

## **Knowledge, faith, and ambiguity: Hope in the work of Novalis and Karoline von Günderrode**

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This chapter considers ideas about hope in the work of two Romantic writers who have historically been notorious for their morbid outlooks. Romanticism has often been associated with sickness, suicide, and yearning for death, and the lives and writings of Novalis (1772–1801) and Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806) contributed to this reputation. Both died young: Novalis of tuberculosis aged 29, and Günderrode by suicide aged 26. Both left writings that lend themselves to interpretation as death-desiring, death-oriented, even suicidal: famously, Novalis' *Hymnen an die Nacht* (Hymns to the Night), written following a vision on the grave of his fiancée Sophie von Kuhn, includes a section titled “Longing for Death,” while Günderrode published several pieces expressing desire for reunion with a lover after death or featuring suicidal protagonists. This, as Nicholas Saul puts it, can make their deaths seem “the logical consequence of their Romantic convictions and an almost superfluous proof of the dangerous, allegedly inherent affinity of Romanticism and death” (Saul 2006, 581).

Both Novalis and Günderrode had friends and followers who worked to construct a mythos of mysticism, otherworldliness, and morbidity around their lives and works. Novalis' friend Ludwig Tieck described Novalis as having a “pious longing for death” after Sophie's death, which “planted the kernel of death in him” (Novalis 1960–1975 [hereafter “NS”], 4:554). Letters between Günderrode's friends immediately following her death already described her character and suicide in mystifying, fatalistic terms (Wolf [1979] 1997, 295–297). Her friend Bettina Brentano-von Arnim, in particular, took steps to make sure the story

was well-known, writing a “Report on Günderrode’s Suicide” for Goethe’s mother, Katharina Elisabeth Goethe (Brentano-von Arnim [1808/1839] 1990) and describing the events in person to Goethe in 1810 (Wolf [1979] 1997, 53). Goethe, who was instrumental in establishing the identification of Romanticism with sickness and death, visited the site of Günderrode’s suicide in 1814, writing: “They showed me the place on the Rhine, in a willow thicket, where Miss Günderrode took her life. The narration of this catastrophe on the very site, by people who were nearby and had taken part in it, gave me that unpleasant feeling that a tragic location always arouses” (cited in Wolf [1979] 1997, 53–54; my translation).

Despite these reputations, in Novalis’ case more recent scholarship recognizes the optimism in his work, especially the importance of his revaluation of death to provide grounds for hope in a world full of suffering and loss (e.g., Beiser 2021; Saul 2006). In Günderrode’s case, too, scholarship has begun to explore the ways that Günderrode reimagined death, as well as her responses to philosophical debates on identity, metaphysics, politics, aesthetics, and friendship (e.g., Battersby 1995; Nassar 2021).

Apart from fascination in uncovering ideas about hope in work that overtly valorizes death, there are further reasons for considering Novalis and Günderrode together. Both are “philosophical poets” (Licher 1996, 398) in the Romantic tradition, steeped in the thought of Kant and Fichte. Günderrode was an avid reader of Novalis: she wrote two poems explicitly responding to his work (Günderrode 1990–1991 [hereafter “SW”], 1:382, 391) and excerpted his writings in her notebooks. His influence is evident in her writings; however, she departed from his thought in significant ways. This paper draws out some of these differences by placing their work alongside each other, in doing so showing how they each responded to Kant’s framing of the question of hope in relation to the limitations of reason.

Novalis and Günderrode provide grounds for a number of different kinds of hope. The

first section of this chapter briefly sketches the most obvious of these: the hope for union with loved ones after death. In this section, I also explain G nderrode’s unique metaphysics, which underlies her understanding of life, death, and love, and entails significant differences from Novalis in most areas of her thought. Section 2 explores what I am calling “epistemological hope”: the hope for knowledge or awareness of things beyond the limitations of reason. Section 3 considers G nderrode’s “moral hope,” that is, her ethical thought, which she contrasts to that of Kant. Section 4 considers “ontological hope”: the hope for improvement in the world as a whole, including the nonhuman world. Finally, section 5, on “political hope,” examines G nderrode’s and Novalis’ hopes for the betterment of society. In both cases, these are closely connected to their ontological hopes. Novalis famously advocated a “raising,” “Romanticization” or “cultivation” (*Bildung*) of society and nature, which would be effected by human beings. For G nderrode, by contrast, this kind of improvement is largely beyond human control (although human beings can contribute to it), leaving us in a state of hopeful ambiguity regarding the possibility of the eventual realization of an “immortal ideal” for the earth and the establishment of ideal human communities.

### 1 Hope for union with loved ones after death

For Novalis and G nderrode, the question of whether we can expect to one day be reunited with our loved ones was concrete and urgent. Both experienced considerable loss: in short succession, Novalis lost his fianc e and two of his younger brothers (his detailed study of Kant stems from this period), while G nderrode’s father died when she was five years old and she was predeceased by three younger sisters, two of whom she nursed through their fatal illnesses. Her letters show her despair during these events and her search for consolation in philosophy. It is not surprising, therefore, that both Novalis and G nderrode articulated

longing for union with loved ones after death.

In the *Hymns*, Novalis presents a consoling vision of unity with an infinite night, mediated by a dead lover: “tender beloved—sweet sun of the night,—now I wake—for I am yours and mine—you heralded the living night to me ... feed on my body with spiritual fervor so I mix myself airily, more deeply with you, and then the wedding night lasts forever” (NS 1:133; see also 135; translations of Novalis’ writings are my own). This imagery follows Christian traditions that understand immortality, not as the survival of the individual in paradise, but as posthumous union with the divine. Novalis imagines this as a merging in which selfhood—one’s own and that of one’s loved ones—is dissolved in a divine whole, sometimes depicted as an ocean:

Whose heart does not ... skip delightedly, when ... then that powerful feeling, for which speech has no other name than love and lust, expands in him, like a powerful, all-dissolving mist, and he sinks quivering with sweet fear in the dark, alluring womb of nature, the poor personality is consumed in the plunging waves of delight, and nothing remains but a burning point of immeasurable procreativity, a swallowing eddy in the great ocean! (NS 1:104)

Novalis’ understanding of death as union with loved ones through dissolution together in an infinite whole inverts the value of individuality and consciousness, on the one hand, and the loss of these, on the other (NS 1:88–89; NS 2:416–418). For Novalis, death is the end of the self as an individual, conscious being, but that self is part of a greater whole and continues to exist as part of the latter. Thus, he writes: “Death is a self-overcoming” (NS 2:414 #11).

Günderrode also uses oceanic imagery to present a longed-for union with lovers (or sometimes other individual beings in general; see SW 1:52) and the divine after death. For instance, in “Die Pilger” (The Pilgrims) she uses a traditional Christian metaphor of the pilgrim, representing the life of the human being, traveling back to the sea, representing God (SW 1:106–108). Her poem “Piedro” also uses images of the ocean to portray immersion in an absolute whole, in this case imagined as a compensatory consummation of union with a dead lover (SW 1:103–105).

Scholars have tended to assume that Günderrode’s images of merging with the ocean represent annihilation and, therefore, that she longs for death, conceived as oblivion (e.g., Dormann 2004, 204; Heimerl 2003, 408; Licher 1996, 287). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Ezekiel 2016b), unlike Novalis, Günderrode maintains that we continue to exist after death as experiencing selves, if not as individuals in the sense that we usually see ourselves. However, this only becomes evident when Günderrode’s ideas about death are considered in light of her metaphysics.

The clearest exposition of Günderrode’s metaphysics is found in an epistolary exchange titled “Briefe zweier Freunde” (Letters of Two Friends) and the unpublished essay “Idee der Erde” (Idea of the Earth). The latter forms part of Günderrode’s preparatory work for the “Letters” and in places the two texts use identical wording. In these pieces, Günderrode explains that every entity in the world is composed of indestructible “elements” (*Elemente*), which temporarily combine to form objects. At death (or the destruction of inanimate objects), the elements are decomposed, return to the whole, and become available for recombination in new forms:

[L]ife is only the product of the deepest contact and attraction of the elements; I know

that all its blossoms and leaves, which we call thoughts and sensations, must wither when that contact is dissolved, and that individual life is given up to the law of mortality. But as certain as this is to me, just as much is something else beyond all doubt for me: the immortality of life in the whole. For this whole is just life, it surges up and down in its parts—the elements—and whatever has returned to it through dissolution (which we sometimes call death) mingles with it according to laws of affinity, i.e., the similar mingles with what is similar to it. (Günderrode forthcoming).

Thus, individuals obtain a kind of immortality through their continued existence as part of the whole: “the particular survives immortally in the All” (ibid.). As I explain in section 2, Günderrode indicates that, despite the “withering” of “thoughts and sensations,” these immortal elements are not just physical atoms or forces, but possess a degree of awareness.

Above, Günderrode described the mechanism by which the elements are joined together to form new entities as following “laws of affinity.” She expands on this claim elsewhere, explaining the force that pulls elements together as operating through harmony, attraction, or love (SW 1:33–34, 325). In “Letters,” the character known as the Friend tells their correspondent, Eusebio,<sup>1</sup> that their hopes are pinned on the possibility of this kind of union after death:

[The idea] that you could be lost to me was the most painful of thoughts. I said<sup>2</sup> that

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<sup>1</sup> These characters are likely based on Günderrode and her lover, Georg Friedrich Creuzer: they referred to themselves by these names in their correspondence. Creuzer’s views on hope are discussed by Allen Speight in his contribution to this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Possibly “hesitated” or “was apprehensive” (*zagte*) rather than “said” (*sagte*) (SW 1:358).

your I and mine should be dissolved in the ancient primordial matter of the world; then 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. So hope and doubt surged up and down in my soul. (Günderrode forthcoming)

Rather than equating death with oblivion, Günderrode identifies her metaphysical model and the place of individual entities within it to an idea of reincarnation. The Friend writes that “the idea of the Indians of the transmigration of souls corresponds to this opinion” (Günderrode forthcoming). In another work, “Geschichte eines Braminen” (Story of a Brahmin), a Brahmin explains to the narrator

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 leading to ever higher perfection awaits souls; how eventually, through mysterious ways, they will all unite with the primal force from which they emanated and will become one with it, and still at the same time remain themselves, and thus unite the divinity and universality of the creator with the individuality of the creature. (Günderrode forthcoming)

I revisit this idea of a “primal force” in section 4. But first, let us examine in more detail how Günderrode conceptualized the possibility of a posthumous union with loved ones *of which we are aware*. This reveals a difference in how Novalis and Günderrode responded to Kant’s limitation of human cognition to phenomena—and its implications for both subjectivity and our relationship to the rest of the world.

## 2 Epistemological hope

Kant's Copernican revolution, which limited human cognition to knowledge of phenomena, also ruled out direct knowledge of the self, or subject, through internal reflection. Instead, Kant presents us with the transcendental unity of apperception: "the 'I' as an 'empty form' (a pure logical necessity ...) that 'accompanies my representations,'" as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy describe it ([1978] 1988, 30). In response to this elimination of a substantive self, Novalis and G nderrode, like other of Kant's successors, imagined non-cognitive possibilities for knowledge of both the subject and the noumenal world in general. Both accepted the Kantian limitation of discursive, conceptual knowledge to a realm of appearances, but sought to overcome this limitation through feeling, intuition, and other practices.

Much has been written about Novalis' efforts to complement the discursive reason of Kantian cognition, "scholasticism," or science with other forms of knowledge (e.g., Kneller 2021, 32; Mill n-Zaibert 2008; Nassar 2013, 44f.). Rather than describing this again here, in this section I provide an exposition of G nderrode's thought that highlights its differences to Novalis' account.

Writing to a friend in 1801, G nderrode responds to the Kantian rejection of knowledge of the thing-in-itself, including the subject, expressing her hope that this will one day change:

[S]ometimes I have no opinion of myself at all, my self-observations are so fluctuating. In general it's totally incomprehensible to me that we have no consciousness other than perception of effects, never of causes. All other knowledge seems to me ... not worthy



of knowledge, as long as I don't know the cause of the knowledge, my faculty of knowledge. To me, this ignorance is the most unbearable lack, the greatest contradiction. And I think if we really ever enter the borders of a second life, then one of our first inner phenomena would have to be that our consciousness would grow larger and clearer; for it would be unbearable to drag this limitation into a second life. (Günderrode forthcoming)

Much of Günderrode's work attempts to conceptualize and convey the possibility of a consciousness that is "larger and clearer" than that which attends individuated human existence. For example, her prose poem "Ein apokaliptisches Fragment" (An Apocalyptic Fragment) describes an experience of awareness of the world beyond the self, as the self is merged with that world: "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 to 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" (Günderrode forthcoming).

This poetic passage (and parallel passages elsewhere in Günderrode's writing; see, e.g., SW 1:439) needs explication. Is Günderrode describing a kind of awareness that we can experience while alive, or something that occurs after death? I suggest she is doing both, i.e., that she presents two possible forms of non-cognitive knowledge or, rather, awareness.<sup>3</sup> The first involves hints or intimations of the world beyond the limitations of human reason. This is similar to the glimpses of such a world described by Novalis, for example in his reference to sleep, opium dreams, and the vision on the grave of his beloved in *Hymns* (NS 1:133–134). As with Novalis, this form of expanded knowledge or intimation is possible while we are

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of these forms of consciousness, see Ezekiel forthcoming a.

alive.

Günderrode provides literary descriptions of this form of knowledge in many pieces, including “An Apocalyptic Fragment” and “Story of a Brahmin,” but she provides a clearer account in her dialogue “Die Manen” (The Manes). Here, she describes direct, immediate knowledge of something behind everyday phenomena through a faculty she calls “inner sense,” the “spiritual eye,” and “the deepest and finest organ of the soul.” She writes: “Forces that are only spiritual cannot be revealed to our outer senses; they do not work upon us through our eyes and ears, but through the only organ by which a connection with them is possible: through the inner sense—on this they work immediately” (Günderrode forthcoming).

This model is clearly influenced by Hemsterhuis’ idea of the “moral organ,” and likely also by Schleiermacher and others.<sup>4</sup> However, there are also indications that Günderrode is here responding to Kant’s dismissive view of certain accounts of inner sense, especially that of Swedenborg. Swedenborg’s “inner sense” is not the same as the “inner sense” of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which Kant defines as “inner intuition” or “the intuiting we do of ourselves and of our inner state” (Kant [1781/1787] 1996, A33/B49–50; see also A48–49/B66–72, A107). In his 1766 *Träume eines Geistersehers* (Dreams of a Spirit-Seer), Kant specifically addresses Swedenborg’s conception of the inner sense as a means of communicating with spirits.<sup>5</sup> Kant’s description of Swedenborg’s claims in this piece include numerous points that correspond with points in “The Manes.” These include the

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<sup>4</sup> On the influence of these and others’ ideas of the inner sense on Günderrode’s work, see Dormann 2004.

<sup>5</sup> There is debate about the extent to which Kant was criticizing Swedenborg and the extent to which his mockery masked a degree of acceptance of or identification with some of Swedenborg’s ideas (see Grier 2002, 1–2).

possibility of an “immediate inner connection” with the spirit world; the idea that everyone has the capacity to connect with the spirit world but only those whose inward “spiritual sense” has awakened can do so; the statement that individuals connect with the spirits of those with whom they have something in common; the claim that this connection endures through death; and the possibility of an effect by spirits—including spirits of the dead—on the living. Unfortunately, there is not space here for a more detailed account of these similarities. However, the number of correspondences, and G nderrode’s framing of her account as a response to “doubters and vilifiers” of the inner sense, suggest that G nderrode may have read *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* and have been concerned to refute the kind of objections to these ideas that emerge in Kant’s text.

The second form of non-cognitive knowledge that G nderrode offers is something that occurs after death. It is in relation to this latter form of knowledge that G nderrode’s account diverges sharply from that of Novalis. This is because G nderrode’s conceptualization of post-mortem forms of experience is supported by her unique and strange metaphysics, which present death as a radical transformation of the self. On G nderrode’s model, not only are the “elements” that constitute us as individuals recycled after our death, but these elements continue to carry aspects of our consciousness and our selfhood. Interestingly, this entails that our consciousness and self are not indivisible unities, but can be divided up and conjoined with the selves and consciousnesses of others.

This interpretation of a second form of non-cognitive knowledge in G nderrode is supported by works, such as “An Apocalyptic Fragment” and “Ein Traum” (A Dream), in which G nderrode describes awareness after death. In these pieces, she uses terminology that distinguishes this kind of awareness from discursive forms of cognition, i.e., the limited form of human cognition that she complains about in relation to Kant’s work. In “An Apocalyptic

Fragment” the narrator describes a “numbing” that occurs upon death, followed by “muffled” and “tangled” experiences characterized by the absence of memory (SW 1:53). In “A Dream,” the sleeping “spirits of antiquity” are described as “stupefied” and hearing only a “confused roaring” of the events of the world (SW 1:439).

As portrayed by G nderrode, these non-conscious forms of awareness are experienced by a self that is broader than, and very different to, the individuated human being. This means that, while G nderrode accepts the Kantian limitation of human cognition, she does not accept that we will be subject to this limitation forever. Other forms of existence are possible and, with them, other forms of knowledge and experience. This is quite different than for Novalis, whose hoped-for union with others after death does not include awareness (see NS 2:104 #1; Mill n-Zaibert 2008; section 1, above).

### 3 Moral hope

G nderrode’s acknowledgement of the cognitive limits of human beings and her claims for the possibility of non-cognitive awareness has implications for her moral thought. In explicit contrast to Kant’s moral philosophy, she strongly distinguishes our moral obligations to other human beings from our relationship to the divine, insisting on a firm division between religion and morality.

The clearest account of G nderrode’s moral thought is found in “Story of a Brahmin,” which describes the *Bildung* of Almor, a man of mixed European and Asian heritage. As a child, Almor participates in religious ceremonies but has no inward relationship to religion; he subsequently travels to Europe to take up a life of business, enlivened with frivolous pleasures (SW 1:303–304). After some years, Almor experiences a moral awakening (SW 1:304–305). However, he eventually becomes disillusioned with morality and travels to

Persia, where he lives as a hermit. Here, he learns to listen to his “inner voice,” which reveals to him the presence of something divine running through the world we experience: he describes this as “an infinite force, an eternal life, that is everything that is, that was, and will become” (Günderrode forthcoming).

Importantly, this period of solitary contemplation is only a further stage in Almor’s spiritual development. The final stage occurs when he travels to India and is instructed by a Brahmin regarding the divine nature of this “infinite force,” and regarding the “community [that] exists between human beings in whom the inner sense has arisen and the world-spirit” (Günderrode forthcoming). “Story of a Brahmin” ends with Almor settled happily in a tiny community comprising himself, the Brahmin’s daughter, and (interestingly) the spirit of the now-deceased Brahmin.

Günderrode specifically equates Almor’s moral awakening (a relatively early stage in Almor’s development) with Kant’s moral thought. Almor narrates how, at this point in his life:

The moral world ... was unveiled to me: I saw a community of spirits, a realm of effect and countereffect, an invisible harmony, a purpose to human striving, and a true good. I was lost to my professional work .... For before I determined an area in which to be active, I wanted to know: who was I? what should I be? what position befitted me? and which laws ruled in the realm whose citizen I wanted to be? (Günderrode forthcoming)

Almor continues: “I found that wisdom and virtue, the objects of my highest striving, could be attained by mastering sensuality [and] the passions, and by the exercise of my forces in noble and useful activity. If I considered myself a citizen of the moral realm, I found myself

obliged to promote its welfare just like my own” (ibid.). Lastly, Almor describes how he “stepped ... into the free activity of a thinking being that sets its own purpose for its conduct; out of limited personal self-interest into the great fraternity of all human beings for the good of all. The merely mechanical and animal life that I had escaped lay behind me like a musty dungeon” (ibid.).

The terminology identifies the above account of Almor’s moral period with Kantian moral philosophy. Furthermore, Almor’s motivation for moving on from this orientation to life is the conflict it engenders between reason and nature, or between different parts of Almor’s personality (SW 1:305–306)—a problem Kant’s contemporaries complained about in relation to his moral thought (e.g., Schiller [1793] 2005, 152).

This discovery motivates Almor’s withdrawal from society for a period of self-reflection. This is how he comes to realize that his relationship to other human beings is not the most important factor in human existence: “I discovered aptitudes within me that these finite relations would no longer satisfy” (Günderrode forthcoming). Almor determines that human beings can live in three ways, corresponding to three aspects of their nature: animal (satisfaction of physical needs and desires), human (relationships with other human beings, including morality), and spiritual (religion).<sup>6</sup> He explains:

Just like health, preservation, propagation are the highest for merely animal life, humanity ... is the highest for human beings as human beings; as such they have humankind as their object. Their pure relationship to it, morality, consists in itself,

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<sup>6</sup> These three forms also correspond to the different levels of Almor’s *Bildung*, beginning with his life as a businessman enjoying physical pleasures, through his moral awakening, to his religious or spiritual development.

satisfies itself, and needs no other motive nor prospects than itself and humankind.

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 .... But the spirit seeks the spiritual, its thirst searches for the source of life, it seeks its forces, which find no proportion on earth, something unearthly, an infinite object of contemplation for its spiritual eye, and it finds all this in religion.

(Günderrode forthcoming)

The above quotation includes criticism of Kant's use of the practical postulates of freedom, God, and immortality (or at least the latter two) in his moral thought. According to Günderrode, by integrating religious ideas in his moral system, Kant fails to maintain the distinction between morality and religion, thus compromising both. On the other hand, Günderrode does not argue for rejecting other elements of Kantian morality, such as the categorical imperative or the idea of the moral world; rather, she relativizes these (like any other moral or ethical models) to the social and political side of human life and insists this be kept distinct from religion.

Günderrode does not articulate an alternative to Kantian morality—she is concerned with the formation of spiritual communities (like the one featured at the end of “Story of a Brahmin”) rather than with creating a moral system to govern relations between members of this (or other kinds of) community. However, she does express a few general ideas about “virtue” (*Tugend*), including a hope for what it can accomplish. In “Letters,” the Friend claims that “what the great thoughts of truth, justice, virtue, love and beauty claim ... is the enduring, the eternal,” and adds: “are not all virtues and excellences approximations to that highest perfect condition[?]” (Günderrode forthcoming; see Ezekiel forthcoming b; Nassar

2021). To understand what G nderrode means by this, we must return to her metaphysics, including her idea of the “infinite force” or “eternal life” which, according to Almor “is at the same time the ground of all things and the things themselves, the condition and the conditioned, the creator and the creature” (G nderrode forthcoming).

#### 4 Ontological hope

Almor’s description of the “infinite force” that underlies the processes and entities of nature is echoed elsewhere in G nderrode’s writings, such as “Letters” and “Idea” (SW 1:359–361, 446–449). It is also reflected in work by other thinkers of the time, including Novalis, who presented natural (and human) history as the emergence or self-differentiation of a single, animating force, often conceived as progressing towards a future recuperation of unity. In Novalis’ version of this model, the multifarious entities that constitute the universe have emerged from an original whole, which continues to animate them; these entities are currently passing through a period of separation and individuation as they move towards reunification. The latter, however, will be a “higher” form of unity than the original because, instead of an undifferentiated mass, it is an articulated unity of harmoniously related parts: “Before abstraction everything is one, but one like chaos; after abstraction everything is unified again, but this unification is a free interconnection of independent, self-determined beings” (NS 2:454–456 #94).

From the above claim, Novalis derives an ethical imperative to promote the realization of this new unity, famously stating that human beings “are on a mission: our vocation is the cultivation of the earth” (NS 2:426 #32). Novalis views the reclamation of unity as the specific task of human beings, who are conscious and who all possess, at least in germ, the artistic creativity or “genius” necessary to overcome the fragmentation that



characterizes our experience of the world, especially the fragmentation between subject and object (NS 2:420 #22, 466 #118, 524–526 #13; see Kneller 2021; Nassar 2013, 42f.).

Günderrode, too, views the establishment of a harmonious, articulated unity as a desirable outcome for the universe as a whole. However, she differs from Novalis both in decentering human activity from this process and in her emphasis on the uncertainty of the achievability of this outcome.

Like Novalis, Günderrode claims that human beings should work to increase the extent to which the world manifests the unity-in-multiplicity that characterizes “infinite spirit”—or (as she calls it in “Letters” and “Idea”) the “idea of the earth.” In her account of virtue, sketched at the end of “Letters” and “Idea,” she defines truth, justice, and other virtues as various ways of promoting unity: “Truth is only the expression of what is altogether the same as itself .... Justice is striving, in isolation from each other, to be the same. Beauty is the outer expression of equilibrium achieved with itself. Love is the reconciliation of personhood with the All” (Günderrode forthcoming). On this basis, she claims that human virtues contribute to establishing the harmonious, articulated whole that she claims is the goal of the universe: “whatever is the same as itself, and externally and internally bears the expression of this harmonious being in itself .... that is precisely that perfect, immortal and unchangeable thing” (Günderrode forthcoming).<sup>7</sup>

However, unlike most of her contemporaries, including Novalis, for Günderrode human beings do not have a special role to play in this realization of the “idea of the earth.” Rather, they participate in this process in the same way as every other finite entity. That is, like the latter, human beings help the whole to develop through individuation and the interaction of these individual parts. Günderrode claims that it is through individuation that matter becomes

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Günderrode’s account of virtue, see Nassar 2021.

more animated and, eventually, conscious: the elements that constitute the beings of the universe “become different, after they have been forced up to life ... they have become livelier, like two who have trained in long struggle are stronger when it has ended than before they struggled” (Günderrode forthcoming).<sup>8</sup> These more developed forms are then reabsorbed by the whole and the process is repeated, so that “each mortal gives back to the earth a raised, more developed elemental life, which it cultivates further in ascending forms” (ibid.). In this way, the earth as a whole, “by assimilating ever more developed elements, must become ever more perfect and universal” (ibid.).

On Günderrode’s account, virtuous behaviors—whether truth-telling, justice, artistic creation, or love—are simply human expressions of, or the human way of experiencing, processes that are also ongoing at other levels. Thus, while human beings can certainly contribute to increasing the harmony and cohesiveness of the universe, and while they may do so in their own, particular way, this is also something that occurs at lower or higher levels of what Almor calls the “infinite series of migrations leading to ever higher perfection.”

For Günderrode, the desired final state for “the earth” would comprise the full interpenetration or correspondence of spirit and matter, soul and body, form and essence, force and appearance which, she maintains, are currently unbalanced, out of proportion, and incompletely joined (SW 2:256). Over time, the repeated dissolution and reemergence of finite forms may be able to address this balance, if the universe is ever able to integrate these forms into a single, coherent body. Günderrode calls this ideal final body an “organism”:

This perfect sameness of inner essence and form cannot, it seems to me, be achieved in

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<sup>8</sup> For more on Günderrode’s vitalism and the role of consciousness in her work, see Ezekiel [2020] 2022.

a multiplicity of forms. The essence of the earth is only one, therefore its form may also only be one, not various, and the earth would only attain its actual true being when it dissolved all its appearances in a collective organism, when spirit and body penetrated each other so that all body, all form would also at the same time be thought and soul, and all thought at the same time form and body, and a truly transfigured body, without lack or illness and immortal, and thus wholly different from what we call body or material, when we attribute to it transience, illness, inertia and deficiency, for this kind of body is, as it were, only a failed attempt to produce that immortal divine body. (Günderrode forthcoming)

The above explains the basis for Günderrode's ontological hope: that is, her hope for an eventual, fully harmonious integration of all the diverse beings of the universe into one, achieved partly through human activity and partly through processes going on everywhere in nature. If that happens, there will emerge "that perfect, immortal and unchangeable thing, that organism, that I consider the goal of nature, history and the times" (Günderrode forthcoming). However, Günderrode emphasizes that this is a hope, not a certainty:

I do not know whether the earth will be 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 solar system is needed to bring about this equilibrium; perhaps even this does not suffice for it and it is a task for the entire universe. (Günderrode forthcoming)

Thus, in her ontological hopes Günderrode emphasizes human limitations, but also the

participation of human beings in processes beyond themselves which may, perhaps, result in the outcome she considers desirable.

### 5 Political hope

Novalis' political ideals, like those of Günderrode, were informed by his metaphysical commitments.<sup>9</sup> In his essay “Christenheit oder Europa” (Christianity or Europe), Novalis describes the same process that characterizes the emergence and development of the world as a whole as occurring in human history. In this alternative or mythologized history, the European middle ages are characterized by cultural unity, represented by the Catholic Church (NS 3:507–509). With the advent of Protestantism, along with industrialization, this unity fragmented and lost cohesion; on the other hand, Europe enjoyed developments in industry, science, trade, and political arrangements (NS 3:509–512). The next stage, Novalis suggests, would be a reunited community that combined the developments of Enlightenment and the industrial age with the cultural cohesiveness of the middle ages: a “new golden age” or a “great age of reconciliation” (NS 3:519). The unifying principle under which the nations of Europe (and the world) must unite, according to Novalis, is religion—specifically, a revised form of Christianity: “Only religion can reawaken Europe and safeguard its people, and, with new magnificence, install Christianity visibly on earth in its old peacemaking office” (NS 3:523; see also 524).

Novalis ends “Christianity or Europe” with the assurance that the golden age of recuperated unity will certainly come: “Just be patient: it will, it must come, the holy age of

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<sup>9</sup> At the time, it was common to conceive of natural and human history as continuous and driven by the same principles (see, e.g., Herder 1784 1:20–27, 4:246; Nees von Esenbeck 1841, vol. 1, 80–81; for more examples and discussion, see Ezekiel [2020] 2022).

eternal peace. ... Until then ... remain true unto death to the true, eternal faith” (NS 3:524). In this text, Novalis slips from hope for regaining unity to faith in such an outcome. In this regard, he differs from Kant, whose political writings recognize the uncertainty of conclusions drawn from history regarding its progress (IaG, 08:17, 26–30; ZeF 08:368; see Goldman 2012; Kleingeld 2012, 173f.). This also separates Novalis from Günderröde, who, like Kant, emphasizes the incompleteness of our knowledge of history and, correspondingly, insists on the essential ambiguity of the future. This ambiguity is reflected in Günderröde’s “ontological hope,” discussed in the previous section, as well as in her political hopes.

“Christianity or Europe” was written in 1799 but not published until 1826, twenty years after Günderröde died. Nonetheless, Günderröde’s “Letters” includes an account of human cultural, religious, and social development that parallels Novalis’ account in several respects. The “Letters” associate the current age, especially Protestantism, with excessive individuation and a loss of social, political and cultural cohesiveness: “we are isolated from nature by restricted circumstances, from true enjoyment of life by even more restricted concepts, from all large-scale activity by our forms of government” (Günderröde forthcoming). By contrast, the past, especially the ancient world and the middle ages, is recognized as a site of inspiration (SW 1:352).<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Novalis, however, Günderröde does not advocate a revitalization of

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<sup>10</sup> To an extent, this is a conventional Enlightenment and Romantic valorization of the artistic accomplishments of the ancient world. For example, cf. Friedrich Schlegel’s valorization of the ancient world in “Rede über die Mythologie” (Speech on Mythology), which Günderröde quoted in her notebooks. Here, Schlegel argues that modern literature lacks the greatness of ancient poetry, and attributes this to a lack of cohesive culture in modern times (KFSA 2:312). This claim motivates his call for a new mythology to unite and revitalize modern literature (KFSA 2:319–320).

Christianity that can spread across and unify the world; she rejects the idea that the solution to the current cultural and political stagnation should involve a rejuvenation of Europe's past. Instead, she emphasizes the value of expanding one's creative and spiritual life by absorbing or assimilating ideas from outside one's own culture. In "Letters," the Friend wonders: "Perhaps now we have achieved a level of cultivation [*Bildungsstufe*] where our highest and worthiest aspiration should aim at understanding the great masters of the ancient world, fertilizing our meager life with the wealth and fullness of their ideas" (Günderrode forthcoming). However, Eusebio rejects this idea: "The great masters of the ancient world are certainly there to be read and understood, but ... those masters *were there* [at that specific time and place], and that is why they shall not be born again; infinite nature will always reveal itself anew in infinite time" (ibid.). Instead, Eusebio sends the Friend some texts on Hinduism, which he claims will reveal the "one thing, a holy thing" that produces itself in the things of the phenomenal world (ibid.). In other words, Günderrode's notion of *Bildung* requires engagement not primarily with one's own past but with other cultures, demanding an expansion beyond the limitations of one's own history.

The notion that human beings should cultivate themselves individually, as nations, and as a species was widespread at the time Günderrode was writing: it was espoused by Kant, Herder, Schiller, Fichte, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, among others. The idea was often coopted by those with colonial ambitions, who claimed that some (generally European) cultures were at a higher level of "cultivation" than others.<sup>11</sup> A moment of this appears in Novalis' "Christianity or Europe," where he argues that, while

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<sup>11</sup> In her paper in this collection, Susan-Judith Hoffmann argues that Humboldt's model of *Bildung* opposes colonial models. On this topic, including efforts to counter these colonialist claims, see also Muthu 2003.

other (in this case, European) countries are at war, “the German educates himself [*sich bildet*] to ... participate in a higher epoch of culture” (NS 3:518f.). Novalis’ idea that certain countries will lead others to higher levels of cultivation, and his claim that it will be a revitalized Christianity that unifies the peoples of the world, are potentially susceptible to colonialist interpretations.

Günderrode’s work runs counter to these colonialist tendencies.<sup>12</sup> Rather than spreading outward from a “new Jerusalem” (NS 3:524), for Günderrode, the ideal community arises spontaneously among small groups of individuals united in shared contemplation of “the ground of all things.” These communities may perhaps grow and join together to form larger ones; however, Günderrode does not indicate that this is inevitable, likely, or desirable (see Ezekiel forthcoming b). In fact, despite calling for the establishment of new social forms that join their members in religious life (such as the one that features at the end of “Story of a Brahmin”), Günderrode seems to have been skeptical about the success or desirability of political movements that attempt to spread, including those established on the basis of a new religion. An example is her play *Mahomed, der Prophet von Mekka* (Muhammad, the Prophet of Mecca), which casts Islam as the requisite “new religion” (see Ezekiel 2016a). Here, the harmony and benevolence of the new Islamic community becomes increasingly oppressive as it gains political success (see SW 1:110–200; Ezekiel [2020] 2022).

A further difference between the political thought of Novalis and Günderrode lies in their attitudes to revolution. In “Christianity or Europe,” Novalis argues against revolution in

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to claim, however, that Günderrode avoided the European tendency to appropriate ideas from Asia and create idealized and problematic stereotypes. In particular, her syncretistic approach to religion tends to gloss over genuine differences and, as a result, fails to engage Asian, North African and Middle Eastern cultures on their own terms.

general and the French Revolution in particular as the object of political hope. His argument is based on the conviction that revolutions establish only temporary political forms, which he contrasts with the enduring forms established by religion:

Don't revolutionaries seem like Sisyphus? He's just managed to balance on the peak and already the mighty burden is rolling back down the other side. It will never stay up unless an attraction towards heaven maintains it hovering on the heights. ... Join [the State] to the heights of heaven through higher longing, give it a connection to the cosmos, then it will contain an inexhaustible mechanism" (NS 3:517–518).

By contrast, Günderrode is an advocate of political revolution (see Ezekiel [2020] 2022). Political change, and even peace, are not things that can or should be accomplished for all time; that, she claims, "is a peace of slackness, dying off" (Günderrode 2016, 234). Their results—even their happening at all—are also uncertain. This is indicated, for example, in her play *Udohla*, in which the hoped-for revolution fails to materialize (SW 1:203–231). Thus, Günderrode's attitude to political change retains an element of ambiguity. While we may hope for widescale change, we cannot guarantee that it will come, that it will last, or that it will have the effects we want. Instead, we can develop our own inward relationship to the divine and attempt to find (perhaps only a few) likeminded individuals with whom we can form a community—at least for a time.

### Concluding remarks

The work of Kant and Novalis is probably more familiar to the reader than that of Günderrode, whose work on hope I attempt to introduce here. I believe that the biggest



contribution Günderrode makes to post-Kantian thinking on this subject is her insistence on epistemological and political modesty. Despite her claim that it is possible to move beyond the Kantian limits of cognition, in practice she respects firm limits when it comes to making claims about the future or establishing political institutions or ethical rules. As a result, she calls on her readers to develop their own inner lives and relationships to people close to them, rather than trying to “scale up” ways of thinking or living in order to extend them to all human beings. Partly as a result, Günderrode’s thinking on hope and progress runs counter to colonialist tendencies in European thought.

Throughout her writings, Günderrode steadfastly maintains the distinction between hope and expectation or faith, emphasizing the ambiguity essential to the former. This distinction is articulated explicitly in the “Letters” and “Idea” and appears in more literary form in her poems, plays, dialogues, and short stories. It is the guiding thread of her drama *Udohla*, in which the character Sino continues to hope for political change, even after the anticipated savior betrays him by refusing to lead the uprising Sino wants. This mingling of hope and uncertainty are presented beautifully in Sino’s closing words:

Your destiny, young friend, has been decided,  
But ours the distant future still conceals,  
The future that I will not live to witness,  
The rising that these eyes will never see.  
Deceived, I often thought I saw  
The purple seam of morning in the east, ...  
In that I erred, the day is not yet here.  
But you, oh friend, perhaps you will behold it,

And if it comes, youth, then remember me,  
And help to spring the people's heavy chains;  
And thus repay me for my stolen love.  
... Heaven will reveal through signs,  
When it is well-disposed to the great works.  
Until that time bear silently its will,  
And hope for the returning of the god. (SW 1:231; my translation)

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