NIGHT AND SILENCE

Experience and Language in Romanticism and Mysticism

I

"Does not everything that inspires us wear the colour of Night?" asks Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis, 1772-1802) in the fourth of his Hymnen an die Nacht.¹ Romantic poetry is, in a sense, a prefiguration of a nocturnal sensibility, which, as in Harold Bloom’s reading of Shelley’s “To Night”, “links Night and imaginative life, the life of the poet which cannot be lived in the common day.” ² In this sense romantic poetry has meaning “only by allusion to an intuited Night.” ³ Some of the elements which enter into the making of the nature of this Night may here be described by reference to a number of Arabic and Western poems. The longest, and perhaps the best, of these poems is Novalis’s Hymnen. There are some similarities between it and Jibrān’s prose-poem Ayyūb al-layl (“O Night”).⁴

I

... Yet away I turn away (from daylight) to the holy, ineffable, mysterious Night .... Gladly terrified I behold an earnest face which bends to me softly and devoutly, and beneath infinitely tangled locks it shows a Mother’s dear youth .... More heavenly still than those flashing orbs, seem to us the infinite eyes which Night hath opened within us ...; unneedful of the light, they glance, through the depths of a loving heart which fills a higher space with unutterable delight ....

II

... For light its time was measured out; but timeless and spaceless is the reign of Night.—Eternal is the duration of sleep ....

IV

... Does not everything that inspires us wear the colour of Night? ...

¹ Translated by W. Hastie in Hymns and thoughts on Religion by Novalis (Edinburgh, 1888), pp. 3-30.
... Night became the mighty bosom of revelation; into it the gods returned.

(Novalis)

And:

O Night of lovers, poets and singers,
O Night of shadows, spirits and visions,
O Night of ardent longings and remembrance,
O giant . . . mantled with silence, gazing with a thousand eyes into the depths of life, listening with a thousand ears to the whimpers of death and nothingness.

You are darkness that makes us see the lights of heaven, and the day is light submerging us with the darkness of earth.

You are hope that opens our spiritual eyes before sublime infinity, and day is vanity that stays us in the world of measurement and quantity. In your shade the poet's emotions stir, on your arms the prophets' hearts awake, and among your locks thinkers' minds vibrate. You are he who teaches the poets, inspires the prophets and encourages thinkers and meditators.

When my soul was bored of the human race, and my eyes were wearied of looking at the face of the day, I walked away to those remote fields where the shadows of ancient times sleep . . .

There I saw you, O Night, sublime and beautiful, standing between the earth and the sky . . .

There I saw you, O Night, and you saw me; in your sublimity, you were to me a father, and in my dreams I was to you a son, and so the curtains of forms were drawn away from between us, and the veil of doubt and speculations was rent, from our faces; you made your mysteries and inmost desires mine . . .

(Jubrān)

Like Novalis, Jubrān depicts his initiation into the sacred, inexpressible life of Night, and apprehends Night as a living anthropomorphic deity sympathetic to him, protecting him under his mantle and revealing to him the spiritual secrets of eternal inspiration. As for Novalis, "more divine than [daylight] are the 'eyes' opened within him by [N]ight. This [N]ight-sense is not dependent on light (that is, it is a spiritual, not a physical power), and it penetrates depths which light cannot reach." 5 The Night is a cosmic source of the self, an innocent authentic identity. It is the pure and dark source of metaphysical knowledge and unity, which the poet, identified with the Night, can perceive only in an act of mystical intuition. In the Night,