

## **Earth, Spirit, Humanity: Community and the Nonhuman in Karoline von Günderrode's**

### **"Idea of the Earth"**

Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806) has long been recognized as a poet and paradigmatic figure of the tragic Romantic, but recently her writing has begun to receive attention for its consideration of philosophical questions. Her work is especially promising for its original conceptualizations of death, selfhood, gender, and agency, which Günderrode sites within a metaphysics developed from readings of Schelling, Fichte, Herder, Early German Romanticism and ancient Greek and Indian thought. A secondary literature has emerged on Günderrode's engagement with Fichte and Schelling (Christmann; Dormann; Nassar), reimagining of Early German Romantic themes (Heimerl; Hilger; Kuzniar), and contributions to models of identity, especially female identity (Allingham; Battersby; Ezekiel "Metamorphosis"). This paper adds to the growing discussion of Günderrode's philosophical thought, unpacking Günderrode's metaphysics and arguing that the place Günderrode assigns human beings in her cosmology requires a reconceptualization of the relationship between human beings and the nonhuman world and the development of communities that include the nonhuman.

That Günderrode's work should be a potential source for re-imagining the human-nature relationship is hinted at by her connections with Early German Romanticism and influence on American transcendentalism. Her friend Bettina Brentano-von Arnim's edited collection of their correspondence, *Die Günderode*, was translated into English by Margaret Fuller, and Carol Strauss Sotiropoulos has argued that Fuller's own model of friendship was informed by this text (81–110). Despite this, Günderrode's work has not, so far, been much studied in relation to

transcendentalism, environmentalism, or social or political theory (with the exception of work by Lucia Maria Licher ["Der Völker Schicksal"; "Du mußt Dich"; *Mein Leben*]). In part, this may stem from Günderrode's position as an intermediate figure between Early German Romanticism and the Heidelberg Romantics—she belongs to the broader circle of thinkers and writers associated with late Romanticism known as the Heidelberger Kreis. In particular, as Karl Heinz Bohrer has argued, there are parallels between Günderrode's conception of the self and those of Clemens Brentano and Heinrich von Kleist ("Identität"; *Der romantische Brief* 75–84, 115–129). Brentano's and Kleist's focus on subjective experience is often viewed as part of Romanticism's "turn inward," i.e., its move away from attempts to change social relationships towards a focus on the inner, emotional life and experiences of the individual (Bohrer "Identität"; Dallmayr 54; Sevin and Zeller 4–6). These links between Günderrode and later Romanticism have perhaps contributed to some commentators reading Günderrode as representative of this turn inward. For example, Ruth Christmann claims that Günderrode's work was "in accord with developments after 1800, which, after the failure of the Early German Romantic attempt at renewal, increasingly sought purchase in a retreat inwards and no longer aimed at connections to society" (119; see also Dormann 14, 240).<sup>i</sup>

This paper argues that, rather than rejecting or neglecting social relations, Günderrode's work presents an ideal of community. This ideal is embedded in the philosophical system that Günderrode was developing up until her death, which includes an account of what human beings are and how they relate to each other and to the nonhuman world.

The first part of the paper provides an exposition of Günderrode's cosmology and the place of human beings within it. Analysis of the unpublished essay "Idea of the Earth" and the

closely related epistolary dialogue "Letters of Two Friends" shows that Günderrode presents human beings as embedded in, and the same in kind as, the nonhuman. Part two uses the philosophical dialogue "Story of a Brahmin" to argue that, consistently with this metaphysical picture, Günderrode denies that human beings are justified in adopting a dominating relationship to nature or the nonhuman (or each other). The third part of the paper explores Günderrode's claim that human beings live in three ways—as animal, as human, and spiritually—and considers how these relate to Günderrode's concept of earth. This part of the investigation reveals that, unlike many other philosophers of the time, who tended to strongly associate human beings and spirit, mind or consciousness, Günderrode disassociates these.

The final part of the paper explores how Günderrode's account translates into concrete ideas about community. I argue that Günderrode's normative restraint, ideal of harmony, and view of human beings as part of and the same in kind as the rest of nature contribute to a vision of community in which genuine connections can flourish between human beings at the same time as connections to what is beyond the human. Rather than providing a program for ideal social relations or attitudes towards the natural world, Günderrode describes conditions for the emergence of small communities of friends in harmony with nature. On Günderrode's model, these could potentially grow and eventually, perhaps, enable the emergence of the single, perfect organism she calls the "realized idea of the earth."

## **1. The Idea of the Earth**

Günderrode's unpublished fragment "Idea of the Earth" was probably written in 1805, based on references to this piece in her letters (III:272). This dense essay is an intermediate stage between

Günderrode's notes on Schelling, especially the passages "Idea of Nature" (II:398–99) and "The true idea of materialism..." (II:404–6), and the final letter of "Letters of Two Friends" in her collection *Melete*. The latter repeats passages from "Idea of the Earth," in places verbatim, elsewhere with important changes, and, taken together, the pieces show Günderrode moving progressively further away from Schelling's thought as she developed her own. *Melete*, Günderrode's third collection of writings, had been sent to the publishers when she died and "Letters" is therefore the most authoritative of these texts in terms of representing Günderrode's own and considered position. Nonetheless, the exposition below takes its starting point from "Idea of the Earth," which is more detailed and more closely focused on metaphysics.

In both "Idea of the Earth" and "Letters of Two Friends," Günderrode claims that the world is comprised of "elements," which join in temporary combinations to form individual entities. When these die or are destroyed, the elements are scattered and can then join together again in different combinations, creating new entities. For Günderrode, "life" is the combination of elements as these entities, while "death" is only a relative term applying to individual entities; by contrast, the elements out of which these are formed do not die:

The most intimate mingling of different elements with the highest degree of contact and attraction we call life; to whatever perfection it may have developed it is still only the product of the synthesis of the elements that gestate life. With the dissolution of this synthesis the product also ends, but the life-principle in the elements is immortal; it requires only contact and connection again like before and new life blossoms with all the blooms that we call thought and sensation, and organism and body and soul.

Thus life is immortal and surges up and down in the elements, for they are life itself. But determinate and individual life is only a life-form given through this determinate connection, attraction and contact, which can last no longer than the connection. (I:446–47; cf. I:359)

According to Günderrode, the world we experience is thus comprised of entities that participate in a cycle of formation and destruction which, at all its stages, manifests the principle of life, just in different ways and forms.

Günderrode applies this model of living and dying to all entities, including objects we usually think of as devoid of life. For Günderrode, living beings such as plants and animals are only higher life-forms that exist on a continuum with supposedly inanimate objects. The beings that we think of as alive have developed from less animated forms of life through the process of repeated combination, dissolution and recombination which, Günderrode claims, gradually increases the "life" of the elements and, through these, of the whole:

[E]ach mortal gives back to the earth a raised, more developed elemental life, which it cultivates further in ascending forms, and the organism, by assimilating ever more developed elements, must become ever more perfect and universal. Thus the All [*Allheit*] comes to life through the downfall of the particular, and the particular survives immortally in the All whose life it developed while alive, and even after death elevates and increases, and so by living and dying helps to realize the idea of the earth. Thus however my elements may be dispersed, when they join to what is already living they will elevate it;

when they join to those things whose life resembles death, they will animate them. (I:447–48; cf. I:360)

At the end of the above passage, Günderrode likens this process to reincarnation, adding: "The idea of the Indians of the transmigration of souls corresponds to this opinion[.]" I return to this claim below. Here, I only note that this suggests that Günderrode sees this model as allowing some form of personal survival beyond the death of the individual, although in an altered state.

Günderrode maintains that the process of increasing animation through the forming and re-forming of groups of elements can only stop when and if life has been fully actualized—that is, when all potential life has become real. This, she claims, would take the form of a single organism, which would constitute the realization of what she calls the "idea of the earth":

[E]ach form that [the elements] produce is only a development of their life-principle. But the earth bears the life-material given back to it again in ever new appearances, until through ever new transformations everything capable of life in it has come to life. This would be when all mass would become organic; only then would the idea of the earth be realized. (I:447; cf. I:359–60)

This model has clear connections to the work of Schelling, especially *Bruno*, which Günderrode read in 1804. Several of the concepts featured in Günderrode's metaphysics appear in this text, including "the idea of the earth" (or "idea of earth" as Michael Vater translates *Idee der Erde* [Schelling 125]), although Schelling aligns this concept more clearly with Platonic

ideas than Günderrode does. Günderrode, like Schelling in *Bruno*, is concerned with explaining how the infinite relates to the finite world we experience. For Schelling, the organism is the closest available approximation of the way that individual things relate to the absolute, since the relationship between the parts of an organism is one of mutual, simultaneous conditioning rather than of cause and effect: "the best example we can find among familiar sensible things of the way the finite inheres in the infinite is the way individual parts of the animate body are tied into the whole organism" (Schelling 150, trans. Vater). However, he adds that this is only an image or analogy, because "in the absolute this union of the finite and the infinite is infinitely more perfect than the living union of the parts of the body[.]" Similarly, Günderrode claims that the kinds of organisms we encounter in our ordinary lives are only approximations to the ultimate organism that would constitute the realized idea of the earth:

The earth can therefore only attain its proper being when its organic and inorganic appearances dissolve in a collective organism, [...] where all body would also at the same time be thought, all thinking at the same time body, and a truly transfigured body, without lack or illness and immortal, and thus wholly different from what we call body or material and to which we attribute transience, inertia, illness and deficiency, for this kind of body is, as it were, only a failed attempt by nature to produce that immortal ideal body. (I:448; cf. I:360–61)

Thus we should not think of the realization of Günderrode's idea of the earth as an organism in the ordinary sense. Although the comparison to an organism and Günderrode's

emphasis on the increase of "life" through the progressive forms of its realization suggest that this realization would be some kind of living being, it is characterized most essentially by an identity of form and essence, or body and thought. Günderrode makes this point explicitly: "This perfect unity of essence and form cannot be achieved in *separation* and multiplicity [...] because the essence can only be one but the forms are various" (I:448).<sup>ii</sup>

Günderrode also explicitly claims to be uncertain about whether this ultimate organism, that is, the realization of the idea of the earth, can or will ever in fact emerge:

I do not assert whether the earth will be altogether successful in organizing itself immortally like this; there may be a disproportion of essence and form in its primal elements that always hinders it from this; and perhaps the totality of our whole solar system is needed to resolve the task of such an equilibrium of essence and form, and perhaps even this does not suffice for it and it is a task for the entire universe. (I:448)<sup>iii</sup>

This statement is significant for a number of reasons, including its suggestion that the earth may itself form part of a larger organism such as the solar system or the universe (at another point, Günderrode refers to "the realized idea of the earth (or of the universe)" [I:449]), and the claim that a "disproportion of form and essence" may exist among the elements that constitute the earth. There is not space to explore the latter claim here, but the question of the role and status of the "earth" in Günderrode's thought is considered below.

The picture that emerges from "Idea of the Earth" and "Letters of Two Friends" is of a world in which human beings are not profoundly different in kind from other entities, including



objects we usually think of as inanimate. Instead, human beings are formed of the same basic building blocks (elements) as everything else in nature, and exist on a continuum of liveliness or animation with these other beings. Günderrode's basic metaphysical picture therefore leaves space to imagine ways of relating to nature, or the nonhuman world, in non-oppositional terms.

## **2. Perfection versus Exploitation**

Günderrode's emphasis on increasing life or animation through the death and regeneration of finite beings works against the idea that the human characteristic of mind or consciousness is something that sets human beings apart from nature. Günderrode is not trying to explain how two disparate factors—essence or mind (or soul) and form or body—come to be joined; rather, she presents mind and consciousness as emerging within the material world. In other words, these occur on a continuum with aspects of the world that we usually think of as lacking consciousness. Günderrode explains this non-duality in the opening lines of "Idea of the Earth":

The earth is a realized idea, one that is simultaneously effective (force) and effected (appearance). It is thus a unity of soul and body, of which we call the pole of its activity that it turns outward extension, form, body; the one it turns inwards intension, essence, force, soul. Now, as the whole of the earth only exists through this unification of soul and body, so, too, the individual and smallest things only exist through it and cannot be conceived as split in two, for an outer without an inner, an essence without form, a force without some sort of effect, is not comprehensible. (I:446)<sup>iv</sup>

Similarly to Schelling, for Günderrode opposites are not originally separate, but dual aspects or poles of a single thing. This applies to the dualities we think of as essence and form and as mind or soul and body: at root, these are one, like the inside and outside of a single thing, and their full manifestation requires their complete commensurability. Thus, as we saw above, for Günderrode the fully realized idea of the earth is not one in which mind predominates over body, but a state of equilibrium in which these fully penetrate each other: "where all body would also at the same time be thought, all thinking at the same time body[.]"

Günderrode does imagine a role for human beings in the development of consciousness, and therefore in the emergence of mind or soul in material. However, we have to search outside "Idea of the Earth" and "Letters" to find support for this claim, and for the application of Günderrode's metaphysics to her ideas on social relationships. Like most of Günderrode's work, "Story of a Brahmin" is consistent with the metaphysical picture presented in "Idea of the Earth" and "Letters," although the language is more religious and less philosophical than in these other pieces. This is perhaps partly because "Story of a Brahmin" was published in 1803, before Günderrode's detailed engagement with *Bruno*; this fact should also warn against reading Günderrode's work as too derivative of Schelling, despite the overt similarities between their work. Günderrode seems to have adapted Schelling's ideas to fit a philosophical system that she was already in the process of developing when she encountered his thought.

In "Story of a Brahmin," Günderrode claims that the development of "consciousness and thought" from bare matter through human beings and beyond is part of a process of increasing perfection and individuation that will ultimately allow the things of the world to be unified with what she calls, among other things, the "primal force" (*Urkraft*):

[The Brahmin] taught me how in each part of the infinite spirit of nature lies the aptitude for eternal perfection, 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 await 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, and thus unite the divinity and universality of the creator with the individuality of the creature. (I:312)

As well as indicating that Günderrode views consciousness as developing within the material world, this passage helps clarify the claim in "Idea of the Earth" and "Letters" that "the idea of the Indians of the transmigration of souls corresponds to this opinion[.]" Günderrode views the dissolution of finite beings and their reconstitution in new forms as a kind of reincarnation. Human beings and their minds are not the unique pinnacle of existence, but one form among many in a series that develops through and beyond human beings towards closer connection with the divine. According to Günderrode, human beings are not the ultimate or even penultimate form in this sequence, but simply one stage of the development of the soul.

The idea that human beings are part of a development of the world to consciousness and/or towards the divine or the absolute is, of course, not unique to Günderrode. In this, she draws not only on Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, but also on work by her contemporaries and predecessors, including Schelling, Fichte, and the Early German Romantics. However, unlike many European philosophers, Günderrode draws the implication from siting consciousness within the world and

developing within it that the nonhuman world should not be viewed as inert or as available for human exploitation.

The view of the nonhuman world as material that could or should be worked on by human beings, especially through the use of their reason, was widespread at the time Günderrode was writing (as well as before and since). For example, in *The Vocation of Humankind* Fichte states:

Nature must gradually enter a condition which allows one to calculate and reckon safely on its regular pace, and which keeps its force steady in a definite relation with the power which is destined to control it—the power of man. [...] Cultivated lands shall animate and moderate the inert and hostile atmosphere of primeval forests, deserts, and swamps. [...] H]uman power, enlightened and armed by its discoveries, shall control [nature] without effort and peacefully maintain any conquest once it is made. (Fichte 83, trans. Preuss)

In this passage, Fichte construes the natural world as “inert” and human beings as “destined” to “control” nature through the use of their reason. We can find similar claims by others, for example Herder (IV:239). Even Novalis and Schlegel, famously concerned with transforming Fichte’s “not-I” into a “you” (Novalis III:430), have been criticized for viewing the nonhuman world as something to be appropriated, or at least worked on and shaped, by a creative subject (Pnevmonidou 273–75; Roetzel 370).

For Günderrode, by contrast, although human beings have a place in the development of both consciousness and the earth, their role is neither to master the nonhuman nor to shape it. Instead, human beings are part of nature and can work on themselves as part of nature’s internal

movement towards perfection. In "Idea of the Earth" and "Letters," we saw how this occurs through the enhancement or increase of life during periods when the elements are organized into living beings, including as human beings: as Günderrode writes in these pieces, "each mortal gives back to the earth a raised, more developed elemental life[.]"

The narrator of "Story of a Brahmin" elaborates on the idea of the self-development of the individual within a developing whole:

The philosophy that considers every individual as a means for the whole has now become hateful to me, [the philosophy ...] that always asks what use this or that is for the others and considers each as a fruit that has bloomed and ripened in order to be consumed by the whole; that plants the most various natures in one garden, and wants to grow the oak and the rose according to one standard. To me each individual is holy, it is God's work, it is its own purpose. If it becomes what it can become according to its nature, then it has done enough, and what it profits the others is a side issue. [...] Yes, a time of perfection must come, 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, when every melody throws itself into the eternal harmony.

Just like health, preservation, propagation are the highest for merely animal life, humanity [*Humanität*] in the broadest sense of the word (according to which it also includes morality and culture) is the highest for human beings as human beings; as such they have humankind [*Menschheit*] as their object. Their pure relationship to it, morality, consists in itself, satisfies itself, and needs no other motive nor prospects than itself and

humankind. [...] Thus the human being lives in a threefold way: animally—this is its relation to earth; humanly [*menschlich*]  
—this is its relationship to humankind; spiritually—this is its relationship to the infinite, divine. Whoever does not live in these three ways has a gap in their existence, and something is missing in their aptitudes. (I:310–311)

In this passage, Günderrode emphasizes the intrinsic, non-instrumental value of all living (and, on the basis of "Idea of the Earth" and "Letters," also non-living) things. On Günderrode's model, while human beings are part of the development and perfecting of nature, their role is not to master the world, nor to cultivate or perfect it from a position of dominance (or even stewardship), but, rather, to be human (and animal) and to develop a relationship to the infinite. The harmony that the narrator of "Story of a Brahmin" claims will (hopefully) characterize the end-state of the world is not imposed on or cultivated in nature by human beings, but, if it emerges, will do so through the full self-expression of each of the parts within it, including human beings.

One of the most striking characteristics of this model is its normative restraint: the project facing human beings is one of self-cultivation, not cultivation of others, whether human or nonhuman. Nonetheless, Günderrode clearly imagines this self-cultivation of the individual as part of a self-cultivation of the whole, capable of contributing to an enhanced and harmonious outcome. The last section of this paper explores the nature of this harmony and the means by which Günderrode believes certain kinds of human and nonhuman relationships can foster it. First, however, the next section investigates the "threefold way" of human life that Günderrode

describes in "Story of a Brahmin," and the differences this reveals between Günderrode's account and models that associate human beings uniquely with consciousness and spirituality.

### 3. Being Human

In the passage quoted above, Günderrode aligns the animal side of human nature with "relationship to (the) earth" (*Verhältniß zur Erde*); the human side with "relation to humankind" (*Beziehung zur Menschheit*); and the spiritual side with "relation to the infinite, divine" (*Beziehung zum Unendlichen, Göttlichen*). Günderrode says the least about the animal side of human nature, and this section therefore considers her claims about the relationship of human beings to "humankind" and "the infinite" first, before returning to the animal side of human nature and its relationship to "earth."

In the above passage, Günderrode claims that the human aspect of being human essentially involves, or essentially *is*, relationship to other human beings—to humanity as a whole. As human, she states, human beings "have humanity as their object." She also aligns the human aspect of being human with morality (*Sittlichkeit* or *Moralität*—she seems to use these terms interchangeably). To Günderrode, therefore, morality is specifically something that governs the relations of human beings to each other—i.e., morality does not apply to human relationships with "the earth" or with "the infinite, divine."

Nonetheless, both of the latter relationships are also important on Günderrode's account, as she describes in "Story of a Brahmin." After turning from a worldly life of trade and pleasure, the narrator of this piece first engages in moral thought (I:305) before realizing that participation in the moral world cannot satisfy him:

The struggle [...] of the individual with society, of freedom against freedom, of singularity against general laws, and of morals against their impediments, stopped occupying and tormenting me so much. For a long time it had already been clear to me that justice is the basis of civil society and morality the basis of human society. These two relations had once satisfied me; I had sought to bring all the points of my mind into contact with them. Now I discovered aptitudes within me that these finite relations would no longer satisfy. (I:307–8)

The speaker claims that, whereas social relationships are based on justice (in the case of "civil society") or morality (in the case of "human society"),<sup>v</sup> these matters do not exhaust the needs of human beings. In other words, not only is the mundane and materialistic business of everyday life not sufficient for a full human existence, but neither is the moral life.

Günderrode's account presents morality as unrelated to the spiritual side of human beings, i.e., their relationship to the infinite. Her narrator explains that the aptitudes he has discovered within himself need connection with the infinite, which Günderrode situates beyond the "finite relations" of morals and human society. Her narrator identifies this infinite with "the spirit of nature":

[M]y [...] appetite [sought] an infinite object for its striving; and my inner sense intimated an invisible and mysterious connection with something that I did not yet know, and to which I would gladly have given a shape and name. [...] In this longing, in this love the spirit of nature spoke to me. [... T]he 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. I named this force primal life, and sought to bring my consciousness into connection with it (for a mysterious and unknown descent from it seemed certain to me)[.] (I:308)

Günderrode's narrator explicitly connects this kind of spiritual relationship with religion (I:309). He also explicitly *disconnects* religion from morality: morality, he emphasizes, belongs to the human realm and not the realm of the spiritual: "Anyone who needs some sort of religion as a buttress to their morality, their morality is not pure, for according to its nature this must consist in itself. Thus a human being can do without religion and, considered merely as a human being, does not attain its prospects in religion's territory" (I:310).

The infinite with which Günderrode's narrator seeks a relationship, and which he claims all the world's religions attempt to disclose (I:309), does not correspond to what is peculiarly human in human beings, i.e., their moral and civic relations to other human beings. Instead, Günderrode's narrator aligns this infinite/divine with the spirit of nature, or "primal life" (*Urleben*). This is the "fundamental force" (*Grundkraft*) that connects everything that exists, and from which the individual human being has emerged. This is, he claims, "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 during 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" (I:309).

The references to this infinite as "life" and "force," as well as the claim that it underlies and runs through all things, connect the infinite "ground" of "Story of a Brahmin" to the "All"

that Günderrode describes in "Idea of the Earth" and "Letters." In "Letters," Günderrode explicitly associates the whole, or the "All," with nature, asking: "What does it mean, that from the All of nature [*Allheit der Natur*] a being cuts itself loose with such consciousness, and feels torn off from it?" (I:359). Thus, notwithstanding terminological differences, Günderrode articulates the same idea in all three pieces: i.e., that of an eternal, living whole that manifests itself in every aspect of the world. In "Story of a Brahmin," Günderrode emphasizes the importance of cultivating a relationship to this "infinite spirit of nature" (*unendlicher Naturgeist*) (I:312) or (as she calls it in "Idea of the Earth" and "Letters") the "earth-spirit" (*Erdgeist*) (I:360, 447, 448).

The above points speak in favor of interpreting the terms "life," "spirit of nature,"<sup>vi</sup> and "earth-spirit" (as well as several other terms including "essence of the earth," "god of the earth," and "the infinite") as fulfilling the same function in Günderrode's philosophy. All these terms refer to a single principle or force running through the beings and processes of our world.

In some cases, Günderrode seems to attribute a narrower scope to the spirit or essence of the "earth" than to "life," "spirit of nature," or "the infinite." The latter terms encompass the force, principle or spirit that is unfolding in the entire universe—in everything that exists. By contrast, at some points when Günderrode talks about "earth" she clearly means planet Earth, for example when she states that the idea of the earth may not be realizable by the Earth alone, but may require the solar system or the entire universe (I:361, 448), or when she mentions "the realized idea of the earth (or of the universe)" (I:449). However, Günderrode also uses the terms "earth" and "earthly" (*irdisch*) to mean "mundane" or "worldly," referring to all aspects of the world we experience in ordinary life—i.e., to what might be called "this life" (as opposed to any

idea of a "beyond" or a "hereafter"). For example, in "Story of a Brahmin" she refers to "everything on earth" (I:305) and the narrator claims "I had already been on earth a long time" (I:304; see also I:306, 308, 355, 356, 358). In this usage, the meaning of "earth" is expanded to include all aspects of ordinary existence, and is therefore similar to the meaning Günderrode ascribes to "world" and "universe." This expanded meaning of "earth" to encompass a more general sense of the whole world explains why Günderrode's use of the term "spirit of earth" generally corresponds to "spirit of nature," "life," "the infinite" and the other terms she uses to describe the underlying principle or force that is manifested in the beings of the finite world.

This ambivalence is likely related to Günderrode's stated uncertainty about whether the generative force underlying the succession of finite beings in the world is one that realizes itself in the Earth alone or in all the processes of the universe. This uncertainty causes her to shift back and forth between descriptions of a spirit or essence of earth and an infinite spirit or principle of life and nature in general. The association of the "idea of the earth" with Platonic ideas may also contribute to the confusion. Günderrode's model does not include a realm of ideas, and she uses the notion of the "idea of the earth" as a regulative ideal rather than as an idea, archetype or primal form such as we might find in the work of Goethe or Humboldt or in Schelling's *Bruno*. But the origins of the term *Idee der Erde* in Anselm's Platonic account of the ideas in *Bruno* may have brought with it some associations of an "archetypal nature" in which the ideas of finite things within the universe persist in a perfect form. For instance, Anselm claims that "The created earth [...] is not the true earth, but only an image of the earth which is uncreated, unoriginated, and never to pass away" (Schelling 125, trans. Vater). This is quite a different concept from Günderrode's notion of "idea of the earth," which is indeed a perfect and enduring

entity, but one that, if it ever appears, will be generated from the existing earth that we know and, furthermore, will emerge through the ordinary processes of temporal existence.

Despite the above complication, in general we can take the terms "life," "spirit of earth," "spirit of nature," "the infinite" etc., as they appear in Günderrode's work to all refer to the same basic concept of a single principle or force that underlies the beings and processes of our world (whether we focus on the planet Earth alone or on the entire universe). On the other hand, the "idea of the earth" or "idea of nature" refers to something different. As Günderrode explains, unlike the "earth-spirit," which is the living, generative, original and infinite ground of the world we know, the idea of the earth is the putative end-point of the process of generation and re-generation: it is the "collective organism" in which "all body would also at the same time be thought, all thinking at the same time body, and a truly transfigured body, without lack or illness and immortal, and thus wholly different from what we call body or material" (I:448).

In the unpublished fragment "The true idea of materialism....," Günderrode uses different terminology that supports this point. In this piece, she explains that matter "is simple, unchangeable, eternal," which "contains all things[,] and adds: "that through which they are all one is matter, while that through which they are different and separated from each other is their form" (II:404). "Matter" itself is yet another name for what Günderrode here calls the "principle of all forms" (*Prinzip aller Formen*), "worldsoul" and the "reality of the absolute" (*Wirklichkeit des Absoluten*) (II:405).

Günderrode contrasts this "principle of all forms" with something she calls the "totality of all forms" (*Totalität aller Formen*). These terms correspond, respectively, to her later terms "spirit/essence of earth" and "idea of the earth," as should be clear from the following quote, in

which Günderrode again uses the analogy of the organism as the closest approximation to this totality that we can imagine. She writes that the "true essence [of finite things] eternally seeks the eternal and absolute form, which it would only find in the totality of all forms, i.e., at the end of all evolutions of the principle of form [*Formprinzip*][... T]he organic body, the most complete synthesis of form and essence, thinking and being, spirit and body, is its most similar copy" (II:405–406).

The contrast between the "principle of all forms" and the "totality of all forms" (or the "spirit of earth" and the "idea of the earth," or the "spirit of nature" and the "idea of nature," etc.) is between the underlying driving force, principle, and unifying single origin of all the entities in our world (or, in other words, the fundamental process that is ongoing in these entities) and the end-point of this process in a single, perfectly balanced and harmonious organism.

The relationship to the infinite/divine that Günderrode describes as part of human existence in "Story of a Brahmin" is a relationship to the first of these factors: to the infinite "spirit" of earth or nature. The idea of the earth, on the other hand—as explained in more detail below—is a projected end-state that human beings can work towards and begin to realize, especially through new forms of community.

There is a third term in this relationship: the "earth" itself. It is this term that Günderrode associates with the third and last aspect of being human described in "Story of a Brahmin": the animal. While spirituality depends on relationship to the infinite "life," "nature," or "earth-spirit" that exists in all things, the animal aspect of being human is the human being's "relation to (the) earth." In "Story of a Brahmin," the narrator states that "health, preservation, propagation are the highest for merely animal life," indicating that the animal aspect should be understood as a

straightforward orientation to natural and bodily processes. This kind of relationship differs from the altered orientation to these processes that is experienced in the relationship to the infinite, self-producing force that underlies and inhabits them (i.e., the "earth-spirit"). In other words, the animal "relation to earth" is qualitatively different to the spiritual relation to the "earth-spirit" or the "essence of the earth"—that is, the emotional and intuitive experience of connectedness to the principle of life that runs through natural phenomena.

In some respects, this model reflects ideas current in German philosophy at the time Günderrode was writing. For example, Novalis calls for a change in how human beings relate to the things of the world, including natural forms, that involves perceiving the single divine spirit within them (Novalis I:79; II:454 #93, 461 #112, 594 #316). In *Bruno*, Schelling describes a similar infinitude that can only manifest itself in finite forms, which are therefore necessarily incommensurate to it, but that reflect this infinity in the unfolding of the whole in infinite time (Schelling 151). And Fichte describes human beings as combining characteristics of plants, animals, and a specifically human trait of thought, spirituality, or consciousness (Fichte 12).

However, as we saw above, unlike these philosophers Günderrode explicitly separates what is specifically human in human existence from spirituality, and spirituality from consciousness and thought, as well as from morality. Being human means, essentially, being moral, and this has no connection to either "earth" or the "earth-spirit"/"the infinite, divine." Notably, Günderrode's model also de-emphasizes the "human" aspect of human existence within the trifold structure described above. The development of a higher, spiritual relationship to the spirit of the earth does not seem to require a human element or human relationships at all, but only a shift in how the animal relates to the earth or environment in which it is embedded. That

is, this relationship requires a transition from relating to the beings and processes of the world in terms of their function for the animal's survival and procreation, to a deeper connection with these beings and processes as reflecting an eternal life flowing through them all. Although it might be difficult to imagine how this would take place without a cognitive shift, at no point does Günderrode claim that it is through consciousness or human activity in particular that this shift takes place and a spiritual relationship develops. In fact, in places she explicitly contrasts the revelation of an individual's connection to the infinite with intellectual investigations, whether scientific or moral (I:49, 81–82, 309; see Kastinger Riley 110). Rather, as we saw in the first section of this paper, Günderrode claims that all manifestations of "life" in finite entities have the potential to increase the liveliness of the whole, and hence contribute to its development. Thus for Günderrode, while human beings can certainly contribute to a raised, enhanced, and more animated universe by living and by developing themselves, they do this in essentially the same way as any other being.

Despite this decentering of what is specifically human in human existence, Günderrode in fact views certain kinds of human relationships as an important part of the process of the development of the world towards its ideal, that is, towards the idea of the earth. In order to understand this, we must turn to Günderrode's idea of harmony and attempt to understand the role of this idea within her cosmology and her social thought.

#### **4. Community**

Several commentators have associated Günderrode's emphasis on relationship to the infinite with a turn inwards and away from social relationships (Bohrer "Identität" 79; Christmann 119;

Dormann 14, 240). In the first place, this overlooks the fact that the infinite, for Günderrode, is not a purely spiritual absolute, but the unfolding of nature or life itself, including in human beings. At worst, then, this would involve a turn to nature, understood in this new and deeper way, rather than a turn towards an ineffable absolute—i.e., it would not be a form of “self-annihilation” or “disintegration in infinite space” (Nees 264; Borchardt and Wright 254). This turn to nature might perhaps be conceived of as similar to the turn that Bohrer attributes to Günderrode’s friend Clemens Brentano, which he criticizes for its basis in a view of personal experiences as incommunicable and social interactions as necessarily insincere (*Der romantische Brief*, 120).

There is some support for this interpretation of Günderrode’s writing. On his way to understanding the true nature of existence, the narrator of “Story of a Brahmin” tells his listener that “I wrested myself away from all relations with human beings” (I:306), after which he enjoyed a contemplative life in the countryside. His interlocutor complains that this self-isolation, if adopted by many people, would destroy “human society” (*menschliche Gesellschaft*), and the narrator (Almor) agrees: “I can, Lubar interrupted the storyteller, call this step good as little as I can suicide. Both are equally detrimental to human society, and what would become of [society], if everyone were allowed to kill themselves for it? / Young friend! responded Almor, not everyone can and will do what I did. It does not befit everyone” (I:307).

However, Almor does not remain in isolation for long, and the claims that Günderrode advocates a turn inward overlooks the new kinds of relationships and communities that she indicates are fostered by an altered relationship to the infinite. In “Story of a Brahmin,” the narrator explains that an old Brahmin “taught me how a community exists between human



beings in whom the inner sense has arisen and the worldspirit" (I:312). It would be possible to interpret this statement as claiming that an individual who has become aware of the inner connections between things enjoys a sense of communion with the infinite, without necessarily entering into any kind of community with other human beings. However, the context suggests that Günderrode means that a community exists between those who understand these inner connections as well as between these individuals and what the Brahmin calls the worldspirit. The "wrest[ing] away from all relations with human beings" is only a stage the narrator passes through on his way to finding a true community—one that not only includes a closer relationship to the nonhuman world and the spirit that lies behind it, but also involves especially close connections with other human beings.

For example, the narrator of "Story of a Brahmin" describes a community of priests into whose secrets he must be initiated in order to understand his intimations of infinitude (I:312). One of these priests has such a close connection to the Brahmin that he senses when the old man is dying. The narrator is, furthermore, telling his story to an interlocutor, Lubar, who is himself seeking initiation. And, at the end of the piece, the narrator has found his own community: he lives with the Brahmin's daughter, accompanied by palm trees, a stream, and the immortal spirit of the Brahmin.

In other pieces, too, Günderrode indicates that an ideal community is formed: (1) on the basis of a relation to the infinite/divine; (2) outside the institutions of civil society or the state (see Licher "Du mußt Dich" 30; *Mein Leben* 49); and (3) outside a built-up environment, in proximity to the natural world. For instance, in *Muhammad, the Prophet of Mecca*, Muhammad is banished from Mecca with his followers, during which period he appears as a wise and

resourceful leader, guided by his faith, which he shares with his companions. After their conquest of Mecca and return to the city, his tyrannical impulses emerge, and some of the most sympathetic characters in the piece lament his domination of other people (I:193, 197; see Licher, *Mein Leben* 187–88). In other words, the ideal community created in the wilderness is lost when Muhammad founds a state with himself as its ruler.

In keeping with Günderrode's normative restraint, she presents Muhammad's autocracy towards the end of the play as both wrongful and antithetical to the good community. As noted above, Günderrode denies that the world is improved by mastering others, whether human or nonhuman. The earth cannot be cultivated through the action of some parts on others, but must develop organically through the natural self-development of all its individual parts.

However, that does not mean that this self-development must occur in isolation. Günderrode is clear that friendship, love, and connections to others—including nonhuman others—are important to the emergence of a harmonious, organic whole. In the first place, this can involve sharing knowledge of the divine that underlies the everyday world we experience. In *Prophet of Mecca*, Muhammad claims he will "inject" or "inoculate" the earth with a branch from "the tree of divine blessedness" (I:157), while the narrator of "Story of a Brahmin" describes the Brahmin as "a true priest, a mediator between God and human beings" (I:312). But this is not the most fundamental way that relationships between human beings can contribute to the development of the earth towards its organic end-point, as we can see if we return to Günderrode's basic metaphysical picture.

In the first section of this paper, we saw that, on Günderrode's model, entities are formed of constellations of elements that break apart as creatures die (or objects break down) and are

then reformed into new entities. We also saw that, in this process, the elements, and through them the whole, become more animated, more alive. In "Idea of the Earth," Günderrode claims that this process is driven by the dual factors of "struggle" (*Kampf*) or "exercise" (*Übung*) and "laws of affinity" (*Gesezen der Verwandtschaft [sic]*):

[W]hen a person is dead, their mixture returns to the substance of the earth, but that within them that we called force, activity, or rather that of its materials in which the more active pole predominated, reverts to that which is related to it in the earth; the coarser elements likewise seek what is similar to them according to laws of affinity. But these elements have become different, after they have been forced up to life in the organism, than they were before they entered into this organic connection. They have become livelier, and increase the earth's life in returning to the earth, like two who have hardened their strength in long struggle are stronger when the struggle has ended than they were before. The elements are like this, for they are alive, and the living force strengthens itself in every exercise. (I:447; cf.I:359)

The first factor, struggle, explains how the elements become more animated over time—i.e., through their exercise, including in struggle with each other. The second factor, affinity—which Günderrode elsewhere refers to as "harmony" (*Harmonie*) and "something homogenous" (*etwas Homogenes*) (I:33, 34)—explains not only the law according to which elements combine to form new entities, but also love, friendship, and other feelings of connection that human beings experience with each other (and, perhaps, towards other beings). In the philosophical

dialogue "The Manes," the teacher explains: "As surely as all harmonious things are connected in a certain way, whether they are visible or invisible, just as surely we, too, are connected with *that part* of the spiritual world that harmonizes with us" (I:33).

The teacher adds that this connection is not destroyed by the death of individuals: "The death of a person connected with me in this way does not cancel out this connection. Death is a chemical process, a separation of forces, but no annihilator: it does not tear the bond between me and similar souls" (I:33). On this account, the characteristics of a dead person that harmonize with those of someone living continue to live on in the latter. This point underlies the deathbed scene in "Story of a Brahmin," where the Brahmin anticipates continued life in Almor's life with his daughter: "Live with her and tell her of me; I would like to live on in her love. You, Almor, farewell; I will not die for you because my spirit continues to have an effect in you" (I:313). This also explains why Almor's community includes not just himself and the Brahmin's daughter, but also the dead Brahmin himself: the Brahmin has become part of them, surviving in the ways he has influenced them. Importantly, this model also applies to nonhuman entities, even inanimate beings, as well as humans. If a human being experiences a sense of affinity with nonhuman aspects of the world, this can be explained on the same basis as feelings of affinity between human beings: as an indication of harmony or homogeneity between them. For this reason, it is not surprising that Almor's description of his community at the end of "Story of a Brahmin" includes not only the Brahmin's daughter and the dead Brahmin, but also a tree and a spring.

Günderrode's claim that the dead live on in the living is meant literally: The ability to experience real connections with the dead, as well as nonhuman and even inanimate things ("those things whose life resembles death"), is underpinned by the metaphysical picture outlined

above. According to Günderrode, after a person's death, "their mixture returns to the substance of the earth," after which it is divided up and re-assembled, together with other elements, to form new entities. Thus, in "Letters," the writer, saddened by the thought of being separated from Eusebio by death, claims that "I consoled myself that our befriended elements, obeying the laws of attraction, would find each other even in infinite space and join with each other" (I:358; see also I:68).

A major implication of this model is that the "homogenous" elements in two people, or two beings of any kind, that harmonize with each other can join together after death according to the "laws of affinity" to create new, more harmonious forms of life (see, e.g., I:325). Consequently, the constitution of new entities out of the same elements according to laws of affinity should gradually contribute to a more harmonious world—and potentially to the harmonious, organic unity that Günderrode calls "the realized idea of the earth" (I:449). We saw above that, in "Story of a Brahmin," the narrator claims that: "a time of perfection must come, when each being will be harmonious with itself and with the others, when they flow into each other and become one[.]" The cultivation of friendships and other forms of connection to (human and nonhuman) others, as well as self-cultivation in order to be more capable of forming these connections, are the means by which the beings of the world can gradually come together into a harmonious whole.

Günderrode's ideal for community is based on connections between individuals, and includes connections with aspects of the world beyond the human—that is, both nonhuman entities and the universal principle, spirit, force or life that is manifested in every finite being. This form of community cannot be imposed on people or things, for example through laws or

institutions, educational systems, or methods for controlling, shaping or cultivating the natural world. This community is instead bound by feelings of affinity, friendship, and love, and, if it grows, can only do so organically, as individuals develop to have more in common with each other. This growth of an ideal community—or of several, for there is no reason why these harmonies could not develop in several places at once and then converge (see Licher "Du mußt Dich" 31)—creates a gradual movement towards a more harmonious whole. In other words, by working on oneself in this kind of community of connected beings, that is, in developing together a deeper, shared connection to each other and to the infinite, productive "spirit of nature" that runs through all things, individuals cultivate themselves and thereby the earth, whose elements they are made of. In so doing, they not only increase their own "liveliness," "animation" or "spirit," but begin to join together into the interconnected parts of the ultimate organism that would constitute the final order of the earth.

### **Concluding Remarks on Günderrode and Political Ecology**

Despite its strong commitments to literary and philosophical tropes of its day, Günderrode's account of human nature and of communities that include both humans and the nonhuman is not as outlandish or outdated as it might at first appear. We accept the principle of the conservation of mass, as well as the idea that human beings, like everything else, are made up of smaller elements—chemical and mineral substances and, beyond these, atoms, which are themselves comprised of protons, neutrons and electrons carrying an electric charge. And we know that, upon our death, just like with the destruction of other living and non-living entities, these elements will decompose and go on to participate in different forms of life. What we find hard to

accept is the idea that mind, awareness, experience, soul, or life—whatever we want to call our sense of ourselves as unique living beings—attaches to these atoms, sub-atomic particles, forces, or, in Günderrode's terminology, "elements."

But this is precisely where Günderrode's account provides resources for rethinking our relationship, not just to the nonhuman things of the world, but to each other and, ultimately, ourselves. In the first place, this is due to Günderrode's denial that consciousness is something different to or outside the material world, or even a special and unique force within the material world that attaches to human beings alone. On Günderrode's account, consciousness is present from the beginning in all parts of nature, in the elements that make up our world. As she writes in "Idea of the Earth," "the life-principle in the elements is immortal; it requires only contact and connection again like before and new life blossoms with all the blooms that we call thought and sensation and organism and body and soul." On Günderrode's account, human beings are unique not because they are conscious, but because of their specific orientation to "humanity" in their social and moral lives—and, she is clear, this is not sufficient for the good life. Günderrode's account reveals the human overcommitment to the idea that we are special because of our consciousness, as well as to the idea that this gives us some kind of unique role in the world, even—historically in Europe and many forms of Christianity—a special relationship to the divine.

However, it must be admitted that, even if we can imagine consciousness in nonhuman animals, and, perhaps, plants, most of us find it a stretch to imagine consciousness attaching to inorganic objects such as rocks, and certainly to atoms or forces. Nonetheless, if we focus on the importance of changing how we imagine the things around (and within) us, rather than on the

attempt to develop an ironclad metaphysics, Günderrode's rethinking of the relationship between humanity and consciousness or spirituality, as well as of the role of humans as moral beings and *vis-à-vis* the development of our world, provides resources for efforts to rethink our relationship to nature. This may be particularly valuable in light of the current environmental crisis. The roots of the ongoing human-caused devastation of our world in an attitude of human exceptionalism and human domination is often noted in the environmental literature (e.g., Dallmayr 1; Pattberg 1, 6), as is the need for new ways of conceiving of ourselves in relation to the nonhuman (Dallmayr 2; Schulz 133). As Jane Bennett remarks in *Vibrant Matter*, "the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies" (ix). In light of the serious, ongoing consequences of viewing non-living things as inert and unfeeling, a metaphysics that rejects this view is at least worth exploring.

Bennett views the task of her book, not as proving the agentic or conscious properties of matter, but as a partly rhetorical strategy for inducing a less destructive orientation to nature in human beings, a task that she describes as both ontological and political:

- (1) [T]o paint a positive ontology of vibrant matter, which stretches received concepts of agency, action, and freedom sometimes to the breaking point; (2) to dissipate the ontological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic using arguments and other rhetorical means to induce in human bodies



an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality; and (3) to sketch a style of political analysis that can better account for the contributions of nonhuman actants. (x)

This is a task to which Günderrode's ontology, and the account of human sociality that she situates within it, can contribute. Günderrode's emphasis on the intrinsic value of all entities, including human beings, works against an instrumentalizing view of nature as well as against totalizing social or political discourses that attempt to improve the world through imposing certain ways of beings on (human and nonhuman) others. Together with the ideal of harmony, this provides both a goal that we can work towards and a valuable modesty about the extent to which we can bring it about.

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<sup>i</sup> Translations are the author's, unless stated otherwise. Translations of "Idea of the Earth" and "Idea of Nature" are from Gjesdal and Nassar. Translations of "Letters of Two Friends," "Story of a Brahmin," "The true idea of materialism..." and "The Manes" are from Ezekiel, *Philosophical Fragments*. Page numbers are not yet available for the English translations; references are given to the German in Günderrode's collected works.

<sup>ii</sup> In "Letters of Two Friends," the passage reads: "This perfect sameness of inner essence and form cannot, it seems to me, be achieved in a multiplicity of forms. The essence of the earth is only one, therefore its form may also only be one" (I:360).

<sup>iii</sup> In "Letters of Two Friends," the phrase "is needed to resolve the task of such an equilibrium of essence and form" is replaced with "is needed to bring about this equilibrium" (I:361).

<sup>iv</sup> This passage is omitted from "Letters of Two Friends."

<sup>v</sup> There is not space here to explore the relationship between Günderrode's ideas of "civil society" and "human society," and Günderrode does not expand on her interpretation of these concepts. Günderrode was familiar with Kant's moral thought and these categories may map on to Kant's distinction between juridico-civil (*rechtlich-bürgerliche*) society and ethico-civil (*ethisch-bürgerliche*) or ethical (*ethische*) society (Kant I.6:94). Whether or not this is the case, Günderrode here marks a distinction between relationships between human beings that are

governed by different kinds of principles: on the one hand, rules or laws, perhaps like those in the institutions of the nation-state and, on the other, moral ideals of how individuals should behave towards each other.

<sup>vi</sup> Günderrode treats the term "nature" as roughly synonymous with "spirit of nature," i.e., not (like "earth") to describe our world of finite entities, but to refer to the infinite process that underlies it (i.e., like "spirit of earth" or "earth essence"). For example: in "Letters" the author writes that "infinite nature will always reveal itself anew in infinite time" (I:356; see also I:350, 355); in "Idea of the Earth," Günderrode claims that ordinary bodies are "a failed attempt by nature to produce that immortal ideal body" (I:448); in "Story of a Brahmin," the Brahmin says as he is dying: "I would like to [...] breathe my spirit silently back into silent nature" (I:313); and in "Idea of Nature," Günderrode writes: "Nature is an eternal activity, a self producing product, an ever enduring becoming" (II:398).