‘Die Seele sehnte sich hinaus in den Schnee’: The Meaning and Function of Outside Space in Bettine von Arnim’s Die Günderode

By Catherine Grimm

Bettine von Arnim’s Die Günderode is the second of her autobiographically inspired works of epistolary fiction, based on correspondences and memories of key figures from von Arnim’s youth.¹ Published in 1840 the text is usually read as an idealized depiction of 19th century female friendship and companionship.² Lorely French states, for example, that “recent studies have recognized Die Günderode as the most communicational of Arnim’s four epistolary books”, while Edith Waldstein observes that “such cooperation, mutual respect, reciprocal enrichment and love are characteristic of the relationship between these two women and distinguish it from all other friendships portrayed in Bettine von Arnim’s novels.”³ The frank exchange between the two young women in Die Günderode is often contrasted with the more one-sided and hierarchical correspondence between a young von Arnim and an older Goethe in her first book Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde. For example, in her recent book Ulrike Growe writes the following about Die Günderode: “Dem ganzen Briefverkehr ist konstrastierend vor der Folie des drohenden Selbstmordes eine jugendliche Unbeschwertheit und Träumerei unterlegt, und eine Offenheit und Akzeptanz, die so im

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Austausch mit dem Bruder Clemens oder dem abgöttisch geliebten Goethe nicht vorhanden ist\textsuperscript{iv}.

Yet despite the increased critical attention the book has received over the years there is still a tendency in the secondary literature on von Arnim, in general, and on \textit{Die Günderode} in particular, to foreground von Arnim’s life story and view her writing as a by-product of that story rather than as autonomous creative work worthy of critical analysis beyond its role as source material for her biography\textsuperscript{v} One of the main reasons for this has to do with von Arnim’s own interest in blurring the distinction between her writing and her life, which led to the fact that, as the editors of the critical edition of her works point out:

\begin{quote}
Nicht als Autorin ihrer Werke, sondern als bewunderte und umstrittene Persönlichkeit ist B(ettine) im Bewußtsein der Nachwelt geblieben, und was sie veröffentlichte, wurde stets als Zeugnis ihrer Individualität gewürdigt. Schon von ihren Zeitgenossen wurde der „Mythos Bettine“ kultiviert, und sie selbst ordnete sich diesem Idealbild ihres Lebens unter.\textsuperscript{vi}
\end{quote}

For strategic or other reasons, von Arnim only not did not mind this mythologized view of herself, she even appears to have actively participated in its construction. This led one contemporary, Karl Immermann, to remark in a letter to Tieck: “Diese Frau hat doch unter der Caricatur ihrer äußern Erscheinung einen edlen Reichtum verborgen gehabt\textsuperscript{vii}, which suggests that the person named Bettine, who people knew or had at least heard of, was an extreme, „caricatured“ version of her actual self. While it is necessary to acknowledge von Arnim’s preoccupation with self-mythologizing her life and art, it seems
limiting to replicate the same patterns and strategies she employed if one is interested in undertaking a critical analysis of her writing.\textsuperscript{viii}

At this stage in the history of von Arnim scholarship, I believe, that it is time to place her literary works at the center of critical focus and consider the possibility that a close analysis of the structures and strategies employed in her aesthetic works will reflect and illuminate the author’s underlying motives and inspirations in a way that a one-sided focus on her life cannot. Therefore, this article will concentrate on analyzing what seems to be a central theme throughout much of her work, but especially in \textit{Die Günderode} – namely, the protagonists’ complex relationship to outside space(s). A next step will consist of suggesting how the meaning and function of outside space can be understood as subtle and perhaps even ironic commentaries on certain cultural and philosophical discourses of the day. In so doing, I hope to illuminate the creative complexity of this multi-layered text, and to make clear in what way it transcends the sphere of autobiographical commentary.

Published in 1840, \textit{Die Günderode} was inspired by von Arnim’s relationship with Karoline von Günderrode, which included a correspondence conducted primarily from 1804 to 1806, when Günderrode committed suicide on the banks of the Rhine river. The depiction of the correspondence between von Arnim and Günderrode consisted of extracts from actual letters, portions taken from other people’s letters and also a substantial amount of new material.\textsuperscript{ix} A considerable amount of what the Karoline-figure says or writes was written by von Arnim which makes the work the product of one mind rather than a collaborative effort. It must therefore be seen as von Arnim’s
own poetic construction. Readers do well to remind themselves that the relationship between the figures on the pages of this work was not congruent with the historical personae they purport to be portraying. Too many years had passed and von Arnim was too much the independent, creative artist, to be interested in merely documenting an epistolary relationship from years past.¹

Throughout Die Günderode, the Bettine-character finds herself in complex and multifaceted relationships to outside space. Her letters to Günderode are full of keenly observed and poetically rendered descriptions of natural, seasonal and weather-related phenomena. For Bettine, nature, even at its most mundane, is often more captivating than other forms of social interaction including, for example, listening to another person read out loud: “Savigny liest vor, da hab ich meine Not mit dem Zuhören, auf dem Waldrasen hab ich gar zu viel Zerstreuung, alle Augenblick ist ein Kräutchen oder Spinnchen.”³¹ The Bettine-character is drawn to these outdoor spaces: fields, forests, mountains, rivers and gardens because she recognizes that when in these places her thoughts are less inhibited and seem to flow more freely: “In freier Luft kann ich alles denken, was im Zimmer unmöglich war.”³²⁵ Natural settings function as privileged access sites to the metaphorical space of her own interiority: she goes outside in order to enter more easily into the inside of her own mind.³⁳³

There are two reasons for this. First, simply being in nature has a soothing and calming effect and she seems to be more comfortable there than in enclosed spaces. She also derives immense physical and sensuous pleasure from being outside: “Ich war heut morgen im Wald’…es war so feucht, so warm, so
moosig, es war so brennend im Gesicht, und so kühlig am Boden.»xiv Throughout the text, the reader witnesses her lying in the grass under trees, walking, running, jumping, climbing, or plunging herself fully clothed into pools of water, all of which indicate a basic disregard for societal prescripts and physical boundaries.

The second reason why being outside helps Bettine access her interiority has to do with how these spaces affect her thinking. When outside, the Bettine-character finds it easier to concentrate both on her own thoughts and on the natural environment she is in. She is overcome with the sense that an inherent interdependency exists between her inner world and the outer one: “ich leb nur wenn mein Geist mit der Natur in dieser Wechselwirkung steht.”xv This realization transforms her own sense of self. She not only feels more at home in nature, she begins to conceive of herself as an integral part of it. What this means, for example, is that seasonal changes affect her in ways similar to how they affect the environment: “Frühling schwellet die Erde, ringsum drängt auch wohl meinen Sinn, berauschet mir schwellend die Lippe, daß in erneuerter Sonne die spröden Hüllen und Knospen meiner Gedanken zerbersten.”xvi

Emphasizing her connection with nature inevitably involves distancing herself from the urbane world of culture and society. Being drawn to outside spaces means being drawn away from social interaction: the Bettine-character intuitively senses that spending time alone in nature will allow her own subjectivity to unfold in a less restrictive, more independent fashion. Even when she does interact with other people, nature, usually in the form of plants or flowers, is still present in some form. For example, the gardener to whom she is especially friendly makes
her a wreath of flowers to wear to a ball and Bettine promises to return it to him on her way home.\textsuperscript{xvii}

The fundamental kinship the Bettine-character feels for the natural environment is expressed through numerous vegetative similes and metaphors. Within the parameters of this highly creative nature-language (\textit{Natursprache}),\textsuperscript{xviii} thoughts and ideas are likened to seeds, buds, kernels and blossoms, and the senses turn into “fertile fields” ready to receive the “seeds” of truth, cultivated by an individual’s moods. Conversely, nature itself is viewed as a signifying system: “Sind vielleicht Blüten und Kräuter Worte? Sprache, in der die Gefühle, der Geist der Erde, des Wassers sich deutlich machen?\textsuperscript{xix} The acts of describing natural phenomena as language and internal thoughts as seeds or kernels blur the demarcation between the subject’s interiority and the outside world.

The use of figurative language centered on tropes of transformation and metamorphosis echoes another important, but hidden theme of the text: any type of creative endeavor involves a procedure whereby the identity of the creator is transformed and eventually dissolved into the work produced:

\begin{quote}
Der Dichter stellt dies dar – der ist persönlich und auch nicht, eben ganz nach Gottes Ebenbild, denn er erschafft mit dem Geist was ganz außer dem sinnlichen Dasein liegt, und doch ist es sinnlich da es ganz die Sinne fassen, und sich hierdurch gewiegt fühlen und genährt, und da doch Nahrung der Sinne nur ihre höhere Entwicklung ist, so löst der Dichter, wie Gott, seine Persönlichkeit auf, durch sein Denken in eine höhere Form und bildet sich selbst in eine höhere Entwicklung hinüber.\textsuperscript{xx}
\end{quote}
Von Arnim’s preference for the related themes of self-dissolution and a certain type of vegetative transformation, suggest an intuitive familiarity with two influential theoretical discourses of the day. First, the allusions to nature’s reciprocal relationship to individual human consciousness and creativity align this text with theoretical Romanticism, especially that movement’s attempts to reconfigure the relationship between humans and nature.\textsuperscript{xxi}

The second discourse, evoked by the repeated use of vegetative imagery, is the equation of women with a plant-like (and therefore inferior) consciousness. As Elaine Miller writes in: \textit{The Vegetative Soul}: “Western philosophers from Aristotle to Hegel have repeated the analogy of men to animals and women to plants by virtue of their (perceived) respective characteristics of activity and rationality, on the one hand, and passivity and lack of rationality, on the other.”\textsuperscript{xxii} A well-known example of the equation, which Miller quotes, can be found in Hegel’s \textit{Philosophy of Right}: “The difference between men and women is that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid and the principle that underlies it is rather vague unity of feeling.”\textsuperscript{xxiii}

While von Arnim shares with Hegel an interest in the basic notion of a plant-like subjectivity, the conceptual framework she constructs could not be more different. For von Arnim, nature, in its entirety, is a transcendent, quasi-religious space that provides comfort and solace unavailable from other sources to the Bettine-character. Realizing the degree to which one’s identity is enmeshed with this transcendent realm moves oneself away from the hierarchical world of culture and society. Far
from denoting a lower form of awareness, being plant-like in this context implies having actually evolved beyond the level of individual human consciousness.

Besides a different estimation of vegetative subjectivity another reason it would be inaccurate to describe von Arnim as in agreement with Hegel, is the profound skepticism the Bettine-character expresses throughout the book regarding all forms of systematic knowledge, especially the disciplines of history and philosophy. In one letter to Günderode, Bettine speaks of the history lessons Clemens has arranged for her: “Tut der Lehrer den Mund auf, so sehe ich hinein wie in einen unabsehbaren Schlund, der die Mammutskelettn der Vergangenheit ausspeit, und allerlei versteinert Zeug, das nicht keimen, nicht blühen mehr will, wo Sonn und Regen nicht lohnt.”xxiv When complaining about Karoline’s predilection for philosophy she uses similar imagery: “Deine Schellingsphilosophie ist mir zwar ein Abgrund, es schwindelt mir da hinab zu sehen wo ich doch den Hals brechen werd, eh ich mich zurecht find in dem finstern Schlund, aber Dir zu lieb will ich durchkriechen auf allen Vieren.”xxv

Exposure to systematized knowledge of any kind evokes deep feelings of groundlessness and vertigo for Bettine, while the Karoline-figure, on the other hand, believes that a methodological study of ancient history and philosophy might offer Bettine precisely what she needs: “Sei mir ein bißchen standhaft, trau mir, daß der Geschichtsboden für Deine Phantasien, Deine Begriffe ganz geeignet, ja notwendig ist. – Wo willst Du Dich selber fassen, wenn Du keinen Boden unter Dir hast?”xxvi
The overwhelming sense of mental and physical discomfort that Bettine experiences when confronted with systematic thinking not only reinforces her aversion to it, it also seems to be what drives her resistance to attempts by others to structure and regulate her education. She deems this kind of knowledge “unnatural” and is resolved not to let the attempts interfere with her goal of creating a poetic existence within an autonomous, private realm away from the regulated society she is expected to inhabit. This insistence on a certain kind of self-education, distinct from those offered to her is an area where the Bettine-character and the historical persona von Arnim share common ground and the fact the book even exists is testament to von Arnim’s commitment to her own goals and her willingness to work toward seeing her vision come to fruition.

Central to the representation of utopian “outside spaces” is the depiction of the relationship between Bettina and Karoline. Von Arnim often employs vegetative imagery to frame the description of their friendship: “Durch dich feuert der Geist wie die Sonn durchs frische Laub feuert und mir gehts wie dem Keim, der in der Sonn brütet, wenn ich an Dich denken will, es wärmt mich und ich werd freudig und stolz und streck meine Blätter aus.” Comparing the intensity of Günderode’s spirit (Geist) to the sun beating down on new foliage, while casting Bettine’s own subjectivity in plant-like terms removes the relationship from the realm of the concrete and everyday and situates it in its own metaphorical space.

And while the Bettine-character is a symbol and spokesperson for this space, the attitude and position of the Karoline-character is much more ambivalent. Bettine definitely wants to claim Karoline as her fellow inhabitant of this utopian
realm, yet Karoline’s idealized, classical demeanor and her predilection for precisely the type of learning Bettine abhors, make her at times seem like a rather unwilling participant. Von Arnim portrays the Karoline-figure as much more skeptical about the feminine utopian realm Bettine wants to create. She sets up a telling juxtaposition when she has Bettine use a stylized classical idiom, to describe the effect that Karoline’s poetry has on her:

In deinen Gedichten weht mich die stille Säulenordnung an, mir deucht eine weite Ebne; an dem fernen Horizont rundum heben sich wie der Atem durch die Brust fliegt eines Beschauenenden; alles ist stille Feier dieses heiligen Ebenmaßes, die Leidenschaften, wie Libationen von der reinen Priesterin den Göttern in die Flammen des Herdes gegossen, und leise lodern sie auf – wie stilles Gebet Deiner Poesie, so ist Hingebung und Liebesglück ein sanfter Wiesenschmelz tautiger Knospen, die auf weitem Plan sich auftuen dem Sternenlicht und den glänzenden Lüften, und kaum daß sie sich erheben an den Sprachbaus schlanker Säule, kaum daß die Rose ihren Purpur spigelt im Marmorglanz heiliger Form der sich anschmiegt; so – verschleiernd die Welt, Bedeutung und geheime Gewalt die in der Tiefe dir quellen, -- durchwandelt ein leiser schleierwehender Geist jene Gefilde, die im Bereich der Poesie Du Dir abgrenzest.\textsuperscript{xxviii}

Expressing the wish, in essence, to “save Karoline from herself” Bettine contrasts this view of Karoline’s poetry with a description of her own utopian space:
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Mir aber liegt ein Schmerz in der Seele den ich oft unterdrückte in Deiner Gegenwart, und was mir schwer war; aber eine geheime Sehnsucht Dich Dir selber zu entführen, Dich Dir selber vergessen zu machen, nur einmal jene Säulengänge vor denen die Mirthe schüchtern erblüht zu verlassen, und in meiner Waldhütte einzukehren, auf ihrer Schwelle am Boden sitzend mit mir, von tausend Bienchen umsurrt die sich satt trinken in meines Garten blühenden Kelchen, von den Tauben zärtlich umflattert die unter mein Dach heimkehren am Abend, und da mehr zu Haus sind, mehr Wirtschaft machen als Freundschaft und Liebe der Menschen, denn sie behaupten ihr Vorrecht alle Gedanken zu übertönen mit ihre Gegurre.xxiv

The dichotomy between the phallic verticality and classical placidity of Karoline’s poetry and the earthy sensuality of Bettine’s forest hut is emblematic in its representation of different versions of feminine creative potential. While genuinely in awe of Günderode’s artistic achievements and potential, the Bettine-character seems equally interested in drawing the Karoline-character away not so much from her work but from the at times rather maudlin or melancholy disposition that seems to be its inspiration.

In these scenes we see von Arnim constructing not so much an “imagined relationship to reality”xxxi, as critic Felicity Nussbaum has called autobiographical writing, as much as a clearly alternative reality, in which the Karoline-character is offered an opportunity to escape the oppressive and limiting world dominated by patriarchal structures, especially as they pertain to artistic creation. The creative reworking of the past in
the present that von Arnim is engaged in is itself a transformative act in that it allows von Arnim to revisit and work through a traumatic event.

An important aim of the repeated use of vegetative tropes and the portrayal of nature as a positive transcendent realm is to reclaim the idea of a vegetative, plant-like consciousness as a way to begin thinking positively about feminine creative potential. In this sense von Arnim’s project is, perhaps not unlike that of the modern French feminist Luce Irigaray’s positive appropriation of plant-like imagery. Elaine Miller describes such imagery in the following manner:

Rather than simply pointing out the flaws of traditional philosophy’s linkage of the feminine with the earth or nature, Irigaray focuses on the redemptive possibilities inherent in the very metaphors that have been used to reduce the feminine to the silent, concealed ground of Being, just as “plantlike” reading transforms its textual object in a metamorphic growth."

It would seem both Irigaray and von Arnim are interested in this gesture of reclaiming or “giving new life” to reductive images of feminine subjectivity.

In *Die Günderode* the positive function of outside space, along with the use of vegetative tropes as a way of representing feminine subjectivity can be understood as part of a larger goal of von Arnim’s texts, namely the metaphorical construction of a radically different social or communal space(s), where women would be able to exist in a truly autonomous and uninhibited fashion.
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References


Von Arnim, Bettine. Werke und Briefe in vier Bänden. Edited
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Verlag, 1986] 1-294), centered on her correspondence with her brother, appeared in 1844. The actual encounters and correspondences that these novels are based on, took place decades earlier, around the turn of the century. For extensive background information on all aspects relating to the writing, publication and reception of these works see the commentary sections in the Deutscher Klassiker Verlag edition.


iv See Ulrike Growe, Das Briefleben Bettine von Arnims – Vom Musenruf zur Selbstreflexion: Studie zu „Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde, Die
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v Solveig Ockenfuß states, e.g. “Selbstverständnis und Identität der Autorin Bettine drücken sich in ihren Briefromanen aus. Ihre Briefromane legen lebensgeschichtliches Material bereit und lassen so Rückschlüsse auf Anspruch und Wirklichkeit der Verfasserin zu.” (Solveig Ockenfuß: _Bettine von Arnims Briefromane_ [Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag GmbH, 1992] 23). Although there is no denying the fact that von Arnim’s novels exhibit an autobiographical core, I do not think that they can be read simply as a reflection of her life. The relationship of author to work is more complex and less straightforward.

vi _Bettine von Arnim, Werke und Briefe_ I, 979.

vii _Bettine von Arnim, Werke und Briefe_ II, 923.

viii Plenty of fiction writers have been inspired, as Lisbeth Hock points out in her 2001 study of von Arnim’s works, to incorporate a version of the mythological Bettina into their non-scholarly works, including Rainer Maria Rilke, Fanny Lewald, Balzac and Milan Kundera. See Lisabeth Hock, _Replicas of a Female Prometheus: The Textual Personae of Bettina von Arnim_ (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) xvi.


x For an excellent description of von Arnim’s _Arbeitsweise_ see “Bettines Dichtungslehre und Arbeitsweise” in _Bettine von Arnim, Werke und Briefe_ Bd.1 879-895.

xi Bettine von Arnim, _Werke und Briefe_ Bd.1 Clemens Brentano’s Frühlingskrantz, _Die Günderode_, (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1986) 315.

xii Von Arnim, _Die Günderode_ 299.
As Charles Taylor points out in his influential work, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) the underlying “partitioning of the world” (111) into an outside and an inside is itself “in large part a feature of our world, the world of modern, Western people” (111). In Chapter 20 of that work, “Nature as Source” (355-367) Taylor traces the reevaluation of the significance of nature back to Rousseau and describes how this in turn led to the Romantic emphasis on a certain notion of inwardness, that prioritized the “inner voice” vis-à-vis the outside, external world. The Bettine character’s own romantic disposition is emphasized by the fact that she prefers being “outside” in nature in order to get a sense of her own interiority.


Von Arnim, *Die Günderode* 675.

Von Arnim, *Die Günderode* 446.

See Taylor.

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xxv Von Arnim, *Die Günderode* 405.

xxvi Von Arnim, *Die Günderode* 404.

xxvii Von Arnim, *Die Günderode* 299.

xxviii Von Arnim, *Die Günderode* 620.

xxix Von Arnim, *Die Günderode* 620.
