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Karoline von Günderrode's Responses to Kant on Knowledge and *Bildung*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores two areas in the work of Romantic writer and philosopher Karoline von Günderrode in which she was influenced by Kant: her epistemology and her views on the human vocation. Günderrode developed her claims about knowledge partly as a challenge to Kant's limitation of human experience to the realm of phenomena, while her views on the human vocation respond to Kant's claims regarding moral development and the ideal society. In these areas, Günderrode engaged directly with Kant's work and with work by other thinkers working in the Kantian context. The paper provides a brief introduction to Günderrode as a reader of Kant before investigating Günderrode's ideas about "inner sense" in her dialogue "Die Manen," her exploration of several possible ways of acquiring knowledge in her 1804 collection *Gedichte und Phantasien*, and her account of the human vocation in her short story "Geschichte eines Braminen."

Keywords: Bildung, epistemology, human vocation, Kant, Karoline von Günderrode

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore deux secteurs de l'œuvre de l'écrivaine et philosophe romantique Karoline von Günderrode sur lesquels Kant a exercé une influence : son épistémologie et ses vues sur la vocation humaine. Günderrode a développé ses thèses sur la connaissance en partie pour défier la limitation kantienne de l'expérience humaine au domaine des phénomènes, tandis que ses positions sur la vocation humaine sont une réponse aux jugements de Kant relatifs au développement moral et à sa compréhension de la société idéale. Dans ces domaines, Günderrode s'est directement confrontée à l'œuvre de Kant, mais aussi d'autres penseurs s'inscrivant dans le courant kantien. L'article présente brièvement Günderrode comme lectrice de Kant, avant d'examiner les idées de Günderrode sur le « sens interne » dans son dialogue « Die Manen » ; son exploration des différentes possibilités d'acquérir des connaissances dans son recueil *Gedichte und Phantasien* de 1804 ; et sa compréhension de la vocation humaine dans sa nouvelle « Geschichte eines Braminen ».

Mots-clés : *Bildung*, épistémologie, vocation humaine, Kant, Karoline von Günderrode

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1. Introduction

The philosophical work of Romantic writer Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806) has finally begun to emerge from the shadow of her biography, which has been a source of fascination since her suicide. In addition to her reputation as a writer of powerful poetry and dramas, she is now recognized for developing original positions on metaphysics, human identity, consciousness, death, gender and friendship. Günderrode's philosophical claims are rooted in her study of Kant, Schelling, Fichte, Hemsterhuis, Herder, Schleiermacher, the Early German Romantics and others, and attention to her role as an interpreter of these thinkers has increased enormously in recent years.[1]

This paper focuses on two areas of Günderrode's philosophy in which she was influenced by Kant in particular: her epistemology and her views on the human vocation. A third area in which Günderrode can be read as responding to Kant—her model of the sublime—will not be considered here. In part, this is because this aspect of her thought has been studied in detail elsewhere,[2] but it is also harder to establish a direct link between Kant and Günderrode in this area.

The paper first provides a brief introduction to Günderrode as a reader of Kant before examining how she responded to Kant's limitation of human experience to phenomena and his views on moral development. Section 4 looks at Günderrode's ideas about "inner sense" in her dialogue "Die Ma-

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[1] See, e.g., " Anna Ezekiel, "Revolution and Revitalisation: Karoline von Günderrode's Political Philosophy and Its Metaphysical Foundations," *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30.4 (2022): 666–686; Hugo Herrera, "Urgrund and Access to the Urgrund in Karoline von Günderrode's Discussion with the Thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher," *European Journal of Philosophy* (2023): 1–16; Dalia Nassar, "The Human Vocation and the Question of the Earth: Karoline von Günderrode's Reading of Fichte," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* (2021); Karen Ng, "The Idea of the Earth in Günderrode, Schelling and Hegel," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Women Philosophers in the German Tradition*, ed. Kristin Gjesdal and Dalia Nassar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 527–548; Joanna Raisbeck, "'Diese Unwissenheit ist mir der unerträglichste Mangel, der gröste Widerspruck': The Search for Pre-rational Knowledge in Karoline von Günderrode," in *Anti / Idealism: Re-interpreting a German Discourse*, ed. Juliana de Albuquerque and Gert Hofmann (De Gruyter: 2019), 131–146; Alison Stone, "Hegel, Schelling and Günderrode on Nature," in *The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Susanne Lettow and Tuija Pulkkinen (Springer, 2023), 213–230. For a more comprehensive bibliography of secondary resources on Günderrode, including her philosophical thought, see Ezekiel, "Read Günderrode," *Trail of Crumbs* (https://acezekiel.com/__bibliography/).

[2] E.g., Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2007); Anna Ezekiel, "Metamorphosis, Personhood, and Power in Karoline von Günderrode," *European Romantic Review* 25.6 (2014): 773–791.

nen." Section 5 examines Günderrode's exploration of several possible ways of acquiring knowledge beyond the limits drawn by Kant, focusing on her 1804 collection of poetry and short stories, *Gedichte und Phantasien*. Finally, section 6 considers Günderrode's account of the human vocation in her short story "Geschichte eines Braminen," noting where Günderrode responds to Kant's claims regarding individual and socio-political develop-ment.

2. Günderrode as a Reader of Kant

Karoline von Günderrode was born in 1780 in Karlsruhe, the oldest of six children in a cash-strapped family of minor nobility. She was encouraged to study philosophy by her mother, who introduced Günderrode to the work of Fichte,[3] and was supported in this enterprise by educated and wealthier friends. These included members of the famous, literary Brentano family, the *Naturphilosoph* Christian Nees von Esenbeck and his wife Elisabetha von Mettingh, and the mythologist Georg Friedrich Creuzer, with whom Günderrode had an affair. These individuals and others provided her with texts that, as a woman of limited means, would otherwise have been outside her reach.

Günderrode's notebooks do not include records of everything she read and some have likely been lost,[4] but the notes we do have give us a picture of some of Günderrode's reading materials and the nature of her interests. Among many others, we find notes on Schleiermacher's *Monologen* and *Reden über die Religion*, Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen*, Hemsterhuis' *Simon ou des facultés de l'âme*, Schelling's *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* and *Bruno, oder über das göttliche und natürliche Prinzip der Dinge*, and fragments from three issues of the *Athenaeum*, the 1802 edition of Novalis' writings, and Friedrich Schlegel's "Rede über die Mythologie" and "Über die Philosophie. An Dorothea." Günderrode's letters also include references to reading materials, including Jacobi, Hölderlin, Goethe, Herder, and "Schelling's divine philosophy."[5]

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[3] Dagmar von Gersdorff, *"Die Erde ist mir Heimat nicht geworden." Das Leben der Karoline von Günderrode* (Insel: Frankfurt, 2006), 16, 63.

[4] E.g., Günderrode's notes on Goethe were only unearthed in 2022 (Holger Schwinn,"'Silenos ruht in stillen Wiesengründen…': Neuentdeckte Lyrik und Eintragungen von Karoline von Günderrode in der Schlosser'schen Bibliothek," *Jahrbuch des freien deutschen Hochstifts* [2022]: 96–129).

[5] Günderrode, Letter to Friedrich Creuzer, 22 March 1805, in Birgit Weißenborn, ed., *"Ich sende Dir ein zärtliches Pfand." Die Briefe der Karoline von Günderrode* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1992), 205. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

Günderrode's notes on Kant illustrate both Günderrode's intense interest in this philosopher and the difficulties facing women of her generation who wanted to do philosophy. The lengthiest notes that have survived are not on Kant's primary texts, but on Kiesewetter's popularization of Kant's work, *Grundriß einer allgemeinen Logik*,[6] which included an elaboration of the contents for "those who cannot attend lectures" on the topic (e.g., women). Günderrode copied these in more detail than her notes on any other thinker, showing their importance to her. We also find two short passages that the editor of Günderrode's collected work suggests summarize parts of Kant's *Neue Anmerkungen zur Erläuterung der Theorie der Winde* and one of his texts on the Lisbon earthquake.[7] References to *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* in Günderrode's notes are not from the primary source but scavenged, along with quotations from many other thinkers, from a popular collection of edifying quotations.[8] These cobbled-together sources on Kant's thought show Günderrode trying, and to an extent succeeding, to get hold of texts by a philosopher who was clearly important to her but whose work remained largely out of reach to women and those without extensive financial resources.

It is possible that Günderrode read other works by Kant that are not mentioned in her letters or surviving notebooks. She may also have been aware of ideas or texts by Kant through secondary texts or discussions with friends who had read them. A more complete picture of Günderrode's knowledge of Kant must still be constructed from the information we have available.

3. The Boundaries of Perception

In her work on metaphysics and human identity, Günderrode developed a model of reincarnation according to which human beings undergo radically

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[6] Johann Gottfried Karl Christian Kiesewetter, *Grundriß einer allgemeinen Logik nach Kantischen Grundsätzen zum Gebrauch für Vorlesungen begleitet mit einer weitern Auseinandersetzung für diejenigen die keine Vorlesung darüber hören können*, second edition vols. 1 and 2 (Berlin, F. T. Lagarde, 1795 and 1796).

[7] Immanuel Kant, *Neue Anmerkungen zur Erläuterung der Theorie der Winde, wodurch er zugleich zu seinen Vorlesungen einladet* (Königsberg: Driest, 1756); Kant, *Geschichte und Naturbeschreibung der merkwürdigsten Vorfälle des Erdbebens, welches an dem Ende des 1755sten Jahres einen großen Theil der Erde erschüttert hat* (Königsberg: J. H. Hartung, 1756). See Karoline von Günderrode, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Walther Morgenthaler (Frankfurt and Basel: Stroemfeld and Roter Stern, 1990–1991) [hereafter "SW"], 3:334.

[8] J. A. Neurohr and Johann Hugo Wyttenbach, *Aussprüche der philosophierenden Vernunft und des reinen Herzens über die der Menschheit wichtigsten Gegenstände mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die kritische Philosophie zusammengetragen aus den Schriften älterer und neuerer Denker* (Jena: J.G. Voigt, 1797).

different forms of existence (and associated strange experiences) before and after their human lives.[9] Much of her work can be read as an attempt to imagine and convey the types of experience she claims we can have beyond our current embodiment as individual human beings. However, Günderrode also claims that we can experience the world beyond ordinary human limits while alive. She presents this as happening in a number of ways: through revelatory visions, dreams, flashes of insight, the workings of "inner sense," initiation by teachers, masters, and mentors, and journeys underground or to far away countries. In this respect, Günderrode's work has much in common with investigations by other thinkers of her time, including the Early German Romantics, regarding forms of awareness that extend behind everyday experience and ordinary ways of knowing.

Günderrode often indicates that non-discursive, immediate knowledge is superior to the kind of knowledge that can be gained on the basis of measurable empirical data or deduced through argumentation—the traditional tools and starting points of philosophical and scientific inquiry. For instance, in the poem "Der Adept" a scholar is inducted into an Indian religion, after which he learns "How vain all his former knowledge" was, because "He never knew things' souls, / Made do with names and appearance."[10] Because of claims like this, Helene Kastinger Riley claims that "it is inappropriate to talk of Günderrode's 'philosophical' poems, because in her work she always and again and again speaks out against this form of the search for knowledge."[11]

However, Günderrode's interest in alternative knowledge forms is not just a rejection of philosophy or science; instead, it stems from a serious engagement with philosophical idealism, especially Kant's claim that human knowledge is limited to the way things appear to our minds and senses. Günderrode was familiar with this claim, and in one of her letters expresses dissatisfaction with this state of affairs: "it's totally incomprehensible to me," she writes, "that we have no consciousness other than perception of effects, never of causes. All other knowledge seems to me (when I think of this) not worthy of knowledge [...]. To me, this ignorance is the most unbearable lack, the greatest contradiction." She adds that she hopes that, after death, these limits will be removed: "I think if we really ever enter the borders of a second life, then one of our first inner phenomena would have to be that our con-

[9] For details, see the section on "Metaphysics" in the general introduction in Anna Ezekiel, ed., *Philosophical Fragments* (Oxford University Press: forthcoming).

[10] SW 1:49; trans. Anna Ezekiel in *Philosophical Fragments*.

[11] Helene M. Kastinger Riley, "Zwischen den Welten. Ambivalenz und Existential-problematik im Werk Caroline von Günderrodes," in *Die weiblich Muse. Sechs Essays über künstlerisch schaffende Frauen der Goethezeit* (Columbia: Camden House, 1986), 110.

sciousness would grow larger and clearer; for it would be unbearable to drag this limitation into a second life."[12]

Günderrode does not dispute that Kant has correctly identified the limitations of human cognition and sensory perception; however, she *does* dispute that these are the only ways of experiencing the world. She does this in two ways: by claiming, first, that cognition and sensory perception are not the only ways human beings can know things and, second, that human experience is not the only kind of experience we can have. I have argued elsewhere[13] that Günderrode claims we can experience the world in radically altered forms before we are born and after we die. This paper considers the other challenge Günderrode poses to Kant, that is, her account of *human* ways of knowing that escape or exceed ordinary experience.

4. Inner Sense: "Die Manen"

Like the pieces considered in the next section, "Die Manen" was published in Günderrode's first collection, *Gedichte und Phantasien*, in 1804. The "Manen" (English: "Manes") of the title refers to Roman spirits of the dead, which were thought to be able to intercede in the world on behalf of the living. The idea of spirits of the dead that could be contacted by and affect the living was readily integrated with Günderrode's claims about reincarnation and with her interest in the possibilities for new types of experiences after death.

In "Die Manen," a teacher explains to his student that the dead "live on" [*fortleben*] in the living and that we can be aware of this connection, as well as other aspects of the world that are hidden to our normal perceptual apparatus, through an "inner sense," which he also calls an "inner eye," a "spiritual eye" or "mind's eye" and "the deepest and finest organ of the soul."[14]

At the time Günderrode was writing, the idea of an "inner sense" was a popular one that carried a diverse range of meanings. In her book on the inner sense in Günderrode's work, Helga Dormann notes that this sense was construed "on the one hand as an organ of aesthetic feeling that experiences sensations when 'viewing the beautiful'" (Hutcheson, Winckelmann,

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[12] Letter to Gunda Brentano, 11 August 1801, in Weißenborn, ed., *Ich sende Dir*, 75–76; trans. Anna Ezekiel in *Philosophical Fragments*.

[13] Anna Ezekiel, "Through Consciousness Parted from Dream: Alternative Knowledge Forms in Karoline von Günderrode," in *The Being of Negation in Post-Kantian Philosophy*, ed. Gregory S. Moss (Dordrecht: Springer, 2023), 163–180.

[14] SW 1:33–35. Translations from "Die Manen" are by Anna Ezekiel in *Philosophical Fragments*.

Herder) and on the other as a sense that serves an individual's self-perception (Locke, Kant); it was also sometimes defined as an organ through which the individual can communicate with the spiritual world (Swedenborg, Mesmer).[15] Günderrode's version of inner sense can also be linked to Hemsterhuis' conception of the "moral organ" and Schleiermacher's claims regarding introspection as the source and location of genuine religious experience, which he also calls "inner sense."[16] Both these thinkers present this inner sense or organ as a natural capacity that must be developed in order for human nature to be fully realized. Similarly, in "Die Manen," the teacher claims that the inner sense "is totally undeveloped in almost all people and only there in seed form."[17] Most people, he explains, are distracted from the development of their inner sense by the business of everyday life, and are therefore cut off from understanding the real nature of the universe, a deeper connection with other people, and religious experience.

"Die Manen" includes a passage that suggests that Günderrode may have been particularly concerned to respond to remarks regarding the inner sense by Kant. That Günderrode was familiar with Kant's position on this topic is indicated in her letters, where she writes: "In logic I learnt that one can't have intuitions of the outer senses without the characteristics of time and space, and no intuition of the inner sense without the characteristic of time."[18] In "Die Manen," the teacher heads off a potential objection to his explanation of the inner sense by "doubters and vilifiers," claiming "I do not need to explain everything miraculous as fraudulent or as a deception of the senses."[19] This statement is likely a response to Kant's dismissive view of certain accounts of the inner sense, especially that of Swedenborg. The latter is very different from the "inner sense" of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, which Kant defines as "inner intuition" [*innre Anschauung*] or "the intuiting we do of

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15 Dormann also explores the various meanings attributed to "inner sense" by Fichte, Schelling, Goethe, Novalis, Johann Wilhelm Ritter, Alexander von Humboldt, Tieck and Franz von Baader (Helga Dormann, *Die Kunst des inneren Sinns. Mythisierung der inneren und äusseren Natur im Werk Karoline von Günderrodes* [Wurzberg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2004], 99, 113, 115–116, 129–129).

16 Dormann, *Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 104, 117–19; Ruth Christmann, *Zwischen Identitätsgewinn und Bewußtseinsverlust. Das philosophisch-literarische Werk der Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806)* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2005), 170–71.

17 SW 1:34.

18 Günderrode, Letter to Claudine Piautaz, April 1804, Weißenborn, ed., *Ich sende Dir*, 125; trans. Anna Ezekiel in *Philosophical Fragments*. By "logic" Günderrode is likely referring to Kiesewetter's account of Kant's ideas in *Grundriß einer allgemeinen Logik nach Kantischen Grundsätzen*.

19 SW 1:34–35.

ourselves and of our inner state" [*des Anschauens unserer selbst und unseres innern Zustandes*].[20]

In the section "Vom inneren Sinn" in the *Anthropologie*, Kant claims that if we mistake the objects of inner intuition for real objects outside us this can result in deception, madness, and seeing ghosts.[21] He makes a similar point in his 1766 text *Träume eines Geistersehers*, relating this kind of delusion to Swedenborg's conception of the inner sense as a means of communicating with spirits. Similarly to the *Anthropologie*, in *Träume eines Geistersehers* Kant describes an illness in which "the confused person places mere objects of his imagination outside himself and regards them as things that are really present before him."[22] Kant's criticisms of Swedenborg's claims include numerous points that correspond with Günderrode's "Die Manen," including the possibility of an immediate inner connection with the spirit-world, which he calls "an imagined community with spirits" [*einer eingebildeten Geistergemeinschaft*];[23] the idea that everyone has the capacity to connect with the spirit world but only those whose inward spiritual sense has awakened can do so;[24] the claim that individuals connect with the spirits of those with whom they have something in common and that this connection endures through death;[25] and the possibility of an effect by spirits—including spirits of the dead—on the living.[26] The number of correspondences to Kant's relatively short text, combined with Günderrode's framing of the teacher's explanation as a rebuttal of "doubters and vilifiers," suggest that Günderrode may have been responding to Kant's criticisms rather than to Swedenborg himself, raising the possibility that she might have read *Träume eines Geistersehers*.

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20 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996 [1781/1787]), A33/B49–50; see A107, B66–72.

21 Immanuel Kant, s.24 "Vom inneren Sinn," in *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* [1796/1797], AA VII, 161; see Dormann, *Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 126–127.

22 AA II, 346; see Dormann, *Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 120.

23 AA II, 348. Kant also describes this claim as the belief that "The human soul […] is in an indissolubly joined community with all immaterial natures of the spirit-world" (AA II, 333).

24 "This kind of apparition can however not be something common and ordinary, but only occur with persons whose organs have an unusually great sensitivity for amplifying […] the pictures of imagination" (AA II, 339–340).

25 "When finally through death the community of the soul with the physical world is overcome, life in the other [spirit-]world would only be a natural continuation of those connections that it had already established with it in this life" (AA II, 336).

26 Kant characterizes his opponent's argument on this point as: "Departed souls and pure spirits can indeed never be present to our external senses, nor otherwise exist in community with matter, but can work on the spirit of the human being, who belongs with them in one great republic" (AA II, 340–341).

In "Die Manen," Günderrode mobilizes multiple meanings ascribed to inner sense by her contemporaries and predecessors. Despite their diversity, these meanings and models share a rejection of an account of human nature that limits the possibilities for experience to the shape we give the world through our perceptual and intellectual faculties. The ideas of inner sense that Günderrode invokes in "Die Manen" attempt to integrate into our experience and understanding those aspects of the world that are not available to our normal perceptual apparatus and that elude our conscious grasp.

5. The Problem of Knowledge: Günderrode as a Romantic Reader of Kant

Günderrode's account of inner sense places her in a tradition of engaging with Kant's delineation of the limits of human experience that explores the possibility of encountering the world through intellectual intuition—that is, direct, immediate knowledge, undistorted by discursive structures, perceptual constraints, or even the subject-object distinction. Kant denies that human beings can have such a thing as intellectual intuition, because all our intuitions are mediated by our sensory apparatus: "Whatever is presented through a sense is, to that extent, always appearance. Hence either we must not grant that there is an inner sense at all; or we must grant that the subject who is the object of this sense can be presented through it only as appearance, and not as he would judge himself if his intuition were self-activity only, i.e., if it were intellectual intuition."[27] In other words, there may be such a thing as inner sense, but this sense cannot escape the major condition that applies to all our other (external) senses: it provides knowledge of appearances only and not things as they are in themselves. Genuine intellectual intuition — awareness of our actions not as observers but simply because we are the doer of the actions—is not possible, for Kant.

Whereas Fichte and Schelling disputed this claim,[28] Novalis followed Kant in claiming that intellectual intuition is impossible. For Novalis, knowledge, including knowledge of the self, always requires representation and relies on the division between subject and object.[29] Knowledge of the

[27] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Pluhar, B68; see also B72, B307.

[28] See, e.g., J. G. Fichte, "Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*," in *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings (1797–1800)*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 46; F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 27.

[29] Novalis, *Schriften. Zweite, nach den Handschriften ergänzte, erweiterte und verbesserte Auflage in vier Bänden*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel, 4 vols. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960f.), 1:133–135; 2:104–105.

absolute is therefore obtained in inadequate glimpses, such as dreams, drunken or narcotic stupors, or visions (as described, for example, in "Hymnen an die Nacht") or through forms of mirroring (e.g., in the cave sequence in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*).

Günderrode's most sustained engagement with epistemological questions emerges in *Gedichte und Phantasien*, much of which was written around the time of her studies of Novalis. It is therefore not surprising that her thinking on this topic is strongly influenced by him. Like Novalis, Günderrode used depictions of unusual ways of encountering the world to consider possibilities for circumventing what she saw as the painful delimitation of human experience by Kant. She explored options for accessing the world behind the phenomena of ordinary experience, often foregrounding problems with these options and expressing several different and sometimes conflicting positions on their possibility and value. In some texts, such as "Ein apokaliptisches Fragment," "Geschichte eines Braminen," and the later "Briefe zweier Freunde," Günderrode describes visions and revelations that communicate genuine truths about the world behind experiences. However, in other works she presents the attempt to pierce the veil of appearances as doomed to failure, as succeeding only in a qualified sense, or as leading to new and different forms of the attempt to transcend the limits established by Kant. Yet others conclude that the search to better understand the world behind appearances is a red herring in the attempt to find happiness.

In the poem "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt," Günderrode takes up Novalis' claim that the subject-object distinction is a requirement for knowledge, and his use of a cave metaphor to uncover the relationship of mirroring between the human being and the external world. This long poem is a dialogue between the Wanderer, his guide, and "spirits of earth" who inhabit a cave into which the guide leads the Wanderer. Günderrode's interest in boundaries, and especially in traversing them, is clear from the opening lines, which take place at the entrance to a cave on a seashore at sunset. These boundaries represent the division between life and death, as indicated by imagery associated with the Wanderer's guide, whose appellation "Herald of the night" identifies him as a psychopomp.[30] At the same time, in keeping with Günderrode's claim that new forms of awareness await us after death, these borders represent the boundaries of perception. The descent into the depths of the earth in search of insight into the nature of things reverses the traditional association of light with knowledge: it is in "the old realm of dark midnight" that the Wanderer hopes to find answers regarding the reality of

[30] SW 1:70.

the world.[31] It is not reason and visible or otherwise measurable events and objects that allow us to understand the world, but attention to what is hidden, invisible and unspoken.

That Günderrode intends the turn to darkness and the underworld as a deliberate critique of Kantian epistemology is suggested towards the end of the dialogue, where the Wanderer states that he wants to "raise the unalloyed treasures / That the gleam [*Schein*] of the living world does not disturb."[32] Consistently with the connotations of appearance, semblance and pretense associated with the German *Schein*, Günderrode's use of the term, including its contrast with the genuine treasures to be found in the depths of the earth, indicates deceptiveness or only apparent truth. It also, of course, recalls the related term *Erscheinung*. Günderrode evidently intends the Wanderer's descent to be read as a turn away from the phenomenal world to which Kant limits human knowledge.[33] A similar dissatisfaction with phenomenal reality is evident in other works by Günderrode: the poem "Der Adept" (considered next), where the protagonist realizes "How vain all his former knowledge" is, as it only gives knowledge of "names and appearance [*Schein*]"[34]; "Mahomets Traum in der Wüste" (also considered below), where the protagonist wants to "Separate the being of things" from "deceptive appearance [*Schein*]"[35]; and *Immortalita* (considered near the end of this section), in which the hero describes himself as "a stranger on earth" who "wanted to enjoy nothing of its shadow goods" and descends to the land of the dead to satisfy his longing for something greater.[36]

At the conclusion of "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt," the Wanderer has descended into the depths of the earth, but the spirits of earth inform him that he cannot find what he is searching for: he is "already born to the day; / Divided from the life element" and "Through your consciousness already parted from dream."[37] The Wanderer's individuated consciousness separates him from the undivided source of life, about which he seeks to learn. This "primal being" [*Urseyn*] or "primal force" [*Urkraft*] for which the Wanderer

[31] SW 1:70; see Christmann, *Identitätsgewinn*, 165; Dormann, *Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 173–174. Translations from "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt" are by Anna Ezekiel in *Philosophical Fragments*.

[32] SW 1:72. Translations from "Der Adept" and "Der Franke in Egypten" are by Anna Ezekiel in *Philosophical Fragments*.

[33] See Dormann, *Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 176.

[34] SW 1:49.

[35] SW 1:75. Translations of "Mahomets Traum in der Wüste" are from Karoline von Günderrode, "Muhammad's Dream in the Desert," trans. Anna Ezekiel, *Trail of Crumbs* (October 2021); reprinted in *Synkrētic* no. 2 (June 2022): 133–144.

[36] SW 1:45. Translations from *Immortalita* are by Anna Ezekiel in *Philosophical Fragments*.

[37] SW 1:73.

is searching exceeds differentiations such as the subject-object division that is necessary for knowledge.

In emphasizing the necessity of the subject-object distinction for knowledge, Günderrode takes up Novalis' claim that human beings, as conscious individuals, necessarily remain alienated from, and unable to cognize, the whole of which they are more fundamentally a part. Günderrode also follows Novalis in providing a consolation for the impossibility of a direct encounter with the infinite in the form of a learning process that gradually approximates or approaches such an experience. For Novalis, the individual is a microcosm of the universe: a manifestation, and therefore a reflection, of the whole. For this reason, we can obtain knowledge of ourselves by learning about the world, and *vice versa*: "We dream of journeys through the cosmos; is the cosmos not within us? […] The mysterious path goes inwards."[38] "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt" includes a similar moment, when the spirits of earth tell the Wanderer "look down, into your soul's grounds; / What you seek here you will find there, / You are just the cosmos' seeing mirror."[39] For Günderrode, like Novalis, the individual is a part of the whole of nature, and can therefore learn about it not only through external observation, but also through insight into him- or herself.

Like "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt," Günderrode's poem "Der Adept" presents the forms of knowledge that can be gained through study of the everyday world as deceptive and inadequate. In this poem, Valus—a scholar who, like the Wanderer, is driven by a need to learn about the world—travels to India in search of more genuine and satisfying wisdom. The poem describes his initiation into the secrets of the priests he meets there, learning (like the Wanderer) that knowledge of the everyday world is misleading. Unlike the Wanderer, however, Valus learns to distinguish the real nature of things as "one thing" [*Eins*], referred to as "the nature-spirit" underlying all the changing appearances of the universe. He is able to "listen in" to nature, to "see its deepest workings": he "sees through everything."[40]

However, in the end this level of knowledge is useless: Valus is repelled by the changing forms of nature, paralyzed by the rapid changes, and isolated from the rest of humanity; he can only hope for death. In this poem, Günderrode links the encounter with the reality of the world beyond human limitations to despair.

As others have noted, Valus' fate in "Der Adept" uses the "revenge of nature" trope associated with the attempt to penetrate nature's secrets, which

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38 Novalis, *Schriften*, 2:417–419, nr 17.
39 SW 1:73.
40 SW 1:49–50.

famously featured in Schiller's 1795 poem "Das verschleierte Bild zu Saïs."[41] According to this trope, anyone who attempts to "lift the veil" of nature (embodied by the statue of the goddess Isis) to see beyond the realm of phenomena will die or go mad. Günderrode refers explicitly to the Isis metaphor in "Geschichte eines Braminen" and her play *Magie und Schicksal*; references to veils and unveiling in "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt" also work with this association. In "Der Adept," the image is not referenced directly; instead, Günderrode makes the same point by depicting Valus' view behind the superficial appearances of phenomena as paralyzing and leading to despair.

In both "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt" and "Der Adept," Günderrode rejects the possibility of satisfying the search for knowledge beyond the boundaries of normal perception. While in "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt" we learn that it is simply impossible, as conscious individuals, to see things as they really are (although we may move towards this knowledge through introspection), in "Der Adept" it is possible to see things as they are but doing so destroys one's mind and sense of self.

The poem "Mahomets Traum in der Wüste" begins in a similar vein to "Der Adept." The protagonist, described as a "Seer," wants to "Separate the being of things" from "deceptive appearance" and succeeds ("The vain shimmer scatters"), only to experience a violent and turbulent vision of "innermost life."[42] Günderrode describes this as "delusion," "drunken delusions," "horror and fury," and alternating "bliss" and "downfall."[43] The earth and ocean boil and catch fire and everything seems to be falling apart:

> […] then the earth
> Quakes, the sea
> Sublimates into clouds,
> Flames blaze from rocky chasms,
> The air, filled with the smell of brimstone,
> Sluggishly lets the tired shaking rest.
>
> In wild dance,
> The corona entwines
> The errant stars, the heavens;
> The ocean roars in its foundations
> And in the earth's deepest gorges

41 E.g., Dormann, *Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 153. The veiled statue at Saïs also appears in Novalis' work, but instead of going mad, the character who lifts the veil finds his lover (Novalis, *Schriften* 1:95).

42 SW 1:75, 77.

43 SW 1:75–76.

The elements dispute.[44]

However, unlike in "Der Adept," in "Mahomets Traum in der Wüste" the protagonist awakens from his terrifying visions. A voice calls him and affirms the authenticity of what he experienced: "You saw here embodied / What will befall all things / You saw here the history of the world."[45] The poem concludes with the Seer swearing devotion to "the light."

By contrast to both Valus and the Wanderer, the Seer in "Mahomets Traum in der Wüste" is able to have a vision of the world beyond human limits and continue to function. The Seer is even able to use the knowledge gained in the darkness to act in the world of light. This throws into question the positions Günderrode presented in "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt" and "Der Adept"; here, it seems that knowledge of the truths of the universe is both possible and survivable, although it is important to emerge from their dizzying and disruptive contemplation. Furthermore, the knowledge gained during these visions can be beneficial, helping to guide action in ordinary life.

In other pieces, Günderrode considers an option for those who, unlike the Seer, cannot be satisfied by concrete activities any more than they (or anyone) can survive in constant contemplation of the truths of the universe. For the characters in "Der Franke in Egypten," knowledge of any kind cannot satisfy the cravings that drive them. This poem engages another Early German Romantic trope: the idea that love, rather than knowledge, is the means by which we can extend ourselves beyond the boundaries of our individual selves.

Like "Der Adept," "Der Franke in Egypten" describes a European man's journey to the east in search of knowledge and fulfilment, motivated by "discontent" and "longing."[46] However, the Frank finds himself unsatisfied not only by science and the glories of battle, but also by his exploration of Egypt's ancient treasures (including a descent into the depths of the pyramids that recalls the Wanderer's descent) and by the Romantic power of imagination[47]: "Not on far shores, not in battles!" he exclaims, "Sciences! Not at your hand, / Not in the colorful land of fantasies! / Dwells the thirsty heart's satiation." Instead, he discovers: "Love must beckon the tired pilgrim."[48] He has fallen for an Egyptian woman, Lastrada, who, like the Frank, describes a "longing," a "wishing without wish"[49]: in her case (and

[44] SW 1:76.
[45] SW 1:77.
[46] SW 1:81.
[47] See Christmann, *Identitätsgewinn*, 139.
[48] SW 1:84.
[49] SW 1:84.

that of her father) focused on the distant coasts of Europe, her father's homeland. The poem concludes with the Frank describing his salvation through the experience of love.

"Der Franke in Egypten" thus provides a further alternative to the frustrations of "Des Wandrers Niederfahrt" and "Der Adept" and the successful acquisition of deeper knowledge in "Mahomets Traum in der Wüste" by suggesting that it is love, not knowledge, that can lead a person beyond themselves. In addition, the closing lines of "Der Franke in Egypten" suggest that love not only allows connection and communion with the living, but also collapses the boundary between the living and the dead. The Frank claims: "Love must lead to heroes' shadows, / Must speak to us from the spirit world."[50]

Although this idea is only mentioned in passing in "Der Franke in Egypten," it features more prominently elsewhere in Günderrode's work. For instance, at the conclusion to "Geschichte eines Braminen" the protagonist founds a community comprising himself, a living woman, and the spirit of his dead mentor, and in "Die Bande der Liebe" (also published in *Gedichte und Phantasien*) it is love that links the speaker to the dead. The role of love in collapsing the border between life and death is most explicit in Günderrode's play *Immortalita*. Here, the hero Erodion is driven by longing to enter the underworld in search of his beloved, the goddess Immortalita. When he finds her, she helps him pull down the barrier between the worlds of the living and the dead, allowing lovers once more to be joined: "The cliff has fallen," Immortalita announces, "From now on may it be granted to the thoughts of love, the dreams of longing, the inspiration of the poets, to descend from the land of the living to the shadow-realm and go back again."[51]

Günderrode's work on the boundaries of human experience and possibilities for transcending them shares many features with better-known Early German Romantic accounts, especially those of Novalis. These include depictions of journeys to the east and underground in search of special knowledge, with the protagonists urged on by inchoate longings; the frustrations of the subject-object distinction; the mirroring between the human mind and the external world; and the experience of love as a means of finding fulfilment, transcending individual boundaries, and reaching beyond the grave.

Notwithstanding these similarities, Günderrode's response to Kant's limitation of human experience differs from those of Novalis and other Early

[50] SW 1:8.
[51] SW 1:47.

German Romantics in important ways. These include her ambivalence or epistemological modesty regarding the topics she investigates,[52] her treatment of gender (which affects the meaning and function of love in her account),[53] and differences entailed by her unique metaphysics.[54] A detailed consideration of these differences would take us too far from the purpose of this paper. Hopefully, however, it is clear from the above discussion that Günderrode's exploration of epistemological questions (a) responds to Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumenon, and (b) does so in the context of Early German Romantic work that was also shaped by the desire to supercede this distinction.

6. Kant, Günderrode and the Human Vocation: "Geschichte eines Braminen"

In addition to her work on epistemology, Günderrode responded to Kant's work regarding human development and the relationship of the individual to society. This is clearest in her short story "Geschichte eines Braminen," which was written around 1803 and published in Sophie von La Roche's

[52] Günderrode often presents several positions on one topic, highlighting problems with each perspective rather than arguing for a solution, or she explicitly expresses ambivalence about a solution. This is evident in the different and sometimes mutually contradictory conclusions to the quest for secret knowledge in the various pieces in *Gedichte und Phantasien*, as described above. For more examples and analysis, see Anna Ezekiel, "Through Consciousness Parted from Dream"; Ezekiel, "Knowledge, Faith and Ambiguity: Hope in the Work of Novalis and Karoline von Günderrode," in *Hope and the Kantian Legacy: New Contributions to the History of Optimism*, ed. Anna Ezekiel and Katerina Mihaylova (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 239–254.

[53] Günderrode disposes of the gender dichotomy that played an important role in the thought of, for example, Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel. Among other things, this allows her to circumvent criticisms of Early German Romanticism as instrumentalizing women and occluding their possibilities for development (see, e.g., B. Becker-Cantorino, "'Feminismus' und 'Emanzipation'? Zum Geschlechterdizkurs der deutschen Romantik am Beispiel der *Lucinde* und ihrer Rezeption," in *Salons der Romantik: Beitrage eines wiepersdorfer Colloquiums zu Theorie und Geschichte des Salons*, ed. Hartwig Schultz [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997], 35; Anna Ezekiel, "Women, Women Writers, and Early German Romanticism," in *The Palgrave Handbook of German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Elizabeth Millán [Palgrave Macmillan, 2020], 475–509; Sara Friedrichsmeyer, *The Androgyne in Early German Romanticism: Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and the Metaphysics of Love* [Bern: Lange, 1983], 104–105, 158).

[54] Günderrode's metaphysics entail a reconceptualization of both death and personal identity which, among other things, radically alters the meaning of claims regarding the ability of love to transcend the boundaries between life and death. On Günderrode's metaphysics and their implications for other aspects of her thought, especially death and love, see Anna Ezekiel, "Introduction to 'Piedro,' 'The Pilgrims,' and 'The Kiss in the Dream,'" in Karoline von Günderrode, *Poetic Fragments by Tian* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), 87–105.

1805 collection *Herbsttage*. In this piece we see Günderrode raising some of the epistemological themes discussed earlier in this paper at the same time as engaging explicitly with Kant's moral and social thought.

"Geschichte eines Braminen" relates the *Bildung* of the narrator, Almor, who describes his transition from a life centered on money and pleasure through a moral awakening and engagement with various religions, followed by travel to Asia in search of his true self and true religion. Like the pieces in the last section, this story explores possibilities for an encounter with aspects of the world that elude scientific investigation or rational thought. In this case, a variety of methods—a journey to the east, introspection, initiation, the study of religions, an "inner voice" and the voices of nature and "spirit"—lead the narrator to grasp the reality behind everyday experience.

Almor, born in Smyrna of mixed Asian and European descent, moves to Europe to pursue business, but after some years he returns to Asia. Günderrode uses Almor's decision to leave Europe as a way to critique Enlightenment values and society, and in particular to criticize two alternative orientations to life that she associates with these: the pursuit of profit and pleasure, and the subjugation of individual needs and desires to social ends. Günderrode places these orientations in a hierarchical relationship. Almor first questions his lifestyle of "earning money in order to spend it again in a pleasant way"[55]; this questioning leads him to develop a moral orientation to life, in which his own needs must be subordinated to the needs of humanity as a whole. In a sense, however, the individualistic and the moral lifestyles are two sides of the same coin. That is, in a society that views individual and social needs as opposed, a person must choose one or the other: the only two options are either a life focused on personal gain or a life that sacrifices individual desires to the benefit of the whole.[56] This is a dichotomy that runs through the rest of "Geschichte eines Braminen" and that Almor strives to overcome.

Günderrode describes her protagonist's moral awakening in Kantian terms. Almor realizes that in order to become wise and virtuous, he must master "sensuality [and] the passions" and, instead of pursuing his own self-interest, consider himself "a citizen of the moral realm" [*Bürger des moralischen Reiches*], the welfare of which he must promote.[57] He describes this new orientation as "the free activity of a thinking being that sets its own purpose for its conduct" [*die freye Thätigkeit eines denkenden Wesens, das sich selbst einen*

[55] SW 1:304. Translations from "Geschichte eines Braminen" are by Anna Ezekiel in *Philosophical Fragments*.

[56] Battersby, *Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, 126.

[57] SW 1:305.

Zweck seines Thuns setzt].[58] This phrasing deliberately recalls Kant's ideal of a rational individual who creates universalizable maxims for their behavior.

After raising himself to a life that embodies Kantian morality, Almor begins to question the subjugation of one part of his personality (the passions) to another (reason). Prompted by his "inner voice" he asks "Why, then, is everything on earth good except human beings? Why should they alone become different than they are?"[59] In a Rousseauian vein, he begins to suspect that social conditioning has corrupted the original "nature and harmony of my essence."[60] From this point on, Almor will try to free himself from the conventions of his upbringing and society and discover his true, original nature.

At this point Günderrode makes another possible reference to Kant. Almor claims that, by this stage in his development, he had realized that "justice is the basis of civil society and morality the basis of human society."[61] Günderrode does not provide an exposition of the concepts "civil society" [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] and "human society" [*menschliche Gesellschaft*] but the context makes clear that they are intended to mark a distinction between relationships between human beings that are governed by different kinds of principles: on the one hand, rules or laws, such as those in the institutions of the nation-state and, on the other, moral ideals of how individuals should behave towards each other. It is possible that these categories are intended to map on to Kant's distinction, in *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, between juridico-civil [*rechtlich-bürgerliche*] society and ethico-civil [*ethisch-bürgerliche*] or ethical [*ethische*] society. While the former involves "coercive laws" [*Zwangsgesetze*], Kant describes the latter as "An association of human beings merely under the laws of virtue" [*eine Verbindung der Menschen unter bloßen Tugendgesetzen*]; these laws, he specifies, are determined freely by the members of this association using "morally legislative reason" [*moralisch-gesetzgebenden Vernunft*].[62] While for Kant this is a desirable state of affairs, Almor hopes to supercede both these kinds of society in favor of one

58 SW 1:305.

59 SW 1:305.

60 SW 1:306. It is possible that Günderrode derived this idea, not from Rousseau, but from Kant himself. For example, in *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* Kant argues that human beings "mutually corrupt each other's moral disposition and make one another evil" (Immanuel Kant, "Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason," in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni [Cambridge University Press, 1998], 105 [AA VI, 94]).

61 SW 1:307.

62 Kant, trans. Wood and di Giovanni, "Religion," 106–107 [AA VI, 94–95].

that facilitates the development of the whole of his nature, not only his rational capacities.

In order to achieve this, Almor abandons European society and Enlightenment moral values and travels back to Asia, where at first he lives as a hermit. He claims "I wrested myself away from all relations with human beings" in order to "purify myself from everything alien and become wholly myself again."[63] This is an important period that prepares Almor for the final level of his development. After separating himself from the problems of society, especially "The struggle […] of the individual with society,"[64] Almor reconnects with "the speech of my own spirit" and "my individuality"[65] and experiences his first intimations of the divine. He notes that (as Kant claims) the human imagination and desire to know are infinite, and that these drives cannot be satisfied by finite means. However, Günderrode takes this discovery in a different direction to Kant: Almor senses something beyond himself, something he longs to join. We also see the first hints that these two things—one's true, inner self and the divine—are in fact the same: "my inner sense intimated an invisible and mysterious connection with something that I did not yet know."[66]

In addition to this sense of being connected to something greater than himself, Almor learns that his development is part of a three-step path that corresponds to what he calls the "three ways" in which a human being can live. The first stage, the "animal" involves attention to one's physical needs: "health, preservation, propagation," as Almor puts it. This stage corresponds to Almor's early focus on satisfying his physical needs and wants through money and pleasure.[67] The second, "human" stage is the level of "morality," in which Almor claims people take "humankind [as a whole] as their object,"[68] which corresponds to Almor's dalliance with Kantian morality and his concern for social order. The third stage—the "spiritual" stage—is the "relation to the infinite, divine."[69] Pursuing this aspect of his existence will be Almor's goal from now on.

These claims suggest a further possible modification of ideas from Kant. Günderrode's "three ways" of human life recall Kant's claim in *Religion* that the human being can be determined in three ways, relating to its "animality," "humanity," and "personality." These involve one's existence

63 SW 1:306.
64 SW 1:307.
65 SW 1:307.
66 SW 1:308.
67 Riley, "Zwischen den Welten," 101.
68 SW 1:310–311.
69 SW 1:311.

as, respectively, a living being (focused largely on self-preservation and propagation, but also including a basic social instinct), a rational being, and a "responsible" being.[70] Kant explicitly characterizes personality as the most genuinely moral aspect of human existence, relating to concern for all human beings: "The idea of the moral law […] is personality itself (the idea of humanity considered wholly intellectually)."[71] Günderrode, however, collapses Kant's concept of personality into that of humanity, relating the "human" way of living to the search for morality and a concern with the idea of humanity as a whole. She then adds the extra level of "spirituality," which she maintains is a distinct and important area of human experience.[72]

As part of Almor's articulation of his progress towards a spiritual existence, he recognizes that each individual must freely develop themselves according to whatever best suits their unique nature. There is no one course of development for all human beings. As he explains, some individuals will act in society while others, like himself, will withdraw from it, "for as various as is the outer formation of people, just as various is their inner nature, their life, and their wishes."[73] Almor claims that a moral, philosophical, or religious approach that subordinates the needs and nature of individuals to the whole, or that universalizes the path that all individuals should take, stunts the nature of each individual and the purpose for which it was created, which is simply to develop according to its own nature.[74]

Almor is now ready for the final stage in his development. Driven onward by Romantic longing, he travels to India. Here, he meets a "wise Brahmin" who explains more about the workings of the "infinite spirit of

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70 Kant, trans. Wood and di Giovanni, "Religion," 50–51 (AA 6, 26).

71 Kant, trans. Wood and di Giovanni, "Religion," 52 (AA 6, 27–28).

72 It is very possible that Günderrode read Kant's *Religion* and that this is a deliberate critique of Kant. However, the question of how human beings relate on the one hand to animals and on the other to the divine has been a long-running theme in European philosophy, so she may instead have adapted the three levels of human existence described by Almor from elsewhere, possibly several sources.

73 SW 1:307.

74 Yet another possible hint of a connection to Kant at this point in the story is found in Almor's claim that "This new view of things brought my mind perpetual peace [*ewigen Frieden*]" (SW 1:311). As Christine Battersby notes (*Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, 126), the German phrase "perpetual peace" recalls Kant's 1795 essay on *Zum ewigen Freude*. This phrase has a long history in the Christian tradition as a reference to heaven, for example in Luther's statement that "The goal of the worldly regime is temporal peace; the goal of the Christian church is […] eternal peace" (Martin Luther, "Sermon on the First Day of Christmas, Luke 2:1–14," in *Martin Luther, Sermons*, ed. Kurt Alend [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002], 45). Kant's title picks up on this tradition. It is quite likely that Günderrode intended to consider a form of "perpetual peace" that was unrelated to systems of worldly government such as those suggested in Kant's essay.

nature" that Almor first intimated while in isolation. The Brahmin teaches Almor how:

> the forces wander through all forms until they develop consciousness and thought in human beings; how from human beings on an infinite series of migrations that lead to ever higher perfection awaits souls; how eventually, through mysterious ways, they will all unite with the primal force from which they emanated and will become one with it, and still at the same time remain themselves[.][75]

In this way, Günderrode reconciles the needs of individuals and those of the whole: the self-development of the individual is the same as the self-development of the whole, because the individual is a part of the whole and the means through which the whole develops. The free unfolding of each individual's nature—manifested in "their inner nature, their life, and their wishes"—is how the universe cultivates itself.[76]

The outcome of the development of each individual according to their inner nature will be, according to Almor, "a time of perfection […], when each being will be harmonious with itself and with the others, when they flow into each other and become one in a great unison."[77] This harmonious state will emerge when individuals who have developed themselves according to their own inner natures, free from the distorting affects of social constraints, come together to live in a community. If all these individuals have come to know themselves as emanations of the same underlying primal force or life, their lifestyles will naturally align and create a form of social harmony that does not need laws, religious institutions or systems of morality to enforce sociable behavior. This is why Almor must turn inward and remove himself from society before he can turn outward again to found a new form of community.[78] His time in isolation was needed in order to learn to listen to his inner voice, which is at the same time the voice of nature or the world spirit. Only after this development can Almor participate in an ideal community joined in relationship to the divine. At the end of "Geschichte eines Braminen," Almor lives in a hut in the wilderness with the daughter of the Brahmin, who has died and now lives on with them in spirit. This exemplifies

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[75] SW 1:312.

[76] For more on this point, including its relationship to the work of Herder, see Dormann, *Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 62–65, 71; Ezekiel, "Earth, Spirit, Humanity: Karoline von Günderrode's 'Idea of the Earth,'" in *Romanticism and Political Ecology*, ed. Kir Kuiken (Romantic Praxis Circle: 2024).

[77] SW 1:310.

[78] Dormann, *Kunst des inneren Sinns*, 74.

the community "between human beings in whom the inner sense has arisen and the world-spirit"[79] described earlier by the Brahmin.

Rather than advocating a turn inward, away from social and political concerns, "Geschichte eines Braminen" presents Günderrode's contribution to the debate on the vocation of humankind. In addition to a likely influence of Schleiermacher, especially regarding the idea of an ideal community of individuals who have developed their inner selves, Günderrode's text has similarities to Johann Joachim Spalding's popular 1748 publication *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen*.[80] Like "Geschichte eines Braminen," Spalding's text describes the narrator's progress through several stages of development, although the stages presented in the two texts do not perfectly align. Other points of contact include Spalding's advocacy of the possibility of revealed religion (though Spalding, unlike Günderrode, insists that this must be Christian), the focus on subjective experience, through which a greater force is felt to be at work in the individual, and an emphasis on harmony.[81]

It is not known whether Günderrode read Spalding's text; however, she did read Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen*, which was, in part, a response to Spalding.[82] Fichte's *Bestimmung* takes the form of a progression from skepticism to an understanding of the limitations of human knowledge and finally to faith in a spiritual realm, the existence of other individuals similar to oneself, the inner voice of one's conscience, and freedom. On Fichte's account, each shift in perspective is initiated, like Almor's, by doubt in the previous stage. Another similarity is to Fichte's claim that numerous forces drive the emergence of everything in nature, including human beings, and are themselves manifestations of a single force that runs through nature as a whole. A similar claim features in the work of Herder.

And indeed, another likely influence on "Geschichte eines Braminen" is Herder, specifically his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, which Günderrode read in 1799 and described as "a true consolation to me in all my pain."[83] Herder's text is concerned with the development of the natural world, the human species and human societies rather than the *Bildung*

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[79] SW 1:312.

[80] Johann Joachim Spalding, *Betrachtung* über *die Bestimmung des Menschen* (Leipzig: Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1768 [first edition 1748]).

[81] These claims are found in, respectively, Spalding, *Bestimmung*, "Anhang bey der dritten Auflage," 69–80; 40–41; 51–53.

[82] Günderrode excerpted Fichte's text in her notes, possibly around the time she wrote "Geschichte eines Braminen" (SW 3: 325; see also 2: 297–298).

[83] Günderrode, Letter to Karoline von Barkhaus, 17 July 1799, in Weißenborn, ed., *Ich sende Dir*, 53–54.

of a particular individual, but nonetheless shares several points with Günderrode's description of Almor's development. These include the claim that the nature of happiness and ideas of what constitutes a good life are culturally conditioned—a possible correspondence with Almor's assertion that "as various as is the outer formation of people, just as various is their inner nature, their life, and their wishes."

Herder overtly criticizes Kant in the *Ideen*, especially what he perceived as Kant's overemphasis on human rational capacities at the expense of their emotional and other capacities and his privileging of the emergence of an eventual ideal society over the value of earlier human lives. He claims that health and happiness depend on the exercise of the "whole soul, especially its active forces,"[84] rather than on the exercise of reason alone, recalling Almor's questioning of the subjugation of the passions to reason in "Geschichte eines Braminen." Herder also argues against Kant (especially in *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürglicher Absicht*) that it makes no sense to imagine *that human beings exist only for the sake of the State or that* the "people of all parts of the world" have only lived "so that, at the end of time, [their] descendants could become happy."[85] Instead, he claims, "nature created all human forms on earth so that each, in their own time and place, might have enjoyment."[86] For Herder there is a reciprocal relationship between the value of humanity as a whole and the value of individual human beings. Human beings do not just exist for the sake of the species, but the species also exists for the sake of its individuals: "All [God's] means are ends, all his ends means to the greater purposes in which the all-suffusing infinite reveals itself. Therefore what each human being is and can be, that must be the purpose of the human species."[87] Similarly, Almor's development in "Geschichte eines Braminen" leads him to realize that the interests of individuals and society are not fundamentally opposed, and that the infinite spirit of the universe perfects itself in and through the development of individuals as such.

Kant, in turn, was critical of Herder's text,[88] and it is possible that with "Geschichte eines Braminen" Günderrode intended to enter this controversy on the side of Herder. Nonetheless, Günderrode does not follow Herder slavishly and in this text we see her developing her own position on *Bildung* and her own vision of the ideal society. For Günderrode, the integration of a

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[84] Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Ideen zur Geschichte der Menschheit*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1869 [1785], 95).

[85] Herder, *Ideen*, 99.

[86] Herder, *Ideen*, 99.

[87] Herder, *Ideen*, 104.

[88] Immanuel Kant, "Recension von J. G. Herders *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, Theil 2 (1785)," AA 8:62–63.

spiritual component to both subjective experience and social life is crucial, not only to enable the full development of all human capacities but also to bridge the boundary between life and death and allow individuals to maintain their relationships with loved ones even beyond the grave. While Günderrode takes inspiration from a number of sources, the clear references to Kant's moral thought in this piece demonstrate that she was particularly concerned to respond to Kantian views regarding morality, individual development, and ideal human societies, retaining a value for both individual flourishing and fulfilling social relations.

7. Conclusion

This paper has not attempted to unpack all of Günderrode's ideas on knowledge, experience, *Bildung* or the human vocation, nor all the likely influences on her thinking in these areas.[89] Instead, I have highlighted points where Günderrode's thinking shows a clear relationship to work by Kant, often revealing an attempt to push back against Kant's thought. These points include Günderrode's work on the inner sense in "Die Manen," her explorations of alternatives to the Kantian limitation of human experience to phenomena in *Gedichte und Phantasien*, and her claims regarding the human vocation in "Geschichte eines Braminen."

Initial investigation of the idea of the inner sense in "Die Manen" suggests that one of Günderrode's goals in writing this piece may have been to repudiate Kant's criticisms of Swedenborg in *Träume eines Geistersehers*. Similarly, in "Geschichte eines Braminen" Günderrode appears to take Herder's side in his dispute with Kant regarding the relationship between individual development and social goods. For Günderrode, the good of the whole can only be developed through the free flourishing of individuals, and any attempt either to make human urges conform to reason or to universalize human behavior impedes this flourishing and, thereby, also the good of the whole. Günderrode uses a critique of Kant's moral philosophy to argue against moralistic or legalistic views of social relations in favor of a model of ideal communities formed on the basis of mutual spiritual development.

Günderrode's response to Kant regarding the limitation of human knowledge to the realm of experience is more ambiguous. She considers this

[89] E.g., Joanna Raisbeck notes the influence of Plato and the minister Johann Georg Diefenbach, as well as Kant, on Günderrode's ideas about knowledge (*Karoline von Günderrode: Philosophical Romantic* [Legenda, 2022], 125–132). Dalia Nassar ("Human Vocation") has focused on Fichte's influence on Günderrode on the human vocation. Hugo Herrera considers the relationship of Günderrode's thought to that of Schleiermacher ("Urgrund and Access to the Urgrund").

topic in several pieces in her collection *Gedichte und Phantasien*, reaching diverse conclusions in different texts. These range from asserting the possibility of immediate knowledge of things in themselves ("Mahomets Traum in der Wüste") through concerns about the price of such immediate knowledge ("Der Adept") to a denial of its possibility ("Des Wandrers Niederfahrt"). In some pieces ("Der Franke in Egypten," *Immortalita*), she suggests that seeking knowledge of things as they exist outside human perception is a red herring; instead, love may provide a better means of connecting with the world beyond our individual limitations. Despite their diversity, all these investigations are motivated by Günderrode's dissatisfaction with what she describes as the "unbearable" limitation of human consciousness to phenomena, which she learned about in her studies of Kant.[90]

We are still in the early days of serious scholarship on Günderrode as a philosopher, and there remain many exciting opportunities to explore her contributions to early nineteenth-century debates on knowledge, human development, the relationship of human beings to the rest of the world, and many other topics. Hopefully, the overview of Günderrode's reception of Kant provided in this paper will provide a useful starting point for closer investigations of her engagement with Kant's work on these topics.

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