

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Novalis

The Life of Novalis. Friedrich von Hardenburg, who later christened himself Novalis (1772-1801), was born on the manor estate at Overwiederstedt, Saxony, in the Harz mountains. (His childhood was spent on that estate, and his fantasy life of oneness with nature was played out on trips into the mountains.) His father administered the inherited estates, which were part of the patrimony of this distinguished family, and managed the salt mine, which was the source of revenue for the region. Novalis' father was a strictly Pietistic Moravian; Novalis was the second of eleven children. He was sent to a local Lutheran school for his primary education. From 1790-1794 Novalis studied Law at Jena, Wittenberg, and Leipzig Universities. During this time he heard and was influenced by Friedrich Schiller's lectures, and while at University he made brief acquaintances with Goethe, Herder, and Jean Paul. It was at this time that he became engaged to Sophie von Kuehn—who was thirteen years old—and, a quite different issue, became passionately interested in Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre. (That this extremely brilliant young man was at the same time writing goes without saying.) In light of this rapid development of his thought and work, we should note that from childhood on Novalis was keenly interested in the natural and physical sciences. He was a trained geologist, and had he not died at the age of 29 he would have completed his vast Romantic Encyclopedia of the sciences.

The work of Novalis. The prioritizing of the poetic imagination, by Schlegel and many of his contemporaries—including counterparts like Wordsworth and Lamartine elsewhere in Europe—became the leitmotif of Novalis' work. In his *Hymns to the Night*, 1799, Novalis lets his imagination create from the fixed point of the death of his first fiancée, a death which lured him to follow the beloved. As he contemplates this loss, he sees salvation in poetry, whose magic power can transform all that passes into a metaphor of the spirit. Like Orpheus, dealing with the night, he descends into the center of himself, to the point where he can create a salvation—parallel to Christ's saving—from the deification of love. Building from this perception Novalis conceives the universe as a fusion of nature and spirit in the aura of which he can be truly one with his beloved. In two other characteristic works he continues to work the rich Romantic themes of the Catholic Middle Ages. In *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800) he unfolds, self-reflexively, an account of a mediaeval court poet's education in his trade. Heinrich's youthful dream has been of a passage from self-transcendence, through redemption in nature, and the discovery of love, an ecstatic passage through which his experience leads him, bathed in powerful historical mystery. In the speech *Christianity or Europe* Novalis develops imaginatively his vision of the new Europe to come with Romanticism, a Europe which is romantically Catholic, and in that regard highly conservative, but respectful of the individual, and fit to lead the new post Revolutionary monarchical culture of the new Germany.

The conservative Novalis. The early German Romantics, privileging poetry as the visionary weapon for envisaging the new world, turned with frequency to the Middle Ages, and at least the atmosphere of the religious life that flourished at that time. For Novalis in particular the French Revolution was a brutal but necessary stage on humanity's long trek to self-awareness. Mankind's history was a powerful and ongoing education.

Reading

Primary source reading

Novalis: *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia*, ed. David Wood, 2007.

Secondary source reading

Novalis, *Henry von Ofterdingen*, trans. Hilty, 1992.

Further reading

Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics, ed. Bernstein, 2003.

Original language reading

Kutzke, Hermann, *Romantik und Konservatismus. Das 'politische' Werk Friedrich von Hardenbergs (Novalis) im Horizont seiner Wirkungsgeschichte*, 1983.

Suggested paper topics

Read through what remains of Novalis' Encyclopedia. What connections do you see between his thinking in the 'sciences,' and his poetic visionary thinking? Review Goethe's conception of the sciences in his time, a few generations earlier, and compare the value of the contributions of the two men toward 'understanding.' How does Novalis's worship of the mediaeval square with his scientific knowledge?

Does Novalis's conservatism spring from a reaction to the French Revolution, which was itself built onto Enlightenment ideas of progress and human perfectibility? Or is it an integral part of the Romantic fascination with the past in general, and specifically with the 'Romance' traditions, often poetic and mysterious, which underlie much German thinking of the early 19th century?

Excerpts

en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Novalis

H

I was still blind, but twinkling stars did dance throughout my being's limitless expanse...

True anarchy is the generative element of religion. Out of the annihilation of all existing institutions she raises her glorious head, as the new foundress of the world.

To romanticize the world is to make us aware of the magic, mystery and wonder of the world...

- There are ideal series of events which run parallel with the real ones. They rarely coincide. Men and circumstances generally modify the ideal train of events, so that it seems imperfect, and its consequences are equally imperfect. Thus with the Reformation; instead of Protestantism came Lutheranism.
- Throughout my being's limitless expanse,
Nothing had yet drawn close, only at distant stages
I found myself, a mere suggestion sensed in past and future ages.
- o True anarchy is the generative element of religion. Out of the annihilation of all existing institutions she raises her glorious head, as the new foundress of the world..
- Blood will stream over Europe until the nations become aware of the frightful madness which drives them in circles. And then, struck by celestial music and made gentle, they approach their former altars all together, hear about the works of peace, and hold a great celebration of peace with fervent tears before the smoking altars.
- Poetry heals the wounds inflicted by reason.
- The world must be romanticized. In this way the originary meaning may be found again.