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Novalis: Signs of Revolution (Post-contemporary interventions)

William Arctander O'Brien

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Novalis traces the meteoric career of one of the most striking—and most strikingly misunderstood—figures of German Romanticism. Although Friedrich von Hardenberg (better known by his pseudonym, Novalis) published scarcely eighty pages of writings in his lifetime, his considerable fame and influence continued to spread long after his death in 1801. His posthumous reputation, however, was largely based on the myth manufactured by opportunistic editors, as Wm. Arctander O'Brien reveals in this book, the first to extract Hardenberg from the distortions of history.
A member of the generation of the 1770s that included Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling, Hardenberg was an avid follower of the French Revolution, a semiotician *avant la lettre*, and a prescient critic of religion. Yet in 1802, only a year after his death, the writer who had scandalized the Prussian court was marketed to a nation at war as a reactionary patriot, a sweet versifier of Idealism, and a morbid mystic. Identifying the break between Hardenberg's own early Romanticism and the late Romanticism that falsified it, *Novalis* shows us a writer fully engaged in revolutionary politics and examines his semiotic readings of philosophy and of the political, scientific, and religious institutions of the day. Drawing on the full range of Novalis's writings, including his poetry, notebooks, novels, and journals, O'Brien situates his semiotics between those of the eighteenth century and those of the twentieth and demonstrates the manner in which a concern for signs and language permeated all aspects of his thought.
The most extensive study of Hardenberg available in English, *Novalis* makes this revolutionary theoretician visible for the first time. Mining a crucial chapter in the history of semiotics and social theory, it suggests fruitful, sometimes problematic connections between semiotic, historical, "deconstructive," and philological practices as it presents a portrait of one of the most complex figures in literary history. Indispensable for scholars of German Romanticism, *Novalis* will also be of interest to students of comparative literature and European intellectual history.

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