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Chapter 9

Through Consciousness Parted from Dream: Alternative Knowledge Forms in Karoline von Günderrode

Anna Ezekiel

Abstract Karoline von Günderrode’s reputation as a mystical writer makes her a likely candidate as a proponent of a negative philosophy. However, the historical emphasis on Günderrode’s mystical and lyrical writings reflects gender stereotypes about women’s writing and ignores Günderrode’s strengths as an epic and historical writer. It is therefore important to approach claims about Günderrode’s supposed mysticism carefully. This paper is a preliminary attempt to investigate Günderrode’s claims about knowledge, including knowledge of the absolute, asking: What does Günderrode think knowledge is? What does she think the purpose of knowledge is—i.e., what does she think knowledge gets us, or does for us? And how do her claims differ from those philosophers, such as Novalis, whose thinking on knowledge (including of the absolute) seems to resemble hers? I argue that Günderrode maintains that human beings can experience, or “know,” a reality behind the discrete objects and events that comprise the world of appearances, and that she integrates this idea into a coherent worldview in a unique way. Specifically, I argue that Günderrode reconceptualizes the nature of death and selfhood in specific ways that allow her to make sense of the possibility of experiencing the true nature of the world behind the divisions that are characteristic of human knowledge and existence.

1 Introduction

Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806) is best known for her biography, particularly her spectacular suicide at the age of 26. This notoriety has contributed to a steady stream of interest in her life and writings over the last 200 years, the latter of which is usually interpreted in biographical terms, and both of which tend to be presented as expressing a morbid, conflicted and pathological personality. But I argue that an original approach to philosophical questions and debates of her time underlies much of Günderrode’s work—including the constellation of concepts in

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31 her writing that is most commonly used to paint a picture of the tragic lover and
 32 poet, i.e., the concepts of death, love, and union.¹ These concepts have a theoretical
 33 meaning for Günderrode and reflect her critical engagement with Early German
 34 Romantic models of the nature of human existence and the world. In addition, state-
 35 ments about Günderrode's supposedly pathological sense of self arguably reflect a
 36 misreading of her claims about the nature of the self in general (Ezekiel 2016b). I
 37 will touch on these issues below, in relation to the role of consciousness in
 38 Günderrode's account of knowledge. In general, I argue that there is more to be said
 39 about Günderrode's work and thought than we can gain from a reductive biographi-
 40 cal reading of her writings, and that in fact these writings reflect a unique stance on
 41 key issues in German idealism.

42 This paper applies this general concern with interpreting Günderrode as a thinker
 43 rather than a romantic personality to Günderrode's thought on the topic of knowl-
 44 edge, considering her claims in the context of traditions of negative philosophy.
 45 Günderrode's reputation as a mystical writer makes her a likely candidate as a pro-
 46 ponent of a negative philosophy. From the early years of the reception of her writ-
 47 ings, Günderrode's work has been presented as mystical, lyrical, and subjective.²
 48 This interpretation of her strengths as a writer and thinker was current even while
 49 she was alive. For example, the philologist and mythologist Georg Friedrich
 50 Creuzer, with whom Günderrode was having an affair, praised the "mythic" and
 51 "mystical" aspects of Günderrode's writing, encouraging her to develop her work in
 52 the direction of "feminine" lyrical poetry and away from her interest in epic forms
 53 and historical dramas. In one instance, he wrote to her: "Let me give you a judgment
 54 about your poetry in general. In its main element it is, I think (and for this reason it
 55 is so dear to me) mystical, revelatory. For this reason you are so at home in the
 56 east."³ And, he continued: "Your poesie is *mystic* [...]—and for that reason it is *not*
 57 *plastic*. / Therefore everything is alien to you that by its nature demands productive
 58 systematic form, therefore the *real systematic Drama*."

59 This assessment of the strengths and rightful focus of Günderrode's work contin-
 60 ued after her death. Scholars have often focused on Günderrode's lyrical and mysti-
 61 cal writings at the expense of her dramas and her interest in history and concrete
 62 great events and figures. These accounts tend to conflate a romanticized or mytholo-
 63 gized image of Günderrode herself with the perceived focus of her writing. For
 64 example, in 1878 Karl Schwartz praised Günderrode's writings as "the pure mirror
 65 of her true beautiful individuality."⁴ Over a century later, Christa Bürger described
 66 Günderrode as having created a "night-world" in her work, and Günderrode herself
 67 as a "shadow among shadows"; Bürger claims that Günderrode "only had the will

¹ See, e.g., Bürger (1995, 36), Becker-Cantarino (2010, 51, 52, 59), Wolf (1997 [1979], 47–50).

² See, e.g., Geiger (1896), Floeck (1911), Hirschberg (1920), Susman (1996 [1929]), Lober (1947), Apert (1992), Görner (1996).

³ Creuzer (1912 [1806]). English translations of Günderrode's writings are my own or taken from Ezekiel (2016a), Ezekiel (Forthcoming), and Nassar and Gjesdal (2021). All other translations are my own.

⁴ Schwartz (1977 [1878], 221).

to [create] form, but not the power to create her own.”⁵ Christa Wolf omitted all of 68
 G nderrode’s dramas—traditionally considered a more systematic and historical 69
 form of writing—from her 1979 selected edition of G nderrode’s works. 70

One problem with the overemphasis on G nderrode’s mystical and lyrical writ- 71
 ings, as others have pointed out, is that this interpretation reflects traditional 72
 European gender stereotypes about the topics and styles of writing that women were 73
 supposed to pursue, as well as about supposedly “feminine” qualities of writing, as 74
 opposed to the supposedly “masculine” qualities of clarity, rigor, power and historical 75
 accuracy.⁶ Relatedly, this interpretation ignores other of G nderrode’s strengths 76
 that fit with what would have been considered “masculine” writing, especially her 77
 skills as an epic and historical writer, as shown, for example, by her plays 78
Muhammad, the Prophet of Mecca and *Hildgund*.⁷ 79

The recognition of these gendered blinkers in the reception of G nderrode’s 80
 work, and the identification of aspects of her work that, partly as a consequence, 81
 have been neglected, provides an initial justification for approaching claims about 82
 G nderrode’s supposed mysticism carefully. And, given that there has not yet been 83
 any rigorous investigation of what G nderrode claimed about knowledge in general 84
 or, in particular, about the possibility of knowledge of the absolute, I will not pre- 85
 suppose that G nderrode promoted a negative philosophy. Instead, this paper is the 86
 beginning of an investigation into the question of what G nderrode thought about 87
 knowledge: What does she think knowledge is? What does she think knowledge is 88
 for human beings? What does she think the purpose of knowledge is—i.e., what 89
 does she think knowledge gets us, or does for us? 90

G nderrode’s corpus includes numerous stories about seekers for knowledge, 91
 whose quests are motivated by a basic distinction between knowledge of worldly 92
 things and knowledge of a truth that lies behind earthly forms. For example, the 93
 protagonist of the poem “The Adept” leaves his life of scientific research to seek 94
 wisdom in the east. After being initiated into an Indian religion, he realizes “How 95
 vain all his former knowledge” was, for “He never knew things’ souls; / Made do 96
 with names and appearance.”⁸ Similarly, the narrator of “Story of a Brahmin” moves 97
 from a life engaged in trade, punctuated by the search for pleasure, to the rational 98
 pursuit of the good and the true, and from there to a life of religious contemplation, 99
 which eventually leads him to become aware of the true inner nature of the uni- 100
 verse.⁹ In the play *Magic and Destiny*, the mage Alcmenes sees through the veil of 101
 the everyday world to the truth that lies behind it: “I do not rest,” he claims, “for my 102
 eye is not deceived / By the powers’ appearance of rest; / I see the inner struggle of 103

⁵ B rger (1995, 36, 37); see also Behrens (1995, 11).

⁶ Dormann (2004, 12), Gersdorff (2006, 189), Hilger (2009), Hoff et al. (1995), Rauchenbacher (2014, 28, 130).

⁷ Hoff et al. (1995, 99, 103).

⁸ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 49).

⁹ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 303–314).

104 life forces, / That sleep and night charitably cloak for you.”¹⁰ These are popular
 105 tropes, but I argue that G nderrode integrates the idea that human beings can experi-
 106 ence the reality behind appearances into a coherent worldview in a unique way. That
 107 is, I argue that G nderrode reconceptualizes the nature of (a) death and (b) selfhood
 108 in ways that make sense of the possibility of experiencing the true nature of
 109 the world.

110 2 G nderrode as a Gnostic

111 Let us take a closer look at how G nderrode thinks this knowledge of whatever may
 112 lie behind appearances is possible, and what she claims it is like. One possibility is
 113 that, in line with the gnostic tradition, G nderrode saw “true” knowledge as occur-
 114 ring in mystical experiences of union with the divine. In other words, glimpses of
 115 true knowledge are obtained in religious experiences that provide a foretaste of a
 116 real union that occurs after death.

117 There are undeniable mystical overtones along these lines in many of
 118 G nderrode’s works. We find amongst her writings poems that fit well, in particular,
 119 with the erotic-mystical tradition, such as “The Kiss in the Dream,” “The Pilgrims,”
 120 and “Love,” which merge religious with erotic imagery to indicate the union of the
 121 individual with a lover, who can be seen as a metaphor for God. “The Kiss in the
 122 Dream” links this idea of union with that of “contemplation” (*Betrachtung*)—a kind
 123 of knowledge or awareness the exact nature of which is not specified but which here
 124 suggests an orientation to the infinite: “In dreams such life was immersed, /
 125 Therefore I live to contemplate eternal dreams.”¹¹

126 In G nderrode’s work we also encounter the mystical trope of the ocean,¹²
 127 including images of merging with an oceanic whole, functioning as a metaphor for
 128 union with the divine, and at the same time for union with the entire universe. The
 129 poem “Piedro” begins with the phrase “Darkness rests upon the waters,”¹³ recalling
 130 Genesis 1:2, which describes the beginnings of creation: “and darkness was upon
 131 the face of the deep.”¹⁴ At the end of the poem, Piedro dies, and we learn that he
 132 “sleeps deep in the ocean.”¹⁵ “The Pilgrims” and “An Apocalyptic Fragment” also
 133 use ocean imagery. In the former, the first pilgrim describes wandering over the
 134 earth, seeking the ocean, while the second pilgrim connects this wandering and
 135 seeking more explicitly to earthly life and the hope for a return to heaven.¹⁶ In “An

¹⁰G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 234).

¹¹G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 109).

¹²McGinn (1994).

¹³G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 103).

¹⁴King James Bible Online (2020).

¹⁵G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 105).

¹⁶G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 108).

Apocalyptic Fragment,” G nderrode writes: “I became aware that all the creatures that had climbed from the ocean returned to it and generated themselves again in changing forms.”¹⁷

3 Other Indications of Mysticism in G nderrode’s Work

In addition to images of mystical union, many of G nderrode’s pieces, including “The Wanderer’s Descent,” “The Adept,” “The Frank in Egypt,” and “Story of a Brahmin,” describe journeys into foreign lands or the depths of the earth in search of knowledge beyond the everyday and beyond European enlightenment science. There are also many religious or prophetic figures in G nderrode’s writings, including the mage Alcmenes, the prophet Muhammad, and the “seeress” in the short story “Timur,” who have insight into the true nature of things beyond the capacity of ordinary human beings or ordinary knowledge. These individuals, it seems, have access in some form to aspects of the world that escape ordinary human understanding.

In several of G nderrode’s pieces, the protagonists learn about themselves and the world after travelling eastwards. For example, after consecration as a priest, the protagonist of “The Adept” sees the eternal spirit of nature “ever new / And ever old in eternal change / As it is in all forms.”¹⁸ In “Story of a Brahmin,” the narrator first experiences a murky awareness of the oneness of nature after moving to Persia: “the spirit of nature spoke to me. I heard its voice, but I did not yet know where it came from; but the more I listened to it, the clearer it was to me that there was a fundamental force in which everything, visible and invisible, was connected.”¹⁹ Later, this character becomes more explicitly aware of a single force that runs through all the forms of the universe, constantly dissolving them and recreating them in new shapes. He explicitly claims that the essence of all religions is insight into the absolute whole that underlies appearances, stating that “the intuition of the original primal ground is the deepest soul of religions.”²⁰ He tells his audience that this ground:

is an infinite force, an eternal life, that is everything that is, that was and will become, that engenders itself in mysterious ways, that remains eternal through all change and dying. It is at the same time the ground of all things and the things themselves, the condition and the conditioned, the creator and the creature, and it divides and separates itself in various figures, becomes sun, moon, stars, plants, animals and human beings together, and flows through itself in fresh streams of life and contemplates itself in human beings in holy humility.²¹

¹⁷ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 53).

¹⁸ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 49).

¹⁹ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 308).

²⁰ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 309).

²¹ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 309).

170 This idea of an original undifferentiated absolute that divides itself in order to create
 171 the individual entities that we encounter in the world seems consistent with the work
 172 of Novalis, Fichte or Schelling. And when the narrator of “Story of a Brahmin”
 173 describes the limitations of language and human reason for understanding the infi-
 174 nite truth of the universe using the common Romantic trope of the veiled statue of
 175 Isis, we might be forgiven for thinking that G nderrode is simply rehashing Early
 176 German Romantic ideas in a story of her own:

177 You ask me, young friend, to lead you in through the gates of the eternal temple of religion.
 178 Know that its mark is infinity and speech is finite. But I will attempt to unveil before you
 179 the holy statue of Isis at Saıs (under which stand the words ‘I am what is, what was and will
 180 be’); but so that your inner sense does not completely come undone before the goddess, you
 181 will not see her, neither through your reason, nor through your knowledge.²²

182 4 The Quest for Knowledge as a Search Within

183 Let us follow this comparison between G nderrode and Early German Romanticism
 184 further. Although G nderrode’s thought (especially her metaphysics) is often said to
 185 be closest to that of Schelling, with regard to her account of knowledge there are
 186 close parallels with Novalis’ work in particular. However, I argue that G nderrode
 187 does not describe a *via negativa* similar to that which emerges in Novalis’ writings.
 188 That is, unlike Novalis, she does not describe or advocate an approach to knowledge
 189 of what is unknowable through a modified deployment of various ordinary strategi-
 190 es for knowledge and communication, including mirroring relationships between
 191 subject and object, repeated iterations of attempts to describe what cannot be
 192 described, and self-awareness about the inadequacies of language.²³

193 This difference is exemplified by the differences in the two thinkers’ uses of cave
 194 metaphors to portray the search for knowledge. In the novel *Henry of Ofterdingen*,
 195 Novalis uses the image of a journey into a cave to represent the uncovering of secret
 196 knowledge. Henry enters a cave where he finds a book describing his own life.²⁴ For
 197 Novalis, this represents the reflective relationship between one’s own inner life and
 198 the world outside, if one penetrates to their hearts—in other words, it indicates the
 199 reflection between the subject, or mind, and object, or the world encountered by the
 200 mind. Each can be learned about by encounters with the other.²⁵ Thus Novalis
 201 famously claims: “We dream of journeys through the universe: but is the universe

²² G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 309).

²³ See, for example, Novalis’ “Monologue,” in Novalis (1960f):2, 672m (see also Novalis (1960f:2, 427 no. 32–33, 439 no. 68, 463 no. 114, 522 no. 3, 523 no. 8, 617 no. 17; Novalis 1960f:3, 685–686 no. 671). For examples of a similar approach in the work of Friedrich Schlegel, see Schlegel (1967, 42, 152 no. 42, 363f).

²⁴ Novalis (1960f:1, 264).

²⁵ See Moln r (1987, 48–53, 90).

not within us?"²⁶ And, in another statement: "The mysterious way goes inwards. Eternity with its worlds, the past and future, is in us or nowhere."²⁷ In Novalis' view, the reflection between the world of the subject and that of the object is necessarily imperfect, but we can increase the correspondence between these through a repeated movement inwards and outwards, gradually shaping ourselves to be more like the outside world and the outside world to be more like us.²⁸ For Novalis, the self is therefore revealed through what is other to it, and in particular through what is apparently alien and different.²⁹ In places, he uses gender difference and the east as the other to stereotyped western androcentricity, consciousness and rationality in order to indicate what escapes language and understanding—which is, ultimately, the infinite.³⁰ And, through efforts to represent what is beyond representation, which necessarily fail, we learn about what is beyond the human capacity to know: the other, the non-conscious world of nature, and the divine.

Günderrode also uses imagery of caves and a descent into the earth to express the search for knowledge. In her dramatic dialogue "The Wanderer's Descent," the protagonist, seeking the truth about the nature of the world, is guided through caverns to the place where, according to the mythology of the dialogue, the things of the world exist before their division into separate entities:

Oh guide me! You know well the paths
 Into the old realm of dark midnight;
 Down will I go to the gloomy shore
 Where never the morning, never the midday smiles.
 I will renounce the day's shimmer
 That unwillingly weds us to the earth,
 That glimmer only blinded me, deceitfully,
 Never chose the earth as its homeland.
 Vainly I wanted to grasp the fugitive,
 But it can never leave constant change.
 So guide me to the circle of silent powers,
 In whose deep womb chaos slept,
 Before, from the dark of eternal midnights,
 The light-spirit called it up to life.
 There, where the earth's womb, still unforced,
 Modestly envelops itself in dark veils,
 Where, never penetrated by bold light,
 It does not yet engender this wavering image
 Of things' order, this race of earth!³¹

²⁶Novalis (1960f:2, 416–418 no. 17/417–419 no. 16).

²⁷Novalis (1960f:2, 416–418 no. 17/417–419 no. 16).

²⁸For example, Novalis claims "The first step will be a look inward, segregating observation of our self. Who stops here gains only half. The second step must be an effective look outward, self-actuating, sustained observation of the external world" (1960f:2, 422 no. 26/423 no. 24).

²⁹For discussion of this point, see Kuzniar (1992) and (1988), Seyhan (1992, 78–79), Strand (1998).

³⁰For example, Henry's interactions with Zulima and Mathilde in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (Novalis 1960f:1, 236–239, 284, 287–288).

³¹Günderrode (1990–1991:1, 70).

239 Unlike Henry in Novalis' account, G nderrode's protagonist does not find an image
 240 or reflection of themselves in the cave. However, the "spirits of earth" do advise
 241 them to look inwards for the answers they seek, suggesting that human beings are a
 242 part of nature that reflects nature's reality:

243 But look down, into your soul's grounds;
 244 What you seek here you will find there,
 245 You are just the cosmos' seeing mirror.
 246 There too are midnights that one day will dawn,
 247 There too are powers that awaken from sleep
 248 There too is a workshop of nature.³²

249 The strong parallels between the language and imagery of the above two accounts
 250 of the knowledge-seeker and the cave contribute to the temptation to assimilate
 251 G nderrode's model of knowledge to that of Novalis. However, there is a major dif-
 252 ference between Novalis' ideas of an iterated approach to a regulative ideal of abso-
 253 lute knowledge and G nderrode's emphasis on immediate intuition or direct
 254 knowledge of the absolute. In Novalis' *via negativa*, language and representation
 255 repeatedly fall short of the absolute that they attempt to capture, and yet point
 256 towards it in part by asserting their own failure. By contrast, for G nderrode the
 257 "seeing mirror" of human consciousness is simply unable to encounter the "primal
 258 force" of "life";³³ it reflects only the already-differentiated living world. There is no
 259 indication that, by recognizing one's failure to really know this underlying life-
 260 force, one moves closer to new forms of understanding that are closer or more ade-
 261 quate. On the contrary: the spirits of earth tell G nderrode's narrator that the journey
 262 has been "In vain!" and "Too late!"³⁴

263 In other words, for G nderrode there is a sharp dichotomy between forms of
 264 representation and thought of the world "of light" (as she puts it in "The Wanderer's
 265 Descent"), i.e., the world that we are used to thinking about, and other forms of
 266 thought, awareness or experience that are adequate to the original, undifferentiated
 267 nature of the universe. The protagonist of "The Wanderer's Descent," like
 268 G nderrode's other protagonists, does not discover a series of mirrors or micro-
 269 cosmoses and macrocosmoses, nor forms of metalepsis that represent an upward spiral
 270 towards closer knowledge of the absolute; nor do they discover hints of something
 271 beyond what can be grasped. Instead, those of G nderrode's characters that under-
 272 stand something of the world beyond the way it appears to ordinary human beings
 273 do so because they grasp that something directly. They directly experience undif-
 274 ferentiation, that is, the original, absolute force that underlies the world we experi-
 275 ence in everyday life. Thus, in "Story of a Brahmin," the Brahmin says that "a
 276 community exists between human beings in whom the inner sense has arisen and
 277 the worldspirit."³⁵ And in "The Manes," the teacher claims that it is not through the

³² G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 73–74).

³³ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 72).

³⁴ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 73).

³⁵ G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 312).

outer senses, but through “inner sense” and “the spiritual eye,” that one perceives the world beyond the ordinary world: a perception that “often reveals itself only like a quick flash that is then buried again by dark night.”³⁶

There are similar moments of unity in Novalis’ work, notably in his “Hymns to the Night,” where he exclaims to the beloved he sees in his vision that: “you heralded the living night to me—made me human—feed on my body with spiritual fervour, so I mix myself airily, more deeply with you.”³⁷ For Novalis, this is a fore-taste, something only available in dreams and visions. In the same piece, he writes:

Holy sleep—do not too seldom gladden in this earthly daily task the ones dedicated to the night. Only fools mistake you and are not aware of sleep as the shadow that you, in each twilight of the truthful night, compassionately cast upon us. They do not feel you in the golden flow of the grapes—in the wonderful oil of the almond tree, and in the brown juice of the poppy.³⁸

For Novalis, it is fundamentally impossible for living human beings to experience union with the cosmos, and there is a sound reason for this. For the Early German Romantics, like Fichte, knowledge of what is undifferentiated is impossible by definition, because it lacks the subject-object distinction that is necessary for knowledge. It is only after death that we can truly experience unity—and then no knowledge of it will be possible.

For Günderrode, too, we cannot truly experience union with the whole or grasp the undifferentiated while we are alive. For example, in “The Wanderer’s Descent” the “spirits of earth” tell the Wanderer that he cannot experience the undifferentiated chaos of the world prior to individuation because human beings are “[t]hrough your consciousness already parted from dream.”³⁹ But it is here that Günderrode’s work differs from Novalis’ in an interesting way. For Günderrode, like Novalis, genuine awareness of the absolute is impossible while alive, and available only in glimpses, while consciousness is impossible after death—but Günderrode has a particularly robust idea of how the self nevertheless continues to exist, along with its ability to be aware and experience.

5 Knowledge, Consciousness and the Self

Günderrode was aware of the requirement for the subject-object distinction for knowledge, and its importance within the philosophical context of Idealism and Romanticism. She studied Novalis, Fichte, Schelling and Kant and was conversant with their theories of knowledge. So when she writes about the possibility of knowledge or of some form of awareness beyond consciousness, what does she mean?

³⁶Günderrode (1990–1991:1, 35).

³⁷Novalis (1960f:1, 133s. 1).

³⁸Novalis (1960f:1, 133–134s. 2).

³⁹Günderrode (1990–1991:1, 73).

313 In 1801, Günderrode wrote to her friend Gunda Brentano that:

314 In general it's totally incomprehensible to me that we have no consciousness other than
 315 perception of effects, never of causes. All other knowledge seems to me (when I think of
 316 this) not worthy of knowledge, as long as I don't know the cause of the knowledge, my
 317 faculty of knowledge. To me, this ignorance is the most unbearable lack, the greatest con-
 318 tradiction. And I think if we really ever enter the borders of a second life, then one of our
 319 first inner phenomena would have to be that our consciousness would grow larger and
 320 clearer; for it would be unbearable to drag this limitation into a second life.⁴⁰

321 At first glance, this could be a banal reference to the afterlife, or simply a repetition
 322 of the Christian idea, also found in Novalis, that the foretaste of union with other
 323 individuals and with the divine that we can experience in dreams and religious
 324 visions will finally be fulfilled after death. But I think Günderrode claims something
 325 more than this: i.e., that not only will this union be fulfilled after death, but that we
 326 ourselves will be able to experience it. More specifically, I argue that Günderrode
 327 conceives of a form of selfhood and a form of knowledge that extend beyond the
 328 individualized, conscious human life that we are accustomed to regarding as inte-
 329 gral to our "self." In other words, Günderrode decentralizes consciousness from her
 330 model of the self and attempts to imagine what this would mean (to use a term
 331 anachronistically) phenomenologically.

332 To return to the letter quoted above, the first part of Günderrode's claim, that we
 333 only ever know effects and not their causes, is grounded in Günderrode's study of
 334 the work of Kant and Fichte. In her notes on the second book in Fichte's *Vocation*
 335 *of Humankind*, on "knowledge," Günderrode summarizes Fichte's position about
 336 the unreliable nature of knowledge of external things in the following way:

337 In all perceptions I only perceive my own state: I see this surface, it seems green to me, i.e.,
 338 it makes an impression on me that I call green. The visual sensation green, therefore, is part
 339 of *me*. [...] Whether these sensations really match an existing green surface I do not know,
 340 because I only know my sensations. [...] The consciousness of a thing outside me is noth-
 341 ing more than the product of my capacity to represent.⁴¹

342 In a close paraphrase of Fichte, Günderrode notes not only the impossibility of the
 343 knowledge of objects outside us, but also the implications of this claim for our
 344 knowledge of our selves:

345 Whether my body—indeed my whole I—is anything more than my thinking and having
 346 thought *I am it* can just as little be proven as the fact that real things exist outside me. [...] I
 347 become conscious of the thinking *etc.* as a determined event, but not of a capacity to do it,
 348 still less of an essence that possesses this capacity.—[...] T]his inwardly intuited thinking is
 349 only half a thought, because, according to my laws of thought, for each condition I must add
 350 the thought of a ground of the condition. Thus, here, I add to the thought of what is *deter-*
 351 *mined* (my real thinking) the thought of something that is *determinable* (a manifold possi-
 352 ble thinking). I grasp this possible thinking as a whole, which, because I cannot grasp
 353 anything infinite, seems to me to be a finite capacity, and because something independent

⁴⁰Günderrode (1992, 75–76).

⁴¹Günderrode (1990–1991:1, 290–291).

of thinking is represented by this way of thinking, I represent to myself a *being* and essence 354
that has this capacity.⁴² 355

I suggest that a model like the above, taken from or based on Fichte, underpins 356
Günderrode's claims in her letter to Gunda. In this letter, Günderrode introduces her 357
general complaint about the inadequacy of knowledge with a specific complaint 358
about her inability to know herself: "sometimes I have no opinion of myself at all, 359
my self-observations are so fluctuating."⁴³ It is this kind of statement that has often 360
led to claims that Günderrode's sense of self was unstable and pathological, but, as 361
I argue elsewhere (Ezekiel 2016b), these statements in fact convey a general model 362
of personal identity. In other words, Günderrode is not claiming that she herself has 363
a particularly unstable sense of self, but that the self in general is by its nature 364
unstable and changing. According to this model, the sensations and other percep- 365
tions—or intuitions—that we become aware of in observing ourselves are con- 366
stantly fluctuating, and, due to the limitations of human reason, we extrapolate from 367
these to a bearer of these states, or an essence, underlying them. But, as Günderrode 368
draws from her notes on Fichte, the extrapolation of an essence underlying these 369
states does not necessarily reflect reality, but only our own necessary ways of 370
thinking. 371

Günderrode derives two significant implications from this. First, the actual exist- 372
ing selves that we are aware of as human individuals are in fact not unitary, consoli- 373
dated selves that run through all our experiences; the latter is only an inference that 374
we draw on the basis of our actual experiences. Rather, the human individual is a 375
radically changeable, discontinuous set of experiences. This implication is crucial 376
for understanding Günderrode's conception of the self. Second, and more impor- 377
tantly for our purposes, what we really are beyond these momentary states is com- 378
pletely unknown—it is beyond the limits of human existence and human experience. 379
However, if, as Günderrode says in her letter to Gunda, we do "enter the borders of 380
a second life" after we die, she claims that we may experience different ways of 381
being and, as she emphasizes in the letter, different forms of consciousness, or dif- 382
ferent ways of knowing. 383

But Günderrode does not stop at the speculative moment of suggesting that dif- 384
ferent forms of experience might open up to us after death; rather, she attempts to 385
imagine what these forms of experience might be like and communicate them to us. 386
In "An Apocalyptic Fragment," Günderrode describes a vision of immersion in an 387
oceanic whole of experience, understood as a vision of death (this experience is 388
initiated by "passing away" [*entschlafen*]).⁴⁴ While in this state, Günderrode's nar- 389
rator claims, "I had muffled and tangled dreams, [but] I encountered nothing that 390
reminded me of time."⁴⁵ Similarly, Günderrode's poem "A Dream" envisions con- 391
tinued—but altered—awareness during death: 392

⁴²Günderrode (1990–1991:2, 292–293).

⁴³Günderrode (1992, 75).

⁴⁴Günderrode (1990–1991:1, 52).

⁴⁵Günderrode (1990–1991:1, 53).

393 I came to a dark hollow where past times and the great spirits of antiquity slept a deep
394 sleep. [...]

395 And they made all kinds of violent movements, and wanted to rip themselves out of
396 their slumber; but the spell's power held them imprisoned in heavy stupefaction.

397 When I went closer I heard a violent roaring like the wild winds when they pound their
398 heads howling against cliffs.

399 And I became aware that it was the destinies of this time, the events of the present, that
400 rushed so violently into the hollow.

401 But the confused roaring of their voices pressed only weakly into the ears of the
402 sleepers.⁴⁶

403 G nderrode's visions of death suggest a form of continued awareness after death
404 that she characterizes as "numb," "muffled," "tangled," "stupefied," a "dark feeling"
405 and as lacking memory—as existing only for the present. I think this is G nderrode's
406 attempt to depict a form of awareness that is not conscious: a pre-conscious or post-
407 conscious experience of a self that extends beyond the narrow "self" as we usually
408 understand it, i.e., the living human individual. This means that G nderrode rejects
409 the Fichtean and Early German Romantic concept of the necessity of a subject-
410 object distinction for knowledge—although the knowledge she imagines is of a
411 different kind to the conscious, rational and articulated knowledge that Fichte and
412 the Early German Romantics had in mind. The kind of knowledge that G nderrode
413 imagines is a kind of awareness that is not differentiated, separated from, the origin:
414 perhaps it is something like the "dream" that the spirits of earth mention in "The
415 Wanderer's Descent" and that also appears in "The Kiss in the Dream." It is an
416 awareness that belongs to a form of life, a selfhood, that is broader than the indi-
417 vidual selfhood of the subject that we are used to thinking of as essential to
418 who we are.

419 This self-beyond-the-self exists within a well thought-out metaphysical context.
420 There is not space here for a detailed account of G nderrode's metaphysics, but a
421 brief sketch is necessary in order to make sense of this claim. So, very quickly:
422 G nderrode conceives of the world as constituted by entities that are made up of
423 "elements" which, over time, dissolve—with the death of individual entities—and
424 are reconstituted in new constellations, incorporating different groups of entities. In
425 this way, the "earth spirit" or the "idea of the earth" repeatedly manifests itself in
426 space and time in different forms. According to G nderrode, this model is consis-
427 tent with what she calls "the idea of the Indians of the transmigration of souls."⁴⁷

428 If we apply this model to individual experience, we see that what is essential to
429 a "self" cannot be individual consciousness as we know it. The self continues after
430 death—at which point it is reconstituted together with elements from other indi-
431 vidual entities, potentially also experiencing a division of its own elements into
432 several new entities. After death, we exceed the boundaries of the entity that we
433 infer as the substratum for the constantly changing experiences of our lives as

⁴⁶G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 439).

⁴⁷G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 447–448). For G nderrode's most succinct and comprehensive account of this metaphysical model, see her unpublished fragment "Idea of the Earth" (G nderrode 1990–1991:1, 446–449). See also Nassar (2021).

individuals. What would that mean for the experience of the beings that make up this universe? What would that feel like? I suggest that this is the experience that G nderrode attempts to depict through imaginative portrayals of “numbed,” “muffled” and “tangled” awareness.

To help describe this experience, G nderrode also relies on a concept of playful interaction that has been totally overlooked in accounts of her work. In the poem “Once I Lived Sweet Life,” G nderrode describes the shadow of death chasing after the narrator’s “playmates,” who disappear one by one.⁴⁸ But this loss is redeemed by a back-and-forth movement between images of heaven and earth, gods and nature, air and the earth—or, in other words, a back-and-forth movement between worldly life and a form of existence in communion with gods and spirits.⁴⁹ She writes:

I raised little wings
 fluttered now here, now there
 was glad of the easy life
 at rest in the clear aether.
 Saw now in the holy deep
 unnameable space of heaven
 wonderfully strange images
 and figures moving.
 [...]
 Earth and heaven,
 following each other
 forever in a circle.⁵⁰

In a similar vein, the narrator of “An Apocalyptic Fragment” says: “I let myself be borne by the breezes in swift drafts, I consorted with the sunset, and with the rainbow’s seven-colored drops, I arranged myself with my playmates around the moon when it would have hidden itself, and accompanied its course.”⁵¹ And, later in the same piece: “I was released from the narrow bounds of my being, and no more a single drop; I was given again to everything, and everything belonged with me. I thought, and felt, surged in the ocean, gleamed in the sun, circled with the stars; I felt myself in everything, and enjoyed everything in me.”⁵²

Through these images of play and communion, G nderrode describes an easy, joyful movement between life as an individual among other individuals, followed by immersion in a primordial whole—an ocean, or the aether—and re-emergence as

⁴⁸G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 384).

⁴⁹Christine Battersby (1995, 98–99; 2007, 120–121, 127) has argued that the spaces in “Once I Lived Sweet Life” relate as forms of (feminine) immanence and (masculine) transcendence, connected by a repeated back-and-forth movement between them. My interpretation builds on Battersby’s but, as I argue elsewhere (Ezekiel 2014), I claim that G nderrode does not view these spaces as fundamentally separate: earthly life and spiritual life are both parts of a single shared world, making the movement between these spaces easy and natural, consistently with how the movement between life and death is depicted in, for example, “An Apocalyptic Fragment.”

⁵⁰G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 384–385).

⁵¹G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 53).

⁵²G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 54).

468 a new individual among others, understood as former or potential future parts of
 469 oneself. We do not lose ourselves in death, but our self continues into the future in
 470 new forms.

471 Knowledge—or, rather, awareness—of the absolute is possible, for G nderrode,
 472 and it is possible to experience ourselves as this absolute, because, she claims, our
 473 self-awareness does not disappear with individuated existence, human conscious-
 474 ness, and knowledge of the forms of existence as we know them. “An Apocalyptic
 475 Fragment” ends with lines that refer quite explicitly to this overstepping of the
 476 bounds of the individual consciousness of a living human being:

477 Then I thought my longing was also to return to the source of life.

478 And as I thought this, and felt almost more alive than all my consciousness, suddenly it
 479 was as if my mind was surrounded with numbing mists. But they soon disappeared; I
 480 seemed to myself no longer to be me, and yet more than ever me, I could no longer find my
 481 borders, my consciousness had overstepped them; it was bigger, other, and yet I felt
 482 myself in it.⁵³

483 6 Everyday Knowledge, Deeper Knowledge, and Awareness

484 Near the start of this paper, I posed three questions about G nderrode’s account of
 485 knowledge: What does she think knowledge is? What does she think knowledge is
 486 for human beings? And what does she think knowledge does for us? We are now in
 487 a position to sketch some answers to these questions.

488 G nderrode differentiates three types of knowledge, or perhaps more accurately,
 489 two types of knowledge and one type of something other than knowledge that we
 490 might call “awareness.” First, there is the ordinary human knowledge that helps us
 491 navigate the everyday world in which we live: knowledge of the objects and events
 492 of our world, which are examined more closely in scientific inquiry. Second, there
 493 is the deeper knowledge of the reality that underlies this everyday situation: the kind
 494 of religious or mystical knowledge that can be had in visions and intuitions. This
 495 second kind of knowledge has much in common with other accounts of mystical
 496 knowledge of the divine or direct intuitions of the world behind appearances, which
 497 can be grasped only murkily and only in glimpses (for example in the dreams and
 498 visions described by Novalis in his “Hymns to the Night”). Lastly, G nderrode sug-
 499 gests that other forms of awareness, beyond the human capacity to know, open up
 500 for us before and after death. This awareness is non-conscious and non-articulated,
 501 and is hard for us to imagine since it corresponds to a state of being that has little in
 502 common with the individuated, conscious life of a human being. G nderrode tries
 503 to indicate the nature of this kind of awareness through accounts of dream-like
 504 forms of awareness that are “muffled,” “tangled” and “numb.”

505 The second question I asked was: What does G nderrode think knowledge is for
 506 human beings? This can be answered briefly: human beings have knowledge of their

⁵³G nderrode (1990–1991):1, 53–54).

own states. We are aware of our emotional and perceptual states, and we extrapolate from these, on the one hand, to an enduring substrate or “self” that underlies these and, on the other, to an external world of objects and processes that corresponds to these states. In these claims, G nderrode follows other philosophers, especially Fichte. However, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Ezekiel 2016b; Ezekiel 2020), she differs from these in attempting to articulate a model of the self that does not have recourse to this substrate; that is, in other words, a model of the self that takes the radically changeable nature of human experience as the basis of notions of identity.⁵⁴

Lastly, I asked what G nderrode thinks the purpose of knowledge is, or what knowledge does for us. In accordance with our answer to the first question, we should ask the purpose, not of knowledge in general, but of each these three forms of knowledge or awareness. There is not space for a detailed exploration of these topics here, but we can sketch the likely answers on the basis of the above account, and point to textual evidence for these claims in G nderrode’s writing.

The first kind of knowledge (that is, ordinary knowledge based on our own experiences as well as the more detailed observation of everyday objects in scientific research) is useful for living, i.e., for navigating everyday life. G nderrode indicates quite clearly that she believes that this kind of knowledge has its place. For example, in “Story of a Brahmin,” the narrator describes his skill in acquiring money before he turns to a life of morals and then religious contemplation,⁵⁵ and in *Magic and Destiny* Alcmenes suggests that, for those who crave accomplishments, the everyday world is a better option than the pursuit of deeper knowledge, telling his son:

[...] only recognize your course,
 And do not thrust on to the elect
 Who humbly consecrate themselves to gods.
 The world calls you, fame and honor call you
 And the desire for deeds wrenches you into the fray;
 By actions the earthly is created,
 But heaven will be quietly observed.⁵⁶

The second kind of knowledge (comprehension of the underlying reality of the world) is often satisfying for those who find it,⁵⁷ although in some places, such as in “The Adept” and *Magic and Destiny*, G nderrode suggests that it can also be terrifying and overwhelming.⁵⁸ In addition, in several pieces G nderrode indicates that this form of knowledge can contribute to the derivation of true ideas of virtue and

⁵⁴For an account of G nderrode’s conception of the fragmentary, momentary, or “catastrophic” self and its relationship to models of selfhood in Clemens Brentano and Heinrich von Kleist, see Bohrer (1984) and (1989).

⁵⁵G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 304).

⁵⁶G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 231); see also G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 307).

⁵⁷See, e.g., G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 311).

⁵⁸See, e.g., G nderrode (1990–1991:1, 50–51, 234).

542 beauty.⁵⁹ This topic in Günderrode's work has not yet been investigated, and unfor-
 543 tunately there is not space to consider it in more detail here.

544 Lastly, there is no indication that Günderrode saw any purpose or use for the kind
 545 of awareness that is possible beyond differentiated existence. Instead, this just
 546 seems to be the state of affairs to be expected after death (and which, presumably,
 547 also existed before we emerged as conscious individuals)—i.e., a state in which the
 548 self continues in new forms, which lack consciousness, but retain the ability to
 549 experience.

550 This paper is a preliminary effort to get to grips with Günderrode's account of
 551 knowledge, and I have not attempted to answer conclusively whether Günderrode's
 552 work can be considered a form of negative philosophy. Certainly, there is a negative
 553 moment—the moment of “In vain!” or “Too late!” depicted in the Wanderer's
 554 encounter with the spirits of earth—in the movement towards a human relationship
 555 with the absolute, or with the “primal force” that lies behind the world of everyday
 556 experience. However, the new relationship to this absolute that Günderrode portrays
 557 in her prophetic and ecstatic figures is not a path towards better, though always
 558 imperfect, knowledge of this absolute (as in Novalis, for example). Instead, it is a
 559 specifically human way of living and comprehending in relation to something that
 560 will only really be experienced in the new and radically different types of awareness
 561 that she maintains await us once we shrug off our human forms.

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⁵⁹ See, e.g., Günderrode (1990–1991:1, 310, 361–362, 448–449).

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