

*Novalis and Materiality: Analyzing, Contextualizing, and Fructifying the Romantic Writer from an Ecocritical Perspective*

*Nicole Fischer*

We are confronted with news concerning species extinctions, environmental destruction, and climate change on a daily basis. The environmental humanities emerged as a new academic field that addresses, processes, and mitigates these environmental problems. Under the umbrella of the environmental humanities, ecocriticism developed as a new theoretical approach within literary studies that analyzes literature from an environmental point of view and illustrates literature's potential in bringing and fostering environmental awareness and actual change of behavior.

During my stay at the Rachel Carson Center, I aim to finish my dissertation project "Novalis and Materiality: Analyzing, Contextualizing, and Fructifying the Romantic Writer from an Ecocritical Perspective." Utilizing an ecocritical approach, it is exciting to analyze Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), who wrote under the pen name Novalis because he was not simply a poet but also a philosopher, scientist, and employee of the mining industry. While Novalis developed his own philosophical perspectives and literary style, he was inspired by various factors. First, he was part of the Jenaer circle of Romantics that included leading early-Romantic philosophers and writers, most prominently the brothers August Wilhelm, Friedrich Schlegel, and Ludwig Tieck who were close friends of Novalis. Second, Novalis met and attended lectures of the most influential philosophers and writers of his time—e.g., Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schiller, and Goethe. Third, Novalis was also a student of the world-renowned Mining Academy Freiberg, where he acquired cutting-edge scientific knowledge in various disciplines, e.g., physics, geology, and chemistry. Like Goethe, Novalis merged and connected intellectual, scientific, and professional spheres creatively in his life, poetry, philosophy, and thinking. Novalis' poetic oeuvre grows out of and connects all these different inspirations. Therefore, Novalis is a perfect example of an eighteenth-century poet who also displayed a strong interest in philosophy and got scientific training, and he can be seen as a representative who put literature and other fields into dialogue. Altogether, Novalis absorbed and processed various ideas and created his own philosophy, a concept of nature, and a poetic style that influenced subsequent authors, philosophers, and thinkers like Heidegger or Rilke.

In my work, I specifically highlight how material aspects influence literature, philosophy, and the sciences using Novalis as a case study. My work's focus is Novalis' engagement with the concept of nature and his material experiences and how they affect his philosophical, scientific, and poetic ideas and vice versa.

My primary method of analysis is an ecocritical approach, utilizing concepts like Alaimo's 'transcorporeality' (2010) or Barad's 'intra-actions' (2007/2012). This approach allows me to re-read historical texts in our current time and connect historical-philosophical, ecological, scientific, and poetic perspectives innovatively. Additionally, my dissertation is a project in literary studies that also uses tools and insights from and aims to contribute to other disciplines, e.g., history of science, biocodicology, social sciences, and communication sciences.

Concluding, being a trained teacher, I am eager to explore ways that allow us to re-read historical texts in our current time. By analyzing Novalis from an ecocritical perspective, I hope to exemplify how we can use historical authors and their oeuvre to reflect on current problems and how literature can be activated as a powerful tool to bring change. With this project, I can connect my main interests: researching German literature in a relevant and current context and opening new perspectives to how one can teach German literature in the context of today's relevant ecological and environmental questions and concerns in the broader context of the interdisciplinary field of the Environmental Humanities.