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Novalis: The Art of Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Novalis developed a “romanticized” account of the state that he intended to be compatible with the ideals of a democracy. Although influenced by the model of intellectual and poetic sociability shared with friends in the Jena circle, Novalis’ view of politics was still unique in many ways. It was premised on the view that artistry and shared artistic practice are a necessary condition of a thriving state and should be developed in *every citizen in every sector* of the population. This entailed the radical proposal that the philosophy of any government, conceived as a civil society whose aim is to promote increasingly greater political and social freedom for its citizens, must commit to making *every citizen an artist*. The aim of this article is to explain and ultimately to defend this radical proposition as reasonable and important, both in the context of Novalis’ own time and for democracies now.

Keywords: Novalis, art, democracy, state, romanticizing, politics

RÉSUMÉ

Novalis a romantisé l’État en une vision qu’il voulait compatible avec les idéaux de la démocratie. Bien qu’influencée par le modèle de sociabilité intellectuelle et poétique partagé avec ses amis du cercle d’Iéna, la vision politique de Novalis est inédite à bien des égards. Partant du principe que l’art et la pratique artistique commune sont une condition nécessaire à la prospérité de l’État, Novalis assigne à *chaque citoyen, dans tous les secteurs* de la population, le devoir de les développer. Il avance en cela la revendication radicale d’un engagement de tout gouvernement, conçu comme une société civile dont l’objectif est de promouvoir une liberté politique et sociale toujours plus grande pour ses citoyens, à faire de *chaque citoyen un artiste*. L’objectif de cet article est de rendre raison de cette position et, en dernière instance, de prendre parti pour elle comme étant raisonnable et importante, à la fois dans le contexte de l’époque de Novalis et pour les démocraties d’aujourd’hui.

Mots-clés: Novalis, art, démocratie, État, romantisme, politique

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1. Introduction

The activity of “romanticizing” associated with the philosophical movement now known as Early German Romanticism was first named, defined, and practiced by Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis). Together the two friends developed the concept of ‘romanticizing’ into a philosophical practice characterized by sharing and developing ideas in a sociable, artistic practice that they labeled “symphilosophy”, that is, philosophy done together with others. Both embraced the practice of “romanticizing” as the method of inquiry for understanding and expanding all the domains of philosophy, including social and political philosophy, and the practice was extended in the mid-1790’s to become a part of the famous Jena circle.¹

Novalis’ own views on politics and political freedom are encapsulated in the slogan: “The world must be romanticized”. France’s new democracy was in its infancy and events there were being closely followed by the Jena romantics. They were supporters of the revolution, and clearly, the prospects for future democracies in Europe were tied to the success of the French model. However, the violent excesses in France during the period of revolutionary turmoil were of real concern to these intellectual “bystanders” as Kant referred to those outside France who were watching hopefully for peaceful and humane outcomes to the revolution.

At this crucial time for politics in Europe, Novalis developed a “romanticized” account of the state that he intended to be compatible with the ideals of a democracy. He was influenced by the model of intellectual and poetic sociability shared with Schlegel and their cohort of artist and philosopher friends in the Jena circle, but at the same time, Novalis’ view of politics was unique in many ways. It was premised on the view that artistry and shared artistic practice are a necessary condition of a thriving state and should be developed in *every citizen in every sector* of the population. For

¹ Novalis was more the philosopher of the two, as Schlegel himself pointed out. Novalis was the better trained philosopher and was more committed to exploring the philosophical ramifications of what it would mean to “romanticize” the world in practice. He had studied Kant in Jena with Karl Leonhard Reinhold, one of Kant’s most famous students. Novalis also wrote an important set of philosophical notes now known as his “Fichte Studies”, in which he explained and critiqued Fichte’s influential theories. (Cf. Manfred Frank’s well-known defense of the philosophical value of these notes which he called “the most important philosophical contribution to early German romanticism” in *Einführung in die Frühromantische Ästhetik: Vorlesungen* (Surkamp Verlag, Frankfurt: 1989), 248, Lecture 15; and my discussion of Novalis’ defense of Kant against both his former professor, Reinhold and his critique of Fichte. (“The Poem of the Understanding” *The Palgrave Handbook of German Romantic Philosophy*: ed. Elizabeth Millán Brusslan (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 19 – 40.

Novalis that entailed the radical proposal that the philosophy of any government, conceived as a civil society whose aim is to promote increasingly greater political and social freedom for its citizens, must commit to making *every citizen an artist*. My aim in what follows is to explain and ultimately to defend this radical proposition as reasonable and important, both in the context of his own time and for democracies now.

2. Romanticizing: Philosophy “Exponentialized”

To begin, a few comments about Novalis’ philosophical method are in order. Novalis famously summarized the activity of “romanticizing” in a set of fragments where he characterizes it as a two part “operation”.² “The world must be romanticized,” he proclaimed:

In this way one rediscovers the original meaning. Romanticizing is nothing but a qualitative potentializing. The lower self is identified with a better self in this operation. Just as we ourselves are such a qualitative potentializing. This operation is still quite unfamiliar (unbekannt). Insofar as I give the common (Gemeinen) a higher meaning, the ordinary (Gewöhnlichen) a mysterious appearance, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the appearance of the infinite – then I romanticize it... The operation is reversed for the higher, unknown, mystical, unending – these are logarithmized.

This fragment is often cited to underscore the view that German romanticism is a poetics of the mysterious, the other-worldly, the uncanny, and so forth, especially in the work of Novalis. It was not. His version of romanticism was far more nuanced, and this persistent caricature misinterprets what Novalis was doing. There is really nothing mysterious about what Novalis calls “the operation” of romanticizing. It is an *activity* - he uses the term almost always as verb, not as an adjective. Romanticizing is a nuanced practice that is not only for educated poets. It is a way of engaging one’s world that may be practiced by individuals together with others, in the midst of their daily lives. It involves envisioning a higher reality for individuals and for societies. Novalis points out that humans by their very nature strive to enact their highest potential: “*we ourselves are such a qualitative potentializing*” means that we human beings have a drive to become civilized. Although we are *already* “potentialized” compared to earlier times, we are still not members of a fully mature civilization. He characterizes this romantic potentializing as an ongoing process that should be carried out self-consciously, and that should

² This claim dates from the winter and spring of 1798. (*Novalis Schriften*, 2: “Poëticismen”, 545 #105).

consciously develop the process of elevating our visions in theory and in practice, through philosophy and in art.

At the same time, it is crucial for Novalis, that the process of romanticizing is not unidirectional. The act or 'operation' of romanticizing is not only a matter of elevating the ordinary to something better ("the lower self to a higher self" for example): it is also to be used as a de-mystification of the thing at issue. In this latter form of romanticizing, we view the fantastic or unattainable as ordinary and within reach, so that what was once visionary is normalized in our thought. As Novalis puts it, "*The operation is reversed for the higher, unknown, mystical, unending – these are logarythmized.*"³ That is, they become ordinary, known, calculable, so that today's vision can therefore become tomorrow's reality, fully defined and rational. Romanticizing is thus not starry-eyed, head-in-the-clouds poeticizing, but rather, it is a deliberate, thoughtful practice of alternating between philosophical inspiration and practical research and application of what is already known; it is the practice of alternating between artistic vision and inspiration on the one hand, and on the other, of normalizing that vision: "lowering" it by bringing the vision back down to earth, embodied and familiar.

In the fragment just prior to proclaiming that "The world must become romanticized!"⁴ Novalis invokes Socrates, reminding his readers that the Socratic philosophy is the art of looking for the truth everywhere, beginning in the place where one is, namely, in the ordinary and everyday. For Socrates, he says, philosophy is "everywhere or [it is] nowhere," so that if one is determined to seek the truth about something one must first orient oneself. The Socratic method, Novalis says, is the art of seeking the truth by starting with what is already given, and from there carefully and precisely attempting to determine the truth about what is being investigated.⁵

For Novalis romanticizing is a two-part operation that is a balance between the grounded and "fact based" scientific model on the one hand and the imaginative elevation of the ordinary in magical moments of transcendent clarity. This is the sense in which, for Novalis, philosophy - the love of wisdom - itself is an *art*: the art of discovering truth in the specific places and

³ Basically, he invokes the notion of a logarithm as a mathematical metaphor for any scientific procedure that is clearly defined to yield a precise answer to a clearly defined question. Technically, a logarithm it is a quantity representing the power to which a fixed number (the base) must be raised to produce a given number. For example, $2^3 = 8$; therefore, 3 is the logarithm of 8 to base 2, or $3 = \log_2 8$)

⁴ *Novalis Schriften* II: p. 545, #105.

⁵ "*Poëticismen*" #103.

spaces where we find ourselves.⁶ This is also what makes travel so important in Novalis' literary work. The travelers find themselves by discovering what are for them at first extraordinary things and occurrences that, in the course of time spent with them, become less alien, more familiar and recognizable. If the traveler is curious and open-minded they are eventually *understood*. In the course of their travels, observant and open-minded people gain insights into "the extraordinary" that expand their knowledge and generally open up new ways of thinking about themselves and the world around them. They return with a heightened knowledge and appreciation not only of the "other," but of their own home, which they now see in a new light. This alternating between mystification and demystification is illustrated by the travels of the young journeyman in Novalis' allegory, "The Novices of Sais" as well as his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. My aim in what follows is to explore the way in which Novalis' model of romanticizing would play out in the cultivation of the citizenry in a democracy.

3. Political freedom: Romanticizing democracy

When Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel proclaimed that "The world must be romanticized" they intended it as a genuine demand, not merely a slogan for their own work.⁷ It was a rallying cry for the enactment of a revolutionary new form of artistic and philosophical practice, and had consequences for their views on everything from interpersonal relationships to religion to politics. If the *world* must be romanticized, clearly politics would have to be as well. Novalis believed that 'romanticizing the world' would have implications during his own time for defining the nature of the state moving forward, and to some extent, away from, the French revolution. That did not mean, however that Novalis rejected democracy, but rather, that any democratic state would have to take a different approach from that of the French in order to properly imagine and enact a state that would take its citizens seriously. He even went so far as to see it as an outgrowth of Christianity because: "It begins with the ordinary person...It is the seed of everything democratic."⁸ "Freedom and equality united is the highest characteristic of the republic, or genuine harmony."⁹ "Laws will exist – As

⁶ II: p.545, #103. The art of finding the truth in any given place and of determining precisely the relationships of the given to the truth.

⁷ *Poeticismen, Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 545.

⁸ III. p. 651, *Fragmenten und Studien*, 1799.

⁹ III. p.284, AB #249.

long as the members are not yet perfect, they will need laws, and the more truly cultured the citizens, the less they will need them.”¹⁰ And also:

*It seems that we have once again stumbled upon the conflict between monarchy and aristocracy—and democracy. The political problem might be one of the major problems, with its true solution drawing innumerable inferior solutions in its wake...The seed of solution lies in a mixed government.*¹¹

This suggestion of a “mixed government” from 1798 appears to be Novalis’ final position, and one that he came to well after he had written the essay *Faith and Love*, which he dedicated to the new king and queen of Prussia. That essay was written in 1797 and is effusive and filled with flattery especially of the young new queen. It appears on the surface of it to be an apology for monarchism. It is therefore important to examine it more carefully to understand why it is not.

As mentioned earlier, Novalis, and his circle of romanticizing compatriots were, at least at its inception, defenders of the French Revolution and of democracy. As time passed and the aftermath of the overthrow of the monarchy grew ever more violent, Novalis distanced himself from France’s government. As we saw, however, Novalis did not condemn the very concept of democracy broadly construed, and his position was more nuanced as a result, as the mention of a mixed government in the *Allgemeine Brouillon* suggests. Novalis position seemed to be simply that the French model could not and should not define future democracies. In a piece entitled *Faith and Love* written on the occasion of the coronation of Friedrich Wilhelm III to the throne in Prussia in 1797, Novalis argues that the new King and Queen (Luise) are now capable of instituting a new, truly enlightened regime and he launches into what is clearly a critique meant to include the fledgling efforts of the French revolutionary model.

Modern states have been run like factories, Novalis says, giving the example of Prussia since Friedrich the First, who successfully bureaucratized and militarized the state.¹² Yet such reforms, Novalis argued, are “mechanical”. They treat citizens as cogs in the operation of the state who are fundamentally driven by self-interest. These reforms are predicated, he says, on the assumption that “raw self-interest” is enough to “bind everyone”

¹⁰ III. p. 284, AB#250.

¹¹ AB. #661; Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, edited and translated by David W. Wood (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 123.

¹² *Faith and Love*, #36. p. 45. *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, edited and translated by Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

together in the social contract.¹³ He argues that this conception of governance in the end cannot sustain a healthy state because it fails to even recognize, let alone nurture, the higher natures of its citizens. That is, it fails to elevate the citizens' capacity for love for others. In a word, it undermines their natural propensities for sociability.

Failure to recognize and nurture the fundamentally social aspect of human nature is therefore a failure to safeguard the healthy maturation of the state over time. He says:

*As necessary as such a mechanical administration may be for physical health, strength, and efficiency in a state, a state goes to ruin when it is governed only in this manner.*¹⁴

What Novalis calls the “mechanical” approach assumes that the self-interest of the state and the self-interest of its individual citizens will be reciprocally promoted by what we might now call a culture of ‘rugged individualism’ which argues that a state that promotes the welfare of self-interested individuals, will thereby promote the health of the state. Novalis vehemently denies this assumption, arguing that “raw self-interest” knows no boundaries, is ultimately irrational, and therefore cannot be systematically regulated and enforced. In the end it does more damage than good. He says:

*[Raw self-interest] admits of no limitation, though the nature of every political organization demands this [limitation]...this formal acceptance of common egoism as principle has done untold damage.*¹⁵

Novalis argues that in a state that is founded on the assumption that the best way to further citizens' well-being is to encourage individuals to compete against each other to get ahead, crude self-interest becomes a “passion” and a form of gambling. Everyone is fighting to outsmart and deceive the other, he says, but sooner or later everyone loses, including the “expert” gamblers who eventually and inevitably themselves fall prey to their own tactics. As Novalis puts it: “*By being deceived one learns how to deceive, and the tables are soon turned.*”¹⁶ Eventually the winners also become losers, and where the driving motive of every citizen is to win the battle to come out on top, be it in terms of class-standing, power over others, or just in terms of amassing greater and greater personal wealth - where that takes place - Novalis argues, universal cultural uplift is impossible. Simply put, adopting common egoism as a

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 46

guiding political principle leads to a morally damaged citizenry and a weak democracy.

For Novalis, the successful state requires that its citizens are properly nurtured and trained to be just and honorable people:

*Enduring happiness comes only from the just man and the just state...Selfless love in the heart and [the maxims of selfless love] in the head...that is the eternal basis of all true, indissoluble union. What is political union but a marriage?*¹⁷

Throughout his writings on politics, Novalis argues that states need a person or persons (“personalities”) who are not themselves political and therefore can act as independent models of civil conduct. In an enlightened citizenry, opposing factions can disagree while still standing united in their commitment to civility and respect. Such a model should be situated outside everyday politics, above the partisan fray of lawmakers and judges and administrators. In *Faith and Love*, Novalis claims that the appropriate model for the state is a healthy family, and the ideal role model of such a family in the state can be a king/queen.

In his introduction to *Faith and Love* for the *Novalis Schriften*, Richard Samuel explains that Novalis was particularly moved by the new queen, praising her goodness and her beauty, and calling her “an angel” who accompanies the king “with her beneficent geniality” and “with her love she is the sublime representative of the king’s heartfelt love for his people.” Samuel points out that Novalis would have read accounts in the newspapers, and he had also been deeply moved by descriptions of a marble statue of the royal couple in which the queen was characterized as the “ideal of beauty expressed in a marble figure.” Ultimately, Samuel suggests, the figure of the queen may have served as a moment of “crystallization” for Novalis of his concept of the “poetic state”.¹⁸

This makes sense. He believed that the conduct of a healthy state depends upon the highest aspirations of its people being embodied in the public culture. Novalis believed that *personalities* were required to capture the spirit of democracy suited for their own country. For Novalis in his own revolutionary time, the king and queen figures could still find a place in a democracy by serving as personifications of that culture. The power they relinquished in government was transferred to an important role in the production and reproduction of public culture.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 46. *Novalis Schriften* 2, p. 476. Again, Novalis is alluding here to the new King and Queen of Prussia.

¹⁸ Ibid.

There is no denying the fact that Novalis' invocation of the royal family as role model, taken together with his glorification of medieval culture, appears quite conservative. And it is true that he was very concerned about the mechanical, soul-less and selfish politics that he feared would overtake nascent democracies in his time. Yet to read this as an expression of anti-democratic sentiment could not be further from the truth. Frederick Beiser makes a strong historiographic case for reading this "romantic medievalism" of the early German romantics more charitably, and I would argue this holds especially for Novalis. Beiser argues that even though it now sounds antiquated, nostalgic and conservative, for Novalis and the romantic circle, this was simply a way of expressing important communitarian ideals:

*Ultimately, romantic medievalism was an expression of much deeper political ideals – ideals that are all too contemporary: the demand for community, the need for social belonging, the insufficiency of civil society and 'market forces.'*¹⁹

This is certainly true for Novalis, who remained firmly committed to a government that did not ignore the social and creative character of its people. When Novalis speaks of the role of the king and queen in the state, he is referring to them as role models of enlightened domestic and social relations – *not* as rulers and lawmakers. When he claims that:

*The conduct of the state depends upon the public ethos. The **ennoblement** of this ethos is the only basis for the genuine reform of the state. The king and queen as such can and must be the principle of the public ethos.*²⁰

Novalis is simply pointing out that the way a state conducts itself is determined, for better or for worse, by its characteristic spirit, that is to say, the way it manifests itself in its beliefs and aspirations. He recognized that not only self-interest, but also prejudice, xenophobia, and lack of motivation and education give rise to a generally benighted society. Role models that offer concrete examples of values and higher moral achievement are needed to motivate and inspire the general public. This, and only this, is what Novalis is suggesting the king and queen can bring to a democratic state.

To be sure, Novalis' focus on royalty, taken together with a sexist "complementary counterparts" account of marriage that assigns woman's domain exclusively to hearth and home, and assigning to the man the domain

¹⁹ Frederick C. Beiser, "Introduction" to *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, xxix.

²⁰ *Faith and Love*, #28.

of civic duty, does suggest an underlying conservatism in his thought. As for his alleged monarchism in this piece, however, that criticism is wrong.

Novalis' appeal to the King and Queen is in fact not intended as a defense of monarchy. The praises he lavishes upon them have to do with their social roles as public figures, not with their politics.²¹ Novalis, as we will see, is careful to leave politics aside in the midst of his praise of their moral virtue and social grace. *Faith and Love* may be an occasional piece, but it is also more than that. Novalis is making a larger point, and one that is compatible with a defense of those values in a democracy. His larger claim here is that the conduct of the state requires more than an independent legislature, executives and courts of law. It also depends on the nature of its public culture and the public figures who represent it.

Moreover, in this same passage it becomes clear that the role model he *really* has in mind is an *artist*, and indeed, that his reference to the *truly* royal personage is to a person with the talent to inspire and encourage all citizens to exercise their own creativity and to bring their *own* individual artistry to their work, *whatever* that may be. In *Faith and Love* the reference to nobility was intended as a shout-out of encouragement to the reform-minded new King and Queen of Prussia on the occasion of their coronation, and, to be sure, Novalis believed that this particular royal couple was genial enough for the two of them to be excellent cultural role models. But having made this bow to the new monarchs, he sets them aside and returns to his central point, namely, that any state that hopes to succeed in the long run requires an *artistic* director or directors for the development of artistry in *each and every* citizen. Shifting from talk of the royal couple, he offers an institutional solution for elevating the public culture in any state, including democracy, namely, that of insuring that every citizen is trained by an *art educator*:

*The true prince is the artist of artists, that is, the director of artists. Every person should be an artist. Everything can become a fine art.*²²

This is a remarkably radical claim. Novalis is not saying that every person should become a trained musician, painter or sculptor. Rather, his point is that *every occupation* can become a fine art in its own right. That is, citizens should be connected to their work, identified with it, not *alienated* from it. Their work should be meaningful to them, so that they not only aim to do it

²¹ It is true, also, that Novalis and his cohort were certainly relieved to have a more moderate and capable monarch taking the place of the corrupt and tyrannical Frederick William III.

²² *Faith and Love*, #39. This is another application of his view of the ubiquity of genius in human beings: it is to be found everywhere, and what we label the genius of genius is the person who can take this to a higher power, as it were.

well, but artistically: with passion, care for detail and beauty, such that they take pride in their “product”, whatever it may be. The sense of pride that they take in what they do for a living will elevate their labor and its products so that it is not a stretch to call those products “works of art” and it is in this sense not hyperbolic to claim that in such a state, “Everything can become a fine art”.

Of course, the conditions for this kind of unalienated, self-fulfilling labor do not arise spontaneously in a democracy. It requires that the state has a vision and the will to find a way to implement that vision across the various vocations, from healthcare to carpentry to education, manufacturing and also to the traditional fine arts. For Novalis’s vision of the ideal state to be fulfilled, some version of his notion of a “true prince” — an artist who creatively trains artists for every vocation — would have to be introduced. This minister of vocational art would require a ministry or institute of artists in every field to recruit and train new members for all vocations and crafts, and these in turn would have to be mobilized and deployed into the citizenry in order to, as Novalis puts it, “*create an infinitely diverse theater where the stage and audience, the actors and spectators are one.*”²³ Whatever this were to look like, it would have to be supported by a national commitment to its universal implementation, just as in our own time universal health care and other programs for the well-being of the citizenry is supported by the state in the more enlightened democracies.

To be clear, Novalis’ “infinitely diverse theater” would not simply be a ministry of culture, although such institutions are important for promoting fine arts education and cultural heritage preservation. As important as those were to Novalis, his vision is much broader. It intended to reach out to and ultimately pervade the whole of society. In his own words:

*Freedom and equality united, is the highest character of the republic, or genuine harmony. A perfect constitution—Determination of the body politic—the soul politic—and the spirit politic—renders every explicit law superfluous. For the laws are self-explanatory if the members are precisely determined. Laws will exist as long as the members are not yet perfect members—and not yet precisely determined—With true culture the number of laws generally diminishes.*²⁴

In sum, Novalis envisions a government that creates and supports a culture of citizen-artists that is completely inclusive: *every* citizen should be trained

²³ Ibid. Just as an aside: This happens to also embody the early romantic view that art should be ironically self-aware, as for instance, in Tieck’s use of romantic irony in *Der Gestiefelte Kater*, which plays with depicting the audience to the show as part of the show.

²⁴ AB.#250-#251, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 37.

and valued as an artist in their own field. This is not merely an aspirational goal for Novalis. The individuals within a state can and should be educated to bring creativity to their calling, whatever that may be. Universal art education, that encourages and trains people to be creative is necessary to ensure that every citizen is ennobled. The figurative “King / Queen” model may be archaic now, but the need for a broad-based artistic education and artist mentors whose job it is to nurture creativity and artistry in *every* citizen and in every occupation is as current as can be. Novalis is clear: “*Every person should be an artist. Everything can become a fine art.*”²⁵ This is his way of romanticizing the state, of elevating it towards an as yet unknown, as yet ideal, stage, in keeping with the romantic mandate to promote a progressive alternation between, on the one hand,

a qualitative potentializing. The lower self is identified with a better self in this operation. Just as we ourselves are such a qualitative potentializing. This operation is still quite unfamiliar (unbekannt). Insofar as I give the common [Gemeinen] a higher meaning, the ordinary [Gewöhnlichen] a mysterious appearance, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the appearance of the infinite – then I romanticize it...

And on the other hand, as we already saw,

The operation is reversed for the higher, unknown, mystical, unending – these are logarythmized.

That is, they are brought down to earth, demystified, and seen as ordinary, realizable tasks for a healthy society in which labor of all sorts is properly valued and rewarded. In this way the idea of turning one’s work into a labor of love, and in that sense also into a work of art, is a bit less utopian, easier to imagine and therefore more realizable.

3. “Coloring” political freedom and equality: Individual self-expression in a romanticized democracy

*Everything national, temporal, local, individual, can be universalized and thus canonized and generalized. Christ is such a provincial figure who has been ennobled. This individual coloring of the universal is its romanticizing element. Thus every national and even every personal god is a romanticized universal. Personality is the romantic element of the I.*²⁶

²⁵ Ibid. It also prefigures Marx’s views in alienated labor in capitalism.

²⁶ II. 616 #425: *Ergänzungen zu den Teplitzer Fragmenten.*

For Novalis, not only every religion but also every state is defined by what he calls its “individual coloring”, that is, by the personality of its individual citizen. The fundament of Novalis’ romanticized account of the state is his conviction that the character of any state is necessarily determined by the individual character of *each and every citizen*. If a democracy is to be more than a monochrome mechanism for self-interested individuals to protect their egocentric wants and needs, it must be re-imagined in light of a higher vision of what humanity can be at its best. It must be enlivened by recognition of the personal and social needs of its citizens, and determined by the needs of real individuals from all walks of life, all callings and all aspirations in all their great diversity. Every citizen is an individual whose talents and character contribute to the personality of the state. Democracies at their best are rainbows reflecting all the ‘colors’ of their citizenry.

This passage is crucial for understanding Novalis’ ideal of romanticizing in a democracy. He mentions “Christ” in this passage to illustrate an ideal religious teacher who was enobled by a higher power and at the same time a human personality with unique characteristics that those around him could understand, love, and emulate. In *Faith and Love* Novalis is contrasting this romantically ‘exponentialized’ teacher with the idea of God as a kind of religious abstraction or mystical being that mere mortals could never fully understand. Christ in this passage represents an enobled *human* teacher who was assigned the task of being a teacher of teachers.

Turning from religion to the context of the state, Novalis calls for an elevated “director of artists” who will romanticize democracy – bring it to life, as it were. Novalis argues that human beings can learn to turn the products of their labor into artworks:

*Instinct is art devoid of purpose—Art, without knowing how and what one makes. Instinct can be transformed into art—through the observation of artistic activities. Thus what one makes, may at length be made and learned in an artistic fashion.*²⁷

Just as in the Christian religion a citizen was elevated not to legislate or judge or administer, but to teach a ‘gospel of love’, the parallel in the democratic state would be an artist – or artists – “enobled” by the state to train other artists to themselves become trainers, until in the ideal case every citizen is an artist. Just as “God” can appear in a thousand “personalities”,²⁸ so too in the state,

²⁷ AB# 270, emphasis added; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 40.

²⁸ AB: #398; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 61.

*The theory of the mediator may be applied to politics...The more brilliant and lively the members—the more lively and personal the state. The Genius of the state shines forth from every genuine citizen of the state—just as in a religious community a personal God reveals itself, as it were, in a thousand forms. The state and God, as with every spiritual being, do not appear in isolation, but in a thousand, diverse forms...*²⁹

Novalis' conception of an artist of artists, that is, of an artistic director of the state, is of a mediator between the state and its citizens, and the more the director, or group of *directors*, succeeds in uplifting citizens to the level of artists in their individual work, the more the state itself is enlivened and gains personality. Moreover, guided by their democratic ideals and their respect for the citizens in all their diversity, these teachers not only help to uplift the citizens, they are themselves uplifted as the state becomes more and more identified with all its people. Ideally, they *become* the state, but in the realizable ideal, enlightened / romanticized citizens will at least know that the state belongs to all of them:

*A perfect constitution...renders every explicit law superfluous. For the laws are self-explanatory if the members are precisely determined. Laws will exist—as long as the members are not yet perfect members—and not yet precisely determined—with true culture the number of laws generally diminishes. ...Laws are the compliment of deficient natures and beings...Once we have more closely determined the essential being of a spirit, we will have no more need of spiritual laws.*³⁰

The ideal, fully romanticized goal is that each and every citizen becomes an artist of their own life's work. Clearly, democracies can and should aspire to this ideal. The state should, Novalis argues, appoint artists to teach and train all citizens to be artists, thereby creating in individual citizens the ability to turn their work into a *work of art*. He calls for recruiting an "artist of artists" to train their compatriots to turn "jobs" into callings, so that, in his words, "*What one makes, may at length be made and learned in an artistic fashion.*"³¹ With purposive intent and expert training, there are myriad ways in which a citizenry can manifest its *collective* genius in diverse and *individual* ways. This is the sense in which for Novalis "*Poësie is the basis of society (Gesellschaft), as*

²⁹ Ibid. This also succinctly captures Novalis' cosmopolitan leanings. For an excellent overview of his cosmopolitanism see Pauline Kleingeld, "Romantic Cosmopolitanism: Novalis's 'Christianity or Europe'", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 46, no.2 (2008): 269-84.

³⁰ AB: #250; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 37.

³¹ AB #270; *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 40.

*virtue is the basis of the state.*³² On this view, democracies should fundamentally be institutions that aim to bring sociability as well as civic virtue together in each and every citizen. This is what democracy looks like — when it is romanticized.

4. Objections

At this point, a couple of concerns should be mentioned, both of which have been raised succinctly in a recent paper by Matthias Löwe, *Poetische Staaten: Frühromantik und Politik*.

*At the core of the early Romantic view of politics and society is... the vague idea of a community of love and brotherhood, a community of “throne-worthy” individuals who act not out of egoism but rather, out of love.*³³

But this vague idea of a community of love and brotherhood, Löwe argues, is in tension with a fundamental task of democracy, namely, adjudicating conflicts of interest between individuals freely pursuing their own self-interest. This feature, as we saw earlier, appears to be in tension with Novalis’ ideal *romantic* model of a society that, Löwe argues, is centered on a communitarianism that

*is not democratic but also not autocratic, rather it is a nebulous idea [von Nebelkerzen umstellte Idee] that can be used in connection with divergent forms of political organization...*³⁴

It is true that Novalis did not in the end embrace democracy as the only appropriate form of government, but neither did he reject it as a form of government. Moreover, democracy is not by definition based only on possessive or laissez-faire individualism. Nothing precludes a democracy from embracing communitarian values. In the short time that Novalis was following events in politics, the details of what democracies could look like were not yet in sight. It is not surprising that Novalis argues that democracy in the form he knew it – the then struggling French model – could legitimately be described solely in terms of managing human egoism. Nevertheless, and his high praise for William III’s morals notwithstanding, Novalis did not *prefer* monarchy to democracy. I have argued already that the point of *Faith and*

³² II: *Poësie*, 37

³³ p. 55: *Poetische Staaten: Frühromantik und Politik*. In *Romantisierung von Politik: Historische Konstellationen und Gegenwartsanalysen*, Athenäum, pp. 45-58, 29 Apr. 2022. (“Throne worthy” here refers to Novalis’ comment”).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Love was not to advocate for monarchy, but rather to make a compelling case that artists and artistic training could serve as a humanizing interface between government and the public at large. They could, in other words, serve as creative, social mediators of the public ethos. Although Novalis generally spoke of mediators as interfaces between the divine and ordinary people, he also argued that a mediator of a different sort, an “artist of artists”, could appear in a state where “Art is the complement of Nature.” And where “Freedom and equality united, is the highest character of the republic, or genuine harmony.”³⁵

Novalis suggests that the notion of an artist of artists would be needed in democracies if they are to aim for more than adjudicating conflicts of interest between individuals motivated only by their own self-interest. It is true that Novalis is light on detail, and yet the proposal that programs run by people who value and promote the uplift of sociability among all citizens are precisely what is needed to change these “mechanical” models of citizenship to incorporate more caring and community models in a democracy. As we saw, Novalis’ *Faith and Love* was addressed in praise of a monarch who was reform-minded and concerned with restoring positive, social values to the state. Novalis advocated on behalf of these goals, but he did not call for the elimination of procedural justice models. He reserved his critique for states that were run *only* “mechanically”, aiming to produce freedom and equality without concern for the social third pillar of the French revolution: “brotherhood”. Nowhere did he suggest that a higher kind of democracy was impossible.

A second issue raised by Löwe is that romantic ideals of community values are compatible with less savory forms of government. This may be true for some states, where communitarian models are narrowly tied to a set of religious beliefs and practices, and in a diverse democracy, especially a multicultural one, there will be tensions that must be adjudicated fairly and equally in terms of competing conceptions of the good. Yet Novalis’ insistence on an *independent* social role that artists would play in bringing forth an artistic mindset in citizens would allow them to appreciate some cultural differences. Certainly Novalis vision is of a state that calls on romanticizing artists who are by nature bold and innovative dreamers who eschew entrenched ideas and practices and often challenge the status quo. Many non-democratic governments would ban the “difficult” ones outright so that the vision of an independent artist of artists would be impossible. In short,

³⁵ III. AB #248, 249.

Novalis extremely expansive view of artistry does not square at all well with what would be the rigidly circumscribed values of a communitarian state.

Postscript

A little over a century later, in Berlin in the fall of 1922, Thomas Mann appealed to Novalis in a lecture to students in Berlin in which he affirmed his commitment to German democracy, and implored the educated youth in his audience to do the same and reject fascism.³⁶ In the course of the lecture, Mann presented his idea of a uniquely *German* democratic republic. He knew that pro-democracy sentiments were unpopular with the students themselves, but believed that he might persuade these young men to embrace democracy in the face of clear signs that the alternative would be Germany's slide into fascism.³⁷

To bolster his argument for a political shift away from these ominous trends he drew on Novalis. Appealing to Novalis' support for the French Revolution as well as his argument in *Faith and Love* for the need for every state to develop its own version of democracy based on the characteristics or unique "coloring" of its citizens, he argued that love of the German national feeling should draw on uniquely German art and sentiments, admonishing them that

If our national feeling is not to fall into disrepute or not to become a curse, it will have to cease being a vehicle for everything warlike and brawling. Instead, corresponding with the (German) Nation's artistic and almost sentimental sides, it will be ever more unconditionally understood as the object of a cult of peace.

Mann's defense of democracy came too late, and the students were not convinced. The 'warlike and brawling' had taken hold of a significant sector of the national psyche. The conditions for even considering an early German romantic embrace of German democracy were fast disappearing. Even if it were not too late, Mann did not himself fully grasp the nature of Novalis' utopian argument. What Mann failed to understand was that the 'coloring'

³⁶ That is, to reject fascism. Mann delivered this speech out of deep concern for this trend in Germany at the time. Open displays of anti-semitism were on the rise, and two recent high-profile assassinations of moderate pro-democracy politicians (Matthias Erzberger, the former finance minister who endorsed the treaty of Versailles and Walther Rathenau, a wealthy industrialist appointed Minister of Reconstruction in 1921, then Foreign Minister in 1922, were both assassinated by right-wing extremists.)

³⁷ "Let me say it openly...my aim is to win you over to the side of the republic and what is termed democracy, and what I term humanity." (Thomas Mann: *Von Deutscher Republik*, 1922).

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of the democratic state that Novalis spoke of was not simply a matter of German heritage and the elevation of what was uniquely German in some halcyon past. In defending his notion of a poetic state, Novalis may have used German examples (it was after all a piece written for the new Prussian King and Queen) and he may have believed that the French model of democracy was on the wrong track. Yet Novalis's message made it clear that a *romanticized* democracy would have to embrace, nurture, and value *all* its citizens, in all their colorful diversity.