Symphilosophie

International Journal of Philosophical Romanticism

Novalis's Encyclopedistic Philosophy

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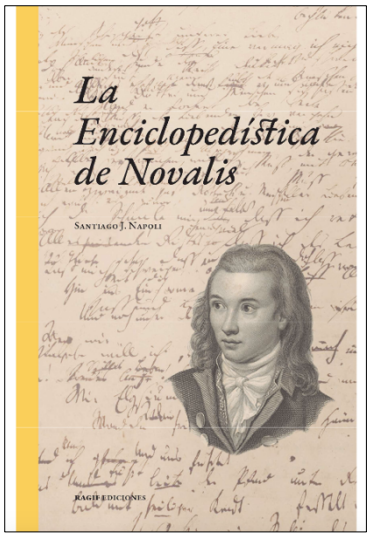
Santiago J. Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis. La experiencia crítica del conocimiento y sus modelos*, Argentina, Ragif Ediciones, 2024, 285 pp. ISBN 978-987-48998-8-0



Goethe's *Faust* was the first work I chose to read on my own initiative as a young person. At the time, all I knew about the great German writer was that he represented the spirit of Romanticism. Much later, immersed in the turbulent world of academia, I learned that this categorization was a colloquial oversimplification, and that the term proto-Romanticism would be more historically accurate to describe the poet's era. Now, the categories seem endless: Early Romanticism, Late Romanticism, Weimar Classicism, *Sturm und Drang*, post-Romanticism, Gothic, Decadentism. When referring to writers and poets, they are labeled as Romantics; when speaking of Romantic philosophy, it is often better to use the term Idealism.

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In the face of such historical divisions of thought, I cannot help but think that this fragmentation is precisely what the early Romantics sought to avoid: the predominance of particularities. In this sense, the posthumous work of Novalis becomes especially significant, as he was emblematically Romantic—fragmentary yet driven by a longing for the universalization of knowledge.

The first time I encountered the name Novalis was in a quote read by Harry Haller in *Der Steppenwolf*. Motivated by curiosity, I soon searched bookstores to find any of his works (in Spanish) but to no avail. Fortunately, Novalis's poetic works have increasingly been translated into Spanish, and, albeit to a lesser extent, so have his philosophical writings.

Novalis, the pseudonym of Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg, likely leaned more toward the tragic than toward the luminous, closer to the mystical without fully becoming a visionary. I was unsure whether the difficulty of finding his works in Spanish stemmed from the inherent challenges of systematizing or categorizing a body of work in a language other than the one in which it was conceived.

Of course, this does not mean that Novalis was unknown in Spanish-speaking countries during the Romantic era. While Spanish and Hispanic American Romanticism did not enjoy the same dissemination or reach as its German and English counterparts—partly because the movement arrived later—some authors, such as Esteban Echeverría and Enrique Gil y Carrasco, engaged with German and French Romantic ideas. The latter, in particular, was influenced by Novalis;[1] however, their focus was more on aesthetic concerns than on philosophical or scientific ones.

Santiago J. Napoli, in his book *La enciclopedística de Novalis. La experiencia crítica del conocimiento y sus modelos* (Novalis's Encyclopaedia: The Critical Experience of Knowledge and Its Models), which inspires me to write today (and to add a few observations I find relevant), suggests that it is precisely Novalis's fragmentary writing that allows for interpretation from various perspectives.[2] Napoli is among the scholars who have dedicated

[1] Unlike other romantics of exalted tone like Espronceda or Zorrilla, Enrique Gil y Carrasco deeply assimilated the philosophical and aesthetic elements of the German movement, including the concept of the sublime from Kant and Burke, and the spirituality of nature found in authors like Novalis. In his poetry, the intimate dialogue with nature as the poet's interlocutor reflects Novalis's influence, particularly his *Flor azul* (*die blaue Blume*), a symbol of unattainable aspiration and poetic ideal. See: Carlos Miguel-Pueyo, "El romanticismo de Enrique Gil: un diálogo con lo sublime," in *Enrique Gil y Carrasco y el Romanticismo* (Spain: Actas del Congreso Internacional El Bierzo, 2015).

[2] Santiago J. Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis. La experiencia crítica del conocimiento y sus modelos* (Argentina: Ragif Ediciones, 2024).

themselves to exploring the poet's work and promoting it in Spanish, focusing on a lesser-known facet of the German poet—at least in Spanish-speaking countries—namely, the *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (*The General Draft*).[3]

In the notes compiled within this draft, Novalis embarks on an endeavor that he envisioned as analogous to the Bible in its role as a "book of books."[4] A "scientific Bible," in the sense that it would encompass epistemological—and, in a broader sense, gnoseological—implications, aiming to synthesize the real and the ideal; in this sense, a pure piece of Romantic work. This project, known as *encyclopaedia* or *encyclopedistics*, aspires to be "a contribution to the cognitive universe."[5] In essence, it constitutes a critical experience of knowledge, with *critical* understood as self-reflection and *experience* as experimentation.

Napoli's book is divided into **seven chapters.** It begins by presenting the historical context and background that explain how Novalis sought to transform the modern encyclopedic tradition, as well as the brief history of *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* and its subsequent editions. The book also delves into the semantics of encyclopedistics and its unique gnoseological approach.

Novalis's friends, Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck, were responsible for editing the first, abbreviated version of the drafts, titled *Schriften* (*Writings*). The issue with this edition is that it does not adhere to the order seemingly left by its author; instead, it conforms to a more arbitrary interpretation, organized by thematic classifications—likely aligned with the early Romantic ideals of which Schlegel and Tieck were key exponents. This approach, Napoli tells us, contributed to the enduring image of Novalis as "the quintessential Romantic poet, associated with fantasy, longing, and melancholy."[6]

This gives us an idea of how the organization of Novalis's notebooks in posthumously published editions reflected criteria foreign to their author's

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[3] This text has been translated into English. See Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das allgemeine Brouillon*, edited and translated by David W. Wood (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2007).

[4] Novalis is not the only one with such a goal. The early German Romantics viewed the Bible as a model, not for its content, but for its quality as a "system of books." We can find the idea of an infinite, absolute book, in Schlegel's Fragment 95 of *Ideas*. Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971). Schlegel wrote a letter to Novalis in October 1798, expressing to his friend his desire to "write a new Bible," which would gather all modern knowledge, just as Greek poetry had formed an organic whole. See: George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[5] Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis*, 18. All translations of references originally written in Spanish are my own.

[6] Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis*, 37.

intentions, shaping the image constructed around him. However, the German thinker's proposal was far more ambitious. He sought to work his "way through all the sciences," [7] beginning with mathematics, which, as we will see later, he placed in a privileged position within his method.

Napoli offers a brief history of the encyclopedia in its German, French, and English iterations to contrast these traditions with Novalis's proposal. While the French encyclopedic project of D'Alembert and Diderot—arguably the most similar to Novalis's due to its classificatory and integrative nature—focuses on organizing and uniting knowledge, the German thinker's proposal moves toward the universality of epistemic elements underlying such classification, making his proposal perhaps fundamentally a question of method.

Encyclopedias require constant updating. Could encyclopedistics for Novalis, then, be the science that brings together the principles enabling such perpetual renewal? This idea is not far-fetched if we consider that, within his draft, Novalis describes his project as, among other things, a universalization of knowledge that is, initially, historical and geographical in scope, as well as a theory of pure objects. His proposal thus transcended the epistemic boundaries of traditional encyclopedias, aiming for the organization and unification of theoretical and practical knowledge—a universalization of all learning, where "knowledge is presented neutrally, so that it can combine, integrate, and ultimately enhance itself."[8]

In the second chapter, Napoli examines the principal influences on Novalis's encyclopedistics, particularly the inspiration and critique of geologist Gottlob Abraham Werner, who was the poet's professor. Drawing on the classificatory and definitional schemes outlined in Werner's *Von den äußerlichen Kennzeichen der Fossilien* (*On the External Characteristics of Minerals*), Novalis sought to apply these methods to other sciences, aiming to integrate theory and taxonomic practice. This reflects an early preoccupation with systematic organization.

One notable example is entry 333 of the *Brouillon*, where Novalis offers a critical reference to Werner's work: "A word corresponds to a proposition. (A proposition is a word raised to a higher power. Every word can be raised to a proposition, to a definition)."[9] Here, we observe Novalis's interest in how words and propositions function as the building blocks of logical

7 Entry 229 of Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 33.
8 Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis*, 68.
9 Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 49.

structure—a concern that would resurface a century later, most notably in Wittgenstein's philosophy.[10]

Werner's scientific theory emphasized the characteristics of minerals, various taxonomic terms, and empirical data, which Novalis reimagines as "words that intensify into propositions, propositions that intensify into sciences, and sciences that, in turn, intensify toward an absolute universal science."[11] In this way, Novalis positions himself as both an inheritor of the modern encyclopedic tradition, with its combinatory nature, and takes it even further, advancing it toward a more integral form of scientific knowledge.

As part of the critique of his professor, Novalis concludes that the concepts in Werner's theory function only in isolation, falling short of the systematic integration that the poet deemed essential. While he recognizes the value of empirical experience, Novalis rejects Werner's excessive empiricism. With these considerations in mind, he embarks on the task of transcending an epistemological model, moving toward an idealist system. This idealist approach requires scientists to integrate particular forms of knowledge into a universal framework. But how could this be achieved?

The third chapter introduces three conceptual operations that are key to Novalis's encyclopedistics as an epistemological theory: classification, combination, and romanticization. These operations reflect the inherently reflexive and epistemological character of his theory as it relates to scientific knowledge. Together, they form the foundation of his critical-scientific methodology.

The classificatory operation involves gathering, dividing, and concluding, underscoring the importance of experimentation and data collection. For Novalis, however, observation already entails explanation, and the collection of data already implies evaluation—contrary to the common practice of collecting data for subsequent assessment. Dividing information leads to the systematization of knowledge, with the category serving as the classificatory unit, which he describes as "the alphabet of human thoughts."[12] Yet, Novalis also identifies a potential pitfall at this

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[10] In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein proposes that propositions are logical pictures of reality, where each word has the potential to contribute to a meaningful statement or proposition. In this way, Wittgenstein touches on the idea that the sense of propositions is derived from the possibilities of combination within language (see *Tractatus* 2.1 - 3). Proposition 3.3: "Only propositions have sense; only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning." Here Wittgenstein emphasizes that individual words (or "names") only attain meaning when they form part of a proposition. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico- Philosophicus* (London: Anthem Press, 2021).

[11] Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis*, 81.

[12] Quoted by Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis*, 104.

stage: the danger of becoming ensnared in the vast world of classifications. The scientist must not lose sight of the ultimate goal—the synthesis of the collected information.

The combinatory operation, though not explicitly defined in Novalis's notes, suggests both an epistemological and a mathematical combinatory analysis. In the Novalisian system, there is an underlying critique of the conventional scientific methods of his time, which often disregard the relationship between experiences and results, leaving them neither organized nor compared.[13] This focus on dynamic processes aligns with the broader interests and debates of Romantic thinkers. The combinatory operation allows to "obtain the unknown elements from out of the given data,"[14] embodying an idealist approach that seeks to integrate and transcend empirical data by relating it to other domains of knowledge, such as history and philosophy.

At this juncture, analogy becomes a vital concept.[15] Novalis encourages historians to articulate events and consider their interconnections. Although his understanding of analogy remains undefined—similar to the vagueness surrounding "combinatorics"—Napoli points it out as a network of interrelations among sciences, which today might be termed homology. This pedagogical function serves as a precursor to future scientific methodologies.

Romantic operations refer to the qualitative integration of heterogeneous elements which initially cannot be combined. Despite Napoli's significant effort to clarify this operation, it remains shrouded in ambiguity, which, of course, must be understood in light of the broad manner in which Novalis himself speaks about "romanticizing." This integration is achieved through logical-mathematical reasoning. As noted in entry 291 of the *Brouillon*, he returns to the idea of homogenization to reconcile opposites (a process we might associate with Romantic annihilation), with the human being serving as the reference point or principle for these processes—specifically, as Napoli notes, the epistemologist.

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13 Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis*, 110. Napoli refers to entry 805 of the *Brouillon*.

14 Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 100. Here Novalis is inspired by the mathematician Georg Simon Klügel.

15 Franz von Baader, whose interests spanned both physics and poetry, profoundly influenced the German Romantics through his use of philosophical analogy. In his view, humanity and nature are interconnected as microcosm and macrocosm, each reflecting the same underlying laws and forces. See: Giulia Valpione, "Hábitos y costumbre. Política en el Romantik," in Garnica, Naim, *La actualidad del primer romanticismo alemán: Modernidad, filosofía y literatura* (Argentina: Editorial Científica Universitaria de la Universidad Nacional de Catamarca, 2019).

By romanticization, understood in a mathematical-epistemological sense, Novalis likens the process to "algebraization." Mathematical operations, according to him, are homologous to this form of synthesis. In this light, romanticization is also envisioned as universalization—a poetic (that is, creative) tendency. This constitutes a "romantic poetic perspective of the sciences."[16] However, this exercise, which involves elevating any experiment or theory to its highest potential through a mathematical operation, remains unresolved;[17] Novalis does not explain the "how." This ambiguity can be attributed to the fragmentary and unfinished nature of his work, which only sketches out a method.

In Novalis's vision, the sciences ultimately merge into philosophy, revealing the encyclopedistics project's overarching aim: the construction of an "infinite totality." This totality represents a unified system of knowledge in which all disciplines—science, art, and philosophy—interconnect and complement one another, revealing a deeper, harmonious understanding of reality. For Novalis, this synthesis transforms fragmented fields of inquiry into an organic whole.

Chapters 4 and 5 delve into encyclopedistics as a theory of knowledge and its connections with mathematics, which Novalis grants a central role as a superior science, and with philosophy, seen as both destructive force and foundational principle.[18]

Novalis's interest in mathematics focuses particularly on the combinatory school, which traces its lineage to Leibniz and Bernoulli. Through the works of Carl Friedrich Hindenburg and Johann Friedrich Lempe, and the equations of Georg Simon Klügel and the calculus of Nicolas de Condorcet, Novalis seeks to "find the unknown from the given data" as part of his epistemological method. His ultimate aim is to discover a universal language

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16 Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis*, 129.

17 Concepts such as "nth power of the binomial of the series of data and facts" (entry 198) remain unclear. Nonetheless, following Novalis's exposition of ideas, we can conjecture that by "nth power," an exponential growth level is suggested (a repetition multiplied by itself), x^{nth}. "Of the binomial" refers to an algebraic expression with two terms ($a+b$), symbolizing a relationship between two elements. Finally, "of the series of data and facts" can be understood as an ordered set of objective information. However, these relationships seem to operate only metaphorically or by analogy, since the "data" and "facts" (as components of a binomial) would be amplified through some process (nth power). This could refer to the way in which simple or dual information is transformed into something more complex or meaningful.

18 The same concern can be seen in no. 44 of Novalis' *Last Fragments*: "Philosophy is *arbitrary*, like all synthetic science such as mathematics. It is an ideal, self-invented method of observing and ordering etc. the inner world. Can philosophy even be the unattainable science *kat exochen*—the scientific ideal?" Novalis, *Philosophical Writings* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 164.

for all sciences. These mathematical applications are transformed by Novalis into gnoseological metaphors, underpinning his project. Related to this, among the many definitions of philosophy found in his notes we can mention: "Philosophy is universal—or higher mathematics" and "poetical mathematics" (entry 719).[19]

Philosophy is related to the definition of encyclopedistics as "critical experience of knowledge," reinforcing its project as the science of sciences.[20] "Philosophy is the substance of science as it were—that is sought everywhere—present everywhere, and yet never appears to the seeker," he writes in entry 343.[21] Philosophy becomes an infinite problem: unlike science, it produces nothing concrete but "relativizes the universe."[22] The strength of philosophy lies in its ability to expose the incompleteness of knowledge and to destroy what is established. This Romantic conception of philosophy's and poetry's purpose emphasizes the impossibility of synthesizing or achieving absolute unity in knowledge.

If philosophy does not create, it destroys—tearing down foundations and burying assumptions. Yet this is a critical destruction from which something new, such as science, can emerge. Encyclopedistics thus provides a method for disintegrating knowledge and then reuniting it—not by mixing or fusing, but by creating a new synthesis. Philosophy, in its destructive role, is also a starting point, for something must always be the beginning.

To avoid remaining trapped in philosophy's merely destructive character, praxis becomes essential. Experience contributes to achieving a synthesis between realism and idealism, but philosophy remains the driving force that inspires one to experience the world and create meaning. The critical path of knowledge leads to systematization, just as the instructed human being leads to the systematic thinker.[23] Consequently, Novalis's project also carries a regulatory function, mediated by philosophy in an idealist sense.

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19 Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 133.

20 "Saber de saberes" (knowledge of knowledges) is the term that Napoli uses, however, the literal translation into English would sound ambiguous.

21 Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 52.

22 Entry 622. Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 110.

23 A similar idea can be found in Novalis' *Logological Fragments II*: "The scholar attains the maximum in his field through the highest simplification—of the rules and therefore also of the subject matter. If he can derive all determinate rules from one *determinate* rule—reduce all determinate ends to one end etc., then he has brought his field to the highest degree of its perfection. The encyclopedic scholar, who does this within the compass of all determinate sciences—and so transforms all determinate sciences into one determinate science, is the maximum of a scholar." No. 28 of the "Logological Fragments II." Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 77.

Novalis found inspiration for his synthesis in Plotinus, whose ideas he encountered through Tiedemann's *Geist der spekulativen Philosophie*. This discovery led him to embrace experimentation as a poetic path to truth, uniting matter and spirit, nature and idea. For Novalis, Plotinus offered a model of idealist realism that complemented his encyclopedic vision, embodying the tension between the pursuit of absolute knowledge and its unattainability. This impossibility, rather than a limitation, fueled his thought, keeping the synthesis open, dynamic, and reflective of the infinite totality he sought to grasp.

Chapter 6 delves into the influences of critical philosophy, idealism, empiricism, and skepticism on the encyclopedistic project of Novalis. To achieve greater systematization, the poet draws on Fichte's philosophy, starting with the concept of the "I" (*das Ich*) as an ontological principle. Fichte's ideas deeply influenced the thinkers of the Jena Circle, and Novalis was no exception, engaging with Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, a revised version of his lectures. Inspired by this critical analysis, Novalis wrote his *Fichte-Studien*, where he explores the regulative function of philosophy and the role of productive imagination.[24] Among the many problems he considers, one stands out: how individuals can access the "absolute foundation of knowledge." For Fichte, absolute philosophy is a *Wissenschaftslehre* (*Doctrine of Science*), which Novalis envisioned as a "genuine, independent, autonomous encyclopaedics.—Science of the sciences."[25]

Novalis is concerned with the study of totalities. He employs the Fichtean concept of unity to support the metaphor of totality, aiming to integrate different sciences, for instance, psychology and physiology, which, from this perspective, are regarded as essentially the same. Building on the *Fichte-Studien*, Novalis conceives the *Wissenschaftslehre* more broadly than Fichte, encompassing both the general and the particular and serving as the foundational principle for all sciences.

Despite his admiration for Fichte, Novalis criticizes the non-philosophical nature of Fichte's attempt to establish a first principle or absolute foundation of knowledge. For the poet, such a principle is inevitably arbitrary, leading to dogmatism. This critique highlights the incompleteness of Fichte's project, which Novalis sought to complement. His master's failure

[24] Fichte proposed that the free activity of self-consciousness is the foundation of all philosophy. He argued that knowledge arises not from passive sensory input but through the self's dynamic effort to overcome its limitations. Central to this process is the "productive imagination," which mediates between the finite and the infinite, enabling the self to shape the world according to its moral ideal.

[25] Entry 56. Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 9.

to address particular or concrete aspects motivates Novalis to, drawing on Plotinus and Spinoza, "express the empirical nature of cognitive experience."[26]

The final chapter considers Novalis's project as a potential book. In his philosophical work *Dialogen*, the German thinker presents a dialogue on two opposing views regarding the proliferation of books: one fearing a glut of worthless publications and the other seeing this trend as a positive development for the dissemination and creation of knowledge. This debate is significant for speculating about what Novalis's encyclopedistics project might have looked like had it not been permanently interrupted.

What form would this gnoseological Bible take? Napoli views the *Brouillon* as "a grand draft of a systematic book,"[27] a textual unity intended for publication and encompassing multiple genres simultaneously. This vision underscores the ambitious and interdisciplinary nature of Novalis's unfinished encyclopedistics endeavor.

Napoli interprets Novalis's potential universal book from two perspectives. First, as the encyclopedistics itself and its method, with the *Brouillon* serving as the draft of a work that would never see the light. Second, he entertains the possibility that the German thinker envisioned the book as an introduction to encyclopedistics—a prelude or prologue to the "book of books." With this speculation about what Novalis's new Bible might have been, Napoli concludes his analysis.

Santiago Napoli's contribution lies not only in delving into this ambitious work of Novalis—analyzing and deciphering its suggestions and unrealized potential—but also in providing tools for its future critique and exploration within the Spanish-speaking world and the broader academic community. In doing so, Napoli transcends the traditional view of Novalis as merely a poet, highlighting his profound interest in the dynamics and foundations of knowledge production.

Unfortunately, Novalis gradually abandoned his project, turning instead to personal reflections and concerns about his professional life. In his letters, he expresses dismay at the lack of time to dedicate to his most ambitious endeavors. Despite all progress and effort in the pursuit of knowledge, the unfathomable remains beyond containment. The end of Novalis's encyclopedistics is imbued with a quintessentially Romantic sensibility: every comprehensive, absolute attempt at understanding ultimately collapses into fragments and melancholy.

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[26] Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis*, 228.
[27] Napoli, *La enciclopedística de Novalis*, 236.