

Quick Summary of the novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*

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friends and members of [The Section for the Literary](#)

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in North America

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I thought it might be helpful at this point to give a brief outline of the chapters. (At least, it was helpful for me!) The novel, although it is short and unfinished, can be quite confusing and perhaps off-putting — especially at the end, when Klingsohr tells his Tale, which is the climax of the first part of the novel.

The first part has 9 chapters. The central chapter, Five, is a descent into the under-earth where Henry reads in pictures the book of his destiny. (Recall similar motif in *Parzival*. Kyot. Book Eight.)

Chapter One

Begins in the realm of sleep and dream. Henry dreams of the blue flower and has a presentiment of his destiny as a poet. A major theme is introduced: what is poetry; how does one become a poet? Henry awakens and hears that his father once had a similar dream of the blue flower. Chapter closes with accent on the blue flower and the dreams of father and son.

“You have seen the wonder of the world. It lies in your power to become the happiest being in the world, and, besides that, a celebrated man. Remember well what I tell you. Come on St. John’s day, towards evening, to this place, and when you have devoutly prayed to God to interpret this vision, the highest earthly lot will be yours. Also take notice particularly of a little blue flower, which you will find above here; pluck it, and commit yourself humbly to heavenly guidance.”

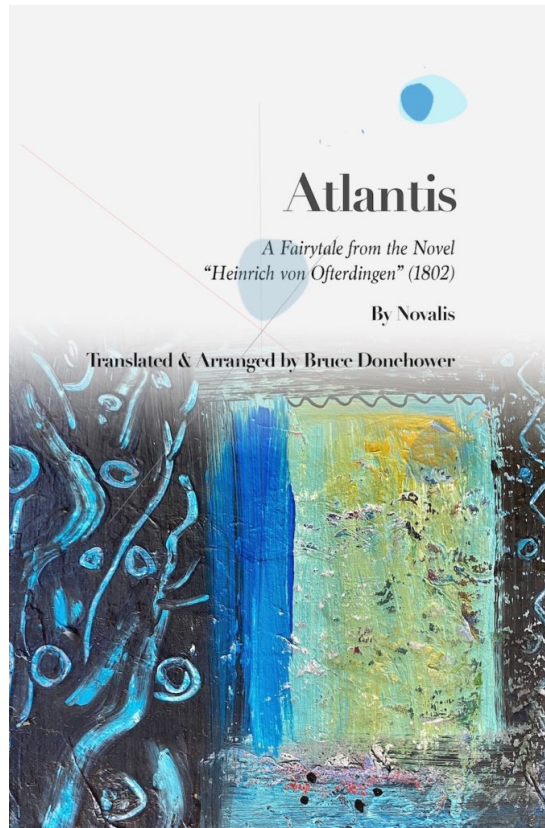
Chapter Two

Henry’s mother decides to take him on a journey to her family home in Augsburg. They will travel in the company of merchants. A sub-theme is introduced: journey to the homeland, the land of the “mother,” or as Goethe might have it: “Mothers.” Although Henry seems quite young because he is inexperienced and has grown up sheltered from the world, he is on the threshold of the birth of the ego, age 21. A third sub-theme is introduced: initiation to the world; how does one rightfully awaken as an ego being to the world of sense experience? Another sub-theme introduced: Two paths of knowledge. Music and poetry are discussed, and a picture of a “Golden Age” is presented, an age of Orphic mysteries. The merchants tell the Tale of the Poet/Musician cast into the sea.

Chapter Three

Merchants tell another story: the Atlantis Tale. This tale elaborates on the themes and motifs previously introduced. Another sub-theme introduced: return of the golden age, or the renewal, reenlivening of the earth. (“We are on a mission. We are called to the cultivation of the earth.”). Another way to consider this “golden age renewal theme” is to consider what it might mean to renew the Orphic Mysteries. “He sang the origin of the world, the stars, plants, animals, and men, the all-powerful sympathy of nature; the remote age of gold, and its rulers Love and Poesy; the appearance of hatred and barbarism, and their battles with these beneficent goddesses; and finally, the future triumph of the latter, the end of affliction, the renovation of nature, and the return of an eternal golden age.”

[Chapter 3 in Heinrich von Ofterdingen is available on Amazon in a very readable new translation that contains a helpful Afterword.](#)



Chapter Four

Henry and the company sojourn with Knights of the Crusades. Remember, the novel is set in the imagined Middle Ages, so instead of the world of timeless imagination (Atlantis) we now are in the time-bound world of historical reality. Henry contemplates the Crusades. He becomes giddy with the imagination of war and plunder for the sake of some high cause (Christianity). The giddiness is counterbalanced by an encounter with Zulima, a captive from the middle east. The “commotion” in Henry’s soul brought about by these contrasting moral/historical realities is resolved by the gift of a lute (music), and we return to the promise of Poetry. What is Poetry?

Chapter Five

He meets a miner. Remember that Hardenberg entered the mining academy in Freiberg after the death of Sophie. His years of poetic activity as Novalis coincide with his activity as a mining engineer. The miner in Chapter Five tells Henry and the merchants how he became a miner and why. Miners are idealized. Once a miserable fate for slaves and prisoners of war and exploited vassals, it is now imagined as a high calling and path of initiation. Mining and poetry linked. “The song and the guitar belong to the miner’s life, and no occupation can retain their charm with more zest than ours. Music and dancing are the pleasures of the miner; like a joyful prayer are they, and the remembrance and hope of them help to lighten weary labor and shorten long solitude.” Much singing and jollity. Henry is overwhelmed.

At the highpoint, the miner takes Henry and merchants on a tour (at night) of the under-earth. Another sub-theme explored: memory, recovery of the past, lemniscate of past and future, the primeval worlds, the so-called subconscious. They discover a hermit, aka a meditant, renunciant. They discover a tomb. "Frederick and Mary of Hohenzollern here returned to their native dust." (Note: Hardenberg family was distantly related to Hohenzollern.)

Another sub-theme introduced: the State. This theme is not elaborated very much in this book, but it appears in other writings of Novalis. German Romantics had a particular view of State and Monarchy, and these concepts led to very pernicious historical consequences, some have argued. More discussion of poetry. And then the most marvelous words about mining are spoken by the Hermit: "You are well nigh inverted astrologers," said the hermit; "as they ceaselessly regard the sky, wandering through its immeasurable spaces, so do you turn your gaze to the earth, exploring its construction."

Astrologers study the forces and influences of the stars, while you are discovering the forces of rocks and mountains, and the manifold properties of earth and stone strata. To them the higher world is a book of futurity; to you the earth is a memorial of the primeval world." Henry reads from the Initiate Book of Destiny (my words), "written in the Provence tongue." They leave the cave and return to mother.

Chapter Six

Arrival in Augsburg. True love! Henry meets Mathilde, daughter of Klingsohr, the master poet, whom Novalis styled on Goethe. Klingsohr makes a big impression on the artist as a young man. In respect to Hardenberg's biography, keep in mind that his early family life was very strict, pious, regulated, and severe. The father was what we might call a Puritan in outlook and behavior. He thought socializing and fun and frivolity was sin. Keep this in mind as Novalis describes the pleasure of the festivals in Augsburg.

This brings in another sub-theme: what do we do with the body and the pleasures of the senses? Are we embodied beings rightfully situated (if we possess the right outlook) between heaven and earth, or is earth a miserable way station on the way to the Promised Land of bodiless eternal happiness or misery? Henry is confused. Stimulated. In love! Mathilde gives him a guitar. Uh oh! She tells him she will show him some riffs. Uh oh! Oder? Klingsohr and Swaning and Mother are pleased. Henry is, too.

The Chapter climaxes (metaphorically) with a blissful vision of a blue stream. "She pressed her lips to his, and so embraced him that she could not tear herself from him. She put a wondrous, secret word into his mouth, and it rang through his whole being. He was about to repeat it, when his grandfather called, and he awoke. He would have given his life to remember that word."

Chapter Seven

Klingsohr expounds on poetry and nature in a magisterial manner that reminds us of Goethe. This begins an elaboration of a romantic "Ars Poetica" counter to Aristototele that culminates in a Grand Vision in Chapter Nine. Sub-theme: subversion of Aristotelian poetics. Oder? New sub-theme: expansion of our understanding of Poetry. Who are poets? Unlike in the classical sense, poets here are potentially everyone: you and me, if we understand the nature of Mind. "The true mind is like the light." This is a bold move for the romantics. Art is no longer a mirror of representation; art and artistic activity (aka Poetry) is the clearing in which truth becomes unhidden — unhidden, but not "revealed"; truth discloses itself (in time, briefly) in the moment of creativity and appreciation of art. In this respect: central words of the Chapter, if not the book: "Poetry," continued Klingsohr, "will be cultivated strictly as an art. As mere enjoyment it ceases to be poetry. The poet must not run about unoccupied the whole day in chase of figures and feelings. That is the very reverse of the proper method. A pure, open mind, dexterity in reflection and contemplation, and ability to put forth all the faculties in a mutually animating effort, and to keep them so,—these are the requisites of our art."

Chapter Eight

Continuation of this theme and sub-themes. If this were a piece of music, we would be interweaving the leitmotifs and exploring related and distant keys, moving toward the grand crescendo movement in Chapter Nine, which in that respect is like the end of the Ninth Symphony, one might consider. Klingsohr discusses war, or what the Buddhists would call the nature of Samsara; or Taoists: interplay of yin and yang. He discusses poetry and rightful poetic activity in terms quite reminiscent of Keats.

Keats: "If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all." Klingsohr: "I might almost say that in every line chaos should shine through the well-clipped foliage of order. A graceful style merely renders the richness of the thought more comprehensible and agreeable; regular symmetry, on the contrary, has all the dryness of numbers."

"Tale" is the most difficult genre, Klingsohr instructs. By Tale he means: Märchen. Is "fairy" tale a good English translation?

Klingsohr explores the epistemology of poetry: "Does not every man strive and compose at every moment?" In another context, we would be talking about initiation and enlightenment. Or Blake: how do we cleanse the doors of perception? Klingsohr's thesis: the rightfully embodied human being is a poet. Oder?

Chapter Nine

We enter the temple and witness the mysteries. Klingsohr's "Tale" will need to be unpacked separately. Henry is thrilled. Goal of the quest. End of Part One. Intersection of historical time and eternity, interweaving of biography and myth.

"At length Sophia said, "The Mother is among us. Her presence will render us eternally happy. Follow us into our dwelling. In the temple will we dwell forever, and treasure up the secret of the world."

Fable spun diligently, and sang with a clear voice:

Established is Eternity's domain,

In Love and Gladness melts the strife/pain; The tedious dream of grief returneth never; Priestess of hearts Sophia is forever.

Recall that Novalis saw this Klingsohr Tale as a response/answer/complement to Goethe's Tale of the Green Snake. Given that Steiner used the "Green Snake" as the origin point for anthroposophy, what does that lead us to here with Klingsohr?

[For more information about Novalis, Heinrich von Ofterdingen, and German early romanticism, visit: TheLiteraryArts.com](http://TheLiteraryArts.com)