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Fragmentation

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The fragmentary, in all its guises, has long been positioned on the margins of literature and philosophy. Disparaged alternatively as a writing of incomplete shards, whimsical proclamations, arrogant maxims or totalizing dicta, its ruptured, contradictory form has also been embraced as the embodiment of broken eras, an escape from the false illusion of completion and an opening to the aleatory. The fragment's brevity precludes systematic exposition or narrative development, and as such it has been interpreted as a form of interruption and rupture, of authority and totalization, or an ironic negotiation between the two. Thus, for Francis Bacon the aphorism's pithiness and lack of development rendered it knowledge in flux, encouraging further engagement and refinement: '[K]nowledge, while it is in aphorisms and observations, it is in growth; but when it once is comprehended in exact methods, it may perchance be further polished and illustrated and accommodated for use and practice; but it increaseth no more in bulk and substance.'[1] For Friedrich Schleiermacher, however, the fragment's independence aped authority and encouraged simplification, as 'from disconnected pieces … or only masses capriciously and unnaturally separated from the whole body, [it] professes, notwithstanding, to make Philosophy comprehensible'.[2] In either form the fragmentary has always been a writing of risk, and at risk – risk that its self-legitimizing authority will be undone, or risk that its incompletion or rupture will become closure. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, the fragment is exposed to 'the ambiguities of a freedom represented simultaneously as disengagement, as a surpassing of all rules and of all literary genres, and as a concentration of self-constitution and self-sufficiency. Because they are essential to the brevity and discontinuity of the fragmentary form, these ambiguities cannot be removed'.[3]

In the midst of generic debates about the differences between the various appellations of the fragmentary – fragment, aphorism, epigram, maxim, dictum, slogan – is a form that is always more than just a style and more than a simple questioning of style. It is an exploration of writing, signification and being, as at its most fundamental the fragmentary performs the complex, contradictory, excessive engagement that takes place between singularity, totality, system and meaning. With these complexities in mind, this chapter explores expositions of the fragmentary that study the form's impact on thought, before moving to a reading of fragmentation as performed in Jacques Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' (1988) and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Sense of the World* (1993).

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Embodying ambiguity, the fragmentary can be read as a form of contradictory excess, an interposition between opposites. Friedrich Schlegel, the grandfather of the fragment, once argued that 'it's equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two'.[4] So he turned to the fragment, a form embodying ironic negotiation, combination and interruption, and whose referral to itself does not enable unity and presence but an interruptive excess that, as Jean Baudrillard writes, 'remains inexhaustible for thought'.[5] The play between oxymoron and tautology in so many definitions of the fragment performs its excessive movement between conjunction and interruption, discourse and silence, and enacts the fragment's overdetermination. Thus for Theodor Adorno the 'fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality'.[6] Similarly, for Friedrich Nietzsche the aphorism is 'too hard for the teeth of time and whole millennia cannot consume it, even though it serves to nourish every age: it is thus the great paradox of literature'.[7] Nietzsche's fragmentary aphorisms cannot be eaten and yet are endlessly nourishing, as unchanging as stone and yet applicable to every different generation. Along similar lines Maurice Blanchot conceives of the fragmentary as the 'interruption of the incessant' whereby interruption has 'the same meaning as that which does not cease'.[8] As such, descriptions of the fragment echo the paradoxical excess that extends *beyond* the fragment from *within* the fragment, denoting a form which is 'everywhere sharply delimited, but within those limits limitless and inexhaustible; … completely faithful to itself, entirely homogeneous, and nonetheless exalted above itself'.[9] A full stop within ellipsis, the fragmentary is of limits, liminality and limitlessness.

Although the fragmentary is most commonly understood to perform the incompletion and chance relation of signification, the form's economy and contextual fluidity can render its openness a rigid, closed imperative. That is, if the fragment is an '[i]nsaturable context',[10] it is both that which can be endlessly filled and that which is resistant to any addition. This ironic ability to take both or either side of a binary is the fragment's strength as well as its weakness and renders the fragment autoimmune, always potentially attacking itself. As Derrida writes, '[W]hat if the aphorism, like ellipsis, the fragment, the "I say almost nothing and take it back immediately", potentializing the mastery of the whole discourse being held back, placing an embargo on all the continuities and supplements to come, were sometimes the most violent didactic authority?'[11] This concern is echoed by Blanchot, who argues that once the fragment turns on itself in perfect enclosure there is 'something sombre, concentrated, obscurely violent about it, something that makes it resemble the crimes of Sade'.[12] When Zygmunt Bauman describes modernity in terms of fragmentation, he deliberately employs its ambiguities to designate false order and assimilation and thereby to signal a certain perversion within the contemporary. He writes: 'Modernity prides itself on the *fragmentation* of the world as its foremost achievement. Fragmentation is the prime source of its strength. The world that falls apart into a plethora of problems is a manageable world.'[13] Modernity, for Bauman, is embodied by biopolitical control through categorization and classification, and fragmentation in this instance creates isolated, contained concepts as objects of containment and observation. In separating an individual, object, genre, structure, era or nation from the complex web of connections from which it arose, we give the

illusion of a world comprising discrete objects of knowledge, with stable beginnings and endings and traceable causes and effects. But the world, as Bauman argues, is not orderly; an illusory mode of controlled fragmentation can make it seem so, but this is a deception. Neither being, meaning, nor fragments are units to be separated and then neatly slotted back into place; all are of an extra-systemic excess, whose multiple connections, liminal borders and intersections render them complex, interlocked and chaotic. Order is not the dominant sign of modernity, but desire, not least of all desire for a logically, rationally, scientifically comprehensible whole of orderly parts, a longing that stems from an anxious awareness of its impossibility. It is, after all, the fragment's incompletion that engenders desire and its structure of projection that enables longing.

In playing with the fragment's tendency to move between ordered separation and chaotic relation, Bauman points to the form's most fundamental negotiation: between the avowal and disavowal of totalization. Colloquially, 'fragment' denotes a part severed from a pre-existing whole – a scrap of pottery, a section of an ode, a portion of a painting – but the term also designates a form that failed to be completed, as interruption, intellectual impasse or death intervened. Both of these forms presume, or at least desire, wholeness, but either lost it or failed to achieve it, and so the fragment embodies a discourse of mourning for lost unity, value and relation, and a rhetoric of ruptures, wounds and failures. It is from this position that Linda Nochlin reads Fuseli's *Artist Overwhelmed by the Grandeur of Antique Ruins* as depicting modernity's 'irrevocable loss, poignant regret for lost totality, … vanished wholeness'.[14] Of course, the ruin and incompletion of involuntary fragmentation lead, perhaps inevitably, to the deliberate adoption of the fragment as a deliberate performance of ruin and incompletion, and so, as Schlegel wrote, 'many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written'.[15]

Late modernity was not, however, the birthplace of appreciation for the ruin, nor origin of a form of manufactured incompletion. As Leonard Barkan argues, the Italian Renaissance saw the creation of deliberate fragments: 'The non finito is not a mere romantic anachronism but a real expression of early modern artistic culture.'[16] This said, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a rise in the literary and philosophical use of the form, so much so that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's naming of the fragment as 'the romantic genre *par excellence*'[17] applies to Romanticism across Europe and the fragmentary in all its guises. While for Schlegel the fragmentary represented a new negotiation between classicism and a contemporaneity marked by infinite becoming, its form was also used innovatively, and derivatively, by writers from Keats to Hölderlin, with the nineteenth century seeing hundreds of fragmentary poems on the theme of loss, death and ruin published in newspapers and periodicals.[18] The ruptured was considered an inevitable part of existence, as is nicely exemplified in Heather McHugh's recounting of a Benjamin Haydon anecdote. In England, 1817, two men stand before the shattered giants of the Elgin marbles: '"How broken they are, a'ant they?" uttered one. "Yes," the other answered; "but how *like life*"'.[19] Since then, while incompletion and destruction remain, the fragmentary form has become less immediately ubiquitous. Outside of the mainstream, however, the fragmentary has had a consistent, if avant-garde or anti-institutional, presence in the literature and philosophy of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A deliberate and self-conscious form of hybridity, rupture and assembly has persisted, ranging from

novels of interrupted stream of consciousness to disassembled, physically ruptured texts, surrealist montage to postmodern anti-poiesis, modernist quotations to fractal hypertexts.[20]

Once we posit the fragment as the formal embodiment of incompletion, we have already stepped from the fragment as representation of the loss of totality to the fragment as performance of the absence or impossibility of totality. This is fragmentation as the form of a priori rupture, 'the pulling to pieces (the tearing) of that which never has preexisted (really or ideally) as a whole, nor can … ever be reassembled in any future presence whatsoever'.[21] If fragmentation is to be associated with grief – which is by no means inevitable – then the differences between the forms of the fragment can be figured in the difference between mourning and melancholia. If the former mourns a lost totality, the latter is a melancholic lamentation for a unity that never existed. Totality is understood to be an illusory desire, and modernity becomes marked by the loss of that which it never had, an impossible nostalgia for a never experienced wholeness. In this case we begin with fragmentation and melancholically acquire the dream of the finished work from the shards we have to hand. However, the danger of this preconceived fragmentation is, as Hans-Jost Frey argues, that its planned rupture might become a form of closure, as 'that which, by its essence, cannot be finished fulfils its essence by remaining unfinished and is thereby whole. Its incompletion is in this case explainable and understandable: it stops where it should, at the end'.[22] It thus becomes the deadening predictability of perfect self-presence and self-relation, of the kind that has been read into Schlegel's most famous definition of the fragment: '[A] fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog.'[23] Schlegel's fragments were thought by Blanchot, Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy to be too close to 'the closure of a perfect sentence'.[24] Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy argued that the 'logic of the hedgehog' does not destabilize totality and closure but disseminates it so that fragmentary totality is 'simultaneously in the whole and in each part … identically the plural totality of fragments, which does not make up a whole (in, say, a mathematical mode) but replicates the whole, the fragmentary itself, in each fragment'.[25] That is, from their perspective the multiple relations and connections between Schlegel's fragments proliferate totalities rather than negating them. While Schlegel's fragments present totality as an impossible aspiration or an infinite becoming, his anti-systematic system is, for these later readers, predicated on a double, synchronized closure and the shifting grounds of a progressive, if infinite, becoming. It is in response to this (mis)reading that Derrida's aphorisms designate 'the memory of a totality, at the same time ruin and monument'.[26] Totality is neither becoming nor to come, but in the past, a distant memory of an illusory closure.

That said, Derrida's aphorisms play, like Schlegel's fragments, on the concept of the both/and. When he describes his aphorisms as singular and plural, however, we see a discourse of disassociation predicated on contamination, one whose complicity renders aphorisms neither independently whole – even a whole deferred or to come – but contaminated, excessive and interrupted. The structure that we see so often in Derrida's texts is one of the hyphenation of fragmentation: the dual medicine and poison of the pharmakon, the double inside and outside of the hymen and tympan,

the addition and replacement of the supplement, the conjunction and separation of the hyphen. What proliferates in these relations is not system or totality, but excess. We can follow this movement in Derrida's exploration of the relation between the systematic and the non-systematic through the architectural and aphoristic. Playing on content and form, Derrida prefaces a book on architecture with a series of aphorisms. While the architectural implies order, logic, authority and system, all of which can be intellectually inhabited, the aphorism is, he writes, usually thought to be that which is never wholly self-present, always less than or more than itself – a point, a plan, a project, a problem. As such it cannot be occupied or made an object of knowledge. However, the aphorism's seeming isolation and independence makes it a self-legitimizing structure, which means that '[t]here is nothing more architectural than a pure aphorism'.[27] Likewise, the architectural is at its most authoritative as a piece of architecture, rather than a building with a purpose, when it revokes the traditional demands of the edifice, 'when it does everything to save itself [*faire économie*] a structural demonstration'.[28] The architectural/systematic cannot thereby shore itself up on length, argument and style, presuming itself thus impregnable, as the system shares the fragment's contradictions and incompletion. Conversely, the aphoristic partakes of much of the system's self-justification. Derrida thus reveals the contamination between supposed opposites, and we arrive, without closure, at the oxymoronic tautology of the architectural aphorism.

Taking this structural contamination further, Groarke argues that the sudden insight or burst of inspiration associated with a fragmentary form is precisely the inductive logic that underpins classical philosophy. Thus for Plato dialectic leads to a burst of intuitive, aphoristic comprehension, while for Aristotle inductive, inspirational first principles lead to retrospective deductive logic. Tracing the structure of thought in Plotinus, Aquinas and Pascal, Louis Groarke positions philosophy on the fractured foundations of the aphorism, 'the kind of memorable, terse expression that can only come about through a nonargumentative act of cognition or intellection'.[29] However, in moving from the contamination of the system and non-system to the (re)appropriation of the non-systematic into the system, do we not work against the radical potentiality of the fragmentary by further institutionalizing it? Does it become graffiti sprayed on an officially sanctioned wall, its potential for revolutionary critique of forms of thought impoverished? Or do fragments, in the process of reading, tend inevitably to the systematic and the homogenized? To the last question we surely have to answer 'yes' but must also understand that the dynamism, contradictions and imperfect negotiation associated with fragments prevent any final, normalizing recuperation. Movement can take place in varied directions without leading to a closure of assimilation; there is always a shifting, protean relation that prevents there being a final step.

Furthermore – there is always another step with the fragmentary, a *pas au-delà* – perhaps a certain thinking of 'open totality' is now necessary. For many who wrote in the wake of the world wars, absolute systems and ideologies of unity were deeply tainted by violence and totalitarianism. I raise this point with some trepidation, but totality does not necessarily have to be malignant. For Timothy Morton, a thinking of totality is necessary for us to envisage and be positioned within the closed system we are swiftly destroying. Thus Morton turns from an othered, isolated nature to the

'ecological view', a fragmentary sense of relation that recognizes the 'vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite centre or edge. It is a radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient or otherwise'.[30] Following the structure of the fragmentary, the mesh is of 'the holes in a network and threading between them. It suggests both hardness and delicacy … Since everything is interconnected, there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground'.[31] The mesh names an interdependence of risk and threat, as it forces us to realize the instability of our position and our potential loss. Morton argues that the excess of fragments' connections does not make the protean whole more than the sum of its parts, but rather a unity full of at-risk, interconnected life. While this totality might arise from our incomplete, lacking, interconnected selves, it is nonetheless a closed system. There is no outside or escape, and thus for Morton a refusal to think in terms of totality and closure is dangerous, as it presumes we can evade the damage we have done. We need to recognize that '"[t]otality" doesn't mean something closed, single, and independent, nor does it mean something predetermined and fixed; it has no goal'.[32] Totality might be inescapable, but a fragmentary, ecological view can perhaps be used to move beyond it from within it, by changing it and the world's fate.

But perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves. In a discourse on fragmentation, it is impossible not to. To return to the avoidance of pure self-relation, the fragment must be of interruption and rupture without this embodiment being its essence. It must fail to be perfect incompletion, without that failure becoming its dominant sign. Its content and form should be

> precisely the language that is not entirely language, not entirely itself but something other than, and different from language itself: a fragment would be that in which the face of language passed behind or beyond it; a fragment would be the language in which something other than itself – nothing, for example – also spoke and, therefore, a language in which at least two languages always spoke – a broken language, the break of language.[33]

This broken language, which Blanchot describes as a '*faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains*',[34] is the whispering of near failure, a haunting by the impossible, pure fragment that can never be without causing fragmentation to complete, and thereby extinguish, itself. Thus the fragment operates at its own limits, never quite realizing its own fragmentation. As Schlegel writes, 'as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and in content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences'.[35] Instead the fragmentary produces a speech 'whose task is not to say things (not to disappear in what it signifies), but to say (itself) in letting (itself) say, yet without taking itself as the new object of this language without object'.[36] In never quite realizing itself, the fragment lives on – its spaces, ambiguities and excesses a resistance that for Schlegel performs an infinite becoming, for Blanchot an infinite unworking (*désoeuvrement*) and for Derrida an infinite coming.

As 'a play of limits in which no limitation plays'[37] fragments' content and form are a writing of blanks and spaces. That is, fragments are

> unfinished separations … For fragments, destined partly to the blank that separates them, find in this gap not what ends them, but what prolongs them, or what makes them await their prolongation – what has already prolonged them, causing them to persist on account of their incompletion. And thus they are always ready to let themselves be worked upon by indefatigable reason, instead of remaining as fallen utterances, left aside, the secret void of mystery which no elaboration could ever fill.[38]

The gap between fragments is not a boundary that concludes and isolates, but a paratactic space engendering changing, aleatory signification. The lacunae that figure between fragments and aphorisms are paths that allow for an infinite number of routes to be taken between fragments and hence an infinite possibility of readings: '[a]phorism: that which hands over every rendezvous to chance'.[39] At the same time, however, the caesuras present an unbridgeable abyss between fragments as the fragments are too isolated to be in opposition or contradiction. A collection of aphorisms presents ideas that can radically refute or consolidate an argument; these agreements or resistances are not, however, part of a set system, and any attempt to systematize them should recognize that the system is imposed and wholly born from the act of reading. The aphorism is thus always in a series, hyphenated internally with the array of all its potential meanings, and externally, with a changing, random selection of other aphorisms. Hence the fragmentary proffers synecdoches – parts of a whole – that point to the general absence of a stable, uncontaminated whole, be it of the thing itself, or that from which it supposedly originated.

The risk and rupture that Blanchot, in particular, sees in the fragmentary render it a form of unending, self-fragmenting *poiesis*, an unworking which removes the fragment from the rational and the product-driven. This is not to say that for Blanchot the fragmentary is nihilistic, its openness leading to the absence of position or value. Instead, the fragment is in excess of nihilism; it is neither affirmation nor negation nor a refusal of both, but an opening that is beyond control.[40] Schlegel once wrote, '"Nothing is yet said." – <*Tout est dit* >'.[41] For Blanchot, writing 'belongs to the fragmentary when all has been said'[42] – when writing is always a rewriting or citation without definitive origin, without this exhaustion leading to closure. The fragmentary is not a base or a ground on which to form identity and presence, nor is it an other against which to position meaning or origin. It is a radical otherness as possibility, where possibility is the suspension, interruption, weakness, silence, contingency and referral of writing and the self. It is on the non-grounds of the fragmentary, and for Blanchot, the neuter and the disaster, that writing and life are possible. As such, the non-essential essence of the fragmentary, the neuter and the disaster is a shifting assembly of contradiction, impossibility, undecidability, ambiguity, mutability, perilousness and risk.

The serial (il)logic of the fragmentary is such that each 'aphorism in the series can come before or after the other, before *and* after the other – and in the other series'.[43] Each aphorism is the centre of a series and the border of (another) series, and the fragmentary thus introduces a radical temporality in which linear temporality and lines of influence are undone. Like the complex inheritance that Derrida maps out between Plato and Socrates in 'Envois', there is always 'the one in the other, the one in front of

the other, the one after the other, the one behind the other'.[44] Linearity, progression and teleology come apart as the fragmentary undoes beginnings and endings, and cause and effect. The time of inception and disruption are, like Tristram Shandy's conception, contaminated, as fragments interrupt ('normal') rhythm, producing an off-beat, irregular time, a time out of joint, where, as Hamm says in Beckett's *Endgame*, 'the end is in the beginning and yet you go on'.[45] We thus see in the fragmentary an 'exemplary anachrony, the essential impossibility of any absolute synchronisation',[46] which means that the fragmentary denotes an impossible contemporaneity. No era can be complete in itself, or present to itself, as each epoch has its beginnings outside of itself. As Giorgio Agamben argues, to be contemporary is to be out of joint with one's own time, to 'neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust […] to its demands'.[47] Contemporariness is a relationship with one's time that '*adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.* Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it'.[48] To be contemporary is to be sufficiently disconnected from the age to see it clearly and see not that which is in focus but that which is in the dark. To be a contemporary is to see that which is out of time, 'like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss'.[49] In the contrapuntal, non-synchronous relation of the contemporary the fragmentary refers to a time which is 'anterior to all past-present, as well as posterior to every possibility of a present yet to come'.[50]

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The attributes of the fragmentary that we have discussed – contradiction, excess, anachronism, discontinuity, relation, vulnerability, movement, self-legitimization and self-interruption – can be further explored in the dialogue between Nancy's conception of the fragmentary and the infinitely finite, and Derrida's elaboration of the poematic and the absolute nonabsolute. While Nancy's *The Sense of the World* is an engagement with Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?', and Derrida's 'Che cos'è la poesia?' is an engagement with the fragmentary, this is a silent, interrupted, unacknowledged hyphenation. Derrida denied that his text engaged with the fragmentary, and Nancy makes no reference to Derrida's essay. Yet in this section we see a web of connections that shift and move through exegetical excess, bringing – despite avowal and disavowal – the works of Schlegel, Blanchot, Derrida, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe together. Each echoes the other; each – in a performance of fragmentary lines of double inheritance – influences and provokes the other.

In '*Che cos'è la poesia*?' Derrida formulates the poematic as that which is neither process nor product, never the object of thetic knowledge, but 'the aleatory rambling of a trek, the strophe, that turns but never leads back to discourse, or back home'.[51] The poematic is never an event but the 'advent of an event'[52] and thus is the permanent coming or endlessly delayed arrival of determination. Its haphazard forays across the road lead to infinite commentary but will always resist a final, thetic word. Derrida gives to the poematic the body of the hedgehog, a sliver of life that turns in on itself only to imperil itself, an animal of defensive vulnerability hidden under the false protection

of spines, a thing 'which in the same stroke exposes itself to death and protects itself'.[53] Derrida's poematic hedgehog of course recalls Schlegel's hedgehog fragment, and yet Derrida states quite categorically in 'Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier' that his hedgehog is not Schlegel's. Despite this denial, however, the vulnerability, alterity, impurity and tautology that Derrida embodies in the hedgehog poematic are of the fragmentary – a sibling of Blanchot's fragments, a cousin of Schlegel's. Derrida's creature 'has no relation to itself – that is, no totalising individuality – that does not expose it even more to death and to being-torn-apart'.[54] It is, writes Derrida, not a moment of self-relating production, but that which '*lets itself* be done, without activity, without work, in the most sober *pathos*, a stranger to all production, especially to creation'.[55] It is the ruin of a totality that never existed, an assortment of paratactic phrases that longs to exist rather than represent, to simply *be*, 'without external support, without substance, without subject, absolute of writing in (it)self'.[56] Blanchot describes the German romantic project in almost identical terms, depicting it as that which introduced

> the work's power to be and no longer to represent; to be everything, but without content or a content that is almost indifferent, and thus at the same time affirming the absolute and the fragmentary; affirming totality, but in a form that, being all forms – that is, at the limit, being none at all – does not realise the whole, but signifies it by suspending it, even breaking it.[57]

As Blanchot continues, for the Romantics 'to speak poetically is to make possible a non-transitive speech whose task is not to say things (not to disappear in what it signifies), but to say (itself) in letting itself say, yet without taking itself as the new object of this language without object'.[58] The consanguinity of the hedgehogs is clear, and even more so when Derrida employs a formulation of oxymoronic relation to singularity and totality: the 'absolute nonabsolute', which is later echoed in Nancy's 'infinitely finite'.

As I have argued elsewhere, the poematic, as the *absolute nonabsolute*, is a longing for absolute inseparation, a paradoxical, fragmentary desire that is expressed by Derrida through entangling formulations of tautologous and oxymoronic contamination.[59] He writes: '*Literally*: you would like to retain by heart an absolutely unique form, an event whose intangible singularity no longer separates the ideality, the ideal meaning as one says, from the body of the letter. In the desire of this absolute inseparation, the absolute nonabsolute, you breathe the origin of the poetic.'[60] The 'absolute', we recognize, is self-referential, unconditional and totalized, while the 'nonabsolute' is contingent, conditional and inseparable from the other. The absolute, as itself and as theory, exegesis and performance of itself, contains itself and that which is more than or different from itself and is thus a priori nonabsolute. In a similar movement, if the nonabsolute is a referral always to the other, it then incorporates everything and acquires a certain completion. As such, the absolute nonabsolute refers to itself through the other and in referring to the other refers to itself. It is an identity predicated on difference, a drive to embody alterity *and* to extinguish alterity, to relate to itself through singular alterity such that it ceases to be.

For Nancy the fragment is, like the poematic, vulnerable, a murmuring. It 'vacillates … between its own decay and a future coming of its devolution. Between its failure and its chance, art begins once again'.[61] The fragment is thus not that which has fallen off but is a vulnerable, chance befalling – its protection an exposure, its exposure also its strength. As Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe write elsewhere, echoing Blanchot, '[t]he fragment is indestructible, which is to say that destruction is assured'.[62] Like Derrida's poematic hedgehog, Nancy's fragment is inextirpable because it is already a fragility, a whispering, a trembling. The fragment exists as the plea/imperative 'noli me frangere': 'Don't shatter me, don't fragment me.'[63] The phrase does not voice a fear of separation or disintegration but a quiet request/dictation: '[D]on't wish to fragment me – fragmentation goes on, and I'm fragmented enough; anyway, it's not up to you.'[64] Fragmentation is always a priori and is not a tool that can be picked up and then put down. Inherent, of course, in Nancy's *noli me frangere* is the *noli me tangere* that Jesus utters in John's gospel – don't touch me as you cannot touch me, and because you don't know what it is you would be touching. This injunction also contains a warning: don't break me down into pieces you can understand; don't make me an object of perception, because what you will arrive at is not me.

For Nancy, fragmentary art as exemplary of a fragmentary existence is predicated on the openness, mutability and exposure of a *movement towards* – a seemingly intransitive phrase whose lack of an enunciated object does not make it a general movement, but a specifically localized movement towards an object that is differentiated each time. The phrase is, as such, a phrase of fragmentary openness. Being in the world renders sense and meaning not an intellectual position but a physical, emotional, dynamic relation to or movement towards the world and towards community. Thus 'the world *no longer has* a sense, but it *is* sense',[65] as there is no transcendental signifier, grand myth or encompassing narrative underpinning meaning. There is just the fractal excess of existence as coexistence, of being in the world, or 'being singular plural'. This understanding of the world, sense and being is fragmentary and relational, as we are positioned as syntactic fragments in an open chain of excessive relations between the absolute and the relative, and the ideal and the material, rather than semantically placed within stable truths. As Nancy writes: '[T]ruth is semantic, sense is syntactic … syntax enchains, enchains itself, involves itself, and carries itself away across semantic punctuations … these punctuations in turn have value and validity only insofar as each is swept along toward, involved in, and even carried away beyond, the others.'[66] Nancy's enchaining is not a restriction but a protean connection of kaleidoscopic fragments which are focused on the event, an act or doing, rather than completed works, projects or lives. This is because the art fragment, as an expression of being, is not that which dedicates itself to sublimation towards a whole or a teleological orientation towards a totality. It is, rather, '[p]resentation without presentness [*présentité*], or pres-ense, [which] does not transcend any more than it immanates**:** it comes, it comes and goes'[67] – a communication through concatenations and interruptions of touch and *jouissance*. Art is, as such, 'a counterpoint without resolution', 'open to this fragmentation of sense that existence *is*'.[68] Art, sense and the world are, thereby, the relation to, towards and between fragments.

With the absence of a creator, ideology or myth, underpinning sense, what supports and gives meaning to the world is the world itself. As such the horizon, frontier or limit of the world is the world; there is no transcendental signifier on the other side. The world is turned towards itself, but inasmuch for the humble hedgehog on its surface, this is not a closure of unity, but rather a fractal or fragmentary excess. Neither the fragment nor being carry their end in themselves, as this would constitute an autonomy of self-enclosure, where '[e]xposition itself ends up as introjection, return to self'.[69] Instead, we have the '[f]ragment: no longer the piece fallen from a broken set, but the explosive splintering of that which is neither immanent nor transcendent. The in-finite explosion of the finite'.[70] Neither ideal nor material, the fragment dwells in 'the realm of essenceless existence. This realm lacks both domain and sovereignty'.[71] For Nancy – how can we not hear Derrida's hedgehog here? – the fragmentary is the performance of 'the event of being that one also calls existence … [one which] comes and "essentially" does nothing but come'.[72] The event is then incommensurable with 'taking place',[73] that is, it is absolutely other to the taking place of the event, which means that the event, as an occurrence or happening, is incommensurable to itself. If it cannot relate to itself, it must then relate to others and be nonabsolute. The singular event which comes is nonetheless an event relating to all others, and as such the event is in fragmentary relation to Derrida's absolute inseparation or the absolute nonabsolute.

Nancy positions 'finitude' as interruption and noncompletion. But the essence of this interrupted and noncomplete finitude cannot be one of privation, because absolute or pure privation 'would annul in itself its own privation, would constitute itself immediately as an absolute, having absolutely and without remainder arrived at itself, as itself as in itself even before existing, existence not taking place, pure *essential* without *esse*'.[74] As absolute privation cancels itself, the essence of finitude cannot be lack, absence, limit, imperfection, fault. For Nancy, finitude denotes instead nonabsolute 'ex-istence', whose mutability, connectivity and existence outside of itself render it effectively without essence. Our finitude is not a curling in ourselves, containing our beginning and our end, but is being affected by our end as that which is outside or beyond us. Hence the fragmentary subject is a '*being-toward-infinity* of what does not have its end *in* itself – does not contain its end – because it is infinitely affected by that end'.[75] That which carries its end in itself is absolute, 'finished, achieved, accomplished, and perfect, infinitely perfect – [it] is at most pure truth, but truth deprived of sense: and it is exactly due to this that God, as such a being, is dead'.[76] We are, instead, as living fragments,

> *infinitely* finite, infinitely exposed to our existence as a nonessence, infinitely exposed to the otherness of our own 'being' (or that being is in us exposed to its own otherness). We begin and we end without beginning and ending: without having a beginning and an end that is *ours*, but having (or being) them only as others', and through others. My beginning and my end are precisely what I cannot have as mine, and what no one can have as his/her own.[77]

Thus we come to Nancy's fragmentary definition: 'That which, for itself, depends on nothing, is an *absolute*. That which nothing completes in itself is a *fragment*. Being or

existence is an absolute fragment. To exist: the *happenstance* of an absolute fragment.'[78] The absolute does not depend on anything; it is complete in itself. The fragment is never completed and as such is nonasbsolute. To exist is to be in the paradoxical relation of the absolute fragment, that is, the absolute nonabsolute, the infinitely finite; on the chance, unpredictable border between the ideal and the material, the unconditional and the conditional, and to exist in relation to the self as other. Of course, Nancy's seemingly laconic definition pivots on the play of 'nothing' as a presence of absence and an absence of presence. As such, it can be read in reverse, thereby stating that the absolute depends on nothing, that is, on difference, absence, isolation, and in this dependency is nonabsolute. The fragment is the completion of nothing, that is, the self-enclosure of nothing, and is thus the absolute. Going further, as Nancy has used the term 'fragment' to denote both that which is absolute and nonabsolute, the sense of the terms begins to combine and blur, until we are left with happenstance,[79] with existence in the midst of the complex, contradictory and contingent – in all its senses – movement of chance, between Nancy, Derrida and the fragmentary.

'The idea of the book', writes Derrida, 'which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing'.[80] Hence we 'have played the post card against literature',[81] and turned to the fragment, because, after all, 'is this interruption that condemns one to the aphorism not the condition of every conversation?'[82] The fragmentary is the contrapuntal relation of interruption that enables signification while disrupting it, and in an era of high consumption and consumerism, is there not a deep need for a form of thought, writing and being that highlights process and passage rather than product and port? A form that doesn't simulate systematic, completed knowledge and ownership of the world, but implicitly acknowledges insufficiency and lack. A writing that works to encourage complexity and undercut the segmentation of the world into commodified units. A textuality that, in denying full possession and interiority, insists that meaning and change will always come. A relation of difference, a negotiation between self-sustaining systems and open, free radicals. And so we close with the words of Roland Barthes:

> Liking to find, to write *beginnings*, he tends to multiply this pleasure: that is why he writes fragments: so many fragments, so many beginnings, so many pleasures (but he doesn't like the ends: the risk of the rhetorical clausule is too great: the fear of not being able to resist the *last word*).[83]

Notes

1 Francis Bacon, 'Advancement of Learning', in *Advancement of Learning, Novum Organon, New Atlantis*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 33, Book 1, aphorism 4.

2 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*, trans. William Dobson (Cambridge: Pitt Press, 1836), 6.

3 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 148.

4 Friedrich Schlegel, '*Athenäum* Fragments', in *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1971), fragment 53.
5 Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments: Conversations with François L'Yvonnet*, trans. Chris Turner and Mike Gane (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29.
6 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), 45.
7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 250.
8 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 21.
9 Schlegel, '*Athenäum* Fragments', fragment 297.
10 Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism,* trans. James Hulbert (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 107 (62–142).
11 Jacques Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy?: Right to Philosophy 1*, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 80.
12 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 152.
13 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 12.
14 Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 7.
15 Schlegel, '*Athenäum* Fragments', fragment 24.
16 Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 207. As quoted by Andrew Allport, 'The Romantic Fragment Poem and the Performance of Form', *Studies in Romanticism* 51 (2012): 399 (399–417).
17 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 40.
18 See, for example, Allport, 'The Romantic Fragment Poem', 399–417.
19 Heather McHugh, *Broken English: Poetry and Partiality* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 86.
20 Which means that the fragment has a certain ubiquity as a subversive or radical form, and in that pervasiveness is, at times, little more than the form of normalized, institutionalized pseudo-rebellion.
21 Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, 60.
22 Hans-Jost Frey, *Interruptions*, trans. Georgia Albert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 30.
23 Schlegel, '*Athenäum* Fragments', fragment 206.
24 Blanchot *Infinite Conversation*, 359. While Schlegel plays on the dissolution of the principle of non-contraction – his fragments are simultaneously absolutely whole and absolutely part of a wider becoming – Blanchot's are never absolutely whole. They are thus less paradoxical and rather more pointed towards non-signifying excess. For Blanchot, whose interests lie more in the *fragmentary* than the fragment, this form pertains to a writing of risk and exhaustion, a writing whose laws are not accessible and knowable, a writing that is of the impossible and unpredictable. The fragmentary, for him, is intermittent and discontinuous and is not of the order of signification but is of dislocation. It is non-identical to itself, and it is of the between – a writing which 'de-scribes' (*Writing of the Disaster*, 7). If Schlegel's fragments are an attempt to express the paradoxical intermingling of the system and the non-system or work to

articulate the incomprehensible, Blanchot's fragments are a more radical unworking of the system and an articulation of the silent, 'the limit, [which,] in as much uncrossable, summons to cross, affirms the desire (the false step) that has always already … crossed the line' (*The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 24). Similarly, if Schlegel's fragments are a 'subject-work', an act of production which simultaneously produces the author as well as the fragment, as they are his or her consciousness made into a work, Blanchot's conception of the fragmentary 'dismisses, in principle, the I, the author' (*Writing of the Disaster*, 61). See also Derrida's, 'Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier', in *Points … Interviews, 1974–1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al., ed. Elizabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). Here Derrida states that *The Literary Absolute* clarified the reservations he had always felt regarding the fragment and totalization, as it pointed to a 'certain cult of the fragment and especially of the fragmentary *work* which always calls for an upping of the ante of authority and monumental totality' (*Points*, 302). See also Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in *The Literary Absolute*.

25 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Literary Absolute*, 44.
26 Jacques Derrida, 'Fifty-Two Aphorisms for a Foreword', trans. Andrew Benjamin, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume II*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), aphorism 46 (117–26).
27 Ibid., aphorism 43.
28 Ibid.
29 Louis Groarke, 'Philosophy as Inspiration: Blaise Pascal and the Epistemology of Aphorisms', *Poetics Today* 28.3 (2007): 431 (393–441).
30 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 8.
31 Ibid., 28.
32 Ibid., 40.
33 Werner Hamacher, *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, trans. Peter Fenves (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 225.
34 Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, 33.
35 Schlegel, '*Athenäum* Fragments', fragment 77.
36 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 357.
37 Blanchot, *Step Not Beyond*, 44.
38 Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, 58.
39 Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', trans. Nicholas Royle, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume II*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), aphorism 11 (127–42).
40 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 159–60.
41 Friedrich Schlegel, '1797–8 *Fragmente zur Litterature und Poesie I*', in *Literary Notebooks 1797–1801*, ed. Hans Eichner (London: The Athlone Press, 1957) xx, fragment 180.
42 Blanchot, *Step Not Beyond*, 42.
43 Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', aphorism 9.
44 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 19.
45 Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 126.
46 Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', aphorism 11.
47 Giorgio Agamben, 'What Is the Contemporary?', in *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 40 (39–54).

48 Ibid., 41.
49 Ibid., 46.
50 Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, 60.
51 Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 225 (221–40).
52 Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia', 227.
53 Ibid., 229.
54 Derrida, *Points*, 303.
55 Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia', 233.
56 Ibid., 237.
57 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 353.
58 Ibid., 357.
59 See Maebh Long, 'Absolute NonAbsolute Singularity: Jacques Derrida, Myles na gCopaleen and Fragmentation', in *Singularity and Transnational Poetics*, ed. Birgit Mara Kaiser (New York: Routledge, 2015), 95–115.
60 Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia', 229–31.
61 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 132.
62 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 268.
63 Nancy, *Birth to Presence*, 267.
64 Ibid., 267.
65 Nancy, *Sense of the World*, 8.
66 Ibid., 15.
67 Ibid., 134.
68 Ibid., 139.
69 Ibid., 125.
70 Ibid., 132.
71 Ibid., 139.
72 Ibid., 127.
73 Ibid., 126.
74 Ibid., 30.
75 Ibid., 32.
76 Ibid., 32.
77 Nancy, *Birth to Presence*, 155–6.
78 Nancy, *Sense of the World*, 152.
79 Happenstance does not mean idle chance, nor does it mean giving the decision to fate or destiny, but knowing the unpredictable can occur, and acting anyway, in the knowledge that you cannot master chance.
80 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 18.
81 Derrida, *The Post Card*, 9.
82 Jacques Derrida, 'Et Cetera', trans. Geoffrey Bennington, in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000), 290 (282–305).
83 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 94.