



LOVE AND THE TRACE OF THE "OTHER" IN POETIC DEVOTION: NOVALIS AND DERRIDA.



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Abstract

Love has never run out of surprises for us to experience; it has always been beyond our ability to comprehend. It overwhelms us as a phenomenon, preventing us from finding any suitable word to describe it in a straightforward manner. When we ask for love, what do we really hope for? The love life of Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), a man who was devastated by Sophie von Kühn's passing and prayed in hope of witnessing her resurrection, fascinated Jacques Derrida in particular. Novalis believed that if he could focus and practice worship with complete fervor, her resurrection would occur. To retain their connection, a traumatic separation may have provided a ritual. The focus of this article is the love life of the romantic poet and thinker Novalis as seen from Jacques Derrida's perspective.

Keywords: Love, Novalis Friedrich von Hardenberg, Sophie, Jacques Derrida

INTRODUCTION

Professor Francesco de Nigiris's¹ Thursday appearance in class 108 is a noteworthy one. He walks smartly with his bag at his side ready to enter the classroom, his simple clothes conceal his person, and when you first encounter him, you can only pass him by as if he were of no significance, but when he takes his seat in the classroom things start to unfold, a man who speaks perfect Spanish with an Italian accent that reveals his Italian style. His command of the text is evident in his handling of it, and we are left wanting more from his instruction. When he reads passages from The "Works of Love" by Søren Kierkegaard and "Erotic Phenomenon" by Jean Luc Marion, the idea of love emerges with a power that engulfs us all. This made everyone hesitant to give a firm definition of love. He asserted with confidence that "love is both a mystery and a secret."

In the opening line of his work *Shattered Love*, Jean Luc Nancy issues a warning that this article takes as its beginning point:

The thinking of love, so ancient, so abundant and diverse in its forms and in its modulations, asks for an extreme reticence as soon as it is solicited. It is a question of modesty, perhaps, but it is also a question of exhaustion: has not

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everything been said on the subject of love? Every excess and every exactitude? Has not the impossibility of speaking about love been as violently recognized as has been the experience of love itself as the true source of the possibility of speaking in general? We know the words of love to be inexhaustible, but as to speaking about love, could we perhaps be exhausted?,

If caution is a virtue to be urged when approaching the idea of love, there is an understandable wisdom in this. Because we are unsure of what might happen if we ask for love, we might be cautious. For the mention of love seems to evoke a call to unbridled pleasure. Novalis gives us another concept—a poetic devotion, that is perhaps improbable in its discovery but conceivable.

HjalmarHjorthBoyesen in an article: *Novalis and the Blue Flower: The Romantic School in Germany*, in the December 1875 Issue, of *The Atlantic*, writes: "A Romanticist, in the modern acceptance of the term, is a man who adopts a hostile attitude towards the progressive spirit of the age and attempts by artificial means to revive the 'good old days',".

The 'good old days' can possibly offer insight into what we actually lack now in an endeavor to repair and clean

² Nancy, Jean Luc. *The inoperative community*, University of Minnesota Press, USA, 1991, P.82

³ HjalmarHjorthBoyesen in an article: *Novalis and the Blue Flower: The Romantic School in Germany*, in the DECEMBER 1875 ISSUE of *The Atlantic*, p. 689.

up what has been soiled. The goal of this article is to examine Novalis' love life through Jacques Derrida's point of view, a Romantic poet and thinker. The opinions of other academics may be taken into consideration, albeit occasionally we will delve farther. In terms of his love life, Novalis, a man who earnestly prayed in the prospect of witnessing Sophie von Kühn's resurrection, fascinated Jacques Derrida in particular. Novalis believed that if he could focus and do the worship with entire fervor, her resurrection would occur. It's possible that this traumatic separation led to the development of a ritual to keep them together.

John O'Meara states in the foreword of his book "The Way of Novalis: An Exposition on the Process of His Achievement": Novalis the man, the philosopher and the associate, that "Novalis has for the most part been approached directly through his literary works, which has made him appear to many to be the quintessential romantic artist divinely inspired to incomparable raptures of otherworldly intensity and beauty. He has in this way been made also into a rather incomprehensible and evanescent creature, somewhat unhinged as it were, without much grounding in, or indeed any desired connection to, any specially involved thinking about the real world as we know it. However, anyone who undertakes to read the greater part, even if not all, of Novalis's intellectual production will soon realize that he was a philosopher or a philosophical thinker first and foremost and that he only subsequently made

himself into an artist to illustrate what he was already saying was philosophically the world's actual and established state, which he had fully penetrated in himself”⁴.

Novalis and Sophiea Bond In “poetic Devotion”.

Friedrich von Hardenberg, or Novalis as he later chose to call himself in print, still remains a rather obscure figure in the English-speaking world. If known at all, it is mostly as the German Romantic poet of the blue flower, whose fiancée, Sophie, died young—and like Petrarch for Laura and Dante for Beatrice before him, penned sublime lyrical words to immortalize his beloved⁵. Being the most prominent poet of the early German romanticism, Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801) encounter a curiously delayed maturity, suddenly attaining a fulfillment such as has been vouchsafed to but few creative spirits. Heretofore all had been but planning. Now the building began. Heretofore only seedlings had been set out. Now they burgeoned into bloom and fruit. But this flowering was to be tragically brief. One full summer, a fertile fall, a busy winter, another spring, the anxious beginnings of one more summer—these were all that were to be granted him in his prime, before the final breakdown

⁴ O'Meara, John. *The Way of Novalis: An Exposition on the Process of His Achievement*, Heart's Core Publications, Ottawa, 2014, p.13. (Digital)

⁵ Wood, David. *Novalis. Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia Das Allgemeine Brouillon*. State University of New York Press, Albany 2007, P.ix

caught up with him, wracking him with painful inactivity”⁶.

He started exhibiting symptoms of a disease in 1800, which is believed to have been either tuberculosis or cystic fibrosis, and passed away on March 25, 1801, when he was just 28 years old. Although he died so young, the depth of his work rivals the great literary works of history. Since the purpose of this article is to describe his love life, this article will not go into the details of Novalis's life in general, but it would be a good idea to know the man. In summary, the following words should do the trick:

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

⁶ Hiebel, Frederick. *German Poet—European Thinker—Christian Mystic*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954. (doi: https://doi.org/10.5149/9781469657554_Hiebel) p.30

Golden Age⁷.

Novalis's love life caught the attention of many, and there have been many interpretations of his strong bond with Sophie, and some have attempted to call it infatuation. Numerous patronizing views have been taken of Novalis's involvement, at the age of twenty-two, with the young Sophie von Kuhn who was then only twelve years old and to whom he became engaged within four months of their meeting, two days before she turned thirteen⁸. His brother Erasmus made this point clear in a letter to Novalis, in which he wrote that:

I beg you not to take this as a reproach—it was only an outpouring of my overflowing heart... Passion, dear brother, is the word for it. Though you clothe it in whatever finery you wish, it has all the characteristic symptoms. The suddenness, surprise, and overwhelming decisiveness mark this as a manifestation of passion. And wouldn't such a passion be capable of blinding you in a moment? I don't only know this from your own confessions, I know from experience that your nervous system is very excitable; your heart is to the greatest degree sensitive and open to the impressions that the highest ideal of nature—a beautiful, innocent girl—must make upon any man of sense and

⁷ *The Birth of Novalis*. Tr. and Ed. Bruce Donehower. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007. Pp.1-2.

⁸ O'Meara, John, p.24

sensibility.

It is perfectly normal to confuse infatuation with what I call poetic devotion. When we are wounded by words and find them inadequate to describe a particular moment or thing, there is always a part of us that is unsettled. We see exactly the same thing in Dante - a strong connection with Beatrice. Dante speaks of a certain Beatrice who, by chance, catches his eye, an event that will be a torment to him, but in a good way. He mentions that this wonderful experience can best be described as being naked before a divine presence. He writes:

Nine times already since my birth the heaven of light had almost revolved to the self-same point when my mind's glorious lady first appeared to my eyes, she who was called by many Beatrice ('she who confers blessing'), by those who did not know what it meant to so name her. She had already lived as long in this life as in her time the starry heaven had moved east the twelfth part of one degree, so that she appeared to me almost at the start of her ninth year, and I saw her almost at the end of my ninth. She appeared dressed in noblest colour, restrained and pure, in crimson, tied and adorned in the style that

⁹ *The Birth of Novalis*. Tr. and Ed. Bruce Donehower. P.46.
(Wernsdorf, November 28, 1794 Erasmus von Hardenberg to Friedrich von Hardenberg in Tennstedt)

then suited her very tender age. At that moment I say truly that the vital spirit, that which lives in the most secret chamber of the heart began to tremble so violently that I felt it fiercely in the least pulsation, and, trembling, it uttered these words: '*Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi*: Behold a god more powerful than I, who, coming, will rule over me'¹⁰.

Dante recalls his first encounter with Beatrice as a smitten experience that must not be forgotten. One can see the impact that Beatrice had on Dante by invading his domain, and yet this encounter would go down as one of Dante's most memorable. In the fall of 1795, Sophie fell ill with the first symptoms of what was to become an escalating health crisis. From July to August 1796 she underwent three operations on her liver. She endured this torturous ordeal in Jena, spent a few months failing to recover, and in December returned to Gröningen to die¹¹.

Sophie passed away on March 19, two days after turning fifteen. Novalis was devastated when she passed away. He referred to her as his "religion," and his continuing adherence to her became a tenet of his personal faith. The third hymn in *Hymns to the Night*,

¹⁰ Alighieri, Dante. *The New Life*, Trans by Charles Eliot Norton, The Riverside Press, Boston and New York, 1892 Pp1-2

¹¹ *The Birth of Novalis*. Tr. and Ed. Bruce Donehower. P.24

which may have been penned at the same time as the famous visionary experience at Sophie's tomb, was inspired by the renowned visionary experience, which he briefly described in a journal post dated May 13, 1797¹².

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

¹² *The Birth of Novalis*. Tr. and Ed. Bruce Donehower. P.2

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 beloved¹³.

Novalis often celebrated the transformative power of love, viewing it as a force that connects individuals to a higher, transcendent realm. For him, love was not merely a personal or emotional attachment but a pathway to the divine or the infinite. Novalis would emphasize the importance of intuition, imagination, and emotional depth in the experience of love, considering it as a profound and meaningful aspect of human existence.

Derrida and The Trace of the “other”.

In continental philosophy, the concept of "the Other" holds significant importance and appears in the works of several prominent philosophers. While interpretations and nuances may vary among different thinkers, the notion of the Other generally refers to an entity or subjectivity that is distinct from oneself, often highlighting the role of alterity, difference, and intersubjectivity. The other, mentioned in this article,

¹³ Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*, Tr. Dick Higgins. Maidstone, Mcpherson and Company, 1938, p.17

will be the "human person" who responds to the invitation to love.

In *Pulling Strings Wins No Wisdom*, an article by David Farrell Krell, he says that Derrida clearly loved this impossible spectral love of Novalis's, and he loved the idea that a philosophical fragment could capture all wisdom without remnant or residue. He loved it - but he did not believe it¹⁴. In an interview with Jacques Derrida by Nikhil Padgaonkar, Derrida has this to say about love, and it merits quoting at length:

N.P.: Over the years, you have repeatedly defended the view that deconstruction is not an inherently negative term that it is not to be understood as criticism or destruction. And indeed in an interview you gave in 1982 and which was subsequently published in *Le Monde*, you even said that deconstruction is always accompanied by love. Could you comment on this "love". Is it the same love as in "philia"?

J.D.: This love means an affirmative desire towards the Other - to respect the Other, to pay attention to the Other, not to destroy the otherness of the Other - and this is the preliminary affirmation, even if afterwards because of this love, you ask questions. There is some negativity in

¹⁴ Krell, David Farrell. "Pulling Strings Wins No Wisdom." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2011, pp. 15-16. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029582>. Accessed 18 May 2023.

deconstruction. I wouldn't deny this. You have to criticise, to ask questions, to challenge and sometimes to oppose. What I have said is that in the final instance, deconstruction is not negative although negativity is no doubt at work. Now, in order to criticise, to negate, to deny, you have first to say "yes". When you address the Other, even if it is to oppose the Other, you make a sort of promise - that is, to address the Other as Other, not to reduce the otherness of the Other, and to take into account the singularity of the Other. That's an irreducible affirmation, its the original ethics if you want. So from that point of view, there is an ethics of deconstruction. Not in the usual sense, but there is an affirmation. You know, I often use a quote from Rosensweig or even from Levinas which says that the "yes" is not a word like others, that even if you do not pronounce the word, there is a "yes" implicit in every language, even if you multiply the "no", there is a "yes". And this is even the case with Heidegger. You know Heidegger, for a long time, for years and years kept saying that thinking started with questioning, that questioning (fragen) is the dignity of thinking. And then one day, without contradicting this statement, he said "yes, but there is something even more originary than questioning, than this piety of thinking," and it is what he called *zusage* which means to

acquiesce, to accept, to say "yes", to affirm. So this usage is not only prior to questioning, but it is supposed by any questioning. To ask a question, you must first tell the Other that I am speaking to you. Even to oppose or challenge the Other, you must say "at least I speak to you", "I say yes to our being in common together". So this is what I meant by love, this reaffirmation of the affirmation¹⁵.

Jacques Derrida engaged with the notion of the Other in his deconstructive philosophy. Derrida problematized the binary oppositions that often structure our thinking, such as self/Other, presence/absence, and inside/outside. He revealed how the concept of the Other is entangled in power relations and hierarchical structures. Derrida challenged the tendency to marginalize or exclude the Other and emphasized the need for an ethics of hospitality and openness to difference.

For Derrida, the other simply enters my space even before I speak. There is always a welcoming of someone. Meeting someone does not begin with talking, but with the anticipation of someone coming. Though Derrida wrote very little specifically on love, there are scattered remnants of the concept

¹⁵An interview with Jacques Derrida by Nikhil Padgaonkar <http://mural.uv.es/mibosa/DerridaInterview2.htm>.

throughout his works. In *The work of mourning*, Derrida believes the law of friendship and mourning already places a limit on friendship that one must always go before the other, he writes:

One friend must always go before the other; one friend must always die first. There is no friendship without the possibility that one will die before the other, perhaps right before the other's eyes. For even when friends die together, or rather, at the same time, their friendship will have been structured from the very beginning by the possibility that one of the two would see the other die, and so, surviving,, Would be left to bury, to commemorate, and to mourn¹⁶.

The other will not be with us forever, he or she will surely have to leave one day, and this is what Derrida will talk about in two of his works, the politics of friendship and the work of mourning. However, the other is always archived in memory, a trace that makes present the one who is absent in the mouths of friends¹⁷.

¹⁶ Derrida, Jacques, *The Work of Mourning* [translated and edited by PascaleAnne Brault and Michael Naas]. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.2001, p.1

¹⁷ Derrida, Jacques, *ThePoliticsof Friendship*, [translated by George Collins]. London and New York: 2005. P.5

Conclusion

In an interesting article written by Francesco de Nigrison Jean Luc Marion, *El fenómeno erótico, la lógica del don y Dios en la fenomenología de Marion*, he asserts that:

“La primera reducción, en cuanto conversión del yo como Conciencia de ser en amante, define implícitamente el amor como humilde petición al prójimo a que nos acompañe en nuestra existencia, reconociendo el valor de su contingencia en vez de su pura idea, para que nos abramos a su advenimiento fáctico, imprevisible, y escuchemos el don de su llamada”(The first reduction, as the conversion of the self as Consciousness of being into lover, implicitly defines love as a humblere quest to our neighbour to accompany us in our existence, recognising the value of his contingency rather than his pure idea, so that we open ourselves to his factual, unpredictable advent and listen to the gift of his call.)¹⁸

Love makes us into lovers first, and then it extends a real invitation to the other, inviting them to walk alongside us on this journey of love. Love is a vocation; it installs us in its coming, in its hope and in its gift to the

¹⁸ Francesco de Nigris, “El fenómeno erótico, la lógica del don y Dios en la fenomenología de Marion” CAURIENSIA, Vol. XVII ,2022, p.110

other. Jean Luc Nancy understood this as being broken by love, “The break or the wound is not an accident, and neither is it a property that the subject could relate to himself. For the break is a break in his self-possession as subject; it is, essentially, an interruption of the process of relating oneself to oneself outside of oneself. From then on, “I” is constituted as broken”¹⁹. To put it in simple terms, love breaks us from ourselves to move us toward the other. “As soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is this ontological fissure that cuts across and that disconnects the elements of the subject-proper- the fibers of its heart.”²⁰

When in the grip of love, it is very tempting to lose one's mind. We must be careful not to become very engrossed in it because if we do, we risk saying and doing things that it does not demand of us. We must be cautious about what young people say about love lest they end up giving us a reminder of a bygone era of innocence, and we should practice reticence about what older people say about it, lest they end up making us regretfully nostalgic. This piece is not intended to be a guide on how to fall in love. It would be a deception to say it serves as a manual; instead, I aspire to be able to pray for the perfection of the person who draws my attention when love calls. Novalis simply loved, and his

¹⁹ Nancy, Jean Luc. *The inoperative community*, p.96

²⁰ Ibid, P.96

unwavering faith in love enabled him to experience conversion—not from sin to righteousness, but into a true lover. When Sophie passed away, a ritual was left behind that eventually evolved into an eschatological hope. Sophie became a gift that could not be refused adoration. Such poetic devotion cannot exist today, and even if it did, one would have to be prepared to be lynched. Novalis' love life can only be enjoyed in writing at this point. Nancy asserts that:

... Love offers finitude in its truth, its finitude's dazzling presentation... or perhaps love itself is eclipsed in its outburst, at once because it does not stop coming and going, never being simply present, and because it is always put into play farther off than everything that would have to qualify it (Sublime love, tender love, foolish love, implacable love, pure love, abandoned love). Nietzsche's Zarathustra says: "Great loves do not want love- they want more."²¹

I envy such poetic devotion, for it would be possible to re-enact Novalis's passion for the absent Sophie as a thread that keeps him hoping that she will eventually return to him. At that time, love had an eerie darkness at its core. He did not let go of the memories of their time together; all that time had given him a routine to maintain his closeness. According to the many texts he

²¹Ibid, p.99

wrote about her, love made her a saint.

What better way to end this reflection than to parody the words of David Newheiser: This is not the whole story, nor could it be. There are many stories to tell, for love is blind and many-sided. The purpose of this particular story is to keep open the possibility of a love that is totally focused on its beloved and unconcerned with selfish interests²². While Derrida and Novalis may approach the topic of love from different philosophical standpoints, both recognize the complexities and limitations inherent in attempting to understand and articulate the nature of love. Their works provide valuable insights into the enigmatic and elusive nature of this deeply human experience.

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