

## THE NOVALIS ESTATE. THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MATERIAL LOSSES AFTER 1945 (in German)

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The translocation and destruction of cultural assets – in other words, ›material losses‹ – often occur in conjunction with political injustice and warfare. In the history of thought on the collections and estates of German-language literature, the losses resulting from political events, the so-called Napoleonic art and library looting, and on the scientific study of the same, the great philological editions, have captured a great amount of public attention. The less visible efforts at compensation range from ›filling in the war gaps‹ (G. Leyh), to creating substitutes by systematically reconstructing lost originals from diverse text sources (Lachmann), to calling for the establishment of national literary archives dedicated to compiling and conserving what was left behind or scattered. Most of these efforts aim to reconstruct an organic whole – an undamaged text, a unit of intellectual context guaranteed by the person, generation, etc., an ideal continuum of transmission. The idea of (returning to) an original wholeness appears to have enormous appeal – perhaps due to its utopian or ›salvatory‹ character. In any case, it is an idea that keeps cropping up in numerous texts concerning estates, collections and archives – as well as the digital compilation of scattered materials, though the process of converting source materials into digital media offers various methods to ensure that potential losses remain visible.<sup>1</sup>

Against this backdrop, this presentation examines a concrete example of material loss in which the catastrophe of World War II and the eradication of Jewish life in Europe manifested itself for contemporary protagonists in the fields of science, politics and journalism. The complicated history of the literary estate of Novalis (a.k.a. Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) allows us to determine the scientific and symbolic significance of the material losses and investigate the language used to communicate the gravity of the loss.

In 1960, word had spread that a considerable portion of Novalis' estate, which had been auctioned off by the Von Hardenberg family in 1930, would be back on the autograph market. A number of archives in Germany, Switzerland and the United States (including the DLA Marbach, the Freie

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. The virtual reconstruction of the old East Asia collection of the Prussian State Library in a cooperation project of the Biblioteka Jagiellońska in Krakow and the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. <https://staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/die-staatsbibliothek/abteilungen/ostasien/projekte/berlin-krakau-projekt/> [as of Apr. 3, 2021]; cf. also Bibliotheca Palatina - Heidelberg University Library. <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/bpd/> [as of Apr. 3, 2021.] - In both projects, it is implied that digitalization does not replace a real repatriation of holdings.

Deutsche Hochstift in Frankfurt and the Beinecke Library of Yale University in New Haven) expressed interest in purchasing these documents which had been inaccessible for three decades, owned by private collectors first in Germany, then in Switzerland and Israel. The Freie Deutsche Hochstift in Frankfurt seemed predestined as a possible buyer. Its director Ernst Beutler had devoted himself to collecting and preserving the estates of the German Romanticists ever since the 1920s. Overwhelmed by the global financial crisis, the institution was not able to afford Novalis' estate in 1930. The Jewish magnate and future publisher Salman Schocken purchased the largest share of the offered documents, while the Staatsbibliothek Berlin acquired a smaller portion, which was later seized as war loot at the end of World War II and eventually ended up in Cracow. When Salman Schocken passed away and his heirs in Israel commissioned an auction house in Hamburg to sell his Novalis manuscripts a year later, Beutler reminded his institution's funding providers that he had been «fighting tirelessly for years» to acquire the estate after failing to prevent «its exodus abroad». His goal after 1945 was to «reunite everything that an evil fate had scattered» (R.B. to State Minister Helene von Bila, 3 May 1960, FDH). Beutler had been in contact with Salman Schocken since 1954. In their mutual pursuit to strengthen their respective national literary contexts, Beutler arranged a highly unusual agreement in 1957 to «trade» two Hebrew Haggadah manuscripts from the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg for a collection of Novalis' poems. In the same way the journal *Die literarische Welt* had described the Novalis auction in 1930 as the «dissection of a living, breathing organism into small pieces» (*Die literarische Welt*, no. 46, 1930, p.9), Ernst Beutler regarded the Novalis estate 30 years later as an organic entity in a larger, national context of other estates left behind by the poets and philosophers of his time. To Beutler, the «return» of the Novalis manuscripts and their reintegration into a German literary family represented the re-established integrity of an «intellectual context» which had visibly disintegrated in the German concentration and extermination camps. Beutler did not specify at the time whether his mention of that «evil fate» referred to the private ownership of cultural assets, their scattering and translocation to places outside of Germany, the financial crisis of the 1920s or National Socialism. He did note, however, in a letter to the Novalis editor Richard Samuel, who had emigrated first to London and then Australia, that payment of the surprisingly high price for the collection was «a kind of reparation» (E.B. to Richard Samuel, 25 March 1960, FDH). Judging from the metaphors and words borrowed from other semantic contexts, his comments and those by other parties demonstrate to what extent historical, political and academic considerations were interconnected in the discourse on estates and collections after 1945. In this regard, the ownership and location of the Novalis manuscripts had surreptitiously become symbolic issues in which history played a role. Focussing on this language, my presentation examines how the return of «exiled» collections influenced the restoration and convalescence of the visible fractures and loss of the material. Subsequently we will discuss what epistemic function is attributed to such losses and how they might have to be kept visible (as gaps or marked seams, e.g. information on provenance and contested claims of ownerships). The fact remains that the reconstructed or hypostasised organic whole of an estate can only reflect the present condition and not the historicity of the material.