

## HEINRICH VON OFTERDINGEN: A STRIVING TOWARDS UNITY

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IN considering the Novalis-literature one finds that certain aspects of Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* have been almost completely neglected. Klingsohr's "Märchen" has repeatedly and almost exclusively attracted the attention of the critics. Its mysterious symbolism has been felt as a real challenge to the interpretative mind and has been commented upon at length.<sup>1</sup> In the course of these analyses many interesting facts have been stressed: Novalis' readings of Plotinus and the German mystics, the influence of Jacob Böhme on his work, and that of Fichte which the former tended to supersede. But something remains to be said about Novalis' own mystical approach to the universe. As was to be the case for most Romantics, he was in search of a basic Unity of the cosmos.<sup>2</sup> This is reflected in his *Fragments*, but it is fundamental to the conception of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

The novel, as has repeatedly been pointed out, is admirably constructed, so well in fact that through the fragment which we possess we can quite easily visualize the whole as it might have been. Shortly before his death, however, Novalis told F. Schlegel that he had suddenly thought of a plan for its continuation which would be entirely different from that upon which he had up to then been working. Yet this is no valid reason for discarding what we know of the initial plan. Had he lived, Novalis might have written an entirely different novel, but the fragment we have is representative of a novel that existed in his mind as a whole and only needed to be written down.

The two parts, as they were originally conceived, are indeed very closely linked. "Der zweite Teil wird der Kommentar des ersten," Novalis writes to F. Schlegel on June 18, 1800. On April 5 of the same year, he had explained to him how the novel was meant to be transformed into a *Märchen* as it went along. In the first part there is indeed the main story, which is interrupted at irregular intervals by tales told by various people. In the second part, as we can see from notes, some of the persons figuring in these tales were supposed to join in the main action: a wonderful structural plan, but one which is only partially successful.

This partial failure is of stylistic nature. In the course of this paper I shall emphasize the unity of structure in the novel as related to the unity

<sup>1</sup> See in particular K. J. Obenauer, *Hölderlin, Novalis* (Jena, 1925), and F. Hiebel, *Novalis, Der Dichter der blauen Blume* (Bern, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> Albert Béguin, *L'Ame romantique et le rêve* (Paris, 1939), devotes a chapter to this problem: "L'Unité cosmique."

of Novalis' metaphysical universe. A few remarks must first be made about the lack of unity in the stylistic execution.

Novalis does not feel at ease in the world of semi-reality through which he first wants to lead the reader. The "Märchen" is admirably told; in the second part one is quite ready to accept the new laws according to which people exist, appear, disappear, and speak. But the first part is not really satisfactory reading. It was meant to be highly symbolic: Heinrich, the born poet, starts on his educational journey without having ever heard or seen a poet, and encounters persons symbolizing War, the Orient, History, and Nature to prepare him for his calling. Finally he is put under the tutelage of a poet, Klingsohr, and the love which he feels for the poet's daughter marks the end of his period of initiation. The events are of course too extraordinary to allow one to accept them as reality. But at the same time they are too close to a possible reality to make the reader feel he is living in a different world, either of poetry or of stylization.

Novalis himself was not quite satisfied with his work. One of the things he admired most in Goethe's style was precisely the gift to make the most ordinary little things seem interesting to the reader, and he writes about his own:

Meine Erzählungen und romantischen Arbeiten sind noch zu grell und zu hart gezeichnet—nichts als derbe Striche und Umrisse—nackt und unausgeführt.—Es fehlt ihnen jener sanfte, ründende Hauch—jene Fülle der Ausarbeitung—Mitteltinten—feine, verbindende Züge—eine gewisse Haltung—Ruhe und Bewegung in einander— . . . —Geschmeidigkeit und Reichtum des Stils—ein Ohr und eine Hand für reizende Periodenkettten.<sup>3</sup> (Diary entry, Summer, 1800)

To Schlegel, who criticized him, he answered: "geschmeidige Prosa ist mein frommer Wunsch" (June 18, 1800).

Besides these utterances, there are little touches of "realism" in the novel which indicate that Novalis did not merely want to write a pure allegory, as is sometimes assumed, but wanted to paint reality as well. They remind us at times of descriptions in *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* or *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, with both of which Novalis was most familiar, and stand in sharp contrast to the artificial reflections or dialogues that precede or follow. Let us quote a few examples of this "realism": at the very beginning, Heinrich's father calls his just-awakened son "Langschläfer." Because of him, he adds grumblingly, Mother would not serve breakfast, and she has also kept her husband from using a hammer for fear of his disturbing the dear child. During the gay banquet at the castle between Augsburg and Eisenach, where the travelers spend the night, Heinrich's mother has him called away. Nobody noticed Heinrich's leaving, the author adds, as all of them were much too busily engaged in their discussion. When Heinrich and his traveling companions reach Augsburg, his grandfather's serv-

<sup>3</sup> Novalis, *Werke und Briefe* (Munich, 1953), p. 725.

ants do not want to tell the old Schwaning of their arrival, as they distrust such badly attired fellows. All through the novel, everybody's entrances and exits are noted with the greatest care and their motivations are explained.

The passages we have just quoted could also be interpreted symbolically, of course: Poetry being considered of lesser importance than food or work, Poetry discreetly leaving heated discussions, Poetry hiding under a traveler's dusty coat which renders it invisible to the servants. If they jar with the rest of the text, nevertheless, the reason is that most of the first part of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is not told in that style at all, and that Novalis, although he seems to have wanted to make us feel the symbol through reality, appears to have had difficulty in fusing the two and presents the symbol outside of the reality of the tale.

Novalis' plan is carried out much more successfully in the second part of the novel. "Der zweite Teil wird schon in der Form weit poetischer als der erste," Novalis writes to F. Schlegel on June 18, 1800. We are now in a completely different world, with its own compelling logic. Yet there is no structural break between the two parts; much of the action has been prepared through the dreams and symbols of the first chapters. Heinrich was fated to go through most of the experiences in reality which he had lived through intuitively. He comes to be a captain, and in the first part he had heard the call of war through the tales of the crusader. He visits the mysterious Orient, and he had felt its charm through Zulima's tears. Mathilde dies, as he had foreseen in a prophetic dream.

Not only was there to be a unity in the life of Heinrich, but he was meant to gather in himself all human experiences, the teachings of all cultures, past and present. Figures of medieval as well as classical mythology were to play a part in his life. He was destined to go to Greece and to the Orient. He would have united in him the hero and the poet which Novalis, at the beginning of the sixth chapter of the first book, describes as the incarnation of the two opposite elements of human nature: the active element, turned towards the outside world, changing every chance event into history, and the contemplative one, to which unrest is not known, whose entire life is self-created and which goes beyond the surface of events. Finally, to become completely united to the cosmos, Heinrich experiences all the aspects in which nature manifests itself: he is changed into an animal, into a plant, into a stone. Like Orpheus, he was also meant to dwell some time among the dead, symbolized by the strange inhabitants of a mysterious monastery.

Thus a desire for unity pervades every line of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. The unity of construction, the strange plot, are only outward signs of this striving of the whole novel. The fragment ends with a conversation which creates a whole metaphysical world; the novel would have ended in a poem banishing all elements of contrast.

For this the reader is already prepared in the first part by the abolition

of time and space, by the mingling of dream and reality, by the reconciling of life and death.

The novel opens with a poem containing the following lines:

Noch schlummerte mein allerhöchster Sinn;  
Da sah ich sie als Engel zu mir schweben  
Und flog, erwacht, in ihrem Arm dahin.

The vision of the angel becomes a higher reality, an awakening. Thus Heinrich, when he thinks of the Blue Flower, has the feeling that up to then he had only dreamed a world where she was not known.

The fact that, when dream and reality are no longer part of two different realms, the laws of time are also modified, partakes of the inner logic of the *Märchen*. The events of the first part are still presented in a loose chronological order. Yet in that apparent order there are recurring breaches: again and again, Heinrich has the feeling that the present is a repetition of something past. When the merchants speak to him of poets: "Mir ist auf einmal, als hätte ich irgendwo schon davon in meiner tiefsten Jugend reden hören, doch kann ich mich schlechterdings nichts mehr davon entsinnen. Aber mir ist das, was ihr sagt, so klar, so bekannt" (p. 180).<sup>4</sup> When the miner sings a cabbalistic song: "Es dünkte Heinrich, wie der Alte geendigt hatte, als habe er das Lied schon irgendwo gehört" (p. 213). He finds his life written and illustrated in a mysterious book which later allows him to recognize the poet Klingsohr as the man who in it had always stood by his side. Others have the same impression of "recognition" in his presence: he resembles the brother of Zulima, and Mathilde feels she has always known him. Time becomes entirely relative: what the hermit says in a few moments seem to him the teachings of a lifetime (p. 223).

The usual time-perception is completely modified in the second half of the novel. Cyane, whom Heinrich at first glance feels he has always known, speaks of fathers and mothers he has not had according to the laws of the flesh, and thus reveals to him the existence of times unknown to him. In a vision after Mathilde's death he sees "die Unermeßlichkeit der Zeiten . . . [und] die weitesten Geschichten in kleinen glänzenden Minuten" (p. 278). "Zukunft und Vergangenheit hatten sich in ihm berührt und einen innigen Verein geschlossen" (p. 274).

When he left Eisenach, Heinrich looked at the far away mountains: "Er war im Begriff, sich in ihre blaue Flut zu tauchen. Die blaue Blume stand vor ihm" (p. 176). In the same way his initial dream had begun with his entering the blue cavern and descending into the waves of the blue stream which carried him to the Blue Flower. Thus dream and reality meet. While he stands there looking over towards Thüringen which he is about to leave, he has the feeling that after many years he will return to this country and that he is really now traveling towards what he is leaving. In the second

<sup>4</sup> The quotations from *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* refer to *Deutsche Literatur in Entwicklungsreihen, Reihe Romantik*, Vol. V (Leipzig, 1932).

part Cyane tells him they are going "immer nach Hause." This might be explained by a *Fragment* of Novalis: "Alle Märchen sind nur Träume von jener heimatlichen Welt, die überall und nirgends ist."<sup>5</sup> It expresses the abolition of space as well as of time.

Dream becomes reality, time and space can no longer be measured. Death is no longer opposed to life. "Warst du schon einmal gestorben?" Heinrich asks Cyane, and she answers: "Wie könnt ich denn leben?" (p. 277). He feels that death is not only one with life, but can even be a "höhere Offenbarung des Lebens" (p. 176).

The barriers which man has created between what is essentially one seemed to Novalis the fundamental evil of the world. This conception was widespread among the Romantics, who generally believed that there had once been a perfect unity which might one day be found again. In *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* nothing indicates that it had already once existed. But Novalis planned to end his novel in an allegorical poem, which he composed in part and called "die Vermählung der Jahreszeiten," where all separation would be condemned:

Wären die Zeiten nicht so ungesellig, verbände  
 Zukunft mit Gegenwart und mit Vergangenheit sich,  
 Schlösse Frühling sich an Herbst, und Sommer an Winter,  
 Wäre zu spielendem Ernst Jugend mit Alter gepaart:  
 Dann, mein süßer Gemahl, versiegte die Quelle der Schmerzen,  
 Aller Empfindungen Wunsch wäre dem Herzen gewährt.  
 (Tiecks Bericht über die Fortsetzung)

This union, which the queen here wishes, is then fulfilled.

Thus laws which seem imposed on us by the outside world lose their immutability, become fluid, and mingle with their opposites. A similar change will take place in our spiritual world. Art, love, religion, and nature are really one, and by devoting oneself to any one of them, one devotes oneself to all.

We have already said that love was the last phase of Heinrich's initiation. Love is, by its very nature, intimately connected with poetry: "Die Liebe ist stumm, nur die Poesie kann für sie sprechen. Oder die Liebe ist selbst nichts, als die höchste Naturpoesie" (p. 246). Mathilde is the priestess of Poetry: "Deine Liebe wird mich in die Heiligtümer des Lebens, in das Allerheiligste des Gemüts führen; du wirst mich zu den höchsten Anschauungen begeistern" (p. 247). She is yet more, she is herself Poetry:

Oh, sie ist der sichtbare Geist des Gesanges, eine würdige Tochter ihres Vaters. Sie wird mich in Musik auflösen. Sie wird meine innerste Seele, die Hüterin meines heiligen Feuers sein . . . Ich ward nur geboren, um sie zu verehren, um ihr ewig zu dienen, um sie zu denken und zu empfinden. (p. 236)

<sup>5</sup> Novalis, p. 424.

Poetry is the essence of Heinrich, his "inmost soul." The last sentence here quoted offers stylistically a perfect example of Mathilde's mutations: "sie zu verehren . . . ihr ewig zu dienen" can still be addressed to a human being; in "sie zu denken und zu empfinden," the abstraction as well as the identification with Heinrich is completed.

One step more and the distinction between love and poetry disappears. This sublimation is not, however, a repetition of the old medieval theme of the adoration of the beloved. It does not occur because of an external use of superlative expressions to magnify a certain feeling, but because religious veneration is the very essence of this feeling, as Novalis experienced it in his love for Sophie von Kühn:

Deine irdische Gestalt ist nur ein Schatten dieses Bildes. Die irdischen Kräfte ringen und quellen um es festzuhalten, aber die Natur ist noch unreif; das Bild ist ein ewiges Urbild, ein Teil der unbekanntenen heiligen Welt. (p. 247)

Love is "die Gegenwart Gottes bei uns" (p. 247). Religion is redefined:

Du bist die Heilige, die meine Wünsche zu Gott bringt, durch die er sich mir offenbart, durch die er mir die Fülle seiner Liebe kund tut. Was ist die Religion, als ein unendliches Einverständnis, eine ewige Vereinigung liebender Herzen? (p. 246)

Thus Mathilde is only an incarnation of her Idea. She is love. Love is expressed by poetry, is poetry, is religion. It is nature also, for plants seem the result of an excess of inexpressible love: "Über die ganze Welt ist dieser grüne Teppich der Liebe gezogen" (p. 281).

In the last pages of the fragment Novalis makes another supreme effort towards unification, this time of the abstract world, of the laws that govern the universe. This is done in a very involved conversation between Heinrich and the physician Sylvester. Concepts of various kinds are reconciled.

The subject of the discussion is, significantly enough for the whole novel, the "höchste Unteilbarkeit," the nature of "Gewissen." "Gewissen" is the one Sense which leads to all senses, which leads to the understanding of the cosmos. For the cosmos is divided into an infinite number of worlds, all encompassed by greater worlds. The problem of self-education is touched upon and left unsolved: can we develop senses that lead us to higher worlds or only come to a deeper understanding of our own?

This Sense of all senses is of a special nature, both perceiving and thing perceived, and cannot therefore be defined. Novalis uses two different meanings of the word as starting-point for his speculation. When he declares that conscience is representative of God on earth, yet never splits itself into various imperatives, as there are not many virtues but only *one* Virtue, we are reminded of the conventional, religious, and ethical sense of conscience, modified perhaps under the influence of Socrates' *Daimon*. Yet Novalis also uses the word with the meaning of "consciousness." Thus it is defined as the sense through which all evils, which are due to "geringe

sittliche Empfänglichkeit" and "Mangel an Reiz der Freiheit" (p. 283), will be abolished. It is "des Menschen eigenstes Wesen in voller Verklärung," the "Urmensch" (p. 284).

"Mangel an Reiz der Freiheit" is one of the causes of suffering on earth. Liberty also has a very special meaning. It is identified with "mastery," with which it is indeed linked in art. He who has full command over his tools, be they colors, words, or laws of harmony, is freer to express himself than he who only stutters. This liberty or mastery is the essence, the origin, of conscience. Every act of the master expresses the world in its simplicity, the word of God.

Now, "Gewissen" and poetry are one, for "jede durch Nachdenken zu einem Weltbild umgearbeitete Neigung und Fertigkeit wird zu einer Erscheinung, zu einer Verwandlung des Gewissens." Thus poetry gives us access to worlds beyond us. It comprises liberty, it comprises ethics which in this higher conception is linked with religion and is not a set of rules. The existence of Nature itself depends on Virtue. Thus, God, Nature, and Poetry are linked. All suffering will be abolished on the day when "Gewissen" will reign. Poetry will flourish from that day forth.

We have seen Novalis' striving for synthesis on various levels. First on the level of the construction: all was to tend towards a final merging of the novel and the *Märchen*, symbolizing the transformation of reality. This would evidently have been continued with success in the second part, where reality is subjected to the laws of the dream-world, but it is less successful in the first where the style does not span the difference. Secondly on the level of action: Heinrich, who is the representative of that synthesis, was to go through all human and cosmological experiences. This may be considered as an illustration of the then widespread belief that man is a microcosm, reflecting the macrocosm, as well as of the popular theme of reincarnation. For the construction of this unified cosmos, barriers between time and space, dream and reality, life and death had to be abolished. The reign of poetry was prepared in two stages: all the elements of experience, nature, love, love of God, were united in poetry which then was proclaimed equal to the highest in the realm of speculation, opening new worlds, equal to conscience, representative of Virtue and of God; a final unity which is not, however, of a pantheistic nature for: "[In der] Freiheit . . . , das Wesen, der Trieb des Gewissens . . . offenbart sich die heilige Eigentümlichkeit, das unmittelbare Schaffen der Persönlichkeit" (p. 284).

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