THE POETICS OF FRAGMENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH AND AMERICAN FICTION

Edited by
Vanessa Guignery, *École Normale Supérieure in Lyon*
and
Wojciech Drąg, *University of Wrocław*

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Introduction: the art of the fragment

Vanessa Guignery,
École Normale Supérieure in Lyon

Wojciech Drąg,
University of Wrocław

In 1966, Donald Barthelme had the narrator of his short story "See the Moon?" declare, "Fragments are the only forms I trust" (157). A number of contemporary British and American novelists could also make this statement theirs as the last few decades have seen a renewed popularity of fragmentation in works of fiction that deny completeness, linearity and coherence in favor of incompletion, disruption and gaps. According to Hans-Jost Frey, the fragment "is not a popular subject for literary scholarship" because it "does not fulfil the presupposition of wholeness" and "cannot be controlled" (32). However, the resurgence of fragmentation at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries deserves to be examined in order to ascertain whether contemporary forms of fragmentary writing constitute a return to the modernist episteme or the fragmented literature of exhaustion of the 1960s, whether they mark a continuity with some aspects of the postmodernist aesthetics or signal a major deviation from previous structures. Additionally, the relation between the fragment and the whole needs to be reconsidered so as to determine if the two notions are mutually exclusive in contemporary fiction and if the loss of the ideal of totality and unity is viewed with nostalgia or accepted and even welcome. This volume also purports to examine whether thinking up new modes and practices of fragmentation in literature, which can accommodate multimodal and transmedial forms, might be a way for contemporary writers to reflect today's accelerated culture of social media and overcommunication within which long-form fiction seems increasingly anachronistic. If the novel is not quite dead despite Will Self's dogged insistence that "this time it's for real" and that, in the digital age, "the novel is absolutely doomed to become a marginal cultural form" (qtd. in Clark), the genre is undergoing significant transformations which seem necessary if one is to overcome the "novel-nausea" that writers like Zadie Smith have expressed (Smith, "An Essay"). While the most innovative fiction some-

times veers towards the anti-novel in its extreme discontinuity (Drąg) or creates hybrid genres, less experimental works rely on fragmentation to shake the novel "out of its present complacency" (Smith, *Changing My Mind* 94), mimic the fissures of the self (Gibbons, *Multimodality* 201–02) or echo the shattering effects of trauma.

Defining the fragment

Before examining the ways in which contemporary forms of fragmentariness differ from, refurbish or repeat past models, one should start with the near-impossible task of trying to define the fragment. In *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (2004), Camelia Elias argues that "much of the appeal to the fragment relies on the fact that one can never be sure of what exactly constitutes a fragment" (2). For Frey, the fragment is "hostile to meaning and resists understanding" (25) because it cannot be accommodated into a whole: defining the fragment would amount to giving it well-delineated contours and considering it as a self-contained object, thereby disavowing its fragmentariness. Despite this proviso, critics have attempted to pinpoint some characteristics of this elusive object and have insisted in particular on its incompleteness: "a fragment appears incomplete, be it a sliver cut off from a larger whole, an unfinished work, or a work that seems insubstantial" (Metzer 106). David Metzer adds that the central relationship for a fragment is "that between part and whole" (106), a relationship that is predicated on loss. The etymology of the word certainly highlights these aspects. As noted by Alain Montandon, in Latin, the words *fragmen* and *fragmentum* derive from *frango*, which means "to break, to shatter, to crash." A fragment is a piece of a whole which has been ruptured and fragmentation therefore implies "an endured violence, an intolerable disintegration" (Montandon 77).[1] André Guyaux also draws attention to the etymology which emphasizes the cut, the separation and even "the wound" (7) while Sébastien Rongier refers to "a fracture" and "a tear." Fragmentariness is therefore commonly associated with loss, lack and vulnerability – a word whose etymology is significantly *vulnus*, i.e., the wound. It might thereby come as no surprise that in our "era of the vulnerable" (Ganteau, *The Ethics* 5), works of fiction which relate personal and collective traumas, with a focus on bodily frailty and a dramatization of loss, should opt for the trope of vulnerability and for modes of fragmentation and dislocation.

[1] All quotations from French sources are provided in our own translation.

A historical overview of the fragment

In earlier centuries, however, the fragment was not necessarily considered as the sign of a fracture to be deplored. Critics usually locate the origins of theoretical interest in the fragment in two European traditions. Firstly, French moralists and essayists from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century including Montaigne, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld and Chamfort favored the form of the *pensée*, the sentence, the maxim, the aphorism – a form taken up again by David Markson and David Shields in the contemporary period, as analyzed by Wojciech Drąg in this volume. According to Françoise Susini-Anastopoulos, unlike the fragment, the aphorism of the French moralists is marked by its "excessive closure" and "perfect completeness" (31), and for Elias, it "does not possess the same potential as the fragment to be performative" (9). The second European tradition of the fragment privileges a more open form: the late eighteenth-century Jena group of the first period of German Romanticism (including Schlegel and Novalis) set out their theory of the fragment in the journal *The Athenaeum* – a tradition Marcin Tereszewski recalls in this volume to differentiate it from the relationship of the fragment to totality in J. G. Ballard's fiction. According to D. F. Rauber, the classical literary stance centered on the finite and developed forms that enhanced "effects such as balance, harmony, perfection" (214). On the other hand, the Romantic artist was looking for a finite and discreet form that would "reflect the infinite and the indeterminate" (Rauber 214). For Schlegel and Novalis, but also for Goethe, Schiller or Nietzsche, the fragment seemed to offer the best solution to fulfil this ideal, which has led Rauber to call it "the ultimate romantic form" (215) and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy to name it "the romantic genre *par excellence*" (40). The two French critics insist that the German Romantics, contrary to the etymological definition proposed earlier, never confuse the fragment with "the residue of a broken ensemble," nor do they emphasize the fracture that produces the fragment (42).

This marks a contrast with the perception of fragmentation in the twentieth and twenty-first century, as noted by Elizabeth Wanning Harries in *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century* (1994): "We tend to think of fragmentary forms as radically discontinuous, reflecting a discontinuous, unstable, uncentered universe. The world is in chaos, and we represent that chaos in fragments. In the eighteenth century, however, and even into the nineteenth, fragments were not necessarily signs of a broken reality" (34). Instead, the Romantics gesture towards an impossible totality which remains an ideal. They acknowledge that the fragment "involves an essential incompletion" (42) because it is a project, engaged in the process of becoming – a "fragment

of the future" as noted in *Athenaeum* fragment 22 (qtd. in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 43). Simultaneously, however, they insist that the fragment relies on a form of unity, integrity and individuation, as suggested by Schlegel's famous description in *Athenaeum* fragment 206: "[a] fragment, like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog" (qtd. in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 43). The Romantic fragment, therefore, reaches out towards an impossible whole and does not bring "the dispersion or the shattering of the work into play" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 48).

A century later, the modernists repudiated Romanticism, and yet several critics traced the lineage of modernism, commonly labeled as an art of rupture, to Romantic modes of writing. For Anne Janowitz, the Romantic fragment poem was "the precursor form to the modernist fragment poem" (442), and for Rebecca Varley-Winter, "modernist fragments respond to Romantic fragments" (15). At the beginning of the twentieth century, chaos, confusion and a sense of crisis prevailed in the context of technological, social and economic modernization, scientific breakthroughs such as Einstein's theory of relativity, the decline of philosophical, religious and moral certainties and the catastrophe of the First World War. Susini-Anastopoulos attributes the development of fragmentary writing in that period to what she calls modernity's triple crisis of completeness, totality and genre (2) – notions which are deemed obsolete. Ricard Ripoll adds to that list the modern crisis of the subject (*L'écriture* 17–18), whereas Isabelle Chol proposes the crisis of meaning – prompted by the experience and awareness of lack, emptiness and discontinuity – as yet another philosophical context for the emergence of fragmentary literature (Chol 18–22). Moving further into the twentieth century, Rongier indicates a historical crisis as the motivation for the adoption of fragmentary style by thinkers such as Theodor Adorno. Rongier regards the choice to write in fragments as a "testimony of rupture" precipitated by the Holocaust and calls it "a thought of the radical mutilation of thought." In the aftermath of Auschwitz, fragmentary writing signifies, according to Rongier, the "loss of every form of innocence," the impossible "suture of the historical wound" and the exhaustion of "the affirmative conciliatory or reconciliatory thought." Rongier associates formal disintegration with the "sense of an ending," interprets the rise of fragmentation as literature's admission of its own impotence and cites Adorno's remark that art's "turn to the friable and the fragmentary is in truth an effort to save art by dismantling the claim that artworks are what they cannot be" (Adorno 190).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, disillusioned poets were intent on devising new strategies that could capture the complexity of the

contemporary world. In *The Waste Land* (1922), T. S. Eliot juxtaposed the refuse, shards and debris of Western culture, "confronting the reader with a collage of seemingly unrelated fragments and abandoning the narrative that might hold them together" (Gasiorek 11). Eliot's poem concludes with snippets from other works (a children's song, the Upanishads, an ancient Latin poem and works by Dante, Thomas Kyd, Gérard de Nerval, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Algernon Swinburne, each of them in its original language), presented by the Fisher King as "these fragments I have shored against my ruins" (Eliot 75). Characteristically, Eliot does not provide any bridges or transitions which would account for the coexistence of so many distinct fragments.

While poetry is conducive to fragmentary writing and fragmentariness is integral to the short story (as examined by David Malcolm and Teresa Bruś in this volume), the novel has been considered as the genre that is the most distant from fragmentation (Ripoll, *L'écriture* 15). And yet, modernist novelists – wary of unifying plots, autonomous characters, reassuring sequentiality and closure – turned their backs on "realism as an unwarrantedly stable and epistemologically confident narrative mode" and "developed novelistic forms that were fragmented, deployed multiple viewpoints, emphasized the subjective nature of experience, disrupted narrative chronology" (Gasiorek 6). William Faulkner deprived the reader of any organizing narratorial figure and unified representation of the world, favoring instead the juxtaposition of a multitude of points of view in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930) while Virginia Woolf linked herself "to dispersion, to intermittency, to the fragmented brilliance of images, to the simmering fascination of the instant" (Blanchot 101), famously asking readers to "tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure" (Woolf 111). Significantly, most theorists of modernist literature highlight the primacy of fragmentation and put forward related concepts or notions which Stephen Kern has enumerated in *Modernism after the Death of God: Christianity, Fragmentation, and Unification* (2017):

> *rupture* (Marjorie Perloff), *disintegration* (Erich Kahler), *discontinuity* (William Everdell), *nihilism* (Shane Weller), *crisis* (Jacques Le Rider), *meltdown* (Marshall Berman), *trauma* (Ariela Freedman), *shock* (Robert Hughes), *exploded form* (James Mellard), *break-up* (Katharine Kuh), *broken images* (Robert Schwartz), *fragmentation* (Sarah Haslam), and *self-fragmentation* (Dennis Brown). (6)

Kern adds however that this emphasis on fragmentation, disintegration and dislocation is often balanced by a process of reconstruction and a desire for unification. Thus, James McFarlane reinterpreted William Butler Yeats's famous line from "Second Coming" (1919) – "Things fall apart; the

centre cannot hold" (Yeats 158) – by arguing that "the defining thing in the Modernist mode is not so much that things fall *apart* but that they fall *together*" (McFarlane 92). According to Joshua Kavaloski, Yeats was not only mourning "the perceived collapse of the order that had previously provided structure and meaning to human life" but he was also "longing for a new center" and articulating "the desire to reestablish order out of the shocks, crises, and violations of modernism's early phase" (1). In the same way, Eliot in *The Waste Land* aimed to "piece together or reconcile the jigsaw of the myriad references, half-lines, non-sequiturs and quotations," thereby trying to "hold in the chaos" (Childs 182). In "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," Joseph Frank argued for a spatial and non-sequential reading of modernist works, following the model of imagist poetry. Taking the example of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), he wrote, "the reader is forced to read *Ulysses* in exactly the same manner as he reads modern poetry, that is, by continually fitting fragments together and keeping allusions in mind until, by reflexive reference, he can link them to their complements" (20). These examples suggest that fragmentation in modernist literature needs to be set up against the wish to synthesize what has been taken apart in order to recover some form of unity. Thereby, as suggested by Varley-Winter in *Reading Fragments and Fragmentation in Modernist Literature* (2018), crises within modernist literature "are more than purely negative" (21).

While in France in the 1950s and 60s, the *nouveau roman* as practiced by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor and Claude Simon was bringing radical changes to the novel, and in the United States in 1967, John Barth published his famous essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" about "the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities" (71), in Britain, mainstream social realism was the dominating trend and traditional novels were flourishing. Writers such as Eva Figes, B. S. Johnson, Ann Quin, Alan Burns or Brigid Brophy showed their frustration with this "reaction against experiment" – the title of Rubin Rabinovitz's study of the English novel of the period. Figes recalls, "We were concerned with language, with breaking up conventional narrative, with 'making it new' in our different ways. We all used fragmentation as a starting point, and then took off in different directions" (70). Just as William S. Burroughs devised his cut-up technique to reflect the randomness of consciousness and the fragmented nature of the real, Johnson kept looking for forms that would reflect the chaos and fragmentation of reality, or, quoting Samuel Beckett, "a form that accommodates the mess" (Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young* 17). In *Albert Angelo* (1964), the author-narrator describes his own book as being "about the fragmentariness of life, too, attempts to reproduce the moment-to-moment fragmentariness of life, my life, and to echo

it in technique, the fragmentariness" (169). In *The Unfortunates* (1969), Johnson's famous novel-in-a-box composed of twenty-seven unbound sections, the novelist used the dislocated form of the book as a metaphor for the random workings of the narrator's mind, the arbitrary progression of a football match and the proliferation of cancer cells.

Critics have considered Johnson either as "a Modernist stranded on the inimical shores of the late twentieth century" (Ganteau, "Anatomy" 113) or as a paradoxical precursor of postmodernism, "a postmodernist who wasn't postmodern" (White and Tew 6). This hesitation points to the continuities and points of contact between modernism and postmodernism despite the addition of the polysemic prefix "post–," and one of them is specifically "the shattered fragment" (Metzer 104). For Jean-François Lyotard, the postmodern condition is characterized by an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv): master narratives that would grant meaning and rationality to events no longer exist and are replaced by a multitude of stories, a polyphony of voices, a plurality of versions. Therefore, as noted by Paul Virilio in 1983, "[w]e're in the age of micro-narrative, the art of the fragment" (35): the unity of continuity has been displaced "onto the notion of fragment, of disorder" (36). While Romantic and modernist artists were still longing for unity, the postmodernist writer "only disconnects…. His ultimate opprobrium is 'totalization,' any synthesis whatever, social, epistemic, even poetic. Hence his preference for montage, collage, the found or cut-up literary object, for paratactical over hypotactical forms" (Hassan 19). Several theorists have highlighted that major difference with modernism, for instance, Alan Wilde, who wrote that "Postmodernism has given up Modernist attempts to restore wholeness to a fragmented world and has accepted the contingency of experience" (42). For such American writers as Barthelme, Richard Brautigan or Thomas Pynchon, the fragments "never come together under the aegis of an explanatory rationale, be it that of history, myth, or psychology" because all such metanarratives are distrusted (D'haen 220). This also explains why the narrator of Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), in his attempt to tell the history of Pakistan, is "forced to reflect that world in fragments of broken mirrors" and has to reconcile himself to "the inevitability of the missing bits" (69). Whereas modernist fiction "endorsed the reader's will to read the fragment into a totality," in postmodernist fiction, "this move to reconstruction breaks down, for both the reader and the fictional characters" (Mepham 146). Postmodernist texts made of unconnected fragments destroy the idea of connectivity and "challenge the literary code that predisposes the reader to look for coherence" (Fokkema 44).

Now that postmodernism is "over" (Hutcheon 165), "dead and gone," "buried" (Federman 245), and has "run out of steam" (Mullins 1), one needs new theoretical tools to analyze the types of fragmentation practiced by British and American contemporary writers, which is what the present volume seeks to provide. On the one hand, contributors examine to what extent contemporary literature draws inspiration or moves away from earlier models, such as, for example, Mariano D'Ambrosio, who sees Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as a precursor of fragmentary writing or Jarosław Hetman, who shows how David Foster Wallace has moved beyond postmodernist fragmentation to counter this brokenness with a sense of transcendence. On the other hand, contributors offer new taxonomies and categories to define the specificity of the modes of fragmentation implemented by contemporary writers in the digital age. A brief review of existing taxonomies and of the main features of fragmentary writing will be proposed below before we turn to the characteristics of fragmentary writing in British and American fiction of the last few decades.

Attempts at taxonomy

A number of critics agree on the basic distinction between works whose fragmentation is the result of the author's conception and those which are incomplete for other reasons, such as the writer's inability to finish them or the loss of some of its parts over time. In *The Romantic Fragment Poem* (1986), Marjorie Levinson uses the terms "authorized" and "accidental" to differentiate between those two categories (19). The element of chance signaled by the latter notion is also conspicuous in Merritt Moseley's choice of the word "fortuitous" to account for this group of texts in the present volume. Harries, in turn, prefers the terms "planned" and "unplanned" (3), whereas Metzer chooses to distinguish between "invented" and "remnant" fragments (105). The invented, or "new," fragments are, in Metzer's words, "fragments of nothing," as their origin is not a complete existing work but rather the concept of the fragment, informed by "the notions of incompletion, loss, and vagueness." Metzer concludes that despite their differences in genesis both types employ a very similar rhetoric (105–06).

Beyond the general agreement about the existence of the two outlined groups of fragmentary writing, there is little or no critical consensus on any further subdivisions and classifications. Elias proposes a classification of ten kinds of literary fragments, which she divides into two categories: those that historically *are* fragments and those that *become* fragments "by being theorized in critical discourse." The former group, composed of coercive, consensual, redundant, repetitive and resolute fragments, mani-

fests "agency," while the latter, comprising ekphrastic, epigrammatic, epigraphic, emblematic and epitaphic fragments, performs "representational functions" (20). By the coercive fragment Elias understands texts (like the writings of Heraclitus) which forcefully aim to elicit a reception emphasizing their incompletion (25). The consensual kind, exemplified by the works of Schlegel, is also defined with reference to the way the text is interpreted; in this case, the text agrees to being "stretched to infinity and engages on a path of 'forever becoming'" (26). Redundant, repetitive and resolute fragments, in turn, are distinguished on the basis of what they mean rather than how they are perceived. The three kinds represent different "stages in modernist writing" as epitomized by the works of Louis Aragon, Gertrude Stein and Emil Cioran, respectively (27). Elias embeds her discussion of the second group of fragments in the context of the poetics of postmodernism. The first subtype, the ekphrastic fragment, is one which comments verbally on its visual properties. The next three – epigrammatic, epigraphic and emblematic – "represent three stages in deconstructive thinking" which are informed, respectively, by writing as performance, writing as paratext and writing as metadiscourse (29–30). The final type, the epitaphic fragment, illustrated by the works of David Markson (discussed in this volume in the articles by Moseley and Drąg), is defined as an "event that puts performativity to rest" (30).

In the present volume, the most comprehensive attempt at classifying deliberately fragmentary works is undertaken by Moseley, who proposes three categories: the braid, the bricolage and the mosaic, each of which is exemplified by a variety of contemporary works including the novels shortlisted for the 2016 Man Booker Prize. The braid is conceived of by Moseley as a series of distinct narrative projects which are interspersed with one another rather than offered in sequence. The bricolage is a category referring to works which are composed out of radically heterogeneous materials, whereas the mosaic comprises texts consisting of many narratives that are complete in themselves. Moseley concedes that his taxonomy is not exhaustive, as there exist numerous *sui generis* works that elude his classification.

The polyphonic novel, explored in this volume by D'Ambrosio, is another possible category of fragmentary writing. It relies on a juxtaposition of multiple voices and the employment of numerous narrators. Rather than amounting to a "messy cacophony," works like Colum McCann's *Let The Great World Spin* (2009) and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) combine the various voices "with a virtuosity akin to that demon-

strated by the great contrapuntal composers" (Gioia 4).[2] David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) is a work which could be classified as a polyphonic novel as well as what A. E. van Vogt has dubbed the "fix-up" (qtd. in Liptak). Also referred to as the short-story novel, the "fix-up" is a notion applied to texts whose degree of coherence between consecutive chapters, regarding subject matter and genre, is greater than in the case of a collection of short stories and lesser than in a traditional novel. Further examples, including other works by Mitchell and, to a certain extent, Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001), are examined in this volume by Gerd Bayer and Alicia Rouverol. The two other categories connected with fragmentary writing which are discussed in other chapters are collage (Drąg) and the shuffle narrative (Côme Martin). Among other relevant critical labels are lexicographic fictions – texts imitating the form of encyclopedias, lexicons or dictionaries, such as Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) and David Levithan's *The Lover's Dictionary* (2010) – and question-and-answer texts, as exemplified by Jeanette Winterson's "The Poetics of Sex" (1993) and Lydia Davis's "Jury Duty" (2001).

The poetics of fragmentary writing

Since fragmentary writing is not a widely established category, the list of its distinctive features has not been authoritatively codified. As Moseley notes in the opening chapter of this volume, in order for a text to be regarded as fragmentary, it certainly needs to *appear* that way to the reader. That subjective impression is often evoked by the division of the text into single paragraphs or sentences which are separated by space. In such works, exemplified by the writings of Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, David Markson and Maggie Nelson, fragmentariness is evident at first glance – from the moment the reader sets eyes on the page. One alternative are works composed of blocks of continuous text – like Smith's *Hotel World* and Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* – where fragmentation is only apparent at the level of the narrative, which frequently intersperses various elements and stories in a non-linear manner. The third common strategy of fragmentary writing is asserting its hybridity by employing multimodality. Composed of "a multitude of semiotic modes," multimodal texts "cognize and integrate meaning from the creative synthesis of word, image, and tactility" (Gibbons, *Multimodality* 4; Gibbons, "Multimodal Literature" 433). Multimodal fragments have become particularly prominent over the last decades, therefore a separate section of the volume has been devoted

[2] Ted Gioia's article "The Rise of the Fragmented Novel" is an electronic publication divided into sections, whose numbers are provided in parenthetical references.

to the analysis of their poetics: Grzegorz Maziarczyk provides an overview of various multimodal and transmedial strategies in contemporary fiction, while Zofia Kolbuszewska and Deborah Bridle examine the formal characteristics of specific examples of works combining text, visuals and sound.

As suggested earlier, among the most common characteristics of fragmentary literature, regardless of which of the above categories they may fit into, are incompleteness, discontinuity and heterogeneity. The defiance of completeness, cohesion and continuity in the syntactic structure and the arrangement of text on the page appears suited to convey content that challenges the status quo. Susini-Anastopoulos sees fragmentary literature as "a space of conflict and tension" and as a "writing of intersection" on many levels, including the "aesthetic, generic [and] logical" (258). Its anarchic and irreverent mixture of incommensurate elements may evoke a strong reaction in the reader, including shock (Rongier), as is the case in sexually explicit literary collages by Burroughs and Kathy Acker. Related to fragmentary writing's propensity for critique and contestation is its frequently adopted position of skepticism and resistance to ideology. The mistrust of systematic truth and of any received hierarchies is, according to Werner Helmich, the intrinsic property of this kind of literature and has made it a useful tool for feminist literature. Authors such as Joan Didion and Annie Leclerc have, according to Ripoll, employed the fragment as a gesture of opposition towards "masculine writing, which would rest on the will to impose a unicity against a specifically feminine *multiplicity*" ("Vers une pataphysique" 18, emphasis original). The programmatic egalitarianism of fragmentary writing invites polysemy (28), as a result of which individual works make no pretense to unity and lay bare their contradictions.

The rejection of the principle of coherence makes fragmentary writing particularly suited to represent the chaos and contingency of reality, as noted by Chol (12) and Marc Botha (213). It can thus be regarded as endowed with a capacity to be a "truer" form of realism than ostensibly realist art. This paradox has been asserted memorably in Burroughs's manifesto for the cut-up technique: "Take a walk down a city street and put down what you have just seen on canvas. You have seen a person cut in two by a car, bits and pieces of street signs and advertisements, reflections from shop windows – a montage of fragments" ("Fall" 76). In fragmentary writing, the seams between the numerous scraps out of which the text is interwoven are deliberately exposed rather than concealed. Hence the stylistic preference for all kinds of lists and inventories as well as for citation and other forms of appropriation, especially those that do not smoothly integrate the borrowed content with the rest of the text. Although some works considered in this volume, especially those by David Foster Wallace

and David Mitchell, amount to several hundred or even over a thousand pages, fragmentary writing is generally associated with brevity and stylistic economy (Helmich 29), as exemplified by Johnson's *The Unfortunates* and Will Eaves's *The Absent Therapist* (2014).

The earlier noted heterogeneity of fragmentary writing is usually the result of combining a number of distinct components, such as genres, discourses, registers, external sources and even passages in different languages. The rhetorical strategy adopted in many texts discussed in this volume, including those by Winterson (in Maria Antonietta Struzziero's paper), Markson, Shields and Eaves, is parataxis – a seemingly arbitrary and non-hierarchical juxtaposition of elements which do not bear any obvious logical relation to one another. A similar mechanism can be observed on a larger scale – when considering the structure of the entire work being composed of sections that vary significantly as regards genre, style or content. Some of the most critically acclaimed examples of generic hybridity, also referred to as generic eclecticism, have been Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999) and *Cloud Atlas*, and Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

The lack of explicit connections between consecutive passages or parts results in the appearance of what Ripoll calls "a space of the not-said which permits ambiguity" ("Vers une pataphysique" 17). Wolfgang Iser's notion of the gap could be invoked here to elucidate the mechanism of the reading process of fragmentary texts. Iser argues that whenever the reader is confronted with such a space of ambiguity, they are offered an opportunity to "bring into play [their] own faculty for establishing connections" and "fill in the gaps left by the text itself" (284–85). Chol's analogical term to Iser's gap is "lacunary interval," which she defines as the text's refusal to provide the "syntactic links of causality," as a result of which the plot of a fragmentary novel may veer towards the antiplot (19). For the same reason, the fragmentary novel often comes close to what is called the antinovel – a work that challenges novelistic expectations, such as the employment of a linear narrative, a single protagonist and a consistent setting. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and Markson's *This Is Not a Novel* (2001) could be cited as cases in point.

Because of its use of ambiguity, discontinuity and other strategies of disorientation, fragmentary writing may be liable to the charges of obscurity and inaccessibility (Veikat; Metzer 106). In order for the reader to succeed in drawing all the necessary connections, they need to pay scrupulous attention to the text, which may involve having to reread some of its parts. Iser notes that while reading a radically fragmented work, "one's attention

is almost exclusively occupied with the search for connections between the fragments" (285). When commenting on certain strategies adopted by "modern experimental works," Gerald Graff notes that their frequent renunciation of a straightforward plot makes them "depend much more heavily on the reader's ability to locate thematic propositions capable of giving their disjunctive, fragmentary, and refractory details some exemplary meaning and coherence" (qtd. in McHale 221). Although the rejection of plot is by no means obligatory for fragmented fictions, Graff's insistence on the strengthened role of the reader applies to all of its varieties. Fragmentary writing could thus be said to belong to the category of "writerly" (*scriptible*) rather than "readerly" (*lisible*) works, as prescribed by Barthes in *S/Z* (4). Their multiple gaps and lacunae compel the reader to increase their engagement with the text and to become an active co-author of its meanings.

Fragmentation today

This volume originates from two convictions: first, that over the last years one can observe a revival of interest in fragmentary literature and, secondly, that its contemporary examples do not restrict themselves to cultivating the poetics of their modernist and postmodernist antecedents but often propose alternative formal solutions. The validity of the former claim can be illustrated by the fact that the year 2014 alone saw the publication of three critically acclaimed and radically fragmentary works: Richard McGuire's *Here* – a graphic novel created out of over 150 images (non-chronologically arranged) of the same location throughout several million years, Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (shortlisted for the Folio Prize) – an account of a marriage crisis narrated with the use of several hundred loosely connected paragraphs, and Eaves's *The Absent Therapist* (shortlisted for the Goldsmiths Prize) – an amalgam of the voices of 150 speakers. The mere list of authors considered in this volume – including Barnes, Mitchell, Ali Smith, Winterson, Wallace and Jonathan Safran Foer (whose mechanics of fragmentation are analyzed by Caroline Magnin) – testifies to the significance of this literary phenomenon.

In "The Rise of the Fragmented Novel" (2013), Ted Gioia locates the resurgence of contemporary fragmentary literature at the time of publication of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997). The critic singles out this work as a harbinger of a new kind of fragmented novel, which despite offering a "sprawling and multivalent" narrative remains "meticulously controlled and orchestrated" (21). Novels such as the earlier mentioned *Cloud Atlas* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, as well as Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), are cited by Gioia as paradigms of the twen-

ty-first century reinvention of the tradition of postmodernist experiments with fragmented narratives as practiced by Burroughs, Ballard and Gilbert Sorrentino. "Instead of relying on fragmentation as a means of disjunction and dissolution," as the postmodernists did, writers like Mitchell and Egan weave fictions out of scraps in such a way as to make them "holistic and coalescent" (Gioia 3). Their overall coherence, combined with greater attention to plot and pacing, makes them a lot more accessible to the general reader. While remaining experimental in their commitment to mixing multiple voices, genres and narrative scraps, Gioia argues, they become palatable to a mainstream audience, thus enabling the fragmented novel to emerge from the niche it occupied in the 1960s and 70s (8). Works like Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch* (1959) and Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* may have developed a cult following some years after their publication, but they did not manage to attract a mass readership. On the contrary, *Atonement* and *Cloud Atlas* not only achieved bestseller status (the former – with close to 1.4 million copies sold in the UK alone by 2010 – was ranked 21 in *The Guardian*'s list of "Top-selling 100 Books of All Time") but were made into high-profile and high-budget films starring Keira Knightley, Tom Hanks and Halle Berry. Other works mentioned in Gioia's essay that testify to the high marketing potential of fragmentary fictions are Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003), Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004) and Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* (2011). Another evidence of the domestication of fragmented fictions is the awarding of major literary prizes to such works as McCann's *Let The Great World Spin* (National Book Award), Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (Pulitzer Prize), George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017, Man Booker Prize) and Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights* (2007/2017, International Man Booker Prize).

What may seem problematic about Gioia's argument is his use of the "mainstream" label to refer to works by authors like Egan, Wallace and Zadie Smith. Although it is true that they have attracted a vast readership and that some of them do make concessions to accessibility in their use of fragmentation, their works remain more ambitious and demanding of the reader than most works of literary fiction. Furthermore, when Gioia states that in twenty-first century literature "the techniques of disjunction and fragmentation, once pursued as part of an *avant-garde* movement, have been tamed and subdued," he omits to notice the continued and thriving tradition of the more experimental (and certainly far removed from the mainstream) fragmentary writing (25). Its representatives include older writers, such as Gabriel Josipovici, David Markson (who died in 2010) and Mary Robinson; younger and established authors like Maggie Nelson, Jenny Offill, Lance Olsen, David Shields and Steve Tomasula, as well as young and aspiring writers such as Zinzi Clemmons, Sheila Heti and Harry

Parker. Much of what many of their works share – besides the usual properties of fragmentary writing outlined in the previous section – and what appears to distinguish them from their postmodernist counterparts can be subsumed under David Shields's notion of "reality hunger" – the desire to "break larger and larger chunks of 'reality'" into the text (1) and, consequently, a greater commitment to representation. In place of irony and playfulness, those works offer seriousness and engagement, which manifests itself in their choice of subject matter: working through traumatic loss (Nelson's *Bluets*, 2009, and Clemmons's *What We Lose*, 2017), the crisis of a marriage (Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*), the experience of losing both legs during the war in Afghanistan (Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier*, 2016) and the assassination of Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist (Olsen's *Head in Flames*, 2009), to name but a few.

In *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), Shields diagnoses the arrival of literary works which, among other characteristics, incorporate "'raw' material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored" and obliterate the distinction between fiction and non-fiction by frequently absorbing autobiography and criticism (3). Both strategies can be observed in the works of many of the authors mentioned above. The inclusion of "authentic" material occurs in them on a scale much greater than in earlier fragmentary works, which relied on appropriating quotations from other texts. At the extreme, *Reality Hunger* alone, Jonathan Lethem's "The Ecstasy of Influence" (2007) and Jeremy Gavron's *Felix Culpa* (2018) are avowed plagiarisms (or collages) which are almost exclusively composed of fragments from other works. One of many other strategies of "breaking reality" into one's text is Sheila Heti's practice of incorporating large portions of recorded and transcribed conversations with friends in her debut novel *How Should a Person Be?* (2010).

While remaining committed to the label of the novel, many examples of contemporary fragmentary literature, including works by Heti, Offill and Ben Lerner, transcend its boundaries. Shields sees it as a consequence of their embracing of "reality": "Our lives aren't prepackaged along narrative lines and, therefore, by its very nature, reality-based art – underprocessed, underproduced – splinters and explodes" (70). According to Shields, there also exists a vital link between fragmentary form and sincere content: "As a work gets more autobiographical, more intimate, more confessional, more embarrassing, it breaks into fragments" (70). This insight may account for the frequent use of fragmentation in life writing, as exemplified by Joe Brainard's *I Remember* (1970), Rick Moody's "Primary Sources" (1995) and Shields's own *How Literature Saved My Life* (2013).

Whereas Shields appears to attribute the resurgence of fragmentary writing to "reality hunger," critics such as Gioia, Tiina Veikat, Dominique Rabaté and Pierre Schoentjes point to the influence of the recent developments of technology. Veikat regards literature's "increasing tendency towards brevity and fragmentation" as a reaction to the massive influx of information available on the Internet and the sense that one is incapable of processing all that data. Rabaté and Schoentjes indicate the quickening pace of the Internet, video games and TV programs as evidence of "our epoch's inability to take things slowly" and as the genesis of "fictions of extreme brevity" (3). Gioia, in turn, draws a parallel between the radical increase in the number of editing cuts in TV commercials and the fragmentation of the mainstream novel. He also adds that in this respect literature is merely following a general and global tendency rather than setting a new trend (9). Jonathan Bastian, likewise, sees the fragmentation of contemporary narratives – particularly in the context of the polyphonic novel – as a symptom of literature "keeping pace with these shifting times." The arrival of digital culture, with its emphasis on visuality, has also influenced twenty-first-century literature and contributed to the earlier noted rise of richly multimodal works. The present volume aims to illustrate the great variety and originality of fragmentary writing in contemporary British and American fiction by examining how electronic literature and print books, experimental works and more traditional ones, develop their own strategies to practice and perfect the art of the fragment.

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