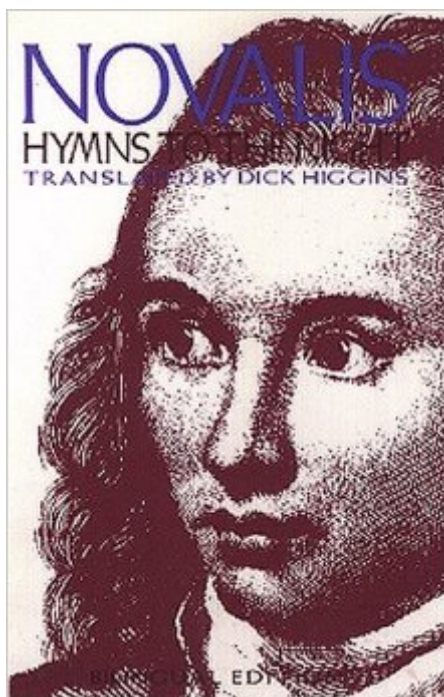


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Hymns To The Night (English And German Edition)



Synopsis

This bilingual, revised, third edition of Dick Higgins' popular translation presents the complete Athenaeum version of Frederick von Hardenburgh's classic romantic long poem, and the substantially different manuscript version of the first section. The German text is en face. The six hymns comprise a deeply affecting poem that speaks across the centuries with unquestioned radiance.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Five stars for the *Hymns*; zero stars for the (mis)translation. Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* are a true gem of late 18th-Century Romantic poetry. A brilliant and original mingling of prose-poetry and verse, the *Hymns* celebrate night, darkness, and death as bearers of tremendous revelation. They do so in supple, elegant, and sensuous language filled with yearning for a deeper reality than that which gaudy daylight reveals. Particularly notable is the erotic dimension of this Romantic yearning, or *Sehnsucht*, that Novalis daringly offers the reader. Given the above, one can only react with disgust at Dick Higgins's vulgar travesty of the *Hymns*. His specious and, not to put too fine a point on it, idiotic rationalization for butchering this work is that Novalis's language was modern for its time; therefore, to preserve that flavor, it should be rendered into the modern "poetic" idiom of, say, William Carlos Williams. Higgins has vulgarized Novalis to the point of idiocy. For example, "What is it [...] that gulps down the soft airs of sadness". "Gulps down"? Really? "What're you holding under your cloak, that grabs so unseen at my soul?" "In wild griefs I recognize your distance from our home, your resistance to the old, grand heaven". If Novalis had truly written in this way, then he

would be justly forgotten--unless, of course, he were magically transported to the Bronze age of Williams and Pound. For better examples of older translations, English-speaking readers who wish to read the *Hymns* as Novalis wrote them should consult the Charles Passage and George Macdonald translations. They are hardly perfect, but, unlike Higgins's misbegotten manglings, they represent Novalis's magnificent *Hymns* with at least a modicum of their original dignity intact. Simon Elmer, however, has finally provided a not merely competent, but also a superb and faithful contemporary English translation of the *Hymns*. It is also freely available online, and I invite you to search for it, rather than waste your time with this travesty.

The German culture can be said to oscillate between two extremes. The first is the predisposition to obsessively systematize and classify life's experience into knowledge with a calm and indifferent demeanor. The second is the reverse tendency to discard the rational and dive off into the realm of the fantastic and the perverse, the moody and the emotionally erratic. Novalis presents a fascinating case study in paradoxically representing both of the tendencies. His "Hymns to the Night" are filled with despair, longing, and a visionary quality that sort of puts one into a trance when reading. However hidden beneath this highly charged emotional atmosphere are layers of allegory and thought. Hence what we have here is that unique poem which combines a very human story of loss, sorrow, and grief with intriguing philosophical meditations on love, [end of life], religion, resurrection, and the relation of mind and body. Much more could be said and should be said. But additional details would spoil the joy of discovering the beauty of the poem on your own....

Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (May 2, 1772 - March 25, 1801), better known as Novalis, accomplished with his short but mercurial, explosive chronicle of God, a dark romantic faith, the fecund subconscious, the dark underbelly of poetry (described by William Blake as "the eternal night") what no poet has done before or since. That is, to reconcile Jung's "shadow self" with the Divine Light we hear in Beethoven and Bach. A tremendous inspiration for all seers or would be seers, Novalis placed himself in the company of Keats, Stravinsky (when he composed "The Rite"), Rimbaud, and all artists of any kind who sacrificed themselves entirely in the name of a certain holy quest for God's answer to man in the form of the Word, Logos. With the death of his beloved fiancée Sophie Von Kuhn at only 15 years old from tuberculosis, a fate Novalis would also succumb to in the following years, the grief and mourning which followed did not produce the madness or the loss of faith of a Poe: indeed, the "Blue Flower" blossomed in this Romantic's mind like never before. "Must the morning always return? Will the despotism of the earthly never cease? Unholy

activity consumes the angel visit of the Night. Will the time never come when Love's hidden sacrifice shall burn eternally? To the Light a season was set: but everlasting and boundless is the dominion of the Night" (pg. 11). The death of this young woman whom Hardenberg's biographer described as "giving an impression which--because it was so gracious and spiritually lovely--we must call superearthly or heavenly, while through this radiant and almost transparent countenance of hers we would be struck with the fear that it was too tender and delicately woven for this life, that it was death or immortality which looked at us so penetratingly from those shining eyes; and only too often a rapid withering motion turned our fear into an actual reality" had finally torn away all that was irrelevant and trivial from Novalis' mind. He knew that the night, dark green with the wisdom of Yeats' fairies and Rimbaud's "singing flower bells" was all that was left to pursue. Christ, the presence of the living God *through* Sophie, the intermediary, is made crystal clear through a focused reading: "More heavenly than those glittering stars we hold the eternal eyes which the Night hath opened within us. Farther they see than eyes which the Night hath opened within us. Farther they see than the palest of those countless hosts. Needing no aid from the light, they penetrate the depths of a loving soul that fills a loftier region and bliss ineffable. Glory to the queen of the world, to the great prophetess of holier worlds, to the foster-mother of blissful love! she sends thee to me, thou tenderly beloved, the gracious sun of the Night" (page 10). Sophia, a name for Wisdom in early Christian mysticism, had been reconciled in these lines with Lorca's duende, the daemon chasing Van Gogh, the psychotic prophecies of British poet David Gascoyne. This is not an easy text to understand (sacred texts never are) but is essential for anyone who wants to understand what poetry is and is not. A beautiful and eternal work.

I won't reiterate what's already been stated, but this is a translation by an academic and not a poet. If you want a real translation of hymns to the night check out Blurb books and search "hymns to the night", translation is by B.R. and there's a preview of hymn 1 to give you an idea of the distance between this translation and all others I've seen. Great work, worth buying and reading but you have to find the best if you want to enjoy it in its entirety. Hymns to the Night

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