

## Muhammad's dream in the desert\*

*Karoline von Günderrode*†

TRANSLATED BY *Anna Ezekiel*‡

In the midday blaze  
Where no cooling breeze  
i Refreshes the desert sand,  
Where, hot, kissed only by the simoom,<sup>1</sup>  
A grey crag greets the clouds,  
There the Seer sinks down tiredly.

*Bei des Mittags Brand  
Wo der Wüste Sand  
i Kein kühlend Lüftchen erlabet,  
Wo heiß, vom Samum nur geküsst,  
Ein grauer Fels die Wolken grüßet  
Da sinket müd der Seher hin.*

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\* This poem was originally published as 'Mahomets Traum in der Wüste' in Karoline von Günderrode's first collection of poetry, dialogues, and short stories *Poems and Fantasies*, which first appeared in 1804. See *Karoline von Günderrode: Gesammelte Werke. Band 1-3, Band 1* (Berlin: Goldschmidt-Gabrielli, 1920-1922), 75-79.

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- ii  
Vom trügenden Schein  
Will der Dinge Seyn  
Sein Geist, betrachtend hier, trennen.  
Der Zukunft Geist will er beschwören, 10  
Des eignen Herzens Stimme hören,  
Und folgen seiner Eingebung.
- iii  
Hier flieht die Gottheit,  
Die der Wahn ihm leiht,  
Der eitle Schimmer verstiebet. 15  
Und ihn, auf den die Völker sehen,  
Den Siegespalmen nur umwehen,  
Umkreist der Sorgen dunkle Nacht.
- iv  
Des Sehers Traum  
Durchflieget den Raum 20  
Und all' die künftigen Zeiten,  
Bald kostet er, in trunknem Wahne,  
Die Seligkeit gelung'ner Plane,  
Dann sieht er seinen Untergang,
- v  
Entsetzen und Wuth, 25  
Mit wechselnder Fluth,  
Kämpfen im innersten Leben,  
Von Zweifeln, ruft er, nur umgeben!  
Verhauchet der Entschluß sein Leben!  
Eh' Reu ihn und Mißlingen straft. 30
- vi  
Der Gottheit Macht,  
Zerreiße die Nacht  
Des Schicksals, vor meinen Blicken!  
Sie lasse mich die Zukunft sehen,  
Ob meine Fahnen siegreich wehen? 35  
ob mein Gesetz die Welt regiert?

- His spirit, here contemplating,  
Will separate the being of things  
From deceptive appearance.  
ii He will invoke the future's spirit, 10  
Hear his own heart's voice,  
And follow his inspiration.
- Here takes flight the divinity  
That delusion lends him,  
The vain shimmer scatters. 15  
iii And he to whom the peoples look,  
Fanned only by palms of victory,<sup>2</sup>  
Is encircled by the dark night of tribulation.
- The Seer's dream  
Skims through space 20  
iv And all future times;  
Now, in drunken delusions, he tastes  
The bliss of successful plans,  
Then sees his downfall.
- Horror and fury 25  
Struggle in alternating spate  
v In innermost life;  
Surrounded, he cries, by doubt alone!  
May resolve breathe out its life!  
Before regret and failure punish it. 30
- The divinity's might  
Rends the night  
vi Of destiny, before my gaze!  
It lets me see the future,  
Do my flags wave, victorious? 35  
Does my law rule the world?

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- vii *Er spricht; da hebt  
Die Erde, es hebt  
Die See sich auf zu den Wolken,  
Flammen entlodern den Felsenklüften,  
Die Luft, erfüllt von Schwefeldüften,  
Läßt trüg die müden Schwingen ruhn.* 40
- viii *Im wilden Tanz,  
Umschlinget der Kranz  
Der irren Sterne, die Himmel;  
Das Meer erbraußt in seinen Gründen,  
Und in der Erde tiefsten Schlünden  
Streiten die Elemente sich.* 45
- ix *Und der Eintracht Band,  
Das mächtig umwand  
Die Kräfte, es schien gelöset.  
Der Luft entsinkt der Wolken Schleier  
Und aus dem Abgrund steigt das Feuer,  
Und zehret alles Ird'sche auf.* 50
- x *Mit trüberer Fluth  
Steigt erst die Gluth,  
Doch brennt sie stets sich reiner,  
Bis hell ein Lichtmeer ihr entsteiget  
Das lodernnd zu den Sternen reichet  
Und rein, und hell, und strahlend wallt.* 60
- xi *Der Seher erwacht  
Wie aus Grabesnacht  
Und staunend fühlt er sich leben,  
Erwachtet aus dem Tod der Schrecken,  
Harr't zagend er, ob nun erwecken  
Ein Gott der Wesen Kette wird.* 65

- He speaks it; then the earth  
Quakes, the sea  
Sublimates into clouds,  
vii Flames blaze from rocky chasms, 40  
The air, filled with the smell of brimstone,  
Sluggishly lets the tired shaking rest.
- In wild dance,  
The corona entwines  
viii The errant stars, the heavens; 45  
The ocean roars in its foundations  
And in the earth's deepest gorges  
The elements dispute.
- And concord's bond,  
That mightily entwined  
ix The forces, it seems undone. 50  
The clouds' veil sinks from the air  
And from the abyss the fire rises  
And consumes everything earthly.
- In turbid spate 55  
The blaze rises,  
x Yet it burns ever purer,  
Till from it arises, bright, a sea of light  
That reaches, blazing, to the stars  
And seethes pure, and bright, and radiant. 60
- The Seer awakens  
As if from the grave's night  
xi And, amazed, feels that he lives.  
Awoken from death's horrors,  
He fearfully awaits whether a god 65  
Of the chain of being now awakens.

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- Von Sternen herab  
Zum Seber hinab  
Ertönt nun eine Stimme:*  
xii »Verkörpert hast du hier gesehen 70  
*Was allen Dingen wird geschehen  
Die Weltgeschichte sabst du hier.*
- Es treibet die Kraft  
Sie wirkt und schafft,  
In unaufhaltsamem Regen;*  
xiii 75  
*Was unrein ist das wird verzehret,  
Das Reine nur, der Lichtstoff, währet  
Und fließt dem ew'gen Urlicht zu.«*
- Jetzt sinket die Nacht  
Und glänzend ertagt*  
xiv 80  
*Der Morgen in seiner Seele.  
Nichts! ruft er, soll mich mehr bezwingen:  
Daß Licht nur werde! sey mein Ringen,  
Dann wird mein Thun unsterblich seyn.*

## *Synkrētīc*

- Down from the stars  
Down to the Seer  
A voice now resounds:  
xii ‘You saw here embodied 70  
What will befall all things  
You saw here the history of the world.
- The force drives  
It works and creates,  
Stirring inexorably; 75  
xiii What is impure is consumed,  
Only the pure, the light-material, endures  
And flows to the eternal primal light.’
- Now night sinks  
And gleaming dawns 80  
The morning in his soul.  
xiv Nothing more, he cries, shall vanquish me!  
Only let there be light! May that be my struggle,  
Then my deeds will be immortal.

### *Commentary*

This poem was published in Günderröde’s first collection of poetry, dialogues, and short stories *Poems and Fantasies*, which appeared in 1804. Unlike Günderröde’s play *Muhammad, the Prophet of Mecca*, the poem does not follow Muhammad’s life or use the Prophet as a stand-in for European political figures. Instead, the piece develops Romantic, Christian, and alchemical themes to create an image of a creative genius radically transforming the world.

The poem ‘Muhammad’s Dream in the Desert’ has little to identify it with the Islamic prophet other than the name itself and,

perhaps, its setting in the Arabian desert. At the time Günderrode was writing, the figure of Muhammad was often used as a stand-in for Napoleon or Luther to critique European society and politics, and Günderrode herself used Muhammad this way in her drama *Muhammad, the Prophet of Mecca*.<sup>3</sup> However, this usage is not evident, or at least not prominent, in 'Muhammad's Dream'. Instead, the poem integrates influences from early German Romanticism, late eighteenth-century chemistry, alchemy, Neo-Platonism, and Christianity to create a rich set of images describing the remaking of the world.<sup>4</sup>

The poem begins with a common Enlightenment trope of a hot and sluggish Asia in need of refreshment and revitalisation.<sup>5</sup> The Seer is 'tired' and 'sinks down' onto the sand of the Arabian desert. This initial setting seems to call for a regeneration of the torpid earth, but several verses intervene before Günderrode will show us the world remaking itself (beginning from the seventh verse). I will discuss that apocalyptic vision below. But first, what is going on in verses ii-vi, after the Prophet sinks onto the sand?

In verse ii, the Prophet begins to develop insight into the true nature of the universe: he 'Will separate the being of things / From deceptive appearance.' This search for 'true' knowledge—that is, knowledge of something beyond or behind the everyday world of our ordinary experiences—was a frequent theme in Günderrode's work. It is the focus of her poems 'The Adept' and 'The Wanderer's Descent' and a major theme in her play 'Immortalita'.<sup>6</sup>

Günderrode would have intended this claim to be understood in the context of philosophical discussions about knowledge. In the first place, it likely includes a reference to Kant's distinction between the 'phenomenal' world of 'appearances' (of individual objects and events), which we encounter in everyday life through our senses and minds, and the 'noumenal' world of actual 'being', which is how the world exists 'in itself', unfiltered by our senses and mental processes, and which we can never know. Günderrode is also mobilising imagery of the 'lifting of the veil of nature', which was a prominent trope at the time, including in early German Romanticism, e.g. in Novalis' *The Novices at Saïs*. On this Romantic

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view, mystical visions can provide glimpses of the world as it exists ‘in itself’—that is, beyond our ability to grasp with our senses and comprehend rationally. However, the cost of such visions may be madness or death. In Günderrode’s poem, we see the Prophet teetering on the brink of insanity as he experiences ‘drunken delusions’, vacillating between megalomaniac dreams of power and crushing despair.

Also in the second verse, Günderrode indicates that insight into the true nature of things is to be gained through ‘contemplating’. Specifically, knowledge of the universe is to be obtained by *inward* contemplation, or contemplation of oneself: by listening to one’s ‘heart’s voice’ and following one’s ‘inspiration’. This focus on the subjective experience of the individual, including as a means of coming to know the world, is typical of early German Romanticism, as well as of the work of the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Günderrode studied these thinkers and integrated various aspects of their thought in her work.

However, Günderrode rarely if ever borrowed ideas from other writers without significantly modifying them, and ‘Muhammad’s Dream in the Desert’ is no exception. Unlike the doomed protagonists of Romantic and Enlightenment seekers of hidden truths, Günderrode’s Prophet penetrates the ‘vain shimmer’ of appearances and learns what lies behind them. At this point, he experiences existence beyond space and time: he ‘Skims through space / And all future times.’ Since space and time are essential categories that characterise and give structure to all our experiences, this indicates that the Prophet has passed behind the ‘veil of nature’ to perceive the world ‘in itself.’<sup>7</sup>

Once the Prophet had reached behind the veil of appearances, he attempts to see the future and, specifically, what will come of his own plans and efforts to implement his will. But rather than obtaining answers, his questioning initiates a vision of an apocalyptic conflagration of the earth and its remaking into a new form. The seventh verse introduces Günderrode’s description of the destruction and remaking of the world. The Prophet watches as ‘the earth / Quakes, the sea / Sublimates’ and ‘Flames blaze from rocky

chasms.' The stars as well as the earth are set into violent motion and conflict, until the whole world is destroyed by fire, which 'consumes everything earthly.'<sup>8</sup>

In this part of the poem, Günderrode uses hermetic and alchemical imagery, blended with ideas from late eighteenth-century chemistry, to portray the remaking of the world. Rather than being annihilated, the world that is 'consumed' by fire is transformed into 'clouds' and then 'light'. The word Günderrode uses is 'sublimates': a weighted term in both chemical theory and German philosophy (the term became especially famous in the work of Hegel). The original German verb, *aufheben*, can also be translated as to cancel, override, dissolve, or elevate. The burning of the world transforms earthly substances into a pure blaze of light which, Günderrode implies, is a higher or more spiritual form of matter. In the penultimate verse, a mysterious 'voice' explains that this resulting pure light-material<sup>9</sup> will merge with the 'eternal primal light': a metaphor for the divine.<sup>10</sup>

Günderrode's adaptation of alchemical and Neo-Platonic ideas becomes clearer in verse xi. Awakening from his apocalyptic vision, the Prophet wonders 'whether a god / Of the chain of being now awakens.' The idea of the chain of being, or the Great Chain of Being, originated with the ancient Greeks, especially the Neo-Platonists, and in mediæval Europe developed into a concept of the universe as organised hierarchically with God at the top, followed in order by angels, human beings, animals, plants, and finally rocks and minerals at the bottom. Each of these levels could be further divided into hierarchically ranked categories, for example mammals were seen as higher in the category of animals than molluscs. In alchemy, the supposed connection of all beings in a continuous hierarchy, like links in a chain, was seen as justifying the idea that one kind of being could be transformed into another. In this poem, Günderrode's use of the language of sublimation, materials being consumed, and repeated sinking and rising movements suggests that she may be depicting this sort of transformative transition between levels in the hierarchy of being.

Lastly, at two points towards the end of the poem Günderrode uses Christian terminology to connect the Prophet's activities to the creative force of the divine—that is, specifically to God's creative word. In the second-last line, the Prophet cries 'Only let there be light!' (in German, *Das Licht nur werde!*), referencing God's creation of the earth in Genesis 1:3 ('Let there be light'; in German, *Es werde Licht!*). Similarly, the seventh verse, which ushers in the vision of the remaking of the world, begins with the phrase, 'He speaks it' (in German, *Er spricht's*). In these places, Günderrode is deliberately identifying the Prophet's speech with the word of God, which forms a new world out of the void or, in the Prophet's case, out of the old world. Linking back to the second and third verses, in which the Prophet's 'spirit' and 'divinity' guide his inner contemplation, it seems that Günderrode is presenting the inspired individual as developing, through introspection and the resulting penetration of the veil of nature, the creative power of a God.

## Notes

- 1 *Simoom*: a word used in the Middle East and the Sahara to denote a strong, dusty wind.
- 2 *Palms of victory*: the palm branch is a symbol of victory in Mediterranean, including Christian and Islamic, cultures.
- 3 Ruth Christmann, *Zwischen Identitätsgewinn und Bewußtseinsverlust. Das philosophisch-literarische Werk der Karoline von Günderrode (1780-1806)* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2005), 212; Karoline von Günderrode, *Poetic Fragments*, ed. and transl. Anna C. Ezekiel (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016), 18, 123f; 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*, eds. Hannelore Scholz and Brita Baume (Berlin: Trafo Verlag, 1995), 21-35.
- 4 Christmann also suggests the influence of ideas from Hemsterhuis and Fichte on the poem, and Solbrig identifies a further influence from Herder. See Christmann, *Zwischen Identitätsgewinn und Bewußtseinsverlust*, 176; Ingeborg Solbrig, 'The Contemplative Muse: Caroline von Günderrode, Religious Works', in *Germanic Notes*, Vol. 18, No. 1-2 (1987): 18.

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- 5 There are obvious colonialist overtones in the associated ideas that: (a) the heat of Asia and Africa made people torpid and, correspondingly, stupid, unhealthy, and lazy; and (b) Asia had fallen from a state of former glory as the torch of civilisation passed to Europe. For the use of this trope by G nderrode and Goethe, see K.F. Hilliard, 'Orient und Mythos: Karoline von G nderrode', in *Frauen: MitSprechen. MitSchreiben. Beitr ge zur literatur- und sprachwissenschaftlichen Frauenforschung*, eds. Marianne Henn and Britta Hufeisen (Stuttgart: Heinz, 1997), 244-255.
- 6 These three pieces will all be available in English translation with commentary in my volume on G nderrode's work, *Philosophical Fragments* (forthcoming with Oxford University Press).
- 7 Cf. G nderrode's prose poem 'An Apocalyptic Fragment', which also describes a vision of the reality that lies behind appearances and which involves a disruption to the normal experience of time.
- 8 G nderrode's play *Udohla* includes similar imagery of a violent and fiery apocalypse, after which the world can be remade. For discussion of the role of revolution and the apocalypse in revitalising the world, and its importance in G nderrode's philosophy, see Anna C. Ezekiel, 'Revolution and Revitalisation: Karoline von G nderrode's Political Philosophy and Its Metaphysical Foundations', in *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* (forthcoming 2022).
- 9 In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, 'light-material' or 'luminous matter' (*Lichtstoff*) was thought to be a substance that emitted light. Later, this theory was shown to be incorrect and 'luminous matter' is now understood to be an imaginary substance.
- 10 Or, perhaps, a secularisation of the divine as a physical element.