

**Joanna Raisbeck, *Karoline von Günderrode: Philosophical Romantic*, Cambridge, Legenda, 2022, 259 pp., ISBN 978-1-83954-025-7**

Serious research into German women philosophers of the long eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is experiencing a true revival. There have been excellent studies in the last decades (e.g. by Katherine Goodman, Petra Wilhelmy-Dollinger, or Ruth Whittle<sup>1</sup>), but I am under the impression that the last years have seen an ever-widening web of researchers devoting their time to a rediscovery of this aspect in the history of philosophy. The translations of key texts into English definitely helps<sup>2</sup>, and the spark has carried over into numerous conferences and handbooks.<sup>3</sup> The present study fits very well into this landscape – and it will hopefully contribute to a thorough rewriting of the history of European thought in these periods.

It is hard to review a book as excellent as this one, but at least I can try to recapitulate the main reasons why this book is well worth the read for anyone interested either in the literature of Romanticism (and its philosophical implications), the dissemination of Spinozism, or women philosophers of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

Raisbeck's study on Karoline von Günderrode (1780-1806), with the apt sub-title or characterization "Philosophical Romantic" promises (and delivers) to fill in a lacuna of Romantic scholarship: to pay justice to the breadth and complexity of Günderrode's oeuvre not by a critical focus on particular themes, but under a more encompassing idea that manages to offer a glimpse into the development of Günderrode's thought as well as a cohesive reading of the entire material. Raisbeck does not discuss all of Günderrode's

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Goodman, *Dis/closures: Women's Autobiography in Germany between 1790 and 1914* (New York et al.: Lang, 1986) and, together with Elke Frederiksen, *Bettina Brentano von Arnim: Gender and Politics* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995); Petra Wilhelmy-Dollinger, *Die Berliner Salons*, New Edition (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2000); Ruth Whittle, *Gender, Canon, and Literary History. The Changing Place of Nineteenth-Century German Woman Writers (1835-1918)* (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> *Women Philosophers in the Long Nineteenth Century. The German Tradition*, edited by Kristin Gjesdal and Dalia Nassar, with translations by Anna C. Ezekiel (Oxford: OUP, 2021). See too Anna Ezekiel's translation of Günderrode's *Poetic Fragments* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2016). And her translation of Günderrode's *Philosophical Fragments* should also be available soon at Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth Century Women*, ed. by Kristin Gjesdal and Dalia Nassar (Oxford: OUP, 2024), but also the *Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Susanne Lettow, Tuija Pulkkinen (Cham: Springer / Palgrave MacMillan, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> A side-note: most translations are from Raisbeck herself who has, as I happen to know first hand, an excellent grasp on my native tongue. The study of this interesting thinker and writer is in very good hands here, as the discussion of a wide range of primary and secondary literature also attests.

works at length, but chooses a representative selection for each period. Unfortunately, there are not too many, as Günderrode's period as an active writer is fairly short, i.e. from around 1799 to 1806. As the main narrative thread, Raisbeck reflects on Günderrode's take on the *Pantheism Controversy* from the 1780s, an event that cannot be underestimated in its importance for the development of Romanticism. Günderrode's metaphysical understanding of the world informs her earlier works such as the *Studienbuch* (1799-1800), but then also fictional texts such as the drama *Hildgund* (c. 1804-5, sometimes referred to a "poetic fragment"<sup>5</sup>), all the way up to her mature work in *Melete* (1806).

This focus also helps in bringing her interest (that she shared with other major Romantic thinkers, among whom this book will hopefully guarantee Günderrode a proper place) in the overlap of religious and poetic concerns into view.

Raisbeck also showcases the breadth of influences on Günderrode's oeuvre, ranging from the Jena Romantics (Schlegel and Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Fichte) to Neoplatonism (Shaftesbury, Hemsterhuis, see also chapter 5, 138-9), but also Herder's and Schelling's philosophies of nature. It is, again, her take on Spinozism that gives these various views a common denominator, a take that Raisbeck declares to be "*the* most consistent adherent of pantheism and panentheism in Romanticism and in the period more generally." (227)

How to bring together poetry, tragedy, and philosophy? Most of Günderrode's oeuvre is not in dry prose, yet she still is a poet as well as a philosopher. Metaphysical concepts play a decisive role in her literary work, and thus, the interplay of these two areas need to be taken into consideration in any attempt to assess her oeuvre. "[H]er philosophical interests should not be considered as conceptual, nor is her literary work a mere vessel for representing concepts" (2). To avoid such simplifications, Raisbeck

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<sup>5</sup> Raisbeck (68) denies reading this work as a fragment but interrogates the abrupt ending. This treatment is commendable in that it avoids a boring statement such as "we will never know since the author did not want us to know", but challenges the reader to come to terms with a tension between our own expectation (the semantic closure: "Hildgund kills Attila", p. 69) and the "formal non-closure" (69). Instead of leading Hildgund to face the realistic consequences of tyrannicide which would have manifested her agency, but also put her back into dependency in the chaos to follow the killing, "Günderrode shifts these concepts of autonomy, the ability to self-determine, and liberation into an unreal subjunctive mood. Their symbolic confirmation in Attila's death is denied. What remains is merely the desire for autonomy and liberation, which finds expression in the intensity of unconsummated hope, with the conditions of its possibility being unknown." (69) And thus, by leaving the reader hanging, she achieves the most realistic impression of all: as female agents, we really do not know where our acts will bring us.

considers their interplay, on the one hand, from a metalevel of how Romanticism as such has been conceptualized over the last three decades<sup>6</sup>, and, on the other hand, on a historical-conceptual level concentrated on G nderrode’s own writings (overall, the latter part receives a tad more detailed discussion). It comes as no surprise that the work of a woman intellectual differs from those of the canonical Romantics such as Novalis or the brothers Schlegel. Women were not allowed at universities, hence their studies (if existent at all) were far more eclectic. However, this allows us better to see the full breadth of Romanticism, as this perspective lightens the “over-commitment to philosophy” (4) that previous research focused on. For good reason Friedrich Schiller and Jean Paul count among G nderrode’s most favorite writers in her youth (see on Schiller’s influence 53-4, for instance, on Jean Paul, for instance, and his *Giannozzo*, 136), as these two happened to put far more stake on literature than philosophy proper.<sup>7</sup> And, accordingly, it is their artistic take on human reality which is more suffused with dreams and hopes than abstract thought, that her philosophical stance stems from. With Schiller, she wants to allow us to flee reality with beauty. But with Jean Paul and the Jena Romantics, she espouses how art and poetry can lay the ground for a true religion, or at least a proper re-enchantment of the world.

The **first chapter** lays the groundwork for appreciating the reception of G nderrode’s thought, mainly through Bettine von Arnim and Christa Wolf. The **second chapter** does quite some more philosophical heavy lifting and introduces the Spinoza debate into the discussion – this offers the framework in which Raisbeck is going to interpret G nderrode. The **third chapter** gives us a first taste of Raisbeck’s knack to bring philosophy and poetry in G nderrode’s writings together. With the drama “Magie und Schicksal” (1805) it also sheds light on G nderrode’s involvement with politics.<sup>8</sup> The fear of Spinoza’s alleged commitment to fatalism (Jacobi) is reflected in the “*Schicksalsdrama*” per se: how is agency possible amidst the overpowering force of history? This is further expanded by a look at the dramatic fragments (on “*Thatmenschen*”, 49) *Nikator* and *Hildgund*, in which the actions of the protagonists are tied back to an inner voice: the divine operating within the individual. At the end of the chapter, Raisbeck

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<sup>6</sup> She mainly mentions the work of F.C. Beiser, D. Henrich, and M. Frank who established the Jena Romantics as a philosophical school in its own right, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Just think of Schiller’s famous dictum that it might have taken him ten years to read and understand Kant, yet it took him ten more to forget about all this again.

<sup>8</sup> On which Anna Ezekiel also wrote a fascinating paper in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30 (2022), 666-86.

accordingly thematizes the dangers that come with reliance on such a voice: it looks good as long as it is against “bad” people, but the line of justification (“an inner voice told me so!”) is rather weak, or at least is in desperate need, with Rousseau, on the assumption of the inner good of human beings (78). However, as Raisbeck stresses, this dangerous outreach at least has the benefit to counterweigh Spinozistic fatalism: through the active realization of their inner voice, the characters as “individual[s] relate to the whole as an equal, rather than as its disempowered subject[s]” (78).

With her critique of Bonaparte with “Der Franke in Egypten”<sup>9</sup> Raisbeck shows in **chapter four** how Günderrode also goes against utopian hopes connected with this form of self-empowerment, but also in its inner connection to (a purified, 87) religion. This is particularly reflected in “Mahomed, der Prophet von Mekka” (1805), that recasts the legitimacy of divine prophecy (in particular in its connection to human agency, seen under a Spinozistic light) in a much broader framework: “In ‘Mahomed’, esoteric forms of divining knowledge – magic, Kabbalic mysticism, ancient mysteries – are given equal credence alongside the three Western monotheisms. This reinvigorates the Neoplatonist and Hermetic notion of perennial philosophy and *Prisca theologia*: all religions and secular knowledge systems are, at their core, expressions of the same stable divine truth given to man in antiquity.” (88) With the even more speculative “Geschichte eines Braminen” (1804/5), Günderrode also includes allusions to J.J. Spalding’s *Bestimmung des Menschen* (after its first publication in 1748, it was surely still well known at the turn of the century after eleven legal editions, many illegal ones, and several translations) – both were in search for a notion of the religious that stemmed from the individual, not any overarching tradition (see 114, 117). Overall, this gives her attempt to bring the universal and the individual closer together some meat to work with.

Her fight with Kant and the relation of subject and object that finds its way in her “apokaliptisches Fragment” is the subject of **chapter five**. The individual is merely the universe’s mirror, but one that can see (here Raisbeck brings the ambivalence in the expression “sehender Spiegel” to the fore, which Günderrode uses in one of the most important poems, “Des Wandrers Niederfahrt”, in allusion to the Leibnizian monad). Ultimately, for the sake of insight into the whole we have to move away from mere individuality, towards the whole of nature – which comes to full fruition in the discussion of *Melete* (1806) in **chapter six**. The last two chapters locate Günderrode’s

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<sup>9</sup> Which in its more banal setting showcases Napoleon’s fall from grace after the praise in an earlier poem from 1799, “Buonaparte in Egypten”, see p. 82.

late works among the work of Schelling and among Romantic thought more generally (**chapter six and seven**), which, as already mentioned, helps to distinguish her stance. But this comparison also shows that Günderrode does not give up on the individual completely, but attempts to see how only through the individual (artistic) lens the whole can ever be seen at all.

A feature that I find most noteworthy in Raisbeck's study is, along with her exceptional conceptual clarity, her deft hand in bringing philosophical, metaphysical, and poetic concerns together with an analysis of the structural elements in Günderrode's writings. Just to take one example, her interpretation of "Adonis Todesfeier" (see chapter 6, 164-9) stresses the importance of repetition that brings about an impression of closure even where there is none. In the respective theoretical texts, Raisbeck shows how Günderrode argues for the importance of repetition for the development of ritual<sup>10</sup>. Thus, in both philosophical argumentation and literary allusion she shows how the changing and transient can borrow a feeling of permanence by its very structural organization.

Another instance of a fruitful conceptual interpretation of poetry serves as an introduction to chapter five's discussion of Günderrode's reception of Kant's philosophy. In the poem "Vorzeit, Neue Zeit" (c. 1800-2), Raisbeck shows how Günderrode incorporates her critique of modern rationalism in the very structure of the contrasting first strophe and the two closing triplets: whereas the first strophe recasts the 'olden days' of enchanted feeling and thinking, in which heaven and hell were clearly present in our very lives, the closing two triplets<sup>11</sup> destroys the old order – quite literally so –, and shows that the disenchantment of the world is still facing the troubling human need for a religion<sup>12</sup>. This need, in her understanding of Kant (for her sources, see 127, for instance, Diefenbach and Kiesewetter), is in danger of being reduced to a 'rational faith'. For Günderrode, any assumption of a first principle cannot just come from our observation of a chain of events or the assumption of a "prima summa" à la Diefenbach (as it could not for Kant, either), but presupposed a subjective principle – and it is this principle that she sees in a deep tension, as neither our understanding nor imagination is fully equipped to expand our consciousness in a way that it can actually yield objectively certain knowledge about ourselves and the world. We are, in short, still

<sup>10</sup> Here one is tempted to think of the much later work by Susanne K. Langer on ritual and myth, for example in her seminal trilogy *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, 1967, 1972, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> In the edition by Christa Wolf (*Karoline von Günderrode. Der Schatten eines Traumes*, Hamburg: dtv 1997, 65) the poem is not rendered in two strophes (as Raisbeck has it), which destroys the symmetry of the poem. On the other hand, this might as well have been intended.

<sup>12</sup> See also pp. 132-34 on "Der Dom zu Cölln", from the same time.

caught up in the need for a quasi-religious foundation of our very selves. The artist can at least point us to this “rupture between individuality and totality” (140), the ground for our desire to be whole again (mirroring the Platonic idea of Eros). Consequently, “Ein apokalyptisches Fragment” shows how this conflict comes to its tragic conclusion, as the invulnerability of the individual, the Leibnizian monad, can only expand itself to actually reflect the cosmos in full consciousness (and in Leibnizian terms, this would indicate a god-like ability to reflect the cosmos clearly and distinctly) at the cost of its own limited being. And so, the possibility to bring together individuality and universality is only possible as a limiting case which factors more into G nderrode’s tragedies than her philosophy. In the end, it is the loss of individuality which is to be preferred, as Raisbeck shows (chapters 3 and 5, e.g. 148-54). Not having “to surrender individuality” (151) remains a goal – and a dream, that can reveal itself in quasi-mystical moments of insight (154-5), but that also comes with a necessary element of (individualistic) defeat (156, 229).

With a deeper appreciation of G nderrode’s philosophy, we also gain a fascinating alternative to the various attempts to justify human singularity. For her, as is also reflected in the more famous fragment “Idee der Erde” (1805)<sup>13</sup>, humans and other beings are not utterly distinct, and hence we require a new philosophy of *nature*, not of man. What might be seen as a setback for philosophies interested in the normative, might as well be an interesting development for any ecological understanding of nature, a direction of thought taken to be born out of Goethe’s *Naturphilosophie*, but, as shown here, nascent in far more diverse lines of thought. G nderrode’s position is also not without tensions, as Raisbeck shows in reference to alternative views, held by Georg Forster, Friedrich Stolberg, or Schelling. Human desire and human reality remain unresolved; a feature that proved fatal for G nderrode herself.

„Die unvermischten Sch tze wollt’ ich heben  
Die nicht der Schein der Oberwelt ber hrt,  
Die Urkraft, die, der Perle gleich, vom Leben  
Des Daseyns Meer in seinen Tiefen f hrt.“ (*Des Wandrers Niederfahrt*)

G nderrode gives voice to an inner desire in us human beings that deserves our full attention, however fruitless our longing for its realization might be.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, its discussion by 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* 104.1 (2022), 108-30.

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With this book, we are given the chance to discover the breadth of its poetic reformulation.

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