

Novalis and *Hymns to the Night*

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“The division of Philosopher and Poet is only apparent, and to the disadvantage of both. It is a sign of disease, and of a sickly constitution.”¹

—Novalis

In this paper, I start by giving a broad introduction of the early Romantics' break from Hegel's systematic philosophy and their efforts to establish the authority of Art in philosophy's claim to Truth. Then I go on to explore a key concept that lends support to the Romantics' accreditation of the authenticity of Art—the immediacy of “feeling” as postulated in Kant's *Third Critique*. The exploration of this concept will then give further clarification to similar ideas expressed in Schlegel, and especially Novalis' works. After this I will introduce a central agency that the Romantics use to evoke the sense of the “feeling” of the infinite—“productive imagination”—as well as Novalis' elaboration on the topic of poetic Imagination (or “romanticization,” as he calls it) in his own writing. At last, I will introduce Novalis' *Hymns to the Night*, and describe how this piece of literary work, from its content to its structure, corresponds to the early Romantics' agenda of unifying poetry and

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¹ Thomas Carlyle, “Novalis,” in *Novalis* (Santa Cruz, CA: BLTC Press, 2007), Kindle book.

philosophy and seeking philosophy's claim to Truth through Art/poetry/literature.



Contrary to Hegel's belief in philosophy's claim to Truth by way of logical deduction, which seeks to use the greater power of abstraction in systematic philosophy to overcome the finitude of everything particular, Romantic writers such as Friedrich Schlegel deny that cognitive thinking can achieve a total account of all things that exist. Such beliefs (as held by Schlegel) cause the Romantics to re-evaluate the importance of Art in philosophy's pursuit of Truth.

Schlegel argues that, "[t]he impossibility of positively reaching the Highest by reflection leads to allegory."² Allegory, which is closely associated with the notion of "irony" in Romantic philosophy, involves using the particular to suggest the Absolute indirectly, producing meanings that go beyond what it (the particular) merely represents.³ Through allegory, what is communicated is not something determinate, but rather indeterminate.⁴ As a particular word or image points beyond what it itself merely represents, and takes on multiple layers/associations, such word or image begins to convey and generate meanings that are inexhaustible.

For example, in the field of Art, a creative piece of artwork always involves employing some particulars (a chosen material, a definite form of speech/expression, etc.), which are finite or transient, to signify the universal that goes beyond the manifold appearances of the empirical world and transcends the contingent particulars contained in the individual artwork.⁵ In a similar way, through irony, a Romantic text, by the deployment of poetic language, aims at generating a sense of absence and incompleteness that constantly points above what it itself appears to mean. This leads to the feeling that Schlegel calls "longing [for the infinite]:"⁶ the sense that we can never come to fully rest with a final

² Found in and translated by Andrew Bowie, "Romantic Philosophy and Religion."

³ Bowie, "Romantic Philosophy and Religion," 186–87.

⁴ Charles Larmore, "Holderlin and Novalis," 156.

⁵ Andrew Bowie, "German Idealism and the arts," 250–51.

⁶ Bowie, "Romantic Philosophy and Religion," 187; also mentioned in "German Idealism and the arts," 250.

certainty because of the finitude of human existence.⁷ In failing to exhaust the meaning of a work of art, we feel the “infinite” Truth in a finite object, which itself cannot be reduced or classified into simple concepts.⁸

In much the same way, Novalis states that “the absolute which is given to us can only be recognized negatively by acting and finding that what we are seeking is not reached by any action.”⁹ Since the “absolute,” which is the ultimate ground of philosophy, can never be reached positively, the existence of the Absolute can only be recognized negatively through other means. This leads Novalis to resort to poetry (by which he means imaginative art in general) for its capability to generate a sense of lack and evoke the feeling of the infinite, so as to “show the elusiveness of the Absolute”¹⁰ from within.

The assigning of a central role to Art in Romantic philosophy is inevitably associated with Art’s ability to evoke the sense of the Absolute from within itself. Cognitive thinking, on the other hand, could only state the Absolute as an external fact. For its “immediacy”, feeling is thus privileged over “mediated” knowledge in Romantic philosophy. But this idea itself has its root in Kant’s work. In order to unravel this concept in detail, I will next give a brief introduction of Kant’s articulation of the immediacy of “feeling” in his work.

In his *Third Critique*, Kant claims that there is a feeling of pleasure in aesthetic perception that derives from a sense of coherence in nature, which cannot be known, as far as general conceptual knowledge driven by reflective cognitive ability is concerned. The possibility of universal assent in relation to this “feeling” suggests the philosophical significance of aesthetics, for it points to a “supersensuous substrate” of human kind, which would link nature itself to the activity of our thinking. Perhaps more significantly, Kant further postulated a “common sense” as the “necessary condition of the universal communicability of our cognition,” which in turn requires the possibility of consensus in aesthetic and non-conceptual thinking. This suggests that the most fundamental relationship of the self to the world occurs at the

⁷ Bowie, “Romantic Philosophy and Religion,” 186.

⁸ Bowie, “German Idealism and the arts,” 250.

⁹ Novalis: *Schriften*, Found in and translated by Bowie, “Romantic Philosophy and Religion,” 183.

¹⁰ Larmore, “Hölderlin and Novalis,” 155.

level of immediate “feeling,” rather than at the level of the “mediated” knowledge of the world in its appearance.¹¹

Kant’s appraisal of the “immediacy” of feeling in his *Third Critique* had a significant influence on the early German Romantics’ thinking. It demonstrates new ways of mapping the relationship between the subjective and the world of objects, which take into account the mind’s active role in the acquisition of knowledge.¹² Later in the 18th century, Fichte intensified Kant’s view on the un-eliminable role of the subject in the constitution of the objective world of nature, by making the subjective self the basis of the world’s being intelligible at all.¹³

In his early writings (later titled as *Pollen*),¹⁴ while acknowledging Fichte’s stress on subjectivity, Novalis argues that the “I” cannot provide the basis for the first principle of philosophy. For to be able to say “I” naturally entails I’s self-reflection, thus separating I from itself and generating a distinction between the subject and the object. Hence the fundamental basis for philosophy has to be sought somewhere antecedent to the I’s self-awareness. In other words, the I must have a more immediate relationship with itself than reflection. Novalis called this the “primordial,” “pre-reflective” activity of the I, which can also be “only a feeling, passively registering an I whose being is simply given.” For Novalis this Being of the I is that which underlies the standpoint of reflection and the knowledge of all the conditioned things it affords.¹⁵

Novalis’s tracing of the nature of Being has important implications for his views on art and poetry, which itself exemplifies an influential strand in the Romantic tradition. By locating the Being within the subjective self, Novalis is suggesting that the ground of philosophy is to be sought within the self. Thus the task of the poet is to “take hold of his transcendental self, to be at the same time the I of his ‘I’, bringing his own thinking into proximity with its ultimate ground.” And hence Novalis says, “The path of mystery leads inward.”¹⁶ From this point he also goes one step further, “Man is both his own evangelist and his own

¹¹ Bowie, “German Idealism and the arts,” 243–44.

¹² *Ibid.*, 240.

¹³ Bowie, “Romantic Philosophy and Religion,” 180.

¹⁴ A collection of aphorisms which Friedrich Schlegel edited and published in 1798 as *Pollen*.

¹⁵ Larmore, “Holderlin and Novalis,” 153–54.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

redeemer: he 'proclaims himself and his evangel of nature. He is the Messiah of nature,'"¹⁷ not only confirming Truth's inherent subjective nature but also pointing out the mind's active power of revealing the Truth.

The mind's power to capture and materialize the feeling of the Absolute has to do with an important agency in Romanticism— "productive imagination," which has become a central concept in early Romanticism since being brought up by Kant. But since any intelligible form of speech would involve employing the particular (something definite and "conditioned" from this world), productive imagination too cannot attain the ground of Being, but only approach it indefinitely in approximation. Yet Novalis believes that rather than describing philosophy's ultimate ground from the outside as in analytical philosophy, poetry, by deploying the special resource of poetic language, can intimate more than it precisely says and gestures beyond the mere conditional, thus evoking a sense of the Infinite from within. A poet starts from some definite point, but at the same time moves beyond it, transcending his initial point of departure and going to places that can only be indicated, but not pinned down, by cognitive thought.¹⁸ This is, for Novalis, the essence of the process of romanticization:

The world must be romanticized. Then one will again find the original sense. . . . In this operation the lower self is identified with a better self. . . . When I give the commonplace a higher meaning, the customary a mysterious appearance, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the illusion of the infinite, I romanticize it. The operation is the converse for the higher, unknown, mystical and infinite. . . .¹⁹

In Novalis's view, poetic imagination calls upon images, dreams, and memories to endlessly expand our capacity for understanding,²⁰ transforming the ordinary, the common, the banal into the sphere of the pure and the unconditioned. Imagination thus functions as a constitutive force in the subject's apprehension of the world. It receives and produces, takes and constructs, imagines and finds. The subject's

¹⁷ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, 248.

¹⁸ Larmore, "Holderlin and Novalis," 155–56.

¹⁹ Novalis, *Werke*, II, 334. 227.

²⁰ Azade Seyhan, "What is Romanticism, and where did it come from?" 11.

activities, its productive imagination in particular, elevate the seen into the sphere of the unseen, and express the infinity of the world as a whole, which encompasses both the subjective self and the seemingly independent world.²¹

Following the break from traditional philosophy's claim to an absolute Truth, the early Romantics correspondingly initiated a revolution in the kind of language and the form of writings they use in their philosophical and literary works. They adopted a quite different approach to philosophical writing, in which poetry and philosophy are combined and ultimately become one.

When the Romantics refer to poetry, they don't mean poetry in its narrow sense, but "poetic" writings in general. Thus if poetry is opposed to anything, it is not prose, but traditional analytical philosophy with its scientific precision in its usage of language. Talking about the agenda of Romanticism, Friedrich Schlegel once claimed that Romantic poetry should be "a progressive universal poetry," seeking to touch upon all area of human experience and suggest a totality.²² Romantic poetry is thus "at once poetry and poetry of poetry,"²³ concerned not with the dissection and categorization of individual objects, but with the working of realization, the evoking of a particular kind of poetic mood by connecting different spheres of experience and creating a dense and light network of interrelations.²⁴ Poetry should thus ultimately transcend the limit of traditional philosophy and become its "goal and meaning."²⁵ This kind of effort to break the oppositions between philosophy and poetry, verse and prose, and create a mode of writing that encompasses everything, finds its expression in the *Hymns*, which is considered to be one of the few authentic gestures to genuinely fulfil Schlegel's transcendental poesy program.²⁶

Having a central theme dealing with the meaning of life and death and human beings' place in the entire universe, *Hymns to the Night* demonstrates a rare case of epic matter condensed into a small compass

²¹ Sturma, "Politics and the New Mythology," 227.

²² Charlie Louth, "The Romantic lyric," 70.

²³ Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. II, 204 (Athenaeum-Fragment).

²⁴ Louth, "The Romantic lyric," 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Another is Holderlin's poetic works after his *Hyperion*. *Ibid.*

and narrated in the exquisite form of lyrical reverie,²⁷ which offers the reader a unique fusion of epic and lyric. With a primary antithesis set forth between the image of "Light" and that of "Night," the work consists of three groups of paired hymns and is to be read as an ensemble of interdependent parts.²⁸ Within each pair of the hymns, the first one leads the reader from an alienated state of Light to the sphere of eternal Night, and the second one tells of the awakening that follows and the longing to return to the sphere of Night. As the narrative proceeds, between each pair of hymns, the antithesis between "Light" and "Night" takes on a richer and deeper meaning. The first pair of hymns, for example, tells of the scorching of the daylight and the nurturing nature of the night; the second pair tells of the vision of the arising of the Beloved from Death as an event of personal salvation and the ensuing return of the day with its earthly labor and earthly cares; the last pair tells of the coming of Christ who brings the salvation of all humankind and ends with the anticipation of Death that signifies the ultimate freedom of the soul and the final return to God the Father.

Since each pair creates an internal tension, the *Hymns* as a whole is strictly symmetrical, while—since each time the deliverance from one pair of hymns to the next is accompanied with a deepening of the central thematic opposition of Light and Night—the *Hymns* simultaneously takes on a spiral structure. As the narrative goes on, it engages, by steps, with the meaning of light and night, loss and love, time and eternity, the limited human life and the eternal life in Death. Key images expressed through a selected set of vocabularies from the individual hymns are reinforced by repetition in new and enlarged contexts in the following hymns, producing a sense of continuity and at the same time enacting a process of transformation.

Drawing upon the proximity of night and day, death and life, fulfillment and longing, the free and seemingly weightless transition between different spheres in the *Hymns* creates a rich constellation of meanings, which are not fixed, but are constantly in flux and motion, transcending all the existing isolated concepts. Through these transitions, the poem explores the openness of the world, dissolving the structures of the visible world to reassemble them in the ideal, inward form of the

²⁷ Novalis, *Hymns to the Night and Other Selected Writings*, trans. & intro. by Charles E. Passage, x.

²⁸ David Gascoyne, "Novalis and the Night," 9.

Hymns themselves.²⁹ The *Hymns* therefore is symbolical in nature, as it aims at expressing universal relationships between man and the universe by translating limited aspects of human life into universal symbols. Shifting the literal to the figurative, it aspires to resemble the infinite; transcending the temporal, it seeks to visualize the eternal.³⁰

Tieck has commented, "He (Novalis) sought to open for himself a new path in Philosophy; to unite Philosophy with Religion."³¹ For the task of the poet, reading in this context, is to heal the present ailment of the world, end Man's alienation from Nature by transforming the existing fragmented world into the new world in his poetic composition, and bring this message to his fellow men. The poet, therefore, is the priest of Nature, the redeemer of the world, the "transcendental man per se."³² And it is perhaps in this sense that Novalis calls Man the "Messiah of nature."

Novalis' view of the ultimate task of poetry and philosophy serves as a prominent example of the early Romantics' way of seeing the world, Truth, and man's active role in it. It is also worth mentioning that it is during this historical period that the very conception of "Art" in its most widely used modern sense was formed, with Art establishing itself as an independent discipline, being liberated from the service of theology and predominantly instrumental functions within society.³³ Early German Romantics thus point out a new direction in philosophy's pursuit and engagement with Truth, and open up a new aesthetic area for philosophy to exercise its influence.

²⁹ Louth, "The Romantic lyric," 70.

³⁰ Helmut Rehder, "Novalis and Shakespeare," 613.

³¹ Carlyle, "Novalis," in *Novalis*, Kindle book.

³² Rehder, "Novalis and Shakespeare," 608.

³³ Bowie, "German Idealism and the arts," 241.

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