

**Novalis: Spirit of a New Age**

by

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In considering the life and work of 'Novalis', Count Friedrich von Hardenburg, several factors have to be taken into account. First of all, we should try to see him as he was in his own life-time and then turn to the inspired writer revealed to us through the work he left behind. In this work Rudolf Steiner saw the potential means by which mankind could be rightly guided into the new era of the future. The historical and geographical background of a writer such as this is important, for from it the personality of the man himself gradually emerges in its true stature. All the creative work of Novalis was death at the age of barely thirty. Each of these years displays a new facet of his genius – we see the philosopher and natural scientist at work, the writer of beautiful fables and fairy tales, the novelist and the mystic poet of Christianity. To reach an understanding of these writings – some of which are uncompleted – means a transformation and vitalization of our thinking, marking it an adequate tool to grasp the *act of becoming* rather than allowing it to rest in a mere comprehension of the past in whose creation we have had no part. We can be greatly helped in this both by immersing ourselves in the living language Novalis himself used and by immersing our own living spirit in the individuality that he is *now*, leading his past endeavours towards their future goal. From this basis we can make the effort to discover for ourselves this poet-philosopher as the pioneer who guides us through the period of metamorphosis which humanity has to undergo, and is the bearer of the new cognition of the Christ within the Michael stream of the future.

In the case of Goethe's conception of the of the world, leading it further into the new form of the Spiritual Science of Anthroposophy: in the case of Novalis gives us only glimpses of an ultimate synthesis – glimpses of a vast vision of the world as a whole. Yet we can through these glimpses, incomplete as they may be, see the possibilities afforded us. We may regard them as small seeds which contain in a great power of germination in our own time. This is what we might term 'Novalis *now*'.

Novalis in his own time had already gained the highest recognition in his own country. Then, gradually, the non-German world began with Thomas Carlyle's Essay in

1829. Carlyle, with his profound knowledge of German literature that no student could pass him by without attention. He wrote: ‘...Novalis, a man of the most indisputable talent, poetical and philosophical; whose opinions, extraordinary, nay altogether wild and baseless as they often appear, are not without a strict coherence in his own mind, and will lead any other mind, that examines them faithfully, into endless considerations; opening the strangest inquiries, new truths, or new possibilities of truth, a whole unbelief or denial, the deepest questions await us.’

Under the deep impression of Carlyle’s essay F. S. Stallknecht of Harvard University translated Novalis’ novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* in 1842 and wrote in his preface: ‘Novalis resembles among late writers the sublime Dante alone, and like him sings to us an unfathomable mystical song. Very different from that of many imitators who think that they can assume and lay aside mysticism as they would a mere ornament.’

M. J. Hope, the translator of Novalis’ *Fragments, Hymns to the Night* and other works. Wrote in the American edition: ‘Thinkers such as Pascal. Coleridge and Novalis arise at intervals – to rouse men’s mind from their lazy acquiescence in the conventional. All those who are not bound by the chains of dogma or prejudice, all who are real seekers after truth, must receive with gratitude these sparks and flashes of a deep-thinking spirit.’

Maurice Maeterlinck introduced Novalis to the French-speaking world late in the nineteenth century. This great Belgian poet. Author of *Pelleas and Melisande* and *The Blue Bird* also translated many of the *Fragments*. In 1895 he uttered these memorable words: ‘He (Novalis) does not torment himself. He never seeks himself in fear and trembling. He looks down on the scene below with gentle detachment. He gazes at the world with the attentive curiosity of an idle angel, distracted by far-away memories.’ But the first real re-awakening of the poet-philosopher from the darkness of the mid-eighteenth century happened through the spiritual research of Rudolf Steiner, who opened up wide vistas of the destiny of this being we know as Novalis, bringing coherence into our picture of his life and work. Today, over two hundred years since the birth of Novalis, the growth of his spiritual stature has not been arrested.

Friedrich von Hardenburg was born on 2 May, 1772 at the Castle of Oberwiedenstadt in Lower Saxony. From behind the historical personage there emerges with ever enhanced significance the creative genius who chose to call himself ‘Novalis’.

This pseudonym has its roots in family history: in previous centuries several Hardenburgs had taken the name ' von Rode' (from the German verb 'roden', which means 'to clear the land') the latinised version of which is ' de novali'. The name thus seems to have meant 'one who clears the land – a path-finder or pioneer'. The destiny of Novalis was bound up with the very fact of this symbolic pen-name. Novalis was a sickly child, dreamy-eyed and slow to develop. His father, Count Erasmus von Hardenburg, who was in the Army in this youth, was now a director of the Saxon Salt Works. Having led a wild and free life, he changed his character completely after the death of his wife and became a dignitary of the Lutheran sect who called themselves 'Pietists'. It is interesting to see the whole cultural and religious situation of the times into which Novalis was born. From France came the movement of 'Enlightenment', which we might consider as equivalent to the present-day 'Intelligentia', and whose chief representatives were the French writers Diderot, Corneille and Voltaire, proudly calling themselves 'Free-thinkers'. This new movement also took hold of Germany and here it was represented by Moses Mendelssohn (grandfather of the composer) and writers such as Hamann, Nicolai and Lessing – the last, the noblest of them all. Lessing's strong love of justice and scorn of narrow intolerance are well expressed in his play 'Nathan the Wise', as is his universal attitude to various religions and their equality. Truth was superior to mere knowledge and out of it came the rationalistic attack or dogmatic Christianity.

'Enlightenment' was the ensign of the Age of Reason, raised against the highly charged emotionalism of the Romanticism which flowered at the time. The search for 'The Blue Flower' was the ideal quest of the romantic poets and Novalis was the finest representative among them.

Between these two opposing cultural streams stood Goethe, a giant, accentuating these polarities by his unifying idea of metamorphosis, which culminated in the union Science, Art and Religion.

When the strict and dour father of Novalis decides to send his ten-year-old son to the fraternity of the Church, hoping he might there be confirmed in the pietistic tradition, the boy strongly resisted the orthodoxy of the Brotherhood and his resentment turned into open revolt. His father despaired of him and the bitterest blow of all was his refusal to stay with the Brotherhood, the 'Herrenhuter' (Herrenhut is a town in Saxony, hence the

name). The best solution, though surrender on the part of the father, was to send the boy to his uncle at Lucklum in Brunswick.

To the boy, his uncle's estate, Lucklum, acquainted him with an altogether different aspect of the life of the times. It was the new era, marked by wit, elegance and fashion, irony and irreverence. Here, in his uncle's library, the boy found works that would never have crossed the threshold of his puritanical father's house. There was Goethe's early tale *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the works of Wieland and Lessing, Shakespeare and Cervantes and the books of the French Encyclopaedists, Diderot, Voltaire and d' Alembert. It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast between the puritan community of his home surroundings and the sophisticated Rococo world of the country house at Lucklum. Here, there were countless guests – officers from Prussia, knights of the Order of the Electorate of Saxony, poets and politicians. Unwittingly they drew the dreamy, unsophisticated boy into their atmosphere of rationalistic scepticism allied with the 'Enlightenment's' tendency towards intellectual snobbery.

What the uncle envisaged for his nephew was an important career in the Government service. He saw him as a future Minister of the Saxon Cabinet and was concerned with moulding him into a man of the world. The uncle cultivated the social graces of the rural aristocracy while the father banned all these social forms and ways as sinful. Under the impact of these conflicts the boy soon became aware of himself as an individual and acquired an astonishing independence of judgment. The young Friedrich's thirst for knowledge was all-encompassing. He now requested from his uncle an Italian grammar and a catalogue of Italian books. This was a period of ferment and most importance during this time was his approach to the world of antiquity. This meant another step towards independence. He became familiar with the works of Euripides, Aeschylus, Theocritus and others. He went to Eisleben to attend the upper classes of the 'Gymnasium', the traditional German High School, where he lived in the home of the Principal who himself taught him the classical languages. As a member of the upper form at the 'Gymnasium', he became wholly immersed in the study of antiquity. However, all the translation he had made were imitations or mere student exercises, revealing no poetic or linguistic originality. Yet it seems as though a deeper wisdom guided the immature hand as it leafed through the books – suddenly halting at certain places – for finally

words welled up from his very depth, freely flowing, neither imitative nor laboured, but with primal force.

In the autumn of 1790 his father sent him to Jena to study law, where – as destiny would have it – he chose Schiller as a teacher and gained in him an elder friend. This occurred during the second year of Schiller's active professorship. For the first time in his life Friedrich von Hardenburg found himself in the *living* presence of a genius. This time it was not the dim spirit of some dead reformer that moved the young student. Here 'was a great man in the flesh'. But the Schiller whom Friedrich knew was not the lyric and dramatic poet, but the philosopher and historian.

Schiller's study of Kant's philosophy lay just ahead of him. Kant exerted a wide influence at that time. His work became Friedrich von Hardenburg's first introduction to philosophic thought, arousing the interest that was to become the guiding star of his creative work; there is, however, no proof that he became an ardent follower of Kant. To his creative and artistic mind, Kant's philosophy became, rather, a source of inner conflict. There can be no doubt whatever that the influence of Schiller was the crucial experience of his years in Jena. The enthusiasm Friedrich felt for Schiller was more than uncritical hero worship. To him, Schiller was not merely an authority on history, he was the poet of philosophy, a creative artist, concerned with the history of the world, the creator of the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, in fact, one of mankind's greatest teachers.

But Friedrich's father now decided to recall his son from Jena and send him instead to the University of Leipzig. Returned to his home, the young man wrote a letter to Schiller, vowing unswerving loyalty and assuring his friend that he would fight for him against all his enemies with the 'fiery zeal of ELIAS, who drowned the priest of Baal, the enemy of the One and Only God, in the river Kidron'. (Here Novalis erred. Elias drowned the priest of Baal in the *River Kishon* at the foot of Mount Carmel. Whereas according to the gospel of St. John ch. 18 'Jesus crossed the *Brook Kidrom* (Cedron) with his disciples, among them John, the Evangelist, and went into a Garden', i.e. Gethsemane.)

Three weeks after his twenty-first birthday Friedrich enrolled at the University of Wittenberg. Here, wherever he turned he was treading the same ground once trod by

Luther. Here, at the scene where Luther nailed his 95 theses against the pope and the practice of Indulgencies on the door of the Court Church, Friedrich at last completed his law studies. He also immersed himself in the study of ecclesiastical history. In the history of the Church he sought to trace *the true evolution of Christianity*.

At the time Friedrich's friends became more and more disturbed by the manner in which he scattered his studies. How dabbled in history, without becoming a historian, he pursued mathematics, without system; and his scientific interests were casual. His studies in ecclesiastical history occupied but odd hours – yet he was inescapably an emulator of Schiller. So we find him seeking desperately to find his equilibrium between the extremes of Jena, Leipzig and Wittenberg.

Friedrich then went to Arnstadt as a law clerk in the District Justice Court but in the evenings he pursued his own studies. On 17 November, 1774 he started on an official journey with his senior associate which took him to the estate of Captain von Rockenthien. Here he met Sophie von Kuhn. The hour of destiny had struck. The relationship with Sophie von Kuhn and the events which emerged from it cannot be easily understood by conventional standards. Sophie was not yet thirteen years old, her womanhood was unawakened, she was a schoolchild who still had difficulties with her spelling, uncertainly putting down her words in the swabian dialect of Saxony. She was ten years younger than von Hardenburg and had led a sheltered life in the house of her stepfather, von Rockthien.

The spontaneity of her sunny, childlike nature enthralled von Hardenburg from the first moment, but this does not explain the awakening of his soul and the enhancement of his spirit that sprang from their meeting, giving force to his whole life. It is impossible to believe that his soul had ever before been touched by such an inexorable faith in the destiny of love such as Sophie's – it overwhelmed his whole being. On Sophie's thirteenth birthday the two became secretly engaged, but only a year later she fell ill and he idealized her serious illness his love and devotion seemed redoubled. On Sophie's fourteenth birthday, when she had scarcely recovered, the engagement was publicly announced. In July, 1796 the disease erupted anew and Sophie lay at point of death following an operation. She suffered agonies at the clinic of the Court and the first

sorrows and forebodings of death over shadowed their youthful happiness. Four days after her fifteenth birthday Sophie died.

Von Hardenburg henceforth began – like Orpheus to seek her in the underworld of his soul. Her death became the rebirth of his spirit. All his preoccupations turned into brooding melancholy and his former interests gave way to contemplative calm. His being found its centre. The earthly name of his departed bride fused with the symbol of the *heavenly Sophia* and gave birth to the mystery of love by which Friedrich von Hardenburg became the poet NOVALIS. This love purified Novalis and remains an unique even in his life, utterly individual in character. The spirit of Novalis developed, Against the background of Fichte's philosophy of the Ego, Novalis developed a living awareness of the Ego's own being.

When Goethe heard of Sophie's illness he had visited her as she lay at the clinic in Jena. He related how deeply moved he was at the sight of her innocent suffering. On the Good Friday after Sophie's death Novalis wrote to a friend: 'I shall not conceal from you that I could not regard Goethe as the apostle of beauty had he not been moved by the very sight of her. Surely it is not passion, it is too inexorable this feeling that she is one of the noblest, idealest figures ever to walk the earth.'

Novalis felt that from this death new powers of healing, of endurance and of resistance were born in his soul. A new inner life began to blossom in him. Sophie's death had fallen during Lent. About Easter he himself had felt as if he were to follow her in death. He struggled with the temptation of suicide. But during that time he also had an experience quite new in nature and importance. He wrote: 'When going for a walk it was my joy to grasp the true meaning of Fichte's Ego and this concept of the Ego Struck me like a flash of intuition. What I feel for Sophia is not love but religion. Absolute love, independent of the heart – love founded in faith such love is religion.' A single lapidary phrase rose like a guiding star on his destined path: 'Christ and Sophia.'

Novalis' inexhaustible imagination conceived soaring plans for work. Thoughts which particularly inspired him were those of the philosopher Schleiermacher: 'Every man is a priest to the degree that he draws others into himself and into the field he has mapped out as his own,' in him from the priest and seer. The picture Novalis created in

his contemporaries was expressed in these words: 'On the first impression his appearance recalled those devout Christians whose nature is simplicity itself. His deep-set eyes carried an ethereal fire. He was wholly a poet. He seemed to speak and to write from a deep sense which however, found it difficult to express itself in terms of the present. Few men have left such a deep impression on their contemporaries.'

Ludwig von Tieck, a writer of the time, who met Novalis in 1800 and became a great personal friend and, later, his editor, described him as he was shortly before his death at the age of barely twenty-nine:

Novalis was tall and slender and of noble proportions. He wore his light-brown hair in long clustering locks, which at that time was less unusual than it would be now; his hazel eyes were clear and glancing; and the colour of his face, especially of the fine brow, almost transparent. Hand and foot were somewhat too large, and without fine character. His look was at all times cheerful and kind. For those who distinguish a man only in so far as he puts himself forward, or by studious breeding, by fashionable bearing, endeavours to shine or to be singular, Novalis was lost in the crowd: to the more practiced eye, again, he presented a figure that might be called beautiful. In outline and expression his face strikingly resembled that of the Evangelist John, as we see him in the large noble painting by Albrecht Durer, preserved at Nurnberg and Munchen.

In speaking, he was lively and loud, his gestures strong: I never saw him tired: though we had talked far into the night, it was still only on purpose that he stopped, for the sake of rest, and even then he used to read before sleeping. Tedium he never felt, even in oppressive company, among mediocre men; for he was sure to find out one or other who could give him yet some new piece of knowledge, such as he could turn use, insignificant as it might seem. His kindness, his frank bearing, made him a universal favourite: his skill in the art of social intercourse was so great that smaller minds did not perceive how high he stood above them. Though in conversation he delighted most to unfold the depths of the soul, and spoke as inspired of the regions of invisible worlds, yet he was mirthful as child; would jest in artless gaiety, and heartily give-in to the jestings of his company. Without vanity, without learned haughtiness, far from every affectation and hypocrisy, he was a genuine, true man, the purest and loftiest embodiment of a high immortal spirit.

With the writing of the *fragments* Novalis began his creative work and referred to them as literary 'seedlings'. These fragmentary flashes of insight matured slowly. Effecting transformation. They marked the starting point of the way in which the thinker was to become the poet, the poet in turn the seer. For him, philosophy was the altar on which poetry received the consecration of priesthood. Philosophical thinking guarded him against the danger of mere emotionalism and brought him clarity, balance and self-discipline. These qualities became the prerequisites of Novalis' recognition of Goethe's significance. "The Goethe's natural scientific writings. Novalis was a pioneer when he proclaimed prophetically that Goethe was the first true physicist of his time and has, in fact, made history in the field of physics. For Novalis, Goethe the physicist occupies the same position in the field of physics as does Goethe the poet to other poets. The characterization of Goethe's perception of the world was carried even further through Novalis. He observed with unique precision Goethe's imagination, his reason and power of abstract thought in a new light. He never abstracts without at the same time constructing the object to which the abstraction corresponds. This power of abstract thought with creative synthesis marks Goethe's method of 'Apperceptive Judgment' (*anschauende Urteilskraft*) as Goethe himself described it almost a generation later. (We may render it as perception of living Idea in the very act of seeing. It is what enable Goethe to perceive the Ur-plant in every actual plant.) In Goethe's work Novalis saw the perfect indivisible union of art and science. Here, too, he was a pioneer in the understanding of Goethe. In his notes, referring to Goethe he writes:

'In Goethe freedom grows with culture and the readiness of the thinker. The poet is but the highest stage of the thinker. The division between the poet and the thinker is only on the surface, in reality there is a deep invisible union. For the truth and the discipline within him are even more exemplary than they seem.' In his interpretation of Goethe's 'Fairytale' Novalis used Goethe's own concept of metamorphosis, his morphological thoughts about polarity and enhancement. His final interpretation of the 'Beautiful Lily' is found in his *Fragments*: 'Perfection', he writes, 'speaks not merely on its own. It expresses the whole world related to itself. That is why perfection of every kind is shrouded by the veil of the Eternal Virgin which the slightest touch dissolves into the seer's cloud chariot. She is the manifestation of a higher World. The true fairytale

must be a prophetic presentation, an idealized presentation, an absolute presentation all in one.'

The study of Goethe's fairytale became the starting point for Novalis' Magic Idealism.

Novalis was a philosopher with no systematic structure of ideas. The path of his philosophy led from Kant's dogmatism to Fichte's Ego-philosophy and at last to magic idealism an 'omnipotent organ in philosophy'. His fundamental formulation of his magic idealism reads: 'The world must be romanticised', by which he means, 'a qualitative raising to a higher power'. It was for him an inner faculty. 'In this operation the lower self. This activity is still wholly unknown.' It is an act of imagination, an activity of the highest order and marks the highest mission of self-development to attain what Novalis called: THE EGO OF ONE'S OWN EGO.

The basic question of his magic idealism is whether supersensible knowledge is possible? According to Kant pure mathematics and pure science refer to the forms of an outer sensibility. 'What science then', asks Novalis, 'refers to the forms of inward sensibility? Is there still another way open for going beyond oneself, reaching other beings or being affected by them?'

The answer is given in the thoughts of his Magic Idealism. Novalis considered this Idealism as an attempt at a universal approach to the wisdom of the bible. He thought of the prototype of his 'bible' as a universal encyclopedia in the sense in which he found it in Goethe's Fairytale as 'grand history symbolically rejuvenated... The Bible begins nobly with Paradise, the symbol of Youth, and concludes with the Eternal Kingdom, the Holy City... The history of every individual man should be a bible'. The 'Bible' is for Novalis the synthesis of knowledge art, and religion. It comprises future it is apocalyptic. He questions further: 'Cannot the preparation of several gospels be envisaged? Must it always be historical? Is there not a gospel of the future? Are there not higher influences within me to blaze a trail of my own into the primal world?'

This 'primal world' of his own becomes for Novalis what he called 'The Lore of Man'. Proceeding by the Goethean method which all organic processes govern, he arrived at the ultimate cognition that these were living forces of human nature too: 'When

the spirit dies, it becomes man' (inhalation). 'When man dies, he becomes spirit' (exhalation). 'May there not be death yonder as well and its fruit earthly birth?

'Novalis has learned something of the deeper layers of human nature by listening to the secret and intimate rhythms of the heart. From the heart glows the fiery spell which his magic idealism has continued to cast over the world ever since its first appearance in his Fragments. Novalis ends his fragment on the magic idealism with a chant of the Resurrection. 'All the sun becomes a light in us. The manifestation of God the Father is light and warmth. These are the cosmic powers of love that kindle the flame is without, as well as within, cosmic light as well as human warmth. The resurrection applies not alone to mankind in general, but also to the individual man. It is an event immanent in the self.'

These 'spiritual seedlings' as Novalis called his thoughts on magic idealism have found rich soil in Anthroposophy. Here they will be nurtured and grow and mature to bring manifold fruits in the future. This need for a new growth of Anthroposophy into the future was Rudolf Steiner's deepest concern and was closest to his heart throughout his life until the very end. Therefore he refers to these 'spiritual seedlings' in the magic idealism of Novalis in the lecture given at Dornach on Michaelmas Eve, 1924, and known to us as The Last Address.

Though given at Michaelmas, our thoughts turn to it at St. John's-tide also. Dr. Steiner referred his listeners to the chapter in his book Christianity as Mystical Fact on the miracle of the Raising of Lazarus, Where he dwelt on the mysteries concerning Lazarus and the Beloved Disciple. In the Last Address he opens up to us yet wider connections into the past, taking us to Elias and St. John the Baptist, gradually bringing us, through Raphael, into our present time, showing us the true significance of the being, Novalis. He said on this occasion:

When we read the Fragments of Novalis, and give ourselves up to the life that flows so abundantly in them, we can discover the secret of the deep impression they make on us. Whatever the eye can see and recognize as beautiful, whatever we have before us in immediate sense-reality – all this, through the magic idealism that lives in the soul of Novalis, appears in his poetry with a well-nigh heavenly splendour. The meanest

and simple material thing – with the magic idealism of his poetry he can make it live again in all its spiritual light and glory.

And so we see in Novalis a radiant and splendid forerunner of the Michael stream which is now to lead you all, while you live; and then, after you have gone through the gate of death, you will find in the spiritual supersensible worlds all those others – among them also the being of whom I have been speaking to you to-day – all those with whom you are to prepare the work that shall be accomplished at the end of the century, and that shall lead mankind past the great crisis in which it is involved.

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