politico-érotiques oppressives, qui cherchent à réguler et à diriger les désirs de la vie quotidienne dans des formes prescrites et prédéfinies. Toutefois, l'œuvre de Günderrode ne culmine pas dans une éthique substantielle de la *Naturphilosophie* : elle opère plutôt une transvaluation des champs de sens éthique et politique dans leur ensemble, transvaluation qui rend contingents les concepts en apparence stables de la vertu, du bien et de l'ordre politique. Son esthétique dérivée de la philosophie de la nature autorise, et affirme, en définitive des formes non standard d'individuation et de désindividuation comme sources légitimes de transformation.

Mots-clés : esthétique, individuation, *Naturphilosophie*, ontologie, politique

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1. Introduction

A pervasive downward pull traverses the works of Karoline von Günderrode: bodies sink to the ground, plummet from cliffs into churning waters, slide into the realm of the dead. Some, like the wanderer in “The Wanderer’s Descent,” actively seek out an Orphic journey to the subterranean world, a *katabasis*. Others, like the protagonist of “The Pilot,” make an upward climb: an ascent towards sidereal order. Along this trajectory toward the beyond, it is not long before gravity reasserts itself, drawing the individual away from the pure order of the ether back to the earth. Attempts at escape velocity are met with an unyielding reality principle, the law of gravity and the gravity of law. In the words of the final lines of the poem: “The law of gravity / it claims its rights anew.”¹

In Günderrode’s works, the realization of an ideal—or *the* ideal—is constantly exposed to failure; the descent into pure matter fails, just as the ascent into pure form fails. But a counterforce becomes palpable in such failures: a force of matter and form nevertheless capable of reconfiguring the elements governing the habitable zone in which humans live out their lives, namely, the field of the earthbound. In Günderrode’s essay *The Idea of the Earth*, the earth refers to a matrix of appearance, akin to a phase space of developmental potentiation, or the set of all possible individuated forms as they emerge from and return to preindividuated substance. Moreover, the earth indexes a *problem*—in the form of a disequilibrium between spirit and matter—that the universe itself aims to solve: “perhaps the totality of our entire solar system is dedicated to the resolution of this task.”² Processes of dynamic emergence as attempts to resolve physical (and metaphysical) problems operate according to a logic that Gilbert Simondon will designate as *transduction*: “transduction does not go elsewhere to seek a principle to resolve the problem of a domain: it extracts the resolving structure from the very tensions of this domain.”³ Günderrode’s idea of the earth stimulates transductive operations: processes of individuation and disindividuation that respond to problems inherent in initial conditions.

¹ Karoline von Günderrode, *Sämtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien. Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, 3 vols., ed. Walther Morgenthaler (Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1990–1991), 1:390. Citations to Günderrode’s work (SW for *Sämtliche Werke*) will follow this edition. All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

² SW 1:448.

³ Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 15.

Dominant strands in G nderrode’s entire oeuvre, even in those works that precede *The Idea of the Earth*, can be read as aesthetic individuation and disindividuation experiments within an ontology informed by Friedrich Schelling’s naturephilosophy.⁴ According to Schelling’s *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799), individuation—how finite or determinate individuals come to emerge at all given that the natural system strives to be pure process without product (and is thus, to a certain extent, hostile to individuation)—constitutes the “highest problem of the philosophy of nature.”⁵ The engagement with processes of individuation—along with the inverse operation, that of disindividuation (which also concerned Schelling)—permeates G nderrode’s aesthetics such that it would not be implausible to call individuation the highest problem of her work as well.

Ultimately, G nderrode places a naturephilosophical ontology in the service of an ethical and political problematic, namely, how to *uncondition* the real through aesthetic-speculative operations. In *Letters of Two Friends*, the present is conceptualized as a defective system of relations, the result of a pathological status quo endemic to Protestantism, namely in the pervasiveness of “economy” as the dominant cultural category of intelligibility.⁶ The cultural logic of economy seeks to apportion out sensuous and spiritual resources and constrain desire such that all subjects are necessarily governed by a constitutive and non-productive lack: “nobody can drink enough to be filled with God, this drop, however, is sufficient for nobody.”⁷ In a cultural context dominated by procedures and norms privileging economic distribution as a general order of things, the pursuit of the unbound, of unconstrained excess, can only appear as extravagant, illusory, or sick. The

⁴ Resonances and divergences in the work of G nderrode with the philosophies of Fichte and Schelling have been investigated in Ruth Christmann, *Zwischen Identit tsgewinn und Bewu tseinsverlust. Das philosophisch-literarische Werk der Karoline von G nderrode (1780-1806)* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2005), as well as in more recent work by Anna Ezekiel, Dalia Nassar, and Karen Ng; see, for example, Anna C. Ezekiel, “Revolution and Revitalization: Karoline von G nderrode’s political philosophy and its metaphysical foundations,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (forthcoming); see also Ezekiel’s introductions to *Poetic Fragments* in Karoline von G nderrode, *Poetic Fragments*, ed. and trans. Anna C. Ezekiel (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016); Dalia Nassar, “The Human Vocation and the Question of the Earth: Karoline von G nderrode’s Philosophy of Nature,” *Archiv f r Geschichte der Philosophie* 104 (forthcoming, 2022); and Karen Ng, “The Idea of the Earth in G nderrode, Schelling, and Hegel,” *The Oxford Handbook of Women Philosophers in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Kristin Gjesdal and Dalia Nassar (forthcoming).

⁵ Friedrich Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Keith R. Peterson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 77. See also Daniel Whistler, “Schelling on Individuation,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (2016): 329–44; and Yuk Hui, “The Parallax of Individuation” *Angelaki* 21, no. 4 (2016): 77–89.

⁶ SW 1:351.

⁷ SW 1:351.

idea of the earth posits a liberation from this constraining system of relations by construing the present as a deficient form in which vital energy cannot properly be intensified, harnessed, and directed towards that which is unbound.

The metaphysics of Günderrode's thought, as Anna Ezekiel has argued, can be described as one of elemental separation and recombining in constellations that form ever new assemblages.⁸ There have been notable attempts to make explicit the ethical and political consequences of Günderrode's metaphysics as thus expressed. Dalia Nassar, for example, argues that Günderrode, by drawing on Fichte rather than Schelling, invests metaphysics with an ethical task, with a *vocation*, one whereby human beings comprehend themselves in service to the earth;⁹ according to Karen Ng, Günderrode's view of the earth as a system that aims to establish a "collective organism" provides a framework for an ethics aimed at the cultivation of a healthy and flourishing ecosystem.¹⁰

When one examines the metaphysics developed in texts such as *The Idea of the Earth* not merely in dialogue with her philosophical interlocutors (i.e. Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling, Hemsterhuis), but in relation to her other poetic adventures—for example, in line with the more radical tendencies of her *Poems and Fantasies* (1804) and the *Poetic Fragments* (1805)—one is left with the impression that such accounts miss the prevalent attraction in her work to non-standard, even perverse forms of individuation invested with a significant deviant potential. Attempts to recuperate Günderrode's work in the service of a contemporary ideology or normative orientation—ecological co-habitation, for example, or service to the earth—downplay the disruptive attractors of her naturephilosophical ontology. It is certainly possible to draw on her thought as an inspirational source for thinking beyond ecological catastrophism; however, fidelity to the full scope of her speculative ontology also requires finding and preserving whatever in Günderrode is untimely, wild, whatever cannot be integrated into the substantive normative concerns of the contemporary. Precisely the untimeliness of her thought can indicate its most emancipatory possibilities. The energetic feedback loop between earth and individual that Günderrode explores in the *Letters of Two Friends* and *The Idea of the Earth*, for example, can be repurposed to dissolve the

⁸ Anna C. Ezekiel, "Revolution and Revitalization" (forthcoming). Ezekiel explores this dynamic in multiple groundbreaking contributions. See also her introduction to *Poetic Fragments*, 19-20; 92.

⁹ Dalia Nassar, "The Human Vocation and the Question of the Earth: Karoline von Günderrode's Philosophy of Nature" (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Karen Ng, "The Idea of the Earth in Günderrode, Schelling, and Hegel" (forthcoming).

normative claims of oppressive political-erotic categories that seek to regulate and channel the desires of everyday life into prescribed and delineated forms. According to Joseph Albernaz, G nderrode’s idea of the earth erects a “destabilizing common that undoes the enclosures of the world and the universal.”¹¹

Grasping these elements of G nderrode’s thought requires placing the naturephilosophical ontology of the *Idea of the Earth* in relation to the extremities of her work as a whole. In an analysis of the poem “The Bonds of Love” from *Poems and Fantasies*, for example, Amy Jones identifies an inverted vampiric principle at the core of G nderrode’s thought: neither female nor male, the inverted vampire’s primary function is to redirect the flow of blood rather than simply to drain blood, and thereby to initiate an energy transfer between individuals in such a way that desire can no longer be channeled into patriarchal patterns of behavior.¹² The residues of such non-standard forms of relationality remain operative in G nderrode’s naturephilosophical metaphysics. G nderrode’s idea of the earth, which potentiates and realizes itself by drawing on the agonistic and energy-intensifying function of individuated beings that it has itself produced, comprises a metaphysical circulatory system that has something equal parts cannibalistic, vampiric, and generative about it: “The totality is enlivened through the destruction of the individual, and the individual lives immortally in this totality, the life of which the individual develops by living.”¹³

To grasp the full import of her thought, it will be necessary to invert the teleology typically invoked as the ethical endpoint of G nderrode’s metaphysics. Instead of examining how individuals produce a healthy or normative holistic body and what this final body might be, a productive question can be posed as follows: what forms of individuation and disindividuation does such a naturephilosophical holism legitimate and stimulate? In the case of *The Idea of the Earth*, one must therefore distinguish between the ideal produced *in* the text (the realized idea of the earth as an immortal, ideal body) and that which is produced *by* the text (the affirmation of non-standard forms of individuation). What might seem to be the telos of G nderrode’s naturephilosophical metaphysics—individuals in ethical

¹¹ Joseph Albernaz, “Earth Unbounded: Division and Inseparability in H lderlin and G nderrode,” *Nothing Absolute: German Idealism and the Question of Political Theology*, eds. Kirill Chepurin and Alex Dubilet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 126-7.

¹² Amy Jones, “Vampirism Inverted: Pathology, Gender, and Authorship in Karoline von G nderrode’s ‘Die Bande der Liebe’,” *Writing the Self, Creating Community: German Women Authors and the Literary Sphere, 1750-1850*, eds. Elisabeth Krimmer and Lauren Nossett (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2020), 141-162.

¹³ SW 1:360.

service to an end greater than themselves, to ecological equilibrium—obscures the consequences of what this telos itself produces and authorizes. Through the positing of such a telos, Günderrode’s thought submits various fields of signification and individuation to elemental recombination: gender, erotics, religion, politics, to name a few such fields. What comes to light in Günderrode’s work is thus not a substantive ethics of *Naturphilosophie*, but rather, a wholesale transvaluation of the ethical and the political, one in which seemingly stable concepts of virtue, the good, or political order are rendered contingent, thereby granting to transgressive forms of individuation and disindividuation an increased ontological power of vitalization; precisely these non-standard forms can be most capable of potentiation, planting the seeds of an as yet unknown future trajectory.

The argument will unfold as follows. First, I will examine Günderrode’s work as commensurate with the operations of romantic *Poesie* inasmuch as they cultivate speculative counter-practices that aim to deviate from standard forms of intelligibility. Second, I show how Günderrode, in her dialogue *The Manes*, already draws on a naturephilosophical concept of the bond (*Verbindung*) to enable non-hierarchical identifications that suspend operative categories of social intelligibility and transmit a power of action beyond class, gender, and historical-cultural difference. Third, I examine how Günderrode constructs limit points for processes of individuation and disindividuation—potentiated zones from which the human is seemingly excluded—in the respective domains of ether (pure form) and underworld (pure matter); however, Günderrode nevertheless harnesses the generativity of such domains in poetic form, either by bringing the experience of divine order back into the realm of differentiation (in “The Pilot”) or by transposing the pure potentiality of matter into the virtuality of the unconscious (in “The Wanderer’s Descent”). Finally, I show how Günderrode further develops the aesthetics of *Naturphilosophie* in the *Letters of Two Friends* and *The Idea of the Earth* as a speculative solution to a culture constrained by the exigencies of political economy; the “idea of the earth” ultimately invests potentially deviant processes of individuation and disindividuation with an affirmative power in the pursuit of possible erotic and political fantasies.

2. Romantic *Poesie* as Speculative Counter-Practice

In an essay on Hölderlin’s post-1806 poetry, Daniel Whistler approaches textual artifacts written in the wake of Kantian philosophy as speculative or counter-speculative forms. Schelling and Hegel, for example, construct speculative mirrors that intend to reflect the “totality of reality”: “it is the

philosopher, her writing practices and the resultant *text* which assume the place of the mirror.”¹⁴ Romantic poetry—the infinite productivity of *Poesie* as it emerges in the discourse of Early German Romanticism and concretizes itself in aesthetic products—also incites speculative discursive operations, albeit often in the form of the fragment that constitutively refuses claims to totalization, whether in infinite approximation, or, as Leif Weatherby argues, in the more radical identification of the fragment *with* a basic material and ontological dynamic of incompleteness in the real that ramifies into the symbolic, becoming commensurate with textual and communicative acts.¹⁵ Whatever the case may be: Romantic *Poesie* functions as a crucible of speculative operations by producing a view on the world inflected by something alien to standard forms of intelligibility. This feature is critical to the work of G nderrode and ascribes a power of estrangement to the poetic object. Moving through poems as speculative experiments changes the very function of the organs of intellection such that one would not—*could not*—turn back to the world with the same view of things. An extra-terrestrial impulse, one that extracts subjects from the stabilizing self-evidence of normative status-quo ideologies, lies at the basis of G nderrode’s idea of the earth.

A consistent tendency of G nderrode’s work—from the key poems and fragments of the *Poems and Fantasies* (1804) to those of *Melete*, posthumously published in 1806—posits the poem as a speculative field subtended by a naturephilosophical ontology. Schelling inaugurates the discourse of *Naturphilosophie* in his *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797); in its initial formulation, naturephilosophy does not simply apply philosophy to the natural sciences—does not approach the empirical sciences as already formed discourses and then seek to philosophically represent the abstract structure or validity of such discourses—but examines how the natural sciences themselves *emerge philosophically*, are themselves emergent properties of an unconditioned natural process whose dynamics they then make visible. Schelling thereby reinterprets the very concept of natural science (*Naturwissenschaft*): where empirical natural science produces knowledge of nature as a reified object, the natural sciences as redefined by Schelling (later, as *speculative physics*), in their material and semiotic operations, disclose an ontology of becoming: “It is my goal... to let natural science itself *emerge philosophically*, and my philosophy is itself nothing other than natural

¹⁴ Daniel Whistler, “The Production of Transparency: H lderlinian Practices,” *Essays in Romanticism* 23:2 (2016): 156.

¹⁵ For this latter Leif Weatherby, “A Reconsideration of the Romantic Fragment,” *The Germanic Review* 92:4 (2017): 416.

science.”¹⁶ *Naturphilosophie* transforms the natural sciences and mathematics into a series of operations that philosophy can then interpret. Schelling claims, “chemistry teaches us to *read* the *elements*, physics the *syllables*, and mathematics nature.”¹⁷ Ultimately, Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* treats the natural sciences as windows onto an ontological grammar of nature whose dynamics condition the emergence of all individuated forms, including the subjectivity of the subject.

Günderrode’s intensive engagement with Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* confronts this non-human ontological ground from which the human mind and body emerges as an inventorium replete with material-semiotic tendencies—attraction and repulsion, conflict (*Streit, Kampf*) and inhibition (*Hemmung*), indifference (*Indifferenz*) and individuality (*Individualität*)—that can be transducted into poetic-generic form; in Günderrode’s works, such operations are, in a word, scaled up.¹⁸ Moreover, these operations are already latent in works that predate her engagement with Schelling; as is the case with other romantic poets (Novalis, Tieck, Hoffmann), she does not simply translate Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* into aesthetic form, but develops an idiosyncratic naturephilosophical aesthetics with its own speculative investments.¹⁹

3. The Aesthetic Ontology of the Bond

The implicit potential of a naturephilosophical ontology to relativize the present—to suspend the categories of intelligibility of a specific cultural moment and to condition the genesis of unforeseeable cultural forms—already comes to light in *The Manes*, one of Günderrode’s dialogues in her

¹⁶ Friedrich Schelling, *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1797), ix.

¹⁷ Schelling, *Ideen*, ix; see also Helga Dormann, *Die Kunst des inneren Sinns. Mythisierung der inneren und äusseren Natur im Werk Karoline von Günderrodes* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2004), 140.

¹⁸ As Helga Dormann claims, “the early romantics do not simply assign to philosophy the role of delivering material.” Dormann, *Die Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 146. While philosophy, including Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, does not provide the “material” of poetry, it nevertheless posits an ontological field within which poetry realizes its mythological potential. To be sure, romantic *Phantasie* disrupts the consistency of naturephilosophical potentiation; but within the framework of a naturephilosophical aesthetics, the disruptive force of poetic fantasy itself would not be located within the subject, but traceable back to ontological material dynamics. This process comes to light in Günderrode’s *Idea of the Earth* and in the *Letters of Two Friends*.

¹⁹ According to Dormann, however, Günderrode’s work can “neither be grasped as the attempt to illustrate Schelling’s philosophy nor as an imitation of his philosophy.” Dormann, *Die Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 148.

Poems and Fantasies. This fragment stages an encounter between student and teacher—itself a performative instantiation of the ontological operations that it purports to describe, namely, the manner in which a bond (*Verbindung*) between individuated entities becomes taken up into a chain of causes and effects. What Siarhei Biareishyk calls a “processual transindividuality”²⁰—dependent on a Spinozistic materialist strain of German Romanticism that manifests itself in chemical forms of individuation (based on a notion of contiguity or *Berührung*) and the maintenance of a galvanic chain (*Kette*)—also infiltrates Günderröde’s speculative semantics. Like Spinoza, Günderröde makes individuated beings commensurate with their power of action; for Günderröde, the continuity of “receiving and acting”²¹ designates the degree to which an individual’s power can remain operative even after the dissolution of the body.²² And like Spinoza, the picture of the cosmos thus developed is ultimately affirmative, as the increase in power that comes with aggregate bindings of individual beings invokes a natural order in which the tragedy of loss is no longer a necessary structure of the given: “melan-choly”²³ is thus converted into a sense of future possibility (“prophecy” as a “sense of futurity,”²⁴ although, strictly speaking, the modality of *possibility* would not have been operative for Spinoza).

The force of this Spinozist strand of Günderröde’s work entails a dissolution of socially binding or imaginatively valid normative (status quo) distinctions in favor of speculative forms of individuation and aggregation that maximize energetic intensification and transfer between entities. In *The Manes*, Günderröde rethinks contiguity or *Berührung* in the propagation of a chain (*Kette*) within a semantics of force as action at a distance; later, in *The Idea of the Earth*, conjunction (*Verknüpfung*), attraction (*Anziehung*) and touch (*Berührung*) constitute the principal operations governing the specific vital power of a form of life (*Lebensform*).²⁵ Moreover, in *The Idea of the Earth*, energy transfer takes place between individuated forms and the substance of the earth itself, as the metastability of substance requires the individual—and the dissolution of the individual—to resolve the tensions of its own virtual

²⁰ Siarhei Biareishyk, “Rethinking Romanticism with Spinoza: Encounter and Individuation in Novalis, Ritter, and Baader,” *The Germanic Review* 94:4 (2019): 294.

²¹ SW 1:34.

²² Jason Yonover argues that Günderröde engages with the emancipatory tendencies of Spinozism even as she recalibrates the Spinozist “bias to existence” to include death as a medium of energy transfer; see Jason Yonover, “Spinozism around 1800,” *The Oxford Handbook of Women Philosophers in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Kristin Gjesdal and Dalia Nassar (forthcoming).

²³ SW 1:30.

²⁴ SW 1:35.

²⁵ SW 1:447.

being and thereby potentiate the ground into its ideal form. In this process, the ground produces forms of individuation that diverge from politically and socially sanctioned forms of normativity. That is, in G nderrode’s literary-speculative experiments and in her naturephilosophical writings, ethics no longer operates along the axiological distinction *good / evil*, but must be redescribed as a heightened form of individuation that affirms processes of disindividuation (the more powerful the individual, the more powerful its force of self-dissolution, and vice versa). This naturephilosophical and speculative imbrication of individuation with disindividuation—and the ethical transvaluation that results from the confluence of these seemingly mutually opposed tendencies—constitutes a persistent thread in G nderrode’s work.

Understanding the novelty of G nderrode’s thought in *The Manes* requires a closer understanding of what constitutes a bond (*Verbindung*). The operation of the bond provides a solution to a metaphysical and existential problem, that of the finitude of the person, and more specifically, concerning how individuality can remain operative after death. The initial problem that catalyzes the exchange between student and teacher, however, is at the same time a political one inasmuch as it is focused on power as manifest in a supposedly singular sovereign instance. The student wonders: can it be true that political energy of the deceased king Gustav Adolph, whose power of action was responsible for the cohesion of the Swedish nation, simply disappears and is lost to time? The question that preoccupies the student in *The Manes* thus concerns death, conceptualized as an entropy of information, where the effect of individuation seems irrevocably gone, dissipated into nothingness, “Thither! Lost! Departed!”²⁶ The teacher postulates that this loss can be preserved and transmuted into a further power of action inasmuch as the individual is re-collected and taken up in an internal field of effectiveness (*er-innert*)—translated into thought. One being can enter into a connection (*Verbindung*) with another and function as a channel for the force of individuation inasmuch as an inner mental homogeneity makes one element receptive to another; the human being becomes a medium in a chain of causes and effects that can transmit a power of individuation “inasmuch as you share something homogeneous with [the great person].”²⁷

The logic of the bond in this instance is predicated on *homogeneity*. The teacher says: “we stand in relation with *that part* of the spirit world that harmonizes with us; a similar or the same thought in different minds, even if they never knew of one another, is, in the spiritual sense, already a bond.”²⁸

²⁶ SW 1:30.

²⁷ SW 1:32.

²⁸ SW 1:33.

The teacher postulates thoughts as instantiations of homogeneous fields that operate in excess of physical contact between individuals; an equivalent or similar thought (*ähnlicher oder gleicher Gedanke*) thus creates a bond between individuals—in which effective force can be preserved or transmitted—even if the individuals never know one another, or even if they never know of one another’s existence. A transhistorical chain is thereby constructed in the realm of thought over which death has no empire. According to the teacher, “Death is a chemical process, a separation of forces, but not an annihilator; it does not break the bond between myself and similar souls.”²⁹ Death does not eliminate effective force or the medium through which force travels—the homogeneity of thought as the medium for a “harmony of forces”³⁰—because the potentiality of a thought is enough to preserve the power of the individual. Every future thought homogeneous with that of another individuated being thus preserves and transmits, whether consciously or not, the forces (*Kräfte*) of this individual.

The chemical interpretation of death—because it separates forces but does not destroy them—enables such forces to transcend seemingly insuperable barriers, such as time, space, gender, and class. A bond (*Verbindung*) establishes a chain of effectiveness—what the teacher calls a “long infinite chain from the cause to all results”³¹—via homologies in thought between individuated entities that, according to the status quo of social-normative logic, would otherwise be separated out in mutually exclusive, and perhaps even oppositional categories: sovereign / subject, male / female, teacher / student (the teacher’s own doctrine would seem to entail the de-naturalization of the power relation that governs the logic of the dialogue itself).

The de-differentiation of hierarchical power relations enabled by this conception of the bond founds the basis of a complete restructuring of social and sacred power. The inner sense, which describes this potential zone of homogeneous mediation, conditions the genesis of “religions” and “many apocalypses of ancient and modern times.”³² While the medium of force through which individuation is preserved and channeled into the projects of the future depends on the homogeneity of mental receptivity in the process of bonding, globally, such chains of cause and effect can ramify heterogeneously, that is, with as many multiple harmonizations as there are thoughts and ideas. One ought not to confuse, then, the homogeneity of the

²⁹ SW 1:33.

³⁰ SW 1:33.

³¹ SW 1:31.

³² SW 1:35.

transfer mechanism with a homogeneity of thoughts or products, since the teacher speaks of religions and apocalypses in the plural rather than the singular.

The naturephilosophical ontology articulated here is not one in which the homogeneity of thought—one mind that enters into a zone of indifferentiation with another mind—generates a homogeneous reality. On the contrary, the possibility that anyone can be bound to any other person in thought—unconstrained by local conditions of time, place, culture, or even consciousness—can produce multiple and potentially conflicting aggregate forms. The bond (*Verbindung*), as emergent from localized homogeneities, generates global heterogeneities. In this speculative mirror, the operation of *binding* can strategically contract and expand the present according to the form taken by thought; “the positive present” can be reduced to “the smallest and most transient point”³³ just as any thought, as part of a chain of actualizations (*wirken*), can become culturally operative at any moment. That a present moment can be dissolved into nothingness as in so “many apocalypses of ancient and modern times”³⁴ thus conditions the opening of a sense of futurity—in this instance, as the intimation of a different order of things, as “prophecy.”³⁵

4. The Unboundedness of Potentiality and the Determinacy of Form

Günderrode explores the dissolving power of an apocalypse—not *the* apocalypse, but one among many potential apocalyptic events—in her “Apocalyptical Fragment.” The fragment begins in a state of orientation, specifically in the liminal passage from west to east—“in front of me was the east, behind me the west”³⁶—and ends by loosening all cardinal points into form-generating and form-dissolving, individuating and disindividuating processes. The ego appears to itself “no longer myself, and yet more than myself,”³⁷ at one time “a drop of dew,”³⁸ and finally “no longer an individual drop,”³⁹ culminating in the celebration of the “one and all”⁴⁰ of eighteenth-century Spinozism after Lessing.

³³ SW 1:31.

³⁴ SW 1:35.

³⁵ SW 1:35.

³⁶ SW 1:52.

³⁷ SW 1:54.

³⁸ SW 1:53.

³⁹ SW 1:54.

⁴⁰ SW 1:54.

The temporality of G nderrode’s apocalypse is emphatically not eschatological—not about bringing time itself to an end—but about folding the eternal dynamic forces of individuation and disindividuation, the visible and the invisible, into the horizon of the present: “simultaneously time and eternity.”⁴¹ This infolding of the eternal into the present is marked by the turn of the visionary voice in this apocalyptic fragment to the determinations of the organs of its audience—the ears—at the moment of highest contraction and expansion, abstraction and generalization: “Thus, whoever has ears to hear, let that person hear! It is not two, not three, not thousands, it is one and everything.”⁴² “One and everything” must become audible, sensuously focalized.

The mythological potency of the power of dissolution thus depends upon establishing points of earthly, sensuous re-entry from privileged sites of absolute becoming into the boundedness of temporal specificity. G nderrode explores two limit points—boundaries between earthly existence and a realm that would entail stripping away the conditions of earthly existence—as failed or inverted Platonic trajectories: the upward thrust as an ascent towards the ideal in the poem “The Pilot;” and the descent into the cave as a shadowy realm antecedent to knowledge and differentiation in “The Wanderer’s Descent.” These two poems—which explore contrary tendencies and velocities, descent and ascent, matter and form, potentiality and actuality—designate the limit points for the space of individuation in the work of G nderrode. At the same time, they transmit the disruptive and restorative forces held *in potentia* in their respective domains (underworld / ether) into the sensible order of things in such a way that this order can be suspended, potentially transformed, and thereby stimulate the emergence of differently organized, unfamiliarly individuated beings.

In “The Pilot,” the move from an intuition of absolute divine motion back into differentiation, towards the “the boundaries of the earth,”⁴³ is a function of “the law of gravity.”⁴⁴ According to notes taken in G nderrode’s *Studienbuch* on Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* (sometimes written in her hand, sometimes in a foreign hand, but strewn with her addenda), gravity is associated with specific functions: it expresses a “persistent indiffer-entiation”⁴⁵ [*beharrende Indifferenz*] between opposing activities, i.e. the third force that synthesizes the excess of attractive force in magnetism

⁴¹ SW 1:54.

⁴² SW 1:54.

⁴³ SW 1:390.

⁴⁴ SW 1:390.

⁴⁵ SW 2.367.

(contraction) and the excess of repulsive force in electricity (expansion); where light is the generative principle, gravity is “the receptive”⁴⁶ principle. Gravity designates the tendency of bodies to seek a central point [*Centrumsbestreben*]⁴⁷; it indicates an overabundance of “rigidity, dead form”⁴⁸ over the life and activity of light (although it is also responsible for cohesion, thus for the consistency of individuated forms). Gravity thus expresses a fundamental ambiguity in Günderrode’s reception of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*: it is at one and the same time the force of limitation and contraction as well as a matrix of receptivity, or that which prevents an individuated being from absolutizing itself as a monomaniacal principle.

Günderrode’s poetic naturephilosophy of gravity in “The Pilot” draws upon but redirects the speculative momentum of these operations. Here, as the pilot ascends upward to attain a vision of infinite cosmic order, gravity discloses a pull toward differentiation as a necessary condition of embodied humanity. The body designates a horizon of potentiality and of limitation; when the pilot notes that “none of earthly lineage”⁴⁹ can escape the pull of gravity, the conditions through which gravity constrains bodies include the limitations produced by naturalizations of gender [*Geschlecht*]. On the one hand, the downward pull that subjects bodies to the violence of the law frustrates the desire of the pilot to maintain himself (and the subject of the poem is in this instance male, *der Luftschiffer*) in a neoplatonically inflected intuition of cosmic rhythm; on the other hand, it is precisely this descent that brings the vision of one who has “completely divested himself of the earthly domain”⁵⁰ back into the world, back into the horizon of differentiation and limitation. Gravity thus designates both the limiting force and the horizon through which the unconditioning of humankind, and, by extension, of the constraints of gender, can enter into the differentiation of discourse, in this instance, of poetic form.

The speculative countermovement to the line of flight towards a desire for a purely intellectual intuition of cosmic order—a desire that is first fulfilled and then frustrated in “The Pilot”—consists in the movement toward the subterranean realm, toward the base materiality of chaos as pure potentiality. Günderrode explores this countermovement in the poem “The Wanderer’s Descent.” Here, the wanderer’s desire pulls him toward the domain of undifferentiated matter (*Materie* as *Mutter* / *mater*, as origin), the

⁴⁶ SW 2:385.

⁴⁷ SW 2:389.

⁴⁸ SW 2:401.

⁴⁹ SW 1:390.

⁵⁰ SW 1:390.

oblivion of a pre-discursive and pre-individuated (pre-elemental) becoming, from which the birth of new forms can emerge. Addressing the Earth Spirits, whose domain is that of unrealized potentiality or “the unborn,”⁵¹ the wanderer yearns to reverse the arrow of time in order to begin a new timeline. He declares:

Thus absorb me, secret powers,
Lull me into deep sleep.
Wrap me in your midnights,
I joyfully take leave of the ranks of the living.
Let me sink into the womb of the mother
To drink oblivion and new life.⁵²

The desire to return to a matrix of non-differentiation represents a point of convergence between death and erotic drives: the wanderer seeks to divest himself from life (*Ich trete freudig aus des Lebensreihn*). He thus aims to forget the differentiation of his specific embodied individuated form, but only so that he can then be repurposed into other forms of emergence (*neues Daseyn*); he seeks to de-potentiate himself so that he can be re-potentiated, die to be reborn. The desire for oblivion, as Ezekiel argues, is thus a condition of possibility for transformation, a kind of transmigration of souls.⁵³

The desire for oblivion applies not merely to the self, but to an entire cultural field of sense. The attraction of Günderrode’s wanderer to the speculative domain of the subterranean contains a potential index of the unbearability of the real; the very trajectory inscribes itself into the philosophical and metaphorological history of returns to and departures from the cave, as Hans Blumenberg writes:

Inasmuch as our fears can be based upon memory, the idea cannot be dismissed that forgetting can become commensurate with wish fulfillment. The cry for consciousness is not the only solution to elementary human problems. The right to forget must always be recalled when this cry enters into proximity with unbearability.⁵⁴

⁵¹ SW 1:73.

⁵² SW 1:73.

⁵³ Ezekiel suggests that death is not merely oblivion, but can be operationalized as part of the transformation of the self; death refers to a discontinuity in a conception of selfhood as “it persists through radical change, periods of dormancy, incorporation of elements previously external to the self, and subjection to forces beyond the individual’s control.” Anna Ezekiel, “Metamorphosis, Personhood, and Power in Karoline von Günderrode,” *European Romantic Review*, 25:6 (2014): 773-791; 782.

⁵⁴ Hans Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 45.

The wanderer seeks oblivion, perhaps as an index of the trauma of an intolerable existence. But the wanderer does not find oblivion; the main operation of the poem consists in converting the power of this oblivion—the annihilation of the present—into a form of recollection or *Er-innerung* through a speculative doubling.

This doubling occurs by making the soul into a mirror of the pure potentiality of nature. One of the many semantics through which Günderrode approaches the zone of unformed potentiality in the subterranean realm—in addition to “primordial force”⁵⁵ [*Urkraft*], the doubling of life in the womb (“life in the womb of life”⁵⁶), and the mother / child dyad—approaches nature as a “workshop.”⁵⁷ The workshop signifies a space for the emergence of arts, a *technicity* of nature itself (and one should note the alternative spelling, the *work-city*, *Werkstadt*, of this first occurrence of the word in the poem, an orthography that indexes a collective or political subtext; this spelling was interpreted as a typographical error and “corrected” in Bettina von Arnim’s reproduction of the poem in *Die Günderrode*).

The impossibility of returning to the preconceptual realm of pure potentiality, of the unborn, with the violation of the mother that this implies, inhibits the wanderer from achieving his desire: he is “already parted from the mother’s womb / Through consciousness already separated from dream.”⁵⁸ Although the wanderer cannot enter into this pre-differentiated workshop of nature external to subjectivity—the workshop from which technicity, as a field of operativity predicated upon differentiation, emerges—he nevertheless harbors an analog of this ground of inorganic chaos in the ground of the soul. The Earth Spirits who confront the wanderer and bar his way into the pure potentiality of matter redirect the wanderer to his own interiority:

Look down, into the grounds of your soul,
 What you seek here you will find there,
 You are only the seeing mirror of the cosmos.
 There too are midnights that one day will dawn,
 There too are forces that awaken from sleep
 There too is a workshop of nature.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ SW 1:72.

⁵⁶ SW 1:72.

⁵⁷ SW 1:72.

⁵⁸ SW 1.73.

⁵⁹ SW 1:73-4.

Günderrode suffuses the poem with an explicitly speculative semantics in the form of the mirror. The ground of the soul as a speculative mirror (*des Weltalls seh'nder Spiegel*), however, does not simply make consciousness into a reflection of the real in its contemporary forms. On the contrary, this mirror, which analogizes the anarchic domain of the earth spectacularized in the unconscious, produces a new trajectory: the imperative, thrice repeated (and thus more than doubled), to go elsewhere (*dort*), posits the ground of the soul as the source of a chaotic potentiality that nevertheless generates arts, products, different technical forms. The Earth Spirits emphasize: *There too is a workshop of nature* (here the spelling or workshop, *Werkstatt*, is “normalized”). The generative extra-organic realm where “primordial force”⁶⁰ slumbers is thus remembered, *er-innert*, by being transposed onto the virtuality of the unconscious.

Inasmuch as it forms the speculative double of anarchic pre-individuated force, the unconscious is invested with a dual power: an annihilation of form, or the return of forms to states of potentiality, along with the stimulation of an alternative genesis, “new life.”⁶¹ The unconscious can thus be repurposed to disrupt accounts of formation (or *Bildung*) that delimit a circumscribed potential of development for individuated beings. Herder’s *Ideas for a Philosophy of Human History*—which Günderrode, already in 1799, called “a true consolation,”⁶² and whose cosmological perspective made her own affairs appear “not worth a tear, not worth one anxious minute”⁶³—links the formation of the human being to the condition of the earth, albeit in such a way that prioritizes the stabilization of individuated forms over unbounded potentiality. When Herder declares in a chapter heading, “OUR EARTH IS A GRAND WORKSHOP FOR THE ORGANIZATION OF VERY HETEROGENEOUS BEINGS,”⁶⁴ he grasps the individuation of entities in this “workshop” as already determined according to the order of eternal, inalterable laws:

Even as everything appears to us in the bowels of the earth still as chaos, as ruins—because we are not yet able to oversee the initial construction of the whole—we nevertheless perceive, even in that which seems to us the smallest and crudest being, a very determinate *entity*, a *forming* and

⁶⁰ SW 1:72.

⁶¹ SW 1:73.

⁶² Max Preitz, “Karoline von Günderrode in ihrer Umwelt. II. Karoline von Günderrodes Briefwechsel mit Friedrich Karl und Gunda von Savigny,” *Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts* (1964): 165.

⁶³ Preitz, “Karoline von Günderrode in ihrer Umwelt. II,” 166.

⁶⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit, Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 6, ed. Martin Bollacher (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker, 1989), 55.

formation according to eternal laws, which no human caprice can change.⁶⁵

While Herder's concept of the earth equally ascribes a chaotic virtuality to force (*Kraft*)—"The mass of effective forces and elements from which the earth emerged probably contained as chaos everything that could and should become on the earth"⁶⁶—the unfolding of this chaotic potentiality is guided by natural laws such as the laws of polarity, of attraction and repulsion. Günderrode's naturephilosophical aesthetics as manifest in "The Wanderer's Descent," which indifferentiates nature and mind by doubling the speculative mirror of natural chaos within the unconscious, re-potentializes the primordial forces of emergence in such a way that they enable normative deviation and stimulate divergent trajectories. She transplants and transforms Herder's "workshops" of lawful planetary organization, of *Bildung*, into a workshop of chaotic potentiality.

5. Speculative Naturephilosophy as an Art of Unconditioning

Günderrode's naturephilosophical aesthetics attains some of its most explicit formulations in the *Letters of Two Friends*, documents exchanged between Eusebio and an unnamed friend of Eusebio, and *The Idea of the Earth* (which was partially integrated into the last of the letters). Three of the texts gathered in the *Letters*, including the final letter, belong to the friend rather than to the character Eusebio (the biographical relation of these two figures to Günderrode and Creuzer, a question belabored in the scholarship, will play no role in the speculative dynamic elaborated here).

The first letter, written by the friend of Eusebio, articulates the aesthetic, religious, erotic and political problem of restricted economies that limit the circulation of effective and aesthetic force in the present: the current cultural moment, "this time,"⁶⁷ is "poor in inspirational intuitions for every sort of artist."⁶⁸ This figure seeks the roots of aesthetic impoverishment in cultural forms of Protestantism according to which "economy in every sense and in all things has grown to such a considerable virtue."⁶⁹ The proliferation of economies based on distribution (restricted economies) rather than those based on unconditioned and excessive dispensation, or what Bataille would

⁶⁵ Herder, *Ideen*, 55.

⁶⁶ Herder, *Ideen*, 31.

⁶⁷ SW 1:351.

⁶⁸ SW 1:351.

⁶⁹ SW 1:351-2.

call general economies, belongs to the “evils of the age,”⁷⁰ an age in which subjects are constrained by “narrow relations of nature,”⁷¹ by even “more narrow concepts of the true pleasure of life,”⁷² and then finally by political power, “forms of state encompassing all activities.”⁷³ These problem fields—in which the categories of nature, pleasure, and politics are revealed to be insufficient for an unconditioned or general economy—can only be resolved through the cultivation of “powerful, strong forms.”⁷⁴

At first, as a provisional solution to this cultural problem, the friend suggests returning to the Middle Ages as a source for powerful forms that would provide a viable alternative to the restricted economy of the present. This possibility is ultimately suppressed in favor of the cultivation of a naturephilosophical idea: the idea of the earth. This idea supersedes the suggestion of the interlocutor Eusebio, who urges the friend to be “modest”⁷⁵ and posits the telos of human potentiality as “repose of contemplation in all things.”⁷⁶

The friend nevertheless agrees with one of Eusebio’s ideas, namely the notion that the repetition of the formative power of the past (i.e. the figurative power of the Middle Ages) cannot provide a viable model of striving in the present that would take aim at the pathologies of the age, at the illness of its restricted economies. The friend’s elaboration of the idea of the earth in the final letter ultimately responds to what Rancière would call the political problem of a deficient distribution of the sensible, indeed, to the very idea that the sensible should be constrained by the naturalization of economies of distribution.

Schelling’s attempt to think individuation as a result of opposing forces, dispersed across his naturephilosophical writings, provides a speculative paradigm—a series of imaginative and elemental operations—that Günderröde repurposes and inverts as part of a widespread transvaluation of ethical and political action. Günderröde’s *Studienbuch* notes that Schelling’s model of individuation posits in every entity the manifestation of a productive power that constantly strives to generate “new conditions,”⁷⁷ but is impeded

⁷⁰ SW 1:352.

⁷¹ SW 1:352.

⁷² SW 1:352.

⁷³ SW 1:352.

⁷⁴ SW 1:352. As Ezekiel notes, vitalism plays an essential role in the development of Günderröde’s political thought. See Ezekiel, “Revolution and Revitalization,” (forthcoming).

⁷⁵ SW 1:354.

⁷⁶ SW 1:356.

⁷⁷ SW 2:365.

by an opposing counterforce of “inhibition.”⁷⁸ Individuated forms thus become ontologically agonistic fields: “all things only exist through the permanence of their struggle.”⁷⁹ Cosmological bodies participate in this drama of individuation, indeed, are themselves conditioned by this oppositional tension between self-maintaining and universalizing tendencies. Individuated forms are thus always *doubled*, manifesting a natural process that turns against itself; the *Studienbuch* notes: “The earth itself has this doubled life”⁸⁰ inasmuch as it strives to tear itself loose from the sun “in order to completely become an individual,” whereby the sun strives to attract the earth to it and thereby to “eliminate its individuality.”⁸¹ The ontological dynamic of Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* thus perpetuates a power inequality between beings in which smaller bodies are permanently threatened: “If we think about two beings of unequal size, the larger one will attract and will, so to speak, consume the smaller one.”⁸² The phenomenality of the earth in the *Studienbuch* lays bare this ontological threat, one in which marginalized bodies are left weakened and potentially overwhelmed.

At one point, the *Studienbuch* posits “a linkage between light and gravity in which the former is *not* overcome and held captive by the latter,”⁸³ in which case “the relation between both forces consists more in coexisting next to one another than in interlocking within one another.”⁸⁴ The idea of forces *next to* one another as opposed to *in one another* implies a different model of relationality, one in which individuals are not internally riven by an agonistic imbrication or penetration of forces; each maintains their separate domain of effectivity. In *The Idea of the Earth* and the *Letters of Two Friends*, Günderrode constructs a naturephilosophical process of individuation as a *vitalization* of the universal, thereby eliminating the agonistic relation between individuated form and general process that can be found in Schelling’s work. In *The Idea of the Earth*, vitality is measured by the capacity of individuals to form bonds with other elements through an intensification of contact and the force of attraction: “We call life the most intimate mixture of different elements with the highest degree of contact and attraction.”⁸⁵ This attractive or binding force of the individuated form intensifies the vital energy that then feeds back into and potentiates the substance of the earth.

⁷⁸ SW 2:365.

⁷⁹ SW 2:365.

⁸⁰ SW 2:368.

⁸¹ SW 2:368.

⁸² SW 2:388.

⁸³ SW 2:403.

⁸⁴ SW 2:403.

⁸⁵ SW 1:446.

Once an entity emerges from the pre-individuated substance of the earth into an individuated form capable of contact or attraction, it becomes loaded with energy in its interactions with other individuated elements. G nderrode uses the ideal of struggle (*Kampf*) as an example of this energetic intensification via individuation: “just as two individuals who steel themselves in a long struggle with one another are stronger at the end of the battle than they were before it began, so too are these elements enlivened, and living force strengthens itself in every exercise; however, every form that this force brought forth is just a development of its life principle.”⁸⁶ The substance of the earth cannot develop without the vitality that comes from individuated elemental interactions, which in turn channel their developed vitality through the exercise (* bung*) of attraction and contact back into substance in an energetic circulatory system. In this process, it should be noted that the *erotic* and the *agonistic* represent equally intensifying processes in G nderrode’s work; while an agonism need no longer exist between individuated form and universal process (*Erds substanz*), it can exist in the relation between individuated elements. Moreover, there can be an agonistic relation between the individuated form and the substance of the earth, although any agonistic relation, as shall become clear, is one that de-realizes the idea of the earth.

The vitality of an individuated form is measured according to the energy it gives back to the substance of the earth upon the individual’s dissolution. Individuals thus intensify, store, and redirect energy; only individuals can bring the earth to its full potentiated development, namely, to the point of perfect indifferenciation between mind and body, or an “indifferenciation... in which all body would also at the same time be thought, all thought at the same time body.”⁸⁷ Attaining the indifference point between thought and body means: an ideal body and a bodily ideal, a body without lack or deficiency and a fully actualized corporeal ideality. As Dalia Nassar argues, each individual thus exists in service to the earth, or rather, to the development of the earth’s preindividuated potentiality.⁸⁸ Establishing an indifference point between body and mind—which entails an indifferenciation between particular and general, element and process—functions as the ethical ideal of the individual. The more general the self can become *as* an individuated form (in equilibrium with itself, as equal to others as possible, as selfless as possible), or the closer it can produce in itself the ideal

⁸⁶ SW 1:447.

⁸⁷ SW 1:448.

⁸⁸ Nassar, “The Human Vocation and the Question of the Earth: Karoline von G nderrode’s Philosophy of Nature” (forthcoming).

state that the substance of the earth seeks to realize, the more the individual pushes the earth toward its own body-spirit indifference point. Another way of expressing the paradoxical economy of this naturephilosophical ontology is as follows: the more extreme the force of disindividuation, the more powerful the energy transference of the individual. The aesthetic experiment with a naturephilosophical ontology thus aims to set individuation and the potentiation of the pre-individuated dynamics of the substance of the earth into a mutually reinforcing and intensifying feedback loop.

Individuals can, however, *inhibit* the potentiation of the substance of the earth inasmuch as they negate the tendency to dedifferentiate body and mind: “Through every deed of injustice, untruth and selfishness, that blessed state is made more remote, and the god of the earth... is bound in new chains.”⁸⁹ The development of the earth is thus radically dependent on the operations of its individuated forms. The idea of the earth is thus not a teleological system that unfolds according to a predetermined path, although its internal dynamic aims at a telos; only the internalization of this telos (dedifferentiation, equilibrium, perfection without lack) in a particular individuated form—as an ethical ideal—can bring this telos into actuality.

While the idea of the earth exhorts the practice of an ethical ideal, it transvalues the field of normativity by redefining what it means to be equal, just, beautiful, selfless, over and against the dominant tendencies that otherwise govern the contemporaneity of individuated forms. Individuals who have achieved the most extreme forms of dedifferentiation compatible with individuation become ethical paragons. Günderröde’s idea of the earth thereby makes deviant, non-standard forms of individuation—those who suspend positive law in favor of a natural law whose only form is that of dedifferentiation between the corporeal and the ideal—into vitalizing elements of mediation.

Günderröde’s oeuvre undertakes multiple aesthetic experiments in which the paradoxical formula—increase in disindividuation (as operation) = increase in individuation (as potential energy storage and transfer)—entails a transvaluation of the ethical and political field. Gender, class, bodily capability, national origin no longer function as naturalized forms through which force ought to be mediated (although they still exist in the real as *constraints*); the idea of the earth aims to subject such contingent relations to a process of unconditioning.

⁸⁹ SW 1:362. Ezekiel notes that the perpetual struggle against the entropy of political and social forms of life entails perpetual revolution Ezekiel, “Revolution and revitalization,” (forthcoming).

Taboos melt away.⁹⁰ Take, for example, the *Story of a Brahmin*, in which the Brahmin describes how the potentiation of “primordial force”⁹¹ moved through individuated forms until such forms became “one with [primordial force]... and at the same time remained themselves, in such a way that the divinity and universality of the creator united with the individuality of the creature.”⁹² The intensification of individuation in tandem with operations of disindividuation transforms not just the ontological ground, but more importantly, the entire field of appearances, which are now structured differently; the Brahmin (not the narrator, but the Brahmin friend of the narrator) says, “the appearances around me took on a new and completely different meaning.”⁹³ The story seeks a transindividual transformation: to produce a chain of Brahmins, albeit extracted from the constraints of the caste system. Force thus moves from the Brahmin-friend within the story, to the narrator as Brahmin, to the potential transformation of the listener (diegetically, the character Lubar) as Brahmin, to the reader, also now a potential Brahmin. This chain of transformations in turn denaturalizes normative systems, de-worlding appearances such that categories of social intelligibility can be re-worlded. Throughout the course of the story, Brahminian *Naturphilosophie* unconditions economic categories of intelligibility (profit = the good); the rationalistic world order that demands the assertion of the ego over the other (Fichtean idealism); and even the agonistic forms of individuation that could be ascribed Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*, or agonistic forces that make individuals into “entities of a contradictory nature.”⁹⁴ Günderrode’s Brahmin, like the aesthetic experiment of the idea of the earth, seeks to resolve the problematic ontological tendencies of Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*—according to which polarities and internal agonisms are naturalized (in the earlier *Naturphilosophie* at least)—and seek out alternative speculative ontologies that would feed back into the restructuring of life practices.

However, the Brahminic form, which alienates subjects from the givenness of the world in order to make the world appear contingent and thus open to reconfiguration, represents only one strategy of individuated disindividuation. Among the set of maximally vitalizing individuals could be

⁹⁰ According to Stefani Engelstein, Günderrode’s *Udohla* “allows sibling incest to pass as a cultural norm without explicit censure”; Stefani Engelstein, “Sibling Incest and Cultural Voyeurism in Günderrode’s *Udohla* and Thomas Mann’s *Wälsungenblut*,” *The German Quarterly* 77.3 (2004): 294.

⁹¹ SW 1:312.

⁹² SW 1:312.

⁹³ SW 1:312.

⁹⁴ SW 1:306.

counted figures in Günderrode's works who suspend the ethical of contemporaneous existence: Nikator, who murders the corrupt sovereign and thereby potentially forfeits his own existence; Hildgund, on the cusp of assassinating the tyrant Attila, and who also embraces disindividuation; Napoleon, whose revolutionary force is equally embedded in a cyclical naturephilosophy of emergence (the emergence of light from night and the return from light to night); Pedro, whose overwhelming erotic pull toward disindividuation, toward a unity with the sea as the virtual space of his unconscious desire, manifests itself in a bloody struggle with a beautiful youth, thereby extracting him from the norms of bourgeois heterosexuality; Brutus, who kills Caesar and himself, and whose disindividuation equally maximizes his vitalizing force—stored as information that can be recollected in the medium of the divine:

Thus did a true priest, Brutus himself,
Offer a sacrifice to freedom, his god,
And yet: whoever dies for his god, lives within his god.⁹⁵

Those figures attracted to tendencies toward disindividuation in erotic and political forms—in such a manner that processes of disindividuation are correlated with an intensification in their deviant individualizing power—effectuate a transvaluation of ethical and political fields of sense. Moreover, inasmuch as each element in attraction to or in interaction with others initiates an energy intensification and transfer (circulating into the *Erds substanz* and then back into forms of individuation), it is no longer evaluated according to the traditional semantics of ethical judgment—according to the dyad of *good* and *evil*—but according to the relative degree of disindividuation of the element as it approaches the indifference point between body and mind: the absolutely whole body-mind organism, without remainder or lack, without tension or internal agonism, as pure affirmation. The striving for “dedifferentiation”⁹⁶ (*Ununterscheidbarkeit*) within the singularity of an individuated form opens a field of political experimentation. In the *Letters of Two Friends*, the idea of earth functions as a speculative solution to the pathology of the time (*Zeitübel*) of politically *restricted economies*, of distributions of resources whereby the strength or power of one element or community depends upon the deprivation of the other. In the first letter of the *Letters of Two Friends*, the problem is framed, perhaps following

⁹⁵ SW 1:374.

⁹⁶ SW 2:402.

Hemsterhuis, as one constrained by “narrow relations of nature”⁹⁷ which in turn generate “narrower concepts of the true pleasure of life”⁹⁸ and finally, “forms of the state.”⁹⁹ The idea of the earth can be repurposed to *uncondition* or dissolve cultural forms—relations of nature, concepts of desire (pleasure) and political structures (*Staatsformen*)—inadequate to intensifying processes of indifferenciation.

The idea of the earth thereby becomes a speculative mirror that gathers utopian erotic and political fantasies into a space of possible appearance: radical equality between individuated forms; freedom as the expression of an affirmative body-mind dedifferentiation; the cultivation of a self-less, asubjective individuality; and the channeling of the anarchic potential inherent in the earth into the dissolution of political forms and their reformation, inasmuch as they would then, as part of their elemental restructuring, permit expansive and vitalizing individuals to maximize their tendencies towards dedifferentiation. The speculative limits of Günderröde’s naturephilosophical aesthetics, thus expressed, have not been set; the fully realized idea of the earth could entail the reorganization of the entire horizon of sensible appearances and forms of cultural intelligibility—of natural relations, concepts of desire, and state forms—in ways yet to be imagined.

⁹⁷ SW 1:352.

⁹⁸ SW 1:352.

⁹⁹ SW 1:352.