

Introduction



“Reading” Novalis

Between April and July 1797, the twenty-five-year-old Saxon aristocrat and former apprentice law clerk Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772–1801) kept a journal that captured the moods, thoughts, and observations that followed the deaths of his fifteen-year-old fiancée, Sophie von Kühn (1782–1797), and his dearly loved younger brother, Erasmus (1774–1797). This journal, which consists of short, day-to-day entries, is complemented biographically by what has been preserved of Hardenberg’s letters. Taken together—and read in conjunction with surviving notebook entries and fragments written shortly before, during, and shortly after this period of time—the journal and letters shed light on a process of maturation and self-discovery during which Friedrich von Hardenberg reimagined his identity.

Novalis, the name Hardenberg chose as his poetic inscription, signified past and future. It had roots in Hardenberg family history, as we shall see. But it also heralded things to come: namely, that brief springtide of literary brilliance known as early German romanticism. This moment had its center in Jena and occurred during the years that Hardenberg did his most significant poetic work: 1798–1801.

The story of Hardenberg’s transformation—the birth of Novalis—has been told many times: how he met by chance and immediately fell in love with twelve-year-old Sophie, a “mere quarter hour” that changed his life; how Sophie and he became engaged, at first secretly in fear of his parents’ reaction; how Sophie took ill and died just a few days past her fifteenth birthday; how he mourned her to the verge of suicide until, like Dante with Beatrice, he found himself united with her again in a moment of ecstatic, mystical vision; how from this

moment the mere mortal Friedrich von Hardenberg gave way to the immortal poet Novalis, romantic herald of a Golden Age. Howsoever possible, Sophie became the center of Hardenberg's poetic universe, the point around which his creative identity constellated. She was, as Hardenberg called her, his "religion," and his continued devotion to her became an article of personal faith. The famous visionary moment at Sophie's grave, which he recorded briefly in a journal entry dated May 13, 1797, became inspiration for the third hymn in *Hymns to the Night*, which may have been drafted at that time.

Once when I was shedding bitter tears, dissolved in pain, my hope disappearing, and I stood alone by the barren hill that hid the form of my life in confined darkness—lonely as no other has ever been, driven by unspeakable fear—powerless, only a thought of misery remaining.—As I looked frantically for help, unable to go forward or turn back, as I clung to the fleeting, extinguished life with endless longing:—then, out of the blue distances—from the heights of my former ecstasy, came a shiver of twilight—and at once the bond of birth broke apart—light's manacles. Away fled the splendor of the earth, along with my sorrow—and with it my sadness flowed into a new, fathomless world—you inspiration of night, you heavenly sleep, you overcame me—the countryside was exalted; my newborn spirit soared. The mound became a cloud of dust—and through the cloud I saw the transfigured countenance of my beloved. Eternity reposed within her eyes—I seized her hands, and the tears became a sparkling, unbreakable bond of union. Millennia, like thunderheads, swept upwards in the distance. I wept ecstatic tears upon her neck to welcome the new life. It was the first, incomparable dream—and since then I have held an eternal, changeless faith in the heaven of night and its light, the beloved. (I, 135)

This poeticized moment of erotic-mystical yearning and transfiguration became within a few years after the poet's death a widely accepted key to his biography. The apotheosis of Sophie von Kühn—her conflation with Sophia, Maria, and Isis—became likewise a paradigmatic axiom for the understanding of Novalis and his work.

While Hardenberg, for a variety of reasons, played no small part in this mythic endeavor, perhaps the most significant impetus for the myth's acceptance came from Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), Hardenberg's friend and literary executor. Ironically, Tieck never met Sophie; Tieck and Hardenberg became friends in 1799, two years after

Sophie's death. But Tieck's revised introduction to the third edition of the Novalis *Schriften* (1815; edited by Ludwig Tieck and Friedrich Schlegel) brought to full expression the tendency to idealize Novalis, and Tieck's interpretative statements regarding the biography of Novalis were decisively important in setting the agenda for Hardenberg's posthumous reception.¹ Tieck ignored or minimized the complexity of Hardenberg's interests and activities, celebrated the poet's relation to Sophie as a rite of passage to supernatural realms, and conflated references to Dante, Raphael, and John the Evangelist to create a literary-spiritual fable with enormous popular appeal.

This extratextual glamour of the Novalis mythology became stunningly persuasive after the poet died. Indeed, it dramatically increased Hardenberg's readership, which during his lifetime was confined to a small circle of family and friends. Within less than a decade after Hardenberg's death from tuberculosis in 1801, the biography of Novalis had become one of the foremost Romantic texts: a *Märchen* (fairy tale) that presented an archetypal tale of *Sehnsucht* (yearning) and longing for the hereafter.

Suitable iconography soon appeared.² Idealized, heroic busts of Novalis became shrines for romantic pilgrims. Illustrations to questionably edited editions of the dead poet's works showed a similar representational trend. It became common to refer to Hardenberg as Novalis in regard to the entire span of his life. When Hardenberg's dear friend and mentor, August Cölestin Just—who knew Hardenberg from the early days in Tennstedt before Hardenberg took the pen name Novalis—referred to the poet in a biography (1805) as “Friedrich von Hardenberg: Assessor of Salt Mines in Saxony and Designated Department Director in Thuringia,” he was criticized for his gauche accent on correct historical detail and for his philistine ignorance of the sublimely mythic and spiritual. “It is an impossible task to describe Hardenberg's life, but Just has failed to achieve even the least that's possible,” Hardenberg's cousin Hans Georg von Carlowitz wrote to his wife in 1806. And a few years later, in another reader's reaction to the same text by Just:

Vienna, January 25, 1810

Justinus Kerner to Ludwig Uhland in Tübingen

I am sending you this excerpt [from Just's biography] because I know that it will interest you immensely. But it makes a rather extraordinary and disturbing impression

to think of Novalis as an official or director of a salt mine. That is horrible!! I would have pictured his life completely differently. The young Miss Charpentier also disturbs the poetry. But his death is so transcendently beautiful. (IV, 550)

This letter is typical of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers who implicitly assumed that Hardenberg was Novalis.

Yet, as the included texts in this collection help make clear, Hardenberg's relation to Sophie and his reaction to her death are highly complex, contradictory, and layered. And Sophie's death was not the only crisis that befell Friedrich von Hardenberg in the spring of 1797—nor was it perhaps the most fateful. Less noted but personally devastating to the poet was the loss of his younger brother, Erasmus, who died only a few weeks after Sophie, on Good Friday 1797. The news of Erasmus's death reached Friedrich in Tennstedt on Easter Sunday, after he returned from a visit to Sophie's grave. Hardenberg had gone to Tennstedt to avoid witnessing his brother's death at their parents' home in nearby Weissenfels. During life, Erasmus shared Friedrich's enthusiasm for Sophie and her close-knit and amiable family unit at the country estate in Grüningen. Erasmus's death, following so closely upon Sophie's, heightened the personal tragedy. It propelled Friedrich von Hardenberg into a crisis of mourning and survivor guilt far more profound than Sophie's death alone might have brought about. A later journal entry from July 1800, seven months before the poet died, reminds us how closely Hardenberg remembered and still felt this doubled loss: "Where Sophie and Erasmus waken, there can I be at lasting peace" (IV, 55).

"Reading" Novalis thus presents a special challenge and fascination for the twenty-first century. Because of the way life and poetry intersect, because of the deliberate strategies used by Hardenberg and others to conflate poetic reality and historical fact, and because of the strange phenomenon that to a great extent Hardenberg's life events *can* be read (or marketed) as a transcendent symbol or work of art, it is hard to resist reading Novalis as a still engagingly vital myth.

It is the purpose of this introduction and the accompanying translations of selected primary texts to allow readers of English to investigate this "birth of Novalis" from the crises and biographical imperatives of Friedrich von Hardenberg's life—in particular, the catalyzing events

that occurred during the crisis months of 1797 that this collection partially documents. It is during these months that Novalis is “born”—born, that is, as myth and persona, which became for many readers for many years the definitive interpretive key to Hardenberg’s brief but encompassing life’s work. It is during these months that Hardenberg invented his literary persona and discovered his authentic poetic voice: an achievement that he announced to his friend A. W. Schlegel in a letter dated February 1798. He had just become a full-time student at the prestigious Freiberg Mining Academy, and he wanted to reassure Schlegel that his enthusiastic study of scientific and technical subjects had not turned him into a positivist “simpleton.” The letter promised early future delivery of a manuscript.

The soon-to-arrive fragments will convince you of this—most of them are of older origin and have been merely revised. Your keen judgment may consign them to fire or flood—I renounce them completely to their fate. If you should have a desire to make a public use of them, I then would ask you to do so under the signature *Novalis*—a name once used by one of my ancestors and not entirely unfit for this purpose. (IV, 251)

The name Novalis first appeared publicly several weeks later in April 1798 with the publication of these edited and rearranged fragments known in English as *Pollen* or *Grains of Pollen* (*Blüthenstaub*) in the first issue of Friedrich Schlegel’s and A. W. Schlegel’s magazine *Athenaeum*. This pen name immediately caught on. In a certain sense, it became symbolic of the early-romantic reaction to the Enlightenment during the years 1798 to 1801—so much so that the name Novalis at times has subsumed within its aura all that is stereotypically “romantic.”

Finding Hardenberg, then, in Novalis—that is, learning to discriminate between facts of biography and facticities of myth—has become an important emphasis in recent decades of German scholarship. This has occurred since the publication of the historical-critical edition of Novalis’s writings in the latter part of the twentieth century. Prior to that, readers lacked access to a complete overview of Novalis’s works. Moreover, they often were misled in their appraisals by questionable or tendentiously edited editions of the surviving texts. Thorough scholarship has allowed for the chronological arrangement of the writings. And fortunate recovery of hitherto unpublished manuscripts has provided a clearer view of the range and complexity of the poet’s extensive

nonliterary professional life, which included an ambitious and highly successful (albeit short) career in the mining industry and civil administration—with poetry, as Richard Samuel commented, “emerging from this sum of intellectual and practical work” not at the beginning but at the end.³

For readers of English, one difficulty in achieving a nuanced overview of the poet’s life has been the scarcity of comprehensive translations, although since the 1990s several publications of hitherto unavailable fragment collections have appeared. Even so, Novalis reception in English retains a resonance of Thomas Carlyle’s early appreciative review, written in 1829. Carlyle, who relied on the partisan “Novalis” biographies written by Friedrich’s brother Karl von Hardenberg and expanded by Ludwig Tieck, promoted a reading of Novalis as the inscrutable, enigmatic, mystical poet of “the blue flower,” an attitude of perplexity carried forward even quite recently by Penelope Fitzgerald in her splendid novel of the same name. As Carlyle writes:

Novalis belongs to that class of persons, who do not recognize the “syllogistic method” as the chief organ for investigating truth, or feel themselves bound at all times to stop where its light fails them. Many of his opinions he would despair of proving in the most patient Court of Law; and would remain well content that they should be disbelieved there. He much loved and had assiduously studied Jakob Böhme and other mystical writers; and was, openly enough, in good part a Mystic himself. (99)

Hardenberg, however, did not intend solely to accent the mystical in choosing his evocative pen name. On the contrary, he appeared drawn to this name for reasons more aligned with personal ambition, and the name brings together contradictory strands of conservative family tradition and Enlightenment progress.

The name Novalis has roots in the Hardenberg family history. It reputedly dated to the thirteenth century when a certain Herr von Hardenberg came into possession of the estate Großenrode bei Nörten in Hannover and began to refer to himself as “von Rode” or as the Latinized “de Novali,” names that mean “one who clears new ground for cultivation” (Kluckhohn; Ritter) or, more simply stated in American vernacular, a pioneer.⁴ In German, the verb *roden* (from which we have the word *Rode* in *Großenrode*) means to cultivate a field or to turn up the earth for planting. According to a footnote on this

etymology in the historical-critical edition, the earliest known ancestors of the Hardenberg family, Hermann and Bernhard (circa 1190), chose the name de Novali or magna Novalis to honor their possession of the Großenrode estate; later, Bernhard's sons changed this name to de Hardenberg (IV, 834).

Paul Kluckhohn pointed out in his introduction to the first volume of the historical-critical edition that according to Hardenberg family tradition the poet spoke his pen name in Germanized fashion with the accent on the first syllable: N^óvalis. In this pronunciation, the name N^óvalis has affinities with the Latin *novus* (new). When Hardenberg proposed the name Novalis to the Schlegels as a pseudonym for his writings, the pronunciation apparently shifted to Novalis as we say the name today—perhaps one reason for this shift, notes Kluckhohn, was that the Schlegels were not familiar with the Hardenberg family's accustomed pronunciation. The Schlegels, Tieck, and subsequent readers favored this pronunciation, and either the poet tolerated the misunderstanding or was indifferent to the change.

As a term designating “one who settles or cultivates a new land or clearing in the woods,” the name Novalis has the connotations of groundbreaking independence as well as overtones of trespass. It is suggestive of a person who crosses boundaries of settled assumption to discover and possibly claim unknown, uncharted territories. The activities of such individuals implicitly put under question the norms, assumptions, and ideologies of settled societies. Such persons implicitly act as heralds of a new age or order,⁵ seed bearers, revolutionaries, or pioneers—this latter word now understood in its martial connotation, which is in keeping with revolutionary ethos of early romanticism.

The prefatory fragment to *Pollen* suggests all these shades of meaning when it makes the bold but latently ironic claim, “Friends, the soil is poor / We must scatter abundant seed to ensure even a middling harvest.” Such ambiguous though highly suggestive juxtapositions of past traditions and future renewals are characteristic of early-romantic literature generally and Hardenberg's writings specifically. His pen name is both the signature of tradition and a challenge to the same—much in keeping with the intentions of the Schlegels and their *Athenaeum*, which Hardenberg hoped would inaugurate “a new age in world literature.”

Hardenberg's decision to “write” himself as Novalis signified the discovery of his authentic voice. But poetry was not his sole concern. In the months leading up to the announcement of his literary persona

in 1798, Hardenberg decisively ratified an earlier decision to follow his father into a career in salt mine administration by enrolling as a student at the world-famous Freiberg Mining Academy. He had previously been a poetaster and student of law at Jena, Leipzig, and Wittenberg and had undertaken a strenuous self-education in the field of contemporary philosophy, encouraged by the examples of Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Richard Samuel (*Der berufliche Werdegang Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, 1929) and Gerhard Schulz (*Der Berufsbahn Friedrich von Hardenbergs* (Novalis), 1963) have demonstrated that work, science, and professional accomplishment were at least equally important determinants—if not more so, at moments of crisis—as poetry and Sophie. After surveying the range of Hardenberg’s academic and professional achievements from 1798 to 1801 and noting the extreme diligence with which Hardenberg pursued his career as engineer, scientist, and mining administrator down to the most exacting details, Schulz concludes:

It can be proved furthermore that Hardenberg not only fulfilled his tasks conscientiously in an exemplary way but that he did so with the deepest inner propensity. The notion of a tortured double life spanned between burdensome daily grind and creative freedom of the spirit is foreign to his thinking, which relentlessly sought synthesis. (311)

One product of this relentless urge to synthesis is the so-called *Romantic Encyclopaedia*, or *Allgemeine Brouillon*, which was recently translated. This collection of fragments, “an extraordinary project to reunite all the separate sciences into one universal science” (*Novalis: Notes x*), was written in free moments during Hardenberg’s student years at the Freiberg Mining Academy. It is an example of Hardenberg drawing inspiration from science, technology, mathematics, and a host of other practical and theoretical disciplines—an example of how the name Novalis orients us as much toward a daylight world of post-Enlightenment enterprise as much as toward a nighttime world of mystic yearning for a lost Sophie.

Another characteristic expression of this progressive agenda to unite opposites is the term *magical idealism*.⁶ Hardenberg’s “discovery” of magical idealism in 1798 in the so-called *Teplitz Fragments* brought to expression an implicit but major theme of the 1797 journal and supporting letters. Magical idealism, as we shall see, is simultaneously Har-

denberg's attempt to articulate an organizing concept for early-romantic theory and a programmatic strategy for integrating Hardenberg's personal biography. The phrase, like the name Novalis, suggestively evokes a range of meanings. But as Richard Samuel pointed out, while the magical idealist fragments written in Teplitz in 1798 touch on a variety of subjects and ideas, the "main theme, however, remains *daily* or *ordinary* life as a departure point for magical idealism" (II, 517). The creative, playful sublimation of the ordinary-everyday into the poetic-mythic is very much the concern of this magical-idealist praxis. The same critical theme appears in Hardenberg's letters, and this "main theme" is highlighted during the crisis months of 1797 that the journal, in particular, documents. The sharp disjunctions of the journal entries—the rapid changes of tempo, focus, vocabulary, and context and the frequent, asyndetic use of a dash to connect, punctuate, or abruptly transition or juxtapose—relate us to this later magical-idealist project, which involves the construction of free, moral identity amid the random, ever-shifting, and often overlapping contingencies of daily life. The months that the journal documents, April to July 1797, serve as a critical workshop for this emerging ethos and constitute a turning point in Hardenberg's biography.

Such complex interchange of roles and identities—the ability to shift with consistent authenticity between spheres of activity that are outwardly mutually exclusive and to coordinate these spheres within an overarching creative ethos—is central to Hardenberg's poetics and to his emerging concept of identity. Hardenberg finds his vocation as Novalis when he discovers how to align the imperatives of individual biography with the archetypal persistence and patterns of the mythic, and he coins the name Novalis to mark this discovery, which touches on every aspect of his life after 1797.

This magical-idealist approach to identity construction mirrors themes common to the late eighteenth century—particularly in regard to the era's questioning of subjectivity and the era's radical use of aesthetic theory to trespass boundaries Immanuel Kant had delimited for philosophy.

By the latter decades of the eighteenth century, Kant had established the so-called experience of self-consciousness (the synthetic unity of apperception) as the highest founding principle of his philosophy when he brought together aspects of Gottfried Leibniz's and René Descartes's epistemology (apperception and *cogito*, respectively) into the concept of pure apperception (*reine Apperzeption*). For Kant, the *I*

which thinks itself must accompany all representation as a pre-given condition. In the moment of apperception, thinking turns back on itself to confirm the reality of its own existence and experience. Unlike Descartes, however, Kant divided the experience of cogito into two opposed realms: the realm of senses (*Sinnlichkeit*) and the realm of understanding (*Verstand*). His critical philosophy described the means by which these two realms achieved dynamic reconciliation as human knowledge. Such reconciliation can occur only by an act of will; without it, the two realms remain opposed: sensations lack conceptual content, while concepts lack sensible basis. By emphasizing the *means* by which sensations and concepts are conjoined via human understanding, Kant abandoned an older model of mimetic certainty in favor of something entirely new. Instead of passive receptivity toward the contents of sense perception, consciousness becomes the creator of content. Truth is no longer a matter of mere representation, but a synthetic, active achievement (judgment) of the human mind in which sense-given percepts follow rules of apperception that Kant called a priori categories of human judgment. The categories were for Kant necessary and general, hence lawful and objectively true. Their lawful mediation between percept and intellect guaranteed human objectivity, in contrast to the danger of mere associative fantasy, a danger posed by David Hume.

Yet, despite the assurance of the lawful operation of these categories of judgment (an operation that joined predicate to subject as valid truth propositions), the prior epistemological certainty of objective, mimetic representation was fatally undermined by Kant's philosophy—and with it, the way became open for the revisions of Jena romanticism, whose partisans make use of a "philosophical aesthetics" (Bowie) to extend Kant's insights in radical ways. For them, Kant poses philosophically the problem of the relationship between the world and human consciousness, asking how that relationship is sustained and what is its characteristic mode of functioning. With this turn from the emphasis on *whether* the world exists to *how* the world exists for the perceiving subject, the way is prepared for an understanding of truth as an activity of self-disclosure. For Hardenberg, Schlegel, and their contemporaries, the work of art *enables* truth to appear, but it no longer *presents* it. Likewise, criticism and critical discernment become essential adjuncts to the work of art, in that art, as mere artifact, is dumb.

Kant's so-called Copernican turn in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) was essential prerequisite for early-romantic theory in that it heralded the end of mimesis and the naïve realism of classicist Aristotelian aesthetics. Henceforth, knowledge is "psychologized,"⁷ in the sense that the givenness of objects exists through and within the activity of human knowing. All this occurs within the confines of synthetic unity of apperception, as it were, and analytic judgments set forth either ongoing, evident aspects of this synthetic activity or are the statements of logical certainty that result.

Yet, as Manfred Frank and others have explored in recent years,⁸ a problem remains here that the early romantics (specifically Friedrich Hölderlin at first and then Hardenberg) will diagnose. To do so, the early romantics turn to the etymology of the word *judgment* in the German language: *Urteilen* in the sense of *Urteilung* (the originary division of a preexistent ground). In direct philosophical statements or indirect poetic fragments (many of which were written during Hardenberg's time of engagement to Sophie), Hardenberg argued that there must be an ongoing, preexistent unity that underlies each individual act of judgment, which judgment catastrophically divides. Each act of judgment or division conceals and makes evident at the same time. It conceals the *originary unity* while at the same time making conceptually evident a single aspect of that unity insofar as the act of judgment raises such an aspect to the level of concept and thus makes it visible as truth. In accepting the evidence of this truth proposition, however, we simultaneously conceal or occlude the underlying unity of being, which makes the proposition possible at all. The hiddenness and unhiddenness of Truth occur simultaneously in each individual act of judgment, or in the operation of Kant's synthetic apperception overall. Being or unity never comes to expression except via differentiation and difference, occurring in time.

Consciousness is a being outside of being inside being.

But what is that?

This "outside of being" cannot be authentic being.

An inauthentic being outside of being is a likeness—Therefore, what is outside of being must be a likeness of being inside being.

It follows that consciousness is a likeness of being inside being.

(II, 106)

Being (*Sein*) cannot be thought, since thinking, in the above sense, necessitates the divisive, originary deed of judgment, which separates thinking from its ground. Nor can being be represented, since in order for it to be represented it must first fall out of being. This fall, however, is inevitable insofar as we are constrained by our present mental activity to make mental representations at all. We are aware of this inevitability to a greater or lesser extent. As Hardenberg wrote:

Philosophy is originally a feeling. The philosophical sciences conceptualize the intuitions of this feeling. It must be a feeling of inner, necessarily free relations. Philosophy always requires, therefore, something given—it is form—and yet real / and ideal at the same time, / like the originating act. Philosophy cannot be constructed. The limits of feeling are the limits of philosophy. Feeling cannot feel itself. (II, 113)

“Philosophical aesthetics,” wherein the subject attempts to determine the truth-content of the object world via self-referential exercise of its own activity of judgment—and the consequent calling into question of the grounds of subjectivity—appears historically in Jena in the 1790s, specifically during the years 1797 to 1801, which we designate as *die deutsche Frühromantik* or “German early romanticism.” These years coincide with Hardenberg’s mature activities as Novalis. Key early-romantic phrases such as *romantische Poesie*, “poeticization of philosophy,” “romanticization of the world,” or the need for a “new mythology” (or even the pen name Novalis) are means of characterizing a literary-philosophical strategy whereby all things (biography included) become potential works of art. The stage for this magical-idealist drama includes all: the earth, the state, companionable societies, an individual’s life, and everything at hand for human usage. In this respect, early romantics carry on the Enlightenment project of perfectibility while adjusting the means to this end. Hardenberg, for example in his journal, time and again returns to the theme of *Bildung* (education) as he perfects his work of mourning for Sophie. It is finally this emphasis on *Bildung*, which is characteristic of early romanticism though not the Sturm und Drang, that makes Hardenberg a Novalis and not a Werther. Significantly, he reads and rereads Goethe’s prototypical novel of *Bildung*, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, during these weeks. Werther dies; Hardenberg dies, too, in a manner of speaking, but he magically resurrects himself

and Sophie as symbols—works of art that give to the age and body of the early romantic era its signal “form and pressure.”

Werner Vordtriede remarked that “poetic symbols in this sense can only arise in the last years of the eighteenth century” (98), at that moment in history when the “I” feels itself cut off from the Absolute, from spirit or Being. It is a crisis moment for identity and for philosophy. Before that moment we do not find it possible in a general sense for the “I” to cognize itself in this way (and thus “consciousness,” so understood, was not a problem as such). Fichte’s *Ich-Lehre*, with its emphasis on selfactivity (*Selbsttätigkeit*, an idea that appears in Novalis’s writings many times), is an obvious sign of this change, following from Kant. “Only since Fichte is it possible to treat the object as a symbol of the subject,” Vordtriede writes (113); we might elaborate further in a postmodern context, following on the insights of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy: only since Fichte can thinking confront “the thesis of a dissolution of all processes of production in the abyss of the subject” (*Literary Absolute* 16). The poetization (*Poetisierung*) of the world that Hardenberg frequently mentions is, as Vordtriede points out, an attempt to confront the subject/object crisis that self-reflectivity brings about, with its consequent threat of spiritual diminishment and threatened death of the subject. Hardenberg’s goal of an encyclopedic “poetization of the world,” such as we see in the fragments entitled *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, is then nothing less than “the transformation of the visible world into this higher truth of the symbolic” (117)—his Novalis, a similar strategy.

In the mature fragments of Novalis, the “I” is conceived dynamically within a field of ever-shifting tensions and relationships. Here, for example, we encounter the term hovering (*Schweben*) as a means to draw attention to this dynamic.

All being, being itself, is nothing more than being free—hovering between extremes that must of necessity be united and separated. From this luminous point of hovering, all reality flows—everything is contained in it—object and subject exist through it, not it through them. I-ness or productive power of imagination, the hovering—determines, produces the extremes, between which it is hovered—This is a deception, but only in the realm of common understanding. Otherwise it is something thoroughly real, because the cause of it, hovering, is the origin, the mother of all reality, reality itself. (II, 266)

“Hovering” occurs in an intermediate zone and is itself paradoxically an agency of mediation and point of origin. Increasingly, the romantic subject defines itself as an intermediary or as an inhabitant of intermediary zones whose ironic distancing from the foundational absolutes of tradition, metaphysics, orthodox religion, or ideology allows the subject to maintain a tenuous freedom of expression and a hopeful degree of creatively independent, moral activity in the everyday world. The subject thus defined so freely to itself becomes in a sense symbolic; its open-endedness, mutability, and affinity with chaos, indeterminacy, and change invite an endless play of interpretative acts—or despair. The often-preferred contextual spaces for such playful interpretative acts are *liminal zones* (Turner): intermediate areas such as forests, caves, deep-shaft mines, mountainous or frozen wastes, nighttime and darkened landscapes, death, borderlands, open spaces of water, or impersonal vistas of anonymity in the developing cities. These liminal zones provide transitional realms of sliding, shifting meanings whose indefinite outlines are both sources of anxiety and invitations to playful, open-ended creativity and identity formations. The romantic subject has affinities for such zones and defines itself through these affinities. *Liminal personae* (threshold people) “are those who have slipped through or eluded the network of classifications that normally locates states and positions in cultural space” (Turner 95). They are those who have resituated their point of perspective outside that accepted grid. The threshold that they cross is “frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (Turner 95). In this sense, the name Novalis, with its connotations of “one who clears a [intermediary] space for cultivation in the woodland,” is an immediate historical antecedent to Martin Heidegger’s use of a similar trope to articulate his concept of *Lichtung* (clearing).

For the romantic subject, personal moral freedom lies in one’s ability to resist systematic closure even when the irresistible tendency of the world, human nature, and society is to ratify such closures. “*Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge,*” Novalis writes—“we search everywhere for the absolute (the unconditional), and find only things (the conditioned)” (II, 413). Whereas in later romanticisms the “I” is increasingly harried and defeated in this quest, early romantics such as Hardenberg cling optimistically to this ideal of indeterminacy and “hovering”; by doing so, they redefine chaos in a

positive, heuristic sense. When Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel call for the world to be romanticized or poeticized, for example, they partly mean that the subject must consent to abide in a fluid zone of indeterminacy and change from which free, creative/poetic (or ironic) possibilities arise. They advert to language questions raised earlier by Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) and by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) in reaction to critical philosophy, particularly as the early romantics move toward religious symbolism and the mythological—areas that Kant placed out of bounds because these liminal zones of indeterminacy threatened to compromise the healthy limits of reason and thus individual freedom. Paradoxically, Novalis found just the opposite to be the case.

A truly *synthetic* person is one who resembles many persons at once—a genius. Each person is the germinal point of an *infinite genius*. He is able to be divided into many persons, yet still remain one. The true analysis of person as such brings forth many persons—the *person* can only be individualized as persons, dissolution and dispersion. A person is a *harmony*—no admixture no movement—no *substance* such as “*soul*.” Spirit and person are one. (Energy is origin.) (III, 250–51)

The name that Hardenberg chose to symbolize his magical-idealist project, Novalis, is thus a complex glyph. It is simultaneously a landmark of personal, psychological integration, a means to articulate emergent themes of early-romantic theory (and its challenge to Enlightenment orthodoxy), and the beginning of Hardenberg’s successful attempt to translate personal events of historical biography into a metapersonal realm of myth.

The journal that Hardenberg kept from April to July 1797 becomes then from this perspective a highly relevant text in which the problems and themes of “magical idealism” are identified early on and worked on, as though in a laboratory. In this context, the journal should be read in relation to the fragments known as the *Fichte Studies* (1795/1796), those “Notes and Commentaries” (*Bemerkungen*) in which Hardenberg came to grip with Fichte’s philosophy and surmounted it.⁹ These fragments from the *Fichte Studies* were for many decades a highly relevant but unpublished and hence unappreciated dimension of the so-called *Sophie-Experience* (*Sophie-Erlebnis*) of the Grüningen years. More recent scholarship has done much to correct this blind spot, and recent translation has made these fragments available in English. These notes

and commentaries inspired by Fichte's work have emerged as a philosophical counterpoint to the more well-known and celebrated biographical events at Grüningen, Tennstedt, and Weissenfels—perhaps, in fact, they are the more crucial but hidden aspect of those events and that experience. Hardenberg's extensive marginal notes and musings on the borderland of Fichte's philosophy are the thorough-ground basis for a *Philo-sophie-Erlebnis* insofar as they provide the foundation for the construction of Novalis as myth and magical idealist text.

Hardenberg died in 1801, only three years after writing himself as Novalis. In an uncanny way, the events of Hardenberg's life do indeed support and illumine the stages of his poetic career. This element of his biography has, as I mentioned, long been appreciated. What is far more engaging for readers in a culture that is postmythological, postreligious, and secular (reactionary lapses into fundamentalism notwithstanding) is the inner developmental and symbolic process that Hardenberg followed to become Novalis. One can view this process in various ways. It is artistic or mythological, shamanic, postmodern, religious or depth psychological, "romantic" or subversively political and revolutionary to the degree that each of these nomenclatures is understood as signifying what for Novalis would have been a magical-idealist deed: the cooperation between the seen and the unseen—the unity of theory and praxis in an aesthetic realm as symbol—the mediation between the ordinary-everyday and the mythological-spiritual, and the hopeful millennialist transformation of the former as a result. This mutual interpenetration of the inner determinative reality of the subject and outer determinative reality of the object can be synthetic and creative, Novalis believed. Who or what does this shaping; where is the artist who creates this mythology out of life? This is a question that Hardenberg's biography and the texts and fragments that relate to his biography lead us to ask.

The Meeting with Sophie von Kühn

I had not been in Tennstedt for long when I made the acquaintance of the unforgettable maiden to whom I owe thanks for my character.
(IV, 310)

Early on the autumn morning of November 17, 1794, the apprentice law clerk Friedrich von Hardenberg, age twenty-three, in the company of his mentor and office supervisor Councilor August Cölestin Just

(1750–1822) and Just's twenty-six-year-old niece and resident housekeeper, Caroline, took a business trip by coach from the Just office in the small village of Tennstedt to consult a government official. The trip covered about ten kilometers. Near the village of Greussen, Friedrich von Hardenberg made the acquaintance of a young military man, twenty-five-year-old Lieutenant Adolph von Selmnitz (1769–1814). Selmnitz and Hardenberg quickly hit it off. The lieutenant captured the sanguine *Freiherr's* (baron's) attention with a tempting report. At a nearby estate in Grüningen, which was held in the keep of an affable country squire by the name of Captain von Rockenthien, there dwelled two lovely maidens. These stepdaughters to Rockenthien, who had taken possession of the Grüningen estate after his marriage to its gracious widow Wilhelmine von Kühn, were of an age to receive suitors, and the idyllic, domestic sociability of the estate encouraged amiable visitations, Selmnitz said.

The news came as music to young Hardenberg's ears. And for him, that first visit to Grüningen became an event of earth-shaking consequence.

Just several days earlier, following his father's advice if not explicit direction, he had arrived in Tennstedt to begin an apprentice year in civil service under the steady eye and capable official hand of August Cölestin Just. Friedrich's devout father had posted the young man to provincial semi-exile in defiance of the father's patronizing elder brother's wishes to situate the lad more favorably in the worldly bustle of the Prussian civil service—an arena more likely to applaud the ambitions of a brilliant, well-educated, handsome, and conversational youth. Perhaps the father intuitively foresaw that his eldest son's artistic, restless spirit required a more settled path.

Friedrich was not opposed to this decision. The father's Pietistic sensibilities found an echo in his offspring, who felt torn between a penchant for flirtatious liaisons and the sober call to the duties of industrious maturity. The goal at Tennstedt—for father and son—was to settle Fritz on a professional path that would lead to self-sufficiency. Matters of economy were pressing, although funds had never lacked for Friedrich's studies, which had gone on for several years. Would his *Bildung* ever end? The question of What to Do?—how to find the proper integration of inner inclination and external necessity—was very much on the young *Freiherr's* mind as he entered the Just household as live-in apprentice. This What to Do? soon became a theme that

dominated his leisure hours as he read through cover to cover several times Goethe's novel pitched to a similar predicament: *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.¹⁰

In Tennstedt, a country town at short remove from the family town house at Weissenfels but worlds distant from those proximate centers of urban glamour and gaiety, Leipzig and Dresden, the father no doubt hoped that his son would settle down to a stable, minor aristocratic career and bring to fruition his legal studies. Application was the order of the day. In Tennstedt, the Councilor Just's young niece, Caroline, and the beckoning sociable atmosphere of a military post at the nearby town of Langensalza were as yet the only hopes to soften what risked becoming a potentially tedious and isolated year of legalisms and stuffy paperwork.

Hardenberg characteristically had highest hopes to turn this tedium to his favor by making the most of every opportunity to learn and excel. In addition, the environs offered some anticipation of romantic liaisons. In a letter to his younger brother and spiritual confidant, Erasmus, written in Tennstedt at the beginning of November 1794 shortly after his arrival, Hardenberg characterized the social life he had been leading just prior to commencement of his duties as well as his conflicted attitude toward his ongoing penchant to flirt:

Between you and me, I was glad to leave Weissenfels: Too much is unhealthy.¹¹ You know I keep nothing secret from you. In the end I became too intimate with the colonel ["Fritzschen" Lindenau, Karl's girlfriend]. The intimacy became too *significant*—I do not want to lie and dissemble—plain speech is difficult in her presence and does not help. Distance is best. I avoided all tête-à-têtes at last. They were too tempting, and, as an honest fellow, I should not say too much. I have always mixed fun with business, so that business did not forget itself. Flirting is a charming but ticklish enterprise. May God in his goodness preserve one from ambition and the irresistible hankering to be the darling of any one girl. (IV, 144)

Tennstedt and the Just official household seemed a desirable and safe middle ground. Here the temptation to continue the old flirtatious games was still in play, but the general context of the middle-class establishment and its sober routine of duties promised to foster a mediating balance between frivolity and enterprise. And a search for

balance between conflicting extremes was always a need of Hardenberg's temperament. In any event, if things got too severe, there was relief to be had at the nearby military watering hole in Langensalza. As Friedrich further confided to Erasmus:

It's going pretty well for me here. I've found lodging between four very pretty young women whom I can see from the window and have conversation with three of them. I was already in Langensalza. There, too, I hope to fit right in. Through and through the flirt—in this place there's a general dearth of dancers. My bureaucratic mentor is a useful, practiced, and humane man. His conduct toward me is quite friendly. I am very diligent and have hope that Father will be satisfied with my efforts as well as with my efforts to economize. I play a worthy role here and stand in good credit, as it appears. (IV, 144–45)

It was a question of allowing oneself to “hover” between these extremes.

Already Hardenberg was known to his close friends and siblings as a young man of infinite potential, a mass of raw material “from whom anything's possible.” He was one of fortune's favored: attractive, highly intelligent, scion of the aristocracy with an innate gift for sociability, devotion, and a protean conversational ability and passion for gab that endeared him to almost everyone, combined with an uncanny ability to find a topical level with any partner, male or female. Over the past several years as a student in Jena, Leipzig, and Wittenberg he had swung between overachievement and dissipation and, within the confines of his rather closely circumscribed world, had become well-acquainted with some of the leading personalities and most of the best ideas of his time. Overall, he made the impression of a young man brimming with enthusiasm, endowed with enormous talents, in search of a context. His close friend, Friedrich Schlegel, described some of the brilliance of Hardenberg's personality in a letter to his brother, A. W. Schlegel.

I have never seen such joyous energy in youth. His feeling is colored by a certain chaste purity that has its origin in his soul rather than lack of experience, because he has been quite often in the midst of society (he's become fast friends with everyone); one year in Jena and he's well acquainted with the best minds and philosophers,

most notably Schiller. Yet, at the same time, he has been completely the student in Jena, and, as I've been told, has often fought.—He is very gay, very open to impression, and takes on the qualities of each formative influence.—(IV, 572)

The young *Freiherr's* pious father, devout and prayerful to a fault, seems to have been puzzled by his son's sanguine breadth of interests and talents. A later relative tells the story how the father was surprised shortly after his son's untimely death to learn that the beautiful lyrics sung to a hymn during worship ("Was wäre ich ohne Dich gewesen") were written by his offspring. Apparently, Heinrich Ulrich Erasmus Freiherr von Hardenberg (1738–1814) had not taken much notice of the poetry during Friedrich's lifetime. Presumably, then, he may not have taken much heed that along with poetry Friedrich also had developed a renaissance catalog of interests in almost every contemporaneous category of knowledge that could interest a post-Enlightenment German mind—took interest, to a large degree mastered, and often improved. But could the father really be faulted? Much of this original activity occurred as a sideline in whatever free moments Friedrich could spare from his exceptional attention to the details of his day jobs: as lawyer, technical student, mining engineer, and state official. Perhaps this exceptional diligence in pursuit of the daily grind threw the father off scent—or perhaps the senior *Freiherr's* single-minded Pietistic concentration on family, duty, and the divine kept him from noticing minor miracles of genius in his midst. Whatever the explanation, it is true nonetheless that the senior Hardenberg steadfastly supported his son's somewhat erratic path of development; and while the father perhaps did not intuit or comprehend where that path might lead, he gave his son the freedom and means to pursue that path individually.

On Monday morning, November 17, young Hardenberg's circuitous path encountered destiny.

Sophie von Kühn was twelve when she first met Friedrich von Hardenberg. Friedrich took her for a year older than she was, and no one apparently bothered to disabuse him of this mistake—not for quite some time, until things began to look serious.

Puzzling as this encounter has persisted to be—even more so in a twenty-first century context—at the time it had all the alarming earmarks of love at first sight (at least from Friedrich's side of the encounter). And it was read that way by Friedrich's brother, Erasmus,