
NOVALIS

PHILOSOPHICAL
WRITINGS

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

Margaret Mahony Stoljar

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Writings

*Translated and Edited by
Margaret Mahony Stoljar*

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Philosophy cannot bake bread—but it can bring us
God, freedom, and immortality.

I show that I have understood a writer only when I
can act in his spirit, when, without constricting his
individuality, I can translate him and change him
in diverse ways.

Novalis

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Abbreviations

MO	<i>Miscellaneous Observations</i>
LFI	<i>Logological Fragments I</i>
LFII	<i>Logological Fragments II</i>
FL	<i>Faith and Love or The King and Queen</i>
TF	<i>Teplitz Fragments</i>
OG	<i>On Goethe</i>
GD	<i>General Draft</i>
CE	<i>Christendom or Europe</i>
LaF	<i>Last Fragments</i>

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Introduction

The writer we know as “Novalis” was born in 1772 as Friedrich von Hardenberg. The manuscripts translated in this volume were compiled between late 1797 and late 1799, most remaining unpublished. The striking range of interests displayed in his notes, philosophical fragments, and short essays reveals Novalis to be one of the most comprehensive thinkers of his generation. He shared in the belief of his contemporaries in the psychological and social value of philosophy, poetry, and the other arts, but since he had also been educated in mathematics and the physical sciences, the dimensions of his writing are far-reaching.

His intellectual profile resembles that of an eighteenth-century polymath such as Diderot or d’Alembert, who wrote expertly on a myriad of scientific and cultural subjects. Indeed, Novalis’s own unfinished project for an encyclopedic work, his *General Draft*, demonstrates his affinity with the *philosophes* whom he admired, even while rejecting their materialism. In spite of the boldness, rigor, and extensive scope of Novalis’s intellectual pursuits, his philosophical work has been largely obscured for those who have thought of him as a prototypical Romantic dreamer. The popularity of his *Hymns to the Night*, a set of dithyrambic poems in verse and prose, and of his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the source of the Romantic archetype of the blue flower, symbol of love and longing, does not prepare the reader for material such as is found in his philosophical manuscripts.

In his original, unprejudiced, and undogmatic questioning of any issue that interests him, Novalis displays to a remarkable degree the kind of innovative thought that will characterize the Romantic movement

throughout Europe. Being a practicing scientist and creative writer as well as possessing a comprehensive approach to theoretical inquiry that in his time was what was meant by “philosophical,” Novalis engages with a wider spectrum of questions than do most of his contemporaries. But it is his readiness to subject any philosophical concept to radical interrogation that marks his published and unpublished work as of enduring interest. For contemporary readers accustomed to the critique of the categories of reason that has followed in the wake of Nietzsche, Novalis’s writings can seem uncannily pertinent. They address issues that in recent years have continued to expand the parameters of our thinking on truth and objectivity, language and mind, symbol and representation, reason and the imagination. In form and style too, Novalis’s manuscripts demonstrate the associative fluidity of thought characteristic of Nietzsche. They proceed by intuitive and imaginative reasoning, rather than sustained systematic argument, in a manner that has become familiar in the writing of Derrida and others in our time. His adoption of the Romantic fragment, a self-conscious and self-contained short prose form created in particular by Friedrich Schlegel to allow maximum flexibility in working out new and developing ideas, is ideally suited to his own quicksilver movement between subjects. In looking at the most important of his themes, it will be appropriate as well to point to the affinities between his approaches and his philosophical style and some of those current today.

Friedrich von Hardenberg was born in central Germany at Oberwiederstedt, in the region of Halle. As the eldest son of a family belonging to the minor aristocracy, Friedrich was tutored at home. He grew up in a household presided over by a devoted mother and a deeply religious father with close ties to the Moravian Brethren of Herrnhut in Saxony. A strong sense of family as the primary community and model for all others, as well as the pietist emphasis on personal faith and mystical communication with God, were aspects of Hardenberg’s early years that proved to be enduring elements of his thought. While a law student at Jena, Leipzig, and Wittenberg between 1790 and 1794, Hardenberg made the acquaintance of Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel, and Fichte, and began to write poetry. Schiller, a historian and philosopher as well as a poet and dramatist, was, with Goethe, one of the two preeminent literary figures of the age. Schlegel, himself still a student, was to be a leader in the field of aesthetics and cultural theory in the late 1790s, at the center of a group that came to be known as the Romantic school.

The next three years saw Hardenberg engaged in intensive philosophical study, principally devoted to Kant and especially Fichte, whose writings, above all his *Theory of Scientific Knowledge* (1794), were received with enthusiasm by the young generation. His interest in mathematics and science, especially geology and mining, was stimulated by his father's appointment as director of the Saxon saltworks, and Hardenberg decided to embark on a course of study at the celebrated mining academy in Freiberg. Meanwhile he had been profoundly moved by the deaths of his young fiancée Sophie von Kühn and his brother Erasmus. These experiences, and the shadow of tuberculosis that lay over countless young people of his own age, prompted Hardenberg to a kind of mystical meditation on death and the possibility of resurrection, themes that became the subject of the poetic cycle *Hymns to the Night*. Late in 1797 he devoted himself intensively to study of the Dutch philosopher Hemsterhuis, whose concept of a moral sense and emphasis on the cognitive validity of poetic language and of feeling impressed him profoundly. He recorded his studies of Kant, Fichte, and Hemsterhuis in a number of philosophical notebooks, the first in a series that was to be continued throughout his life.

In the short years that remained before his death in March 1801, Hardenberg steeped himself in all aspects of contemporary thought, often exchanging ideas with the Schlegel circle, among whom was the philosopher Schelling. He continued to write poetry and prose fiction, as well as to explore philosophical, aesthetic, mathematical, and scientific topics in his notebooks. After completing his studies in Freiberg, Hardenberg became engaged to be married for a second time and applied successfully for a position as district administrator in Thuringia. However, late in 1800 his health began to fail rapidly and it became apparent that tuberculosis would defeat his hope of marriage and plans for further philosophical and literary works.

In the winter of 1797–1798, during his first months in Freiberg, Hardenberg prepared a collection of fragments, *Miscellaneous Observations*, as his first philosophical publication. It initially appeared under the title *Pollen*, and was signed with the pseudonym “Novalis,” which means “one who opens up new land.” The name had traditional associations with the Hardenberg family, but was particularly apt in view of the author's description of his own work as “literary seedings.” This was Novalis's interpretation of the concept of *Symphilosophie*, or collaboration in philosophy, by which the Schlegel circle characterized their joint

work as a kind of philosophical conversation. The Romantic fragment, sometimes brief and aphoristic, sometimes extended to several paragraphs, was conceived by its practitioners as specially suited to collaborative work, but the form also allowed Novalis to move in free association across any aspect of intellectual life. The idea of cultivating and fertilizing new land was evoked in the imagery of the published title, *Pollen*, and the epigraph to it: "Friends, the soil is poor, we must sow abundant seeds/ So that even modest harvests will flourish." These metaphors make explicit Novalis's concept of philosophical discourse not as something closed and finite but as a dynamic movement of thought. During the first half of 1798 Novalis continued to work on his philosophical notebooks; two selections from these unpublished manuscripts are translated here under the heading *Logological Fragments*.

Belief in spirituality, the conviction of human otherness as against the animal and inanimate worlds, is the grounding axiom of Novalis's thought. The hierarchy of spiritual value is extended by the positing of a higher realm of pure spirit, removed in kind from the human as much as the latter is from nonhuman earthly forms. His reading in the history of philosophy made Novalis familiar with Platonic ideas, and like others of his generation such as Hegel and the poet Hölderlin, he is able to reconcile these with Christian conceptions of spirituality. The realm of spirit, the repository of truth, is conceived as the end of all philosophical and creative thought, but Novalis sees the way of its attainment in something other than a search for heterogeneous new discoveries. It is accessible only through perfect self-understanding, which for him is the beginning of all knowledge and all philosophy.

It is apparent that in these interlocking concepts of pure spirit and self-knowledge, Novalis is positing a kind of truth very different from the belief in objective reason that underlies the assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism. Notwithstanding the continuities that link many aspects of eighteenth-century philosophical thinking to that of Novalis's time, such a departure goes far to justify the traditional periodic differentiation between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The mystical dimension of his religious upbringing disposed Novalis toward nonrational ways of understanding, a direction that was reinforced by his reading of Hemsterhuis. In arguments that privilege introspection and intuition, Novalis insists on the subjective nature of truth: "but is not the universe *within ourselves*? The depths of our spirit are unknown to us—the mysterious way leads inwards" (MO 17).

Drawing a distinction that clarifies his concept of subjective truth, Novalis writes that we can be convinced only of magical or miraculous truth, never of natural truth (LFI 78). With this distinction he circumvents a correspondence theory of truth that would demand validity in terms of objective reality, and puts in its place a self-generating, poetic truth. This truth is the only truth that is accessible to me, for if I look elsewhere then the only difference between truth and delusion lies in their life functions (MO 8). The idea of magical truth will prove to be central to Novalis's aesthetic principle of magical idealism. His rejection of a notion of extrinsic truth that can be uncovered by the exercise of reason is at one with the stance of contemporary pragmatists. Philosophers like Richard Rorty have argued against the assumptions of an objective theory of truth such as that held in the Enlightenment, as the way of discovering "the intrinsic nature of things."¹ Novalis, in contrast, proposes a self-referential model for philosophy which seeks not to explain the world but rather to explain itself; its growth is organic, as a seed emerges from a husk and sprouts to form a new plant (LFI 17). The image recalls his description of his own fragments as "seedings."

In another sense too, Novalis's ideas come close to those of Rorty and others who move out from a subjective notion of truth to a cohesive sense of participation in a human community. What Rorty calls solidarity or ethnocentricity embodies a kind of social optimism that is close to Novalis's post-Enlightenment belief in progress.² If truth is not something to be discovered external to myself, but lies rather in acting according to my convictions (MO 38), it is as much an ethical as an epistemological concept. In this sense, it represents the core of that element of late-eighteenth-century German thought which Novalis shared with his philosophical partners and to which he returns again and again: the social responsibility of the intellectual. The philosopher and the artist are gifted with the ability to recognize magical truth, and are therefore called on to guide others toward this recognition: "We are on a *mission*. Our vocation is the education of the earth" (MO 32). The political and social aspirations derived from the belief in progress will be examined more closely in connection with Novalis's writing on the poetic state, in *Faith and Love or The King and Queen* and *Christendom or Europe*.

Recognition of social responsibility precludes the escapism or narcissism that have sometimes been held to inform Novalis's ideas. Indeed, it is precisely the act of distancing from the self that he characterizes as the highest task of education: "... to take command of one's transcendental

self—to be at once the I of its I” (MO 28). As part of his intensive study of Fichte during 1796, Novalis had set out to redefine the relation between the intuitive and cognitive functions of the self, between feeling and reflection, content and form. Through an interactive process that Novalis calls *ordo inversus*, as the self reaches consciousness of itself these two functions come together, subject and object becoming one. This insight underlies Novalis’s theory of representation and his vision of the practice of philosophy as art.

As a creative dynamic, the concept of potentiation or reflection, exemplified in the phrase “the I of its I,” is at the heart of Romantic aesthetics. It is defined by Friedrich Schlegel in terms such as poetry of poetry and philosophy of philosophy, signifying a continuous progression of ever greater intensity and power. But for Novalis the reflection formula has more than purely intellectual force; the *ordo inversus* is infused with a characteristic sense of mystical understanding. He embraces the common goals of the Schlegel circle but endows them with a larger dimension: “The world must be made Romantic. . . . To make Romantic is nothing but a qualitative raising to a higher power” (LFI 66). Raising the self to the power of itself is perhaps the most consequential of all the Romantic reflection formulas, since it describes a progressive mental act whereby, in perfect self-knowledge, one’s gaze is simultaneously extricated from the bounds of individuality. Not forgetful absorption in the self but the converse, critical contemplation, is the goal: “As we behold ourselves—we give ourselves life” (MO 102). Through the *feeling* of the self *reflecting* on itself, transcendent or magical truth may be revealed.

The coinage “logological” shows a new application of the reflection formula. The notebooks that complement *Miscellaneous Observations* are concerned for the most part with different aspects of philosophy in the past, present, and future. Novalis defines his own practice as “logological,” meaning the activity of logic raised to the power of itself or reflecting on its own nature, where “logic” is used in a nontechnical sense to equate “philosophical discourse.” “Logology,” therefore, is the process of self-conscious reflection on the practice of philosophy, the word itself implying a progressive movement or growth toward a new, higher stage. Novalis restates the grounding principles of his thought: that philosophy is possible at all derives from the ability of the intelligence to act on itself (LFI 22). Philosophy begins with the act of transcending the self (LFI 79).

In a retrospective glance at the evolution of philosophy, Novalis does not undertake a review of historical figures in “lexicographical” or

“philological” fashion, a method he will later deplore (TF 34). It is rather a kind of typology of the organic growth that he describes elsewhere in the metaphor of the seed and the plant. Late-eighteenth-century notions of human progress commonly adopted a triadic pattern, seeing in it evolution from a primitive or chaotic phase through a stage of searching and experimentation toward ultimate resolution. Novalis employs this pattern as he traces three phases of philosophy passing through a process of growth and change (LFI 13). None is identified with a specific historical period, although the third and last may be assumed to be Novalis’s own time or, more properly, the age that was about to dawn. He and his fellow Romantics were conscious of the symbolism of the new century, an awareness that informs much of their writing on history, politics, and culture.

Novalis’s brief overview culminates in a presaging of the philosophy of the new age, when rational argument and intuition will come together in an all-embracing kind of philosophy that is also art. It is the artist who will achieve a necessary synthesis both within himself and, through contemplation of himself, in his vision of the transcendental: “The complete representation of true spiritual life, raised to consciousness through this action, is *philosophy kat exochen*.” The universe of the spiritual or of magical truth reflected in art becomes “the kernel or germ of an all-encompassing organism—It is the beginning of a true *self-penetration of the spirit* which never ends.” That art should be perceived as the ultimate phase of philosophy shows Novalis moving radically in the direction of bringing together all dimensions of intellectual life into a whole that is grounded in representation. This vision is guided by the idea of the *ordo inversus*, whereby subject becomes object, self becomes nonself, the symbol becomes the symbolized, and philosophy becomes poetry. The key to these transformations is found in language, the primary site of representation.

The later eighteenth century was a time of much speculation on the origin and nature of language. Rousseau, Herder, and many others differentiated human speech from the articulations of animals by reference to the concept of “instinct,” which was believed to be weak in human beings in comparison with animals. It was therefore held that language must be a function of reason, something other than instinct, and arrived at by imitation and analogy. When we read what Novalis has to say about language, however, it is arresting to find a different position that is much closer to theories widely accepted today. *Miscellaneous Observations* and the *Logological Fragments* as well as the *Monologue*, a short essay on language, include many passages that show that Novalis believed language to