

# Sincerity, Idealization and Writing with the Body

## Karoline von Günderrode and Her Reception

### 1. Introduction

In 1804, when asked by the aspiring writer Clemens Brentano why she had chosen to publish her work, Karoline von Günderrode wrote that she longed »mein Leben in einer bleibenden Form auszusprechen, in einer Gestalt, die würdig sei, zu den Vortreflichsten hinzutreten, sie zu grüssen und Gemeinschaft mit ihnen zu haben.«<sup>1</sup> In light of this kind of statement, it is perhaps not surprising if, despite some exceptions, much of the still relatively scant literature on Günderrode reads her works largely in terms of how they articulate and manifest Günderrode's desires, frustrations, and character, for the most part ignoring their imaginary, creative, and intellectual aspects. This interpretation of the author's works as biography is, in Günderrode's case, often accompanied by an interpretation of her biography, particularly her suicide, as literary work. This paper is not the first to question the conflation of Günderrode's life, death, and writing, but it is one of only a handful that aim to address the autopoietic element of Günderrode's work in a way that does not reduce her writings to biographical and psychological expressions, or Günderrode herself to an image – or a legend – encapsulated by her writings and her relationship to them. This paper argues that Günderrode's own position on what the self is has been largely neglected as a result of this conflation, and that taking this position into account changes how we understand Günderrode's articulations of self in her writings. Thus this paper has two goals: to address difficulties in articulating and even constituting oneself sincerely when one's efforts are unrecognized, belittled, censored, and forced to conform to the conventions of a society in which one is marginalized; and to unearth a neglected and potentially rich account of the modern self.

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1 Karoline von Günderrode, letter to Clemens Brentano, 10th June 1804, *Der Schatten eines Traumes. Gedichte, Prosa, Briefe, Zeugniß von Zeitgenossen*, ed. Christa Wolf, Munich 1997 (1979), p. 221.

## 2. Günderrode's Writing as Autobiography

The tendency to interpret Günderrode's work in terms of its relationship to the life and character of its author has both legitimacy, since it is borne out by many of Günderrode's own statements, and value, since it helps us understand some of the meanings of her work. However, the extreme emphasis on this form of interpretation in Günderrode's case is problematic for a number of reasons. In the first place, the exposition of Günderrode's writings on the basis of psychological and biographical factors fits a sexist mould of underplaying the creativity women as well as men use in producing literary and philosophical work, reducing women's statements to expressions of their life-experiences and emotional states, especially where these emotional states are understood as pathological. Thus we see Günderrode's works described as manifestations of her »otherworldly,« »mystical,« and morbid character, her feeling for nature, or of what is depicted as her uncomfortably conflicting character as both »masculine» and »feminine,» or as a spiritual being in a mundane world. For example, Christa Bürger claims Günderrode had »einer Seele, die nur die Dämmerung kennt» and that in her work she created a shadow-world, peopled with schemata, which she inhabited as a »Schatten unter Schatten.«<sup>2</sup> Others describe Günderrode as having »no worldly weight,« and as embodying »körperliche Schwache und geistige Starke, Weiblichkeit als Gegebenes und Männlichkeit als Erstrebtes.«<sup>3</sup> In particular, Günderrode's suicide,

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2 Christa Bürger, »Aber eine Sehnsucht war in mir, die ihren Gegenstand nicht kannte...«. Ein Versuch über Karoline von Günderrode, in: *Metis* 2 (1995), p. 36, 37. Rüdiger Görner similarly describes Günderrode as having a »Schattenexistenz.« Görner, *Das heimliche Ächzen des gemißhandelten Herzens...*«. Karoline von Günderrodes Grenzgang, in: *Grenzgänger. Dichter und Denker im Dazwischen*, Tübingen 1996, p. 79.

3 Ingeborg Drewitz, *Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806)*, in: *Letzte Tage. Sterbe-geschichten aus zwei Jahrtausenden*, ed. Hans Jürgen Schultz, Berlin 1983, p. 87 and Roswitha Burwick, *Liebe und Tod in Leben und Werk der Günderrode*, in: *German Studies Review* 3.2 (1980), p. 209. Katja Behrens claims that »So bedingungslos wie Karoline von Günderrode hat sich keine von den Frauen der Romantik dem Streit zwischen Phantasie und Wirklichkeit ausgesetzt« and that »Schüchtern aber unbeugsam, spröde aber leidenschaftlich, eine Kompromisslose und Zerrissene, hat die Günderrode einen Widerspruch gelebt.« Behrens, *Karoline von Günderrode*, in: *Frauen der Romantik: Porträts in Briefen*, Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig 1995, p. 11. See also Olivier Apert, *Préface to Karoline von Günderrode, Rouge vif: poésies complètes*, ed. and trans. Olivier Apert, Paris 1992, p. 7, 8,9; Leopold Hirschberg, *Das Märchen von der schönen Günderrode*, in: *Gesammelte Werke der Karoline von Günderrode*, vol. 1, ed. Leopold Hirschberg, Bern 1920–1922, new ed. Bern 1970, p. ix–xxii; Vilma Lober, *Karoline von*

sometimes in conjunction with her affairs with Friedrich Carl von Savigny and Friedrich Creuzer, is often treated as the key to understanding both her life and works, with the result that her life may be presented by her interpreters as tending towards this conclusion as a result of her nature, while her works have their mystical and death-oriented elements emphasized and their other concerns sidelined.<sup>4</sup>

Günderrode's work is also often described as attempting to reconcile »contradictory« elements of her character and living conditions, specifically those between »masculine« and »feminine« elements of her character, and between her desires for action and adventure or for recognition as a poet and the reality of her life as a woman at the turn of the 18th century.<sup>5</sup> In a much-quoted

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Günderrode, in *Die Frauen der Romantik im Urteil ihrer Zeit*, Diss. Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Erlangen 1947, p. 23–37.

- 4 For example, in his preface to the French translation of Günderrode's works, Apert claims that »La seule véritable question où la biographie de Karoline von Günderrode entre en jeu est celle du suicide,« Apert, *Rouge vif*, p. 12; in her account of Günderrode's life, Drewitz repeatedly uses versions of the phrase »den Tod in ihr« to describe Günderrode's character, culminating in the claim that »Der Tod hatte sie überwachsen wie der Krebs,« Drewitz, *Karoline von Günderrode*, p. 96, 97, 98, 100; Christa Bürger claims that Günderrode's »ganze formale Anstrengung scheint darauf gerichtet, einem Gedanken bleibende Gestalt, ihm die Form zu geben: dem Geheimnis der Verwandlung oder dem Tod in allen seinen Formen« and that »Günderrode tötet ihr Selbst im 'Werk'« Bürger, *Aber eine Sehnsucht*, p. 36, 42; Barbara Becker-Cantorino states that »Myth and death are at the center of the poetic works of Karoline von Günderrode,« that Günderrode had a »fascination, if not obsession, with death and sacrificial love« and that »Sie suchte ihre ästhetische Identität in der Darstellung der tragisch endenden Liebe der Frau, die auch als Liebende und als Dichterin in ihrem negativen Handlungsspielraum gefangen blieb[,]« Barbara Becker-Cantorino, *The »New Mythology«: Myth and Death in Karoline von Günderrode's Literary Work*, in: *Women and Death 3: Women's Representations of Death in German Culture since 1500*, ed. Clare Bielby and Anna Richards, Rochester, NY 2010, p. 51, 52 and *Karoline von Günderrode: Dichtung – Mythologie – Geschlecht*, in: *Schriftstellerinnen der Romantik: Epoche, Werke, Wirkung*, Munich 2000, p. 225. See also Marjanne E. Goozé, *The Seduction of Don Juan: Karoline von Günderrode's Romantic Rendering of a Classic Story*, in: *The Enlightenment and Its Legacy: Studies in German Literature in Honor of Helga Slessarev*, ed. Sara Friedrichsmeyer and Barbara Becker-Cantorino, Bonn 1991, p. 120.
- 5 For example, Becker-Cantorino claims that Günderrode's »Selbstverständnis und ihre Wünsche als Frau konnte sie in ihrer Zeit nur in der Sprache der Männer formulieren. Günderrode hat die Diskrepanz von erstrebter Autonomie und realer Gebundenheit leidvoll erfahren und produktiv in künstlerisches Schaffen umgesetzt, als Steigerung uhrer kreativen Sensibilität[,]« Becker-Cantorino, *Dichter – Mythologie – Geschlecht*, p. 204; Behrens claims that »So bedingungslos wie Karoline von Günderrode hat sich keine von den Frauen der Romantik dem Streit zwischen Phantasie und Wirklichkeit ausgesetzt[,]« Behrens, *Karoline von Günderrode*, p. 11; and Goozé states that »Karo-

letter, Günderrode herself claimed to be beset by a struggle between »masculine« characteristics, which thirsted for war, glory, and accomplishments, and her »feminine« nature:

Warum ward ich kein Mann! ich habe keinen Sinn für weibliche Tugenden, für Weiberglückseligkeit. Nur das wilde Grose, Glänzende gefällt mir. Es ist ein unseliges aber unverbesserliches Misverhältniss in meiner Seele; und es wird und muß so bleiben, denn ich bin ein Weib, und habe Begierden wie ein Mann, ohne Männerkraft. Darum bin ich so wechselnd, und so uneins mit mir.<sup>6</sup>

In early texts on Günderrode, including those by contemporaries, the so-called contradictions that supposedly underlay her writings were seen as problematic for the artistic merit of her work. For example, Clemens Brentano wrote to Günderrode that »Das einzige, was man der ganzen Sammlung Böses vorwerfen könnte, wäre, daß sie zwischen dem Männlichen und Weiblichen schwebt[.]«<sup>7</sup> The fact that Günderrode's work did not fit ideas of the time about women's writing was clearly difficult for critics and contemporaries to swallow, and affected the reception of her work.

Since around 1980, the understanding of Günderrode's writings as attempts to deal with the »contradictions« of her character and situation has allowed Günderrode to figure as a feminist prototype, a woman struggling to create and

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line von Günderrode's life and work are defined by irreconcilable conflicts: her desire to be loved and accepted conflicted with her passion for writing; her financial situation undermined her social standing; her longing for action was thwarted, as she saw it, by her femaleness[.]« Goozé, *Seduction of Don Juan*, p. 419. See also Burwick, *Leben und Tod*, p. 210, 222; Görner, *Das »heimliche Ächzen«*, p. 73, 77; Dagmar von Hoff, S. Friedrichsmeyer and P. Herminhouse, *Aspects of Censorship in the Work of Karoline von Günderrode*, in: *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist studies and German culture* 11 (1995), p. 101; Christian Schärf, *Artistische Ironie und Fremdheit der Seele. Zur ästhetischen Disposition in der Frühromantik bei Friedrich Schlegel und Karoline von Günderrode*, in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 72.3 (1998), p. 455, 460.

6 Günderrode, letter to Gunda Brentano, Aug 29 1801, *Schatten eines Traumes*, p. 160.

7 Clemens Brentano, letter to Günderrode, 2 June 1804, *Schatten eines Traumes*, 218. For discussions of reviews of Günderrode's work that mention this apparent conflation of gendered styles and subjects, see Norgard Kohlhaagen, *Karoline von Günderrode in ihrer Zeit*, in: »Sie schreiben wie ein Mann, Madame!« *Schriftstellerinnen aus zwei Jahrhunderten*, Munich 2001, p. 17; Lucia Maria Licher, »Man kann nicht zweien Herren zugleich dienen.« *Poesie und bürgerliche Existenz um 1800. Am Beispiel Karoline von Günderrodes und ihrer Umwelt*, in: *Aurora* 59 (1999), p. 86; Lober, *Karoline von Günderrode*, p. 28, 29–30.

articulate a new form of selfhood beyond the gender roles of her times.<sup>8</sup> This is valuable work, but it only reflects one aspect of G nderrode's writings and, more problematically, as Helga Dormann has pointed out, continues to view them primarily in terms of their psychological and biographical significance, and even as resulting from a pathology, now understood as conditioned by an oppressive social situation.<sup>9</sup> As in earlier interpretations, G nderrode's suicide tends to figure as a working-out of her character that is also visible in her writings.<sup>10</sup>

What are we to make of the claims that G nderrode's work reflects an orientation towards death and/or her own lack of reconciliation with herself and her social situation? It is true that many of G nderrode's poems and dramas are heroic tragedies, although we should note that many are not: her work also includes potential tragedies that have ambiguous or optimistic ends, comedies, satires, hymns, and metaphysical and ethical reflections. However, even if she had written entirely on the topics of heroic death and tragic love, assassinations, and the transience of human existence, such themes have typically been major – and indeed, high status<sup>11</sup> – subjects of mainstream literature. G nderrode, like many writers, used dramatic events from history and mythology, both classical and in G nderrode's case Eastern, as frameworks for her literary efforts and to communicate ideas. For example, as Stephanie Hilger has pointed out, G nderrode's play »Mohammed, the Prophet of Mecca« uses a fictionalized life of Mohammed to respond to plays on Mohammed by Voltaire and Goethe as well as as an analogy for the Reformation, and to explore themes of human freedom, human nature, the origins of religion, and the nature of

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8 Texts which consider this possibility include Karen F. Daubert, Karoline von G nderrode's »Der Gefangene und der S nger«: New Voices in Romanticism's Desire for Cultural Transcendence, in: *New German Review* 8 (1992), p. 1–17; Gisela Dischner, Die Guenderrode, in: Bettine von Arnim: Eine weibliche Sozialbiographie aus dem 19. Jahrhundert, Berlin 1977, p. 61–148; Drewitz, Karoline von G nderrode; Elke Frederiksen, Die Frau als Autorin zur Zeit der romantik-weiblichen literarischen Tradition, in: *Gestaltet und Gestaltet: Frauen in der deutschen Literatur*, ed. Marianne Burkhard, Amsterdam, 1980, p. 83–108; Lorely French, »Meine beiden Ichs«: Confrontations with Language and Self in Letters by Early Nineteenth-Century Women, in: *Women in German Yearbook* 5 (1989), p. 73–89.

9 Dormann, Die Karoline von G nderrode-Forschung 1945–1995. Ein Bericht, in: *Athenaeum* 6 (1996), p. 234.

10 See, for example, Becker-Cantorino, The »New Mythology«, p. 51, 52.

11 This may partly explain why at the time G nderrode was writing, women were not supposed to treat these topics, but to stick to discussing everyday matters and writing charming prose and verse.

knowledge. In »Udohla« Günderrode investigates ethics, moral relativism, revolution, and the origins and fates of civilizations. Even works such as »Ein apokalyptisches Fragment,« »Die Manes,« »Die malabarische Witwen,« »Ariadne auf Naxos,« and »Ein Traum,« which have a central concern with death, are not just fascinated with death, but attempt to articulate a philosophical position on metaphysics and the implications of death for the individual.

Even if we accept that a personal or even pathological element underlies a focus on themes of heroic death and tragic love in Günderrode's work, the use of one's own experiences and desires to inform one's work need not negate their intellectual or aesthetic value. For example, Günderrode often foregrounds the conflict between the passive roles granted women in a patriarchal society and their need and desire for action. Recent literature addresses this theme in Günderrode's writings, but tends to construe this as an attempt to respond to the situation of women particularly, or even more specifically as an attempt to cope with or escape her own circumstances. For example, according to Roswitha Burwick, »Was ihr in der Realität versagt war, blieb in der Poesie erlaubt[.]«<sup>12</sup> Günderrode's literary and philosophical efforts may indeed have been partly motivated by escapism: for example, she wrote to a friend in 1801 that »Vor einiger Zeit gelang es mir mich in eine schöne erhabne Phantasie Welt zu schwingen, in Ossians halbdunkle Zauberwelt[.]«<sup>13</sup> But this does not mean that the work itself is merely escapist fantasy. Focussing exclusively on the compensatory aspects of Günderrode's writing misses the ways in which she used her work to respond to questions in mainstream philosophy and literature. Günderrode's circumstances may have informed her perspective on questions of agency, freedom, determinism, power, and social constraint, motivated her to write, and encouraged her to use female protagonists; however, she articulates responses to these questions that are just as universally

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12 Burwick, *Liebe und Tod*, p. 211–212. Similarly, Bürger claims that »In ihrer kleinen Wohnung [...] lebt sie in Tagträumen[.]« Bürger, *Aber eine Sehnsucht*, p. 26; Görner states »Sie empfand und schrieb, wo die Wirklichkeit zu träumen begann und der Traum dabei war, Wirklichkeit zu werden,« Görner, *Das heimliche Ächzen*, p. 73, see also 74. See also Martha B. Helfer, *Gender studies and Romanticism*, in: *The Literature of German Romanticism*, ed. Dennis Mahoney, Rochester 2004, p. 229–249; Lucia Maria Licher, »Du mußt Dich in eine entferntere Empfindung versetzen.« *Strategien interkultureller Annäherung im Werk Karoline von Günderrodes (1780–1806)*, in: *Der weibliche multikulturelle Blick. Ergebnisse eines Symposiums*, ed. Hannelore Scholz and Brita Baume with Penka Angelova and others, Berlin 1995, p. 21–36; Schärf, *Artistische Ironie*, p. 347.

13 Günderrode, letter to Gunda Brentano, 21 October 1801, *Schatten eines Traumes*, p. 163.

relevant as those framed by contemporaries such as Fichte, Schelling, Novalis, and others.

In short, the emphasis on attempting to retrieve »die Günderrode« through biographical and psychological interpretations of her work has led to a particular reading of both Günderrode and her work as death-oriented, mystical, and incorporating fatal conflicts. This tendency has de-emphasized other aspects of Günderrode's work and obscured the literary and, especially, philosophical merits of her writings as well as the extent to which she contributed, and saw herself as contributing, to an intellectual tradition.

### 3. Authorial Production

This paper takes seriously both the notion that writing can serve as a form of self-construction and evidence that Günderrode used her writing as a means of self-creation, but it attempts to avoid reducing her writing to this function. Writing herself is not the only thing Günderrode used her work to do, nor is it, in my opinion, the most interesting. In the rest of this paper, I hope to separate the conflation of author and authorial production that has pervaded the literature, in the process beginning to retrieve Günderrode's own conceptions of selfhood and of writing the self.

In suggesting that Günderrode's writings played a limited role in her enactment of self, I am concerned in particular to avoid basing our understanding of the historical Günderrode or her writings on her suicide, which has often been treated both as if it defined Günderrode's selfhood almost entirely and as itself a form of literature. For example, Hoff, Friedrichsmeyer and Herminghouse state that Günderrode »crossed herself out, just as one might do with a text to make it unreadable,« and Alice Kuzniar writes of Günderrode's suicide that »first her body is written upon. She has her doctor mark on her bosom the location of her heart, and she carries a dagger with her at all times. She then makes her body write.«<sup>14</sup> These claims not only seem to make too much of what is, in the end, a metaphorical connection between writing and suicide, but also construe Günderrode's death, which marks an end to agency and self, as her ultimate act of self-assertion and self-creation. In other words, such

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14 Hoff, Friedrichsmeyer and Herminghouse, *Aspects of Censorship*, p. 108 and Alice Kuzniar, *Labor Pains: Romantic Theories of Creativity and Gender*, in: »The Spirit of Poesy«: *Essays on Jewish and German Literature and Thought in Honor of Géza von Molnár*, ed. Richard Block and Peter Fenves, Evanston 2000, p. 85. See also Burwick, *Liebe und Tod*, p. 207.

claims privilege narrative self-assertion over the kind of self-assertion one can accomplish through sustaining the self in the world. Such an interpretation has two things to be said in its favour: first, it is compatible with Romantic principles of novelization,<sup>15</sup> and second, it is plausible that suicide can be an act of defiance of the options that one is offered by society, and hence an act of self-assertion where other possibilities for self-assertion are not available. The problem with this interpretation is that it exaggerates the correspondences between the historical G nderrode, her literary self-constructions, her work, and her suicide, with consequences that I have described.

Statements such as those quoted above are not isolated, but belong to a tradition of interpreting G nderrode as conflating her life with her literary and philosophical commitments that began while she was still alive. In a letter from November, 1805, Savigny, concerned about what he considers G nderrode's exaggerated attachment to Creuzer, writes that »Dein Geschmack an Schriftstellern, zum Beispiel an Schiller, h ngt damit zusammen. Denn was ist das charakteristische an diesem, als der Effekt durch eine deklamatorische Sprache, welcher keine korrespondierende Tiefe der Empfindung zum Grund liegt?«<sup>16</sup> More recently, Steven Martinson has stated that »The fact is [...] that Karoline von G nderrode could not separate her vocation as a poet-writer from her social life,« while Nicholas Saul and others argue that G nderrode's philosophical position informed her suicide.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, while Savigny overtly links G nderrode's overwrought affair with Creuzer, which he attributes to a romanticization (in every sense) of reality, to insincerity, later writers take G nderrode's suicide as a sign of the sincerity with which she embraced her philosophical and literary constructions.<sup>18</sup> However, at the risk of stating the obvious, it is one thing to articulate a per-

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15 Nicholas Saul argues that »Romantic suicide« was a form of self-constitution that seemed to exert a particularly strong influence on women Romantics. He claims that »As a freely-willed shortening of the narrative thread of life [Romantic suicide] is the ultimate expression of individual sovereignty« and describes this form of suicide as »the paradoxical recuperation of the lost self in the act of self-destruction[.]« Saul, *Morbid? Suicide, Freedom, Human Dignity and the German Romantic Yearning for Death*, in: *Historical Reflections* 32.3 (2006) p. 591, see also p. 598.

16 Savigny, letter to G nderrode, 29th November 1805, *Schatten eines Traumes*, p. 205–206.

17 Martinson, »...aus dem Schiffbruch des irdischen Lebens«. *The Literature of Karoline von G nderrode and Early German Romantic and Idealist Philosophy*, in: *German Studies Review* 28.2 (2005), p. 315; see also Saul, *Morbid?*, p. 592.

18 See Eva Horn, *Trauer schreiben: Die Toten im Text der Goethezeit*, Munich 1998, p. 192.



spective on love, death, and metaphysics; it is another to commit oneself to this position, that is, to really believe it; and it is yet another to decide to kill oneself on the basis of these beliefs. Conflating these things, first, ignores other potential motivations for Günderrode's suicide, in the process sometimes implying, deliberately or not, that she is silly and overimaginative or has dabbled in things she should not have – or that she was a sacrifice to her art or to the »contradictions« that she sought to overcome in her art.<sup>19</sup> Second, as I have been stressing, this conflation obscures concerns in Günderrode's work that are not thought to have contributed to her suicide. Third, as I will discuss further below, it suggests that Günderrode's philosophy has destructive implications, which encourages a dismissal of this philosophy rather than its careful consideration.

To compound these problems, the claim that Günderrode's suicide was an alternative or last-ditch means of performing what she sought to articulate in her writing often involves the statement that »writing with her body« – that is, committing suicide – was the outcome of inadequacies of that literary and philosophical project. These inadequacies may be seen as resulting from Günderrode's weakness as a writer or from the difficulties of her situation. In particular, Günderrode's turn from writing to suicide is often attributed to what commentators see as her failure to create a coherent self in her works. So, for example, Christa Bürger writes that Günderrode »hat nur den Willen zur Form, aber nicht die Kraft, sich ihre eigene zu schaffen[.]«<sup>20</sup> This type of claim carries with it an implicit devaluation of Günderrode's skills, creativity, and control as a writer.<sup>21</sup> It may well be the case that Günderrode's suicide was

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19 Christa Wolf, Karoline von Günderrode – ein Entwurf, in: *Schatten eines Traumes*, p. 5–60; Lisette von Nees, letter to Susanne von Heyden, 1806, *Schatten eines Traumes*, p. 296.

20 Bürger, *Aber eine Sehnsucht*, p. 37. Becker-Cantorino asks »Was the project of an »aesthetic self,« today belabored repeatedly in recent articles on Günderrode, a meaningful way of life or did it lead to death?« Becker-Cantorino, *The 'New Mythology'*, p. 68, see also 52.

21 For example, Bürger follows the above quote with a dismissal of Günderrode's writing as having »obvious» failings, and claims that that »Die Gemeinschaft der Meister, in die Günderrode aufgenommen zu werden sich sehnt, steht im Zeichen der Trennung von Kunst und Leben« – something of which, according to Bürger (and others) Günderrode was not capable: »Aber da ist etwas, das sie von den romantischen Philosophen und Dichtern trennt, von Schelling wie von Novalis. Sie will mehr als dichten, sie will diese Sprache, nach der sie alle suchen, sein[.]« (*Aber eine Sehnsucht*, p. 37–38, 42, 27 respectively). Drewitz, too, follows her account of Günderrode's inevitable turn towards death with a negative appraisal of her work (Karoline von Günderrode, p. 96ff.).

partly motivated by frustration, feelings of repression, and depression at the often critical reception of her work and the refusal implied by this of her contemporaries to recognize her as a creative, intellectual individual. But this does not mean that her works were unsuccessful, either as articulations of selfhood or as literary and philosophical endeavours.

Furthermore, whether it makes sense to evaluate G nderrode's works as failing in creating a coherent self depends on whether G nderrode intended to create a self in her works at all, and if so, whether she intended to create a self that was coherent, that is, that unified various aspects of her personality into something relatively stable and enduring. In the last part of this paper I will show why it is unlikely that G nderrode had this aim. First, though, we should unravel one further conflation: between using writing to create an identity as an author and using writing to create alternative selves in one's characters.

Some commentators construe at least some of G nderrode's characters and narrators as alternative identities for herself.<sup>22</sup> A degree of identification with her characters by G nderrode is, of course, likely, and indeed in some cases seems quite self-evident. However, we should not overemphasize the extent to which G nderrode wrote herself in her characters or the significance of this fact, which risks performing another biographical and psychologizing interpretation of her work. Recognizing G nderrode as a creative thinker engaging with themes and problems in philosophy and literature means acknowledging the extent to which these characters are creations, based on figures in mythology or other works of literature, or embodiments of ideas that G nderrode wishes to communicate. For example, to whatever extent G nderrode may have identified with the misunderstood and trapped but autonomous Nerissa in her play »Udohla,« she uses this character, like the other characters in the play, to embody different attitudes to the possibility of freedom in a deterministic universe. And the fact that we can establish historical identities for Eusebio (Creuzer) and his interlocutor (G nderrode) in »Briefe zweier Freunde« should not obscure the metaphysical, political, ethical, or aesthetic claims that G nderrode articulates in these fragments. Focussing on the psychological insights into G nderrode herself that her characters might provide obscures the points she wanted to make.

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22 For example, B rger, *Aber eine Sehnsucht*, p. 26, 27; Xu Pei, *Karoline von G nderrode (1780–1806)*, in: *Frauenbilder der Romantik: Sophie Mereau-Brentano, Karoline von G nderrode, Annette von Droste-H lshoff, Clemens Brentano, Joseph von Eichendorff, Heinrich Heine*, D sseldorf 1997, p. 89.

Another possibility for responding to the question of what kind of self or selves Günderrode created in her work is that Günderrode attempted to use her writing to create an identity for herself as the author – that is, sometimes as a lover or prophet, but always as a poet and intellectual of a certain sort. This attempt is often construed as having failed, although the reasons given for this failure vary. As we have seen, some describe Günderrode's authorial identity as occupying an uncomfortable middle ground between irreconcilable opposites, with »masculine« and »feminine« styles and themes mixing unhappily, or her work is described as a synthesis of varied philosophical, religious, literary, and mythical ideas. As Dormann has pointed out, while the latter claim is true, it can be taken to imply that Günderrode's writings are an incoherent mishmash of copied ideas rather than potentially consistent and rich original considerations of philosophical questions or literary themes.<sup>23</sup> Once again, this fits a sexist model in which women are thought to ape the ideas of others – that is, men – rather than to produce original insights. In connection with this point, it is also worth noting that the reading of Günderrode's writings as narcissistic efforts to create an identity for herself that has a rightful place among philosophers and poets conforms to sexist ideas about women who write, not because they have something valuable to say, but because they want to be seen as intellectual and interesting.<sup>24</sup> This assessment may be based in part on the at least partly fictionalized characterization of Günderrode presented in Bettina von Arnim's work *Die Günderrode*, which arguably gives an impression of its title character as a narcissist, but it is also likely to be conditioned by the assumption that Günderrode's primary task in her writing is to create an identity for herself. It seems a particularly egregious injustice of the secondary literature to fixate on Günderrode's biography almost to the exclusion of any other consideration of her work, and then to state that this obsessive focus on her character reflects her own narcissism. Without this assump-

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23 Dormann, Karoline von Günderrode-Forschung, p. 232.

24 Clemens Brentano's question about why Günderrode would want to publish her work (her answer to which is noted at the start of this paper) fits this model, as do more recent statements about Günderrode's »Narzissnatur« or egoism by Burwick, Rüdiger Görner, Carola Hilmes, and Birgit Wägenbaur. Burwick, *Liebe und Tod*; Görner, *Das heimliche Ächzen*, p. 78; Hilmes, »Lieber-Widerhall« – Bettine von Arnim: Die »Gunderode« – An Autobiographical Dialogue, in: *Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift* 46.4 (1996), p. 424–438; Wägenbaur, »habe getaumelt in den Räumen des Aethers.« Karoline von Günderrodes ästhetische Identität, in: *Frauen: MitSprechen. MitSchreiben. Beiträge zur literatur- und sprachwissenschaftlichen Frauenforschung*, ed. Marianne Henn and Britta Hufeisen, Stuttgart 1997, p. 203–204.

tion, I see little basis for the claim that Günderrode's works reflect a narcissistic character; rather, in large part they are concerned with universal problems of identity, politics, ethics, religion, history, myth and metaphysics.

What the strategies of interpretation just described have in common is that they all present Günderrode's authorial identity as insincere: instead of writing works that fit her nature or that she has generated herself, she copies others, aims to create an effect rather than to express herself in an authentic way, or tries to be someone she is not and cannot be.

Other commentators lay the blame on society for what they see as Günderrode's failure to establish and maintain a coherent authorial identity in her writings: The failure of her contemporaries or subsequent readers to interpellate her as a poet and thinker, and/or the incompatibility of this identity with the roles that Günderrode, as a woman of her time, was expected to fill, meant this identity was unsustainable. For example, Hoff, Friedrichsmeyer and Herminhouse claim that Günderrode's suicide »could be seen as a consequence of the tension between her desire to express herself and the censorship to which she was subjected, and, in the final instance, of the impossibility of finding a form for compromise[.]«<sup>25</sup> This is an interesting and valuable point, highlighting the extent to which the self is not created in a vacuum, but depends on one's social environment and requires recognition. The question is, how can you create or sustain an authentic self in a society that treats you according to forms that do not fit?

I suggest that much recent literature on Günderrode, including literature that uses her as a case study in addressing this question, continues to view Günderrode through the lens of her society – as did Günderrode herself, in large part. For example, in a world in which women were not supposed to want travel, adventure, and intellectual recognition, Günderrode was under pressure to understand herself, not just as wanting different things than were permitted, but as actually incorporating a masculine soul, which could not be reconciled with a feminine nature which she also possessed. This struggle, and Günderrode's difficulty in reconciling herself to the realities of her situation, have been taken as decisive for both understanding Günderrode herself and for interpreting her work. Similarly, immediately after her suicide, friends and contemporaries began constructing the mythos of Günderrode as both inherently drawn to death and unable to separate herself from her writings.<sup>26</sup> Con-

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25 Hoff et al, *Aspects of Censorship*, p. 108. See also Wolf, *Entwurf*, p. 5–60.

26 For example, shortly after Günderrode's death her friend Lisette von Nees wrote to another friend, Susanne von Heyden, that »Sie fiel, ein Opfer der Zeit, mächtiger in ihr

temporaries as well as later commentators have addressed this contradictory, death-oriented, mystical and emotional woman, while ignoring Günderrode's creativity as a thinker and writer. Thus Günderrode's authorial self continues to be forced to fit a limiting mould that misses her identity as a potential interlocutor for the philosophical and literary traditions of her time.

#### 4. Günderrode's Model of the Self

Günderrode's letters are often taken to support an image of Günderrode as suffering from irreconcilable contradictions.<sup>27</sup> However, I suggest that rather than providing grounds for establishing the breakdown of Günderrode's identity, these letters are where we start to see how untenable it is to describe Günderrode as having failed to create a coherent self in her writings.

For example, Günderrode writes »Ich glaube mein Wesen ist ungewiß, voll flüchtiger Erscheinungen, die wechselnd kommen und gehen, und ohne dauernde, innige Wärme.«<sup>28</sup> Taken in isolation, this suggests an otherworldly, unstable self in danger of disappearing, in line with many characterizations of Günderrode and her work. However, when we examine her works, particularly her philosophical fragments, as well as other of her letters, we see that this description of herself fits her account of identity in general, and even more generally, her cosmology. In her philosophical fragment »Idee der Erde« she

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wirkender Ideen, frühzeitig schlaff gewordener sittlicher Grundsätze,« Schatten eines Traumes, 296. There are parallels here with the reception of other Romantic writers of the time, including Novalis, Hölderlin, and Kleist, whose friends and biographers idealized them as archetypal Romantics. However, while these figures and their works have, like Günderrode, been pathologized and read as inherently morbid, this treatment has not overshadowed their intellectual achievements to the same extent as it has for Günderrode; their works have received careful analysis independently of the question of their authors' biographies. Günderrode has not yet been the subject of such a rehabilitation, in part, I suggest, because what rehabilitation she has received has tended to reinscribe the interpretation of her as conflicted, alienated, and fated to die. In particular, this has been the case with Bettina von Arnim's *Die Günderrode* (1840), which is much more widely read than Günderrode's works themselves, and which, by novelizing Günderrode's correspondence with von Arnim, gives her life a telos in the form of her suicide and a motivation in the form of the conflicts she experienced as a woman in a man's world. A similar problem occurred following Christa Wolf's rehabilitation of Günderrode in 1979 with her publication of the latter's works, *Der Schatten eines Traumes*, its influential introduction, and her novel of the same year based on a fictional meeting between Günderrode and Kleist, *Kein Ort. Nirgends*, Berlin 1979.

27 Bürger, *Aber eine Sehnsucht*, p. 37; Schärf, *Aristische Ironie*, p. 343–344.

28 Günderrode, letter to Savigny, 26th February 1804, *Schatten eines Traumes*, 192.

presents the self as an aggregate of disparate elements that are altered, ideally for the better, through the life of an individual and, upon this individual's death, return to a universe which is itself a collection of such elements. Laws of attraction and similarity then determine new constellations of elements and new individuals.<sup>29</sup> The focus on metempsychosis as the merging and reconfiguration of identities also appears in »Ein apokalyptisches Fragment,« »Die malabarischen Witwen,« and other works.

Furthermore, Günderrode's description of this process in »Idee der Erde'' should not lead us to expect the elements combined in an individual necessarily to be harmonious; the establishment of harmonious relations between the elements progresses gradually through this process of recombination, which entails that at the outset, at least, this harmony does not exist. In fact, Günderrode states that it is by no means certain that the process will eventually result in harmony at all. This account of the self is an almost Nietzschean picture of an unstable aggregate of potentially conflicting elements, held together only provisionally. One implication is that Günderrode's claim that she is a conflicting and changeable self does not support the conclusion that her identity was unstable in a pathological or unusual way; this instability is a characteristic of all selves, according to Günderrode. In another frequently cited letter Günderrode writes,

es kommt mir sonderbar vor, daß ich zuhöre wie ich spreche und meine eignen Worte kommen mir fast fremder vor als fremde. Auch die wahrsten Briefe sind meiner Ansicht nach nur Leichen, sie bezeichnen ein ihnen einwohnend gewesenes Leben und ob sie gleich dem Lebendigen ähnlich sehen, so ist doch der Moment ihres Lebens schon dahin: deswegen kömmt es mir aber vor (wenn ich lese, was ich vor einiger Zeit geschrieben habe), als sähe ich mich im Sarg liegen und meine beiden Ichs starren sich ganz verwundert an.<sup>30</sup>

Karl Heinz Bohrer has argued plausibly that in this passage Günderrode does not just describe herself, but makes a general point about the impossibility of constructing a stable identity, revealing a conception of the self as momentary

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29 Günderrode, *Idee der Erde*, in: *Sämtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien*. Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe, ed. Walter Morgenthaler, Basel/Frankfurt am Main 1990–1991, p. 246–249.

30 Günderrode, letter to Clemens Brentano, probably 1803, *Schatten eines Traumes*, p. 211.

or »catastrophic.«<sup>31</sup> That Günderrode extended the above self-description to a general statement about identity is borne out by letters that make similar claims about other individuals or biographies. For example, she writes to Clemens »Wenn ich Sie daher in einem Moment verstehe, so kann ich von diesem nicht auf alle übrigen schliessen« and to Bettina »Ich hab immer Biographien mit eigner Freude gelesen, es ist mir dabei stets vorgekommen, als könne man keinen vollständigen Menschen erdichten, man findet immer nur eine Seite, die Kompliziertheit des menschlichen Daseins bleibt unerreicht und also unwahr, denn all Momente müssen immer den einen bestimmen oder begreiflich machen.«<sup>32</sup> What is particularly interesting is the connection of this point with Günderrode's philosophical works: taken in conjunction, these suggest that, according to Günderrode, not only are individuals aggregates of elements that dissolve and reassemble after death, but these changes to identity take place while still alive, from one moment to the next.

Günderrode's statement about her »beiden Ichs« has been taken by some writers as evidence of her alienation from herself and others, and/or her difficulties in expressing herself sincerely and constructing an authentic self. Thus Eva Horn claims that

Günderrode, das zeigt sich im Briefwechsel in aller Deutlichkeit, ist keine Spielerin mit der Sprache [...] – sie nimmt die Einsicht in die Abgestorbenheit der Schrift tödlich ernst. Wo Worte tote Buchstaben sind, Körper ohne Seele, wo sie nur noch die »Gewesenheit« ihres »ihnen einwohnenden Lebens« widerspiegeln, gibt es nur eine Möglichkeit, der Schrift ihre Wahrheit wiederzugeben: der toten Schrift den eigenen toten Körper als Referent unterzulegen.<sup>33</sup>

It is true that the corpse-and-tomb imagery of Günderrode's letter conveys a sense of sadness and strangeness, and we have plenty of evidence for Günderrode's unhappiness with herself. However, in light of the problems I have been outlining, I suggest that we should not focus on the alienation and inauthenticity that Günderrode possibly experienced to the exclusion of other possible significations for her claim. For example, in »Idee der Erde,« »Ein

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31 Bohrer, *Identität als Selbstverlust. Zum romantischen Subjektbegriff*, Merkur 38.4 (1984), p. 367–379. See also French, *Meine beiden Ichs*, p. 78; Schärf, *Artistische Ironie*, p. 347.

32 Günderrode, letter to Clemens Brentano, 19th May 1803 and letter to Bettina, *Schatten eines Traumes*, p. 211–212 and 229. See also letter to Gunda Brentano, 4th September 1801 and letter to Clemens Brentano, 19th May 1803, *Schatten eines Traumes*, p. 161 and 210–211.

33 Horn, *Trauer Schreiben*, p. 192.

apokalyptisches Fragment« and other works, Günderrode presents death as neither a state of non-consciousness nor a termination of individual existence, but as a process of casting off one identity and progressing to another. Whatever its biographical and psychological import, the »beiden Ichs« quote echoes this notion of reincarnation, suggesting that reincarnation takes place not only in death, but also continuously during life. This is an interesting and original idea that has not been carefully explored by the secondary literature on Günderrode.

This discussion suggests that the relevant question emerging regarding Günderrode's statements about identity is not whether or how she created a coherent self, through writing or otherwise – such a goal mistakes both the scope of her statements and what it is to be a self, on her account. Rather, the questions are more general: how are human beings to create articulations of self that are sincere despite their lack of completeness or durability, and how are they to use these selves to relate to others? The latter includes, minimally, the question of how to have these selves recognized and how to recognize others. A partial and provisional answer to the question of how »catastrophic« selves can be sincere emerges from Günderrode's work and its reception: we must recognize that a person manifests many identities, and we should not restrict ourselves or others to preconceived and static notions of what a person – or worse, a type or gender of person – is or should be. Perhaps Günderrode only made a beginning to the investigation of this matter, and certainly it was only one of the many concerns that she wrote about. What else is certain is that only some of her literary selves have been addressed by the literature, while others have been ignored or rejected.

We do not have to accept that Günderrode's portrayal of selfhood is either accurate or viable as a perspective from which to understand oneself and engage with others. However, I suggest that her model of the self warrants further investigation, not primarily in order to tell us about Günderrode and her literary constructions of self, but as a potentially fruitful contribution to the philosophy of subjectivity within both the post-Kantian and post-modern traditions. Most basically, if it is true that Günderrode's claims about the self are attempts to articulate a view of subjectivity – with implications for questions of agency, the possibility and nature of freedom in a physical universe, power, ethics, and eschatology – then we should take them as such. It matters to our interpretation of Günderrode's work whether these statements relate only to Günderrode herself or also to humanity in general, and as I hope this paper has shown, while these statements are the latter they have usually been



taken to be the former, with problematic results. When we begin to unravel the conflation between author and authorial production that pervades the literature on Günderrode, we can see that the idea of selfhood that she projects in her writing is a unique and original contribution to questions about the nature of the self.