

most ornamental parts of  
wit and judgment are of  
them too, indubitably be-  
fitted to go together, in  
in all such cases of dupl-  
embellishments, - to answer  
(163, fragments)  
are the most needful, -- the  
- the most calamitous to

# ROMANTIC POETRY AND THE FRAGMENTARY IMPERATIVE

SCHLEGEL, BYRON, JOYCE, BLANCHOT

for all these reasons put  
is not a mortal amongst  
not wish and steadfastly  
own mind, to be, or to b  
least in the one c  
indeed of both of them,

Christopher A. Strathman

*Romantic Poetry and  
the Fragmentary Imperative*

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*Romantic Poetry  
and the  
Fragmentary Imperative*

Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot



Christopher A. Strathman

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*For Lyle and Bernie Strathman*

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*It is a widely held belief that modern literature is characterized by a doubling-back that enables it to designate itself; this self-reference supposedly allows it both to interiorize to the extreme (to state nothing but itself) and to manifest itself in the shimmering sign of its distant existence. In fact, the event that gave rise to what we call "literature" in the strict sense is only superficially an interiorization; it is far more a question of a passage to the "outside": language escapes the mode of being of discourse—in other words, the dynasty of representation—and literary speech develops from itself, forming a network in which each point is distinct, distant from even its closest neighbors, and has a position in relation to every other point in a space that simultaneously holds and separates them all. Literature is not language approaching itself until it reaches the point of its fiery manifestation; it is, rather, language getting as far away from itself as possible. And if, in this setting "outside of itself," it unveils its own being, the sudden clarity reveals not a folding-back but a gap, not a turning back of signs upon themselves but a dispersion. The "subject" of literature (what speaks in it and what it speaks about) is less language in its positivity than the void language takes as its space when it articulates itself in the nakedness of "I speak."*

—Michel Foucault

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## *Setting Out: Toward Irony, the Fragment, and the Fragmentary Work*

Could a historiographer drive on his history, as a muleteer drives on his mule,—straight forward;—for instance, from *Rome* all the way to *Loretto*, without ever once turning his head aside either to the right hand or to the left,—he might venture to foretell you to an hour when he should get to his journey's end;—but the thing is, morally speaking, impossible: For, if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid. He will have views and prospects to himself perpetually soliciting his eye, which he can no more help standing still to look at than he can fly. . . .

—Laurence Sterne

The purpose of this book is to inquire into a conception of poetry that emerges with special clarity and force during the second half of the eighteenth century. This conception comes into particularly clear view in the 1790s in both German literary theory and English literary practice, although such a distinction between theory and practice is problematic as romantic theory is very much informed by early modern European, especially English, practice.<sup>1</sup> As it happens, this conception finds its most compelling articulation in Friedrich Schlegel's notion of "romantic poetry [*romantische Poesie*]," his call for a new and highly self-conscious literary work that embodies the fractured, decentered consciousness of ancient philosophical dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Historically, this conception originates in the loosening of medieval Christendom's grip on European culture and the emergence of

vernacular literatures, especially ones written in Romance languages, out from under the rock of a comparatively monolithic cultural paradigm. In fact, there is perhaps no single work more influential for the formulation of Schlegel's conception of romantic poetry than Laurence Sterne's late-eighteenth century shaggy dog of a novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67), a text that repeatedly dissolves clear-cut distinctions between Latin and the vernacular, high and low styles of English, and religious and secular discursive registers.<sup>3</sup> The critic Richard Lanham has gone so far as to describe Sterne as “a profound philosopher in—and of—the comic mode,” while *Tristram Shandy* has inspired poets and novelists from Byron and Carlyle to Flaubert and Mallarmé to Joyce and Beckett.<sup>4</sup> One reason for the book's lasting appeal is that it effectively dismantles traditional Aristotelian poetics, which hinges upon a distinction between form and content, with a display of linguistic anarchy that underwrites one of the premises of this book: that one can read *Tristram Shandy* as a point of origin for what Schlegel calls romantic poetry, or “the romantic genre [*Dichtart*]” (*KA* 2:183; *LF* 175).

Romantic poetry in this sense is a hybrid genre that moves unpredictably back and forth between theory and practice; it exhibits both philosophical and literary, narrative and lyrical dimensions, and it contains both transparent and opaquely self-critical moments. In *The Literary Absolute*, their influential study of German romantic literary theory, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy articulate this tension in a useful way by describing the dialectical relationship between the fragmentary work and the fragment per se:

This fragmentary essence of the dialogue has at least one consequence (among several others that we cannot explore here), namely that dialogue, similar in this to the fragment, does not properly constitute a genre. This is why the dialogue, like the fragment, turns out to be one of the privileged sites for taking up the question of genre as such.<sup>5</sup>

At issue here is the genealogy of a supergenre (a genre squared or raised exponentially to the next highest power) predicated on a rethinking of poetry, which has its origins in the novel's displacement of the epic and the simultaneous recognition of the tremendous generic potential inherent in novelistic dialogue. The question of modern poetry, particularly the novel and its relationship to ancient epic and tragic poetry, is a question that is pursued in detail by several eminent theorists,

including György Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Julia Kristeva.<sup>6</sup> And yet it is not simply a question of how to think about the novel.

What is at stake in such a conception of romantic poetry is the status of the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry, which Socrates, in Plato's *Republic*, already regards as ancient. In fact, romantic poetry can be understood as a rethinking of Socratic dialogue based on the assumption that Plato is a quasi-philosophical poet concerned with arriving at the genre most appropriate for (or adequate to) thinking.<sup>7</sup> It is equally a rethinking starting with the thought that modern poetry, or literature, should acknowledge an intimate relationship between philosophy and poetry, a relationship that nevertheless remains unfulfilled. "The whole history of modern poetry," Schlegel says in *Critical Fragment* 115, "is a running commentary on the following brief philosophical text: all art should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be made one" (*KA* 2:161; *LF* 157). At the same time, Schlegel cautions in *Critical Fragment* 103: "many a work of art whose coherence is never questioned is, as the artist knows quite well himself, not a complete work but a fragment, or one or more fragments, a mass, a plan" (*KA* 2:159; *LF* 155). The romantic work thus navigates a precarious passage between knowledge and skepticism, system and fragment, narrative and lyric, and history and language without collapsing into the form of either one or the other. The aim is not so much to reach a settlement as to make one's way to the limits of the opposition itself—and perhaps go beyond it—in response to the claim of what remains unthought in thinking. At its most forceful and most provocative, the fragmentary work of romantic poetry opens onto the domain of ethics and questions literature's relation to moral life.

In his own way, Sterne follows the example of Socrates, and reintroduces the possibility that there is a way out of the endgame of goal-oriented thinking, a passage to the outside, as it were. Consider the following passage from the author's preface to *Tristram Shandy*, in which Sterne speaks directly to the terms of the quarrel. "I now enter directly upon the point," he writes:

—Here stands *wit*,—and there stands *judgment*, close beside it, just like the two knobbs I'm speaking of, upon the back of this self same chair on which I'm sitting.

—You see, they are the highest and most ornamental parts of its *frame*,—as wit and judgment are of *ours*,—and like them too, indubitably both made and fitted to go together, in order as we say in all such cases of duplicated embellishments,——*to answer one another*. (*TS* 163)



Like the chair, constructed in such a way as to balance two opposing knobs, signifying wit and judgment (or, as the romantics interpret it, irony), the romantic work operates by way of a signal tension between a bold intuitive leap and the subsequent questioning that inevitably follows. The romantic work accomplishes its design by opening a rift between narrative exposition and lyrical digression, working less to imitate the external appearance of the world than to embody the dramatic event of the world's innermost, revealing and concealing, play.

Sterne goes on to insist that wit and judgment, far from being self-indulgent diversions of the overcritical mind:

are the most needful,—the most priz'd,—the most calamitous to be without, and consequently the hardest to come at,—for all these reasons put together, there is not a mortal amongst us . . . does not wish and stedfastly resolve in his own mind, to be, or to be thought at least master of the one or the other, and indeed of both of them, if the thing seems any way feasible, or likely to be brought to pass. (*TS* 164)

Sterne makes it abundantly clear that human life, as well as the life of the work of art, depends upon one simultaneously following these two paths. But what Sterne's preface also points to, what marks its dismantling of such commonplace notions as balance between and antithesis of wit and judgment, is the suggestion that such opposing forces persistently generate more questions than anyone can ever possibly hope to answer, and that "if he is a man of the least spirit, [the writer or interpreter] will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid" (*TS* 32).

The exigency or imperative of a work of this sort stems from this two-handed state of affairs. Such a dialogue originates in the desire to mediate between wit and judgment (or irony), ancient and modern, classical and romantic, and traditional and experimental. That is, the fragmentary work of romantic poetry also speaks to legitimate concerns about the narrative structure of myth and history. The interesting thing, however, is that the opposition between wit and irony, unlike the opposition between wit and judgment, is never quite symmetrical; rather, it exhibits a remainder that leaves one exposed to that which calls for further thought. As a consequence of this asymmetry between wit and irony, romantic poetry can be figured as a kind of reciprocal interplay between two modes of discourse that have the capacity to generate new progeny. Schlegel's novel *Lucinde* is predicated on this idea: "A great future

beckons me to rush deeper into infinity: every idea opens its womb and brings forth innumerable new births" (*KA* 5:10; *LF* 46–47). "The genre of the fragment," observe Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, "is the genre of generation" (*LA* 49). It may be that this is what distinguishes the romantic from the post-romantic fragment, as Maurice Blanchot thinks of it. For Blanchot, "fragmentary writing [*l'écriture fragmentaire*]" is not so much a form of generation as it is a form of endurance, survival, way-making, or, as I prefer to think of it, passage.<sup>8</sup> In any case, the twin dimension of the work places the reader under an obligation to answer the call to make a beginning out of the work and, furthermore, to keep moving. It is an invitation to traverse the world with the humility of a desert thinker or an exile rather than a debater (who, after all, desires to win) or an officially anointed poet laureate. What is interesting about this exigency, desire, or will is that it does not originate from inside the subject but from somewhere outside, from the world itself, or from whatever it is that supports the world and allows it to come into being. It is as if this desire or demand issues from the world as a desire to be understood or acknowledged. One might call this, using Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's words (appropriated from Blanchot), "the fragmentary exigency" or, as I prefer, "the fragmentary imperative [*l'exigence fragmentaire*]" (*LA* 39).

The fragmentary imperative underwrites much of what usually counts as romanticism. If it initiates romanticism's obsession with fragments and ruins, however, it also exceeds such a concern to anticipate some of the most compelling writing of the twentieth century, especially as these works are explicitly grounded on the exigency of the fragment or fragmentary writing. In fact, Blanchot makes it possible to read romanticism as mediating an inverted or backward-looking Socratic dialogue to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. "It could be said," Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy argue, "that this is precisely what the romantics envisage as the very essence of literature: the union, in satire (another name for mixture) or in the novel (or even in Platonic dialogue), of poetry and philosophy, the confusion of all the genres arbitrarily delimited by ancient poetics, the interpenetration of the ancient and the modern, etc." (*LA* 91). But the Socrates whose dialogue is in question here is the ironic, fragmentary, many-sided Socrates of the *Symposium* rather than the conceptual, systematic, hyperrational Socrates of the more philosophical dialogues. It is the Socrates who carries inside himself the rhetorical example of Homer's Odysseus, a wily, skillful, persistent, clever man of many turns, and a forceful reminder of an even more ancient, pre-Socratic way of life.<sup>9</sup> In any case, in keeping with this more rhetorical and less philosophical

form of life, the romantics rethink dialogue as a genre-beyond-genre, or, better, a genre-without-genre, a genre composed of bits and pieces of all of the other genres but somehow more (and less) than merely the sum of these parts. "All the classical poetical genres," Schlegel writes in *Critical Fragment* 60, "have become ridiculous in their rigid purity" (*KA* 2:154; *LF* 150). Just so. The romantics open poetics to the possibility of being more than the classification of the genres and at the same time situate it along a fault line between poetry and philosophy; this line exposes philosophical narrative to the threat of the revolution of poetic language in a way that calls into question philosophy's own way of knowing.

Not the product of a poetics in the Aristotelian sense, romantic poetry owes more to Socrates (refracted through the figure of Odysseus) than to the idea of tragedy as the imitation of a human action of a certain magnitude. In fact, it is profoundly non-Aristotelian, calling into question the primacy of plot over character and especially language. "As the 'classical' description of [literary practice]," Robert Langbaum long ago noted, "Aristotle's *Poetics* has much to teach us about modern literature, just because it so illuminatingly *does not apply*."<sup>10</sup> If Langbaum overstates his case, he also makes an important point. Rather than looking to Aristotelian metaphysics for its bearings, romantic poetry looks back through Plato and Socrates to pre-Socratic writing, the tragic chorus, and Homer, while at the same time looking forward to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the twentieth-century avant-garde. Moreover, the Schlegel brothers' invention of the opposition between Apollonian and Dionysian impulses anticipates not only Nietzsche's discussion of tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* but also Heidegger's reflections on the work-being of art in his lectures published as "The Origin of the Work of Art":

In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigation of this striving. This does not happen so that the work should at the same time settle and put an end to the conflict in an insipid agreement, but so that the strife may remain a strife. Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work accomplishes this striving. The work-being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth.<sup>11</sup>

Like the origin of the work of art in the interminable strife of earth and world, romantic poetry exhibits both a worldly and earthly dimension. Its wit opens the possibility of a world of understanding while its ironic judgment withdraws this possibility before it can be cognitively grasped and subsumed within the order of knowledge.

One can think of Sterne's novel as setting to work an ongoing strife between moments of self-disclosure and self-concealment. Sterne's work balances itself precisely, if precariously, between nothing, or non-being, and being; it struggles to facilitate the emergence of the one from out of the other. Possibly no other nothing in western culture resonates so deeply as the nothing that opens Sterne's great novel.<sup>12</sup> The question the novel sets for itself is both prescient and profound: how to make a beginning out of nothing? As Tristram knows, however, beginnings are delicate matters and one should "duly consider how much depends upon what [one is] doing [before one attempts such a thing]" (*TS* 5). Accordingly, conversation swirls around the expectation of the birth of the hero of the story, Tristram himself. The book begins with the comedy of the hero's ill-timed conception:

*Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?—Good G—!* cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time, *—Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question? Pray, what was your father saying?—Nothing.* (*TS* 6)

This passage is telling. It is charged not only with Mrs. Shandy's interruption of her husband but also with Tristram's own self-interruption. Such continuous self-interruption is a responsibility for—responsiveness to—the exigencies of the subject matter in question—to thought itself. As a result, such fragmentary work remains perpetually unfinished, incomplete, unsettling, and a challenge to the limits of philosophical ways of knowing. At the same time it is thoughtful work that continues working at the limits of rationality by virtue of its worklessness or *désoeuvrement*.

For Blanchot, incompleteness as worklessness indicates that the working of the work of art is not exhausted in the achievement of an end or a goal but drifts outside the economy of means and ends to remain unfinished, or better, unsettled. This unsettling dimension of the fragmentary work is the aspect of the work that refuses to be exhausted by the logic of metaphysical dualism. Instead, such work demonstrates that (as Blanchot reminds us in *The Infinite Conversation*), "at whatever time, one must be ready to set out, because to go out [*sortir*] (to step outside [*aller au dehors*])) is the exigency from which one cannot escape if one wants to maintain the possibility of a just relation."<sup>13</sup> Here one senses that Blanchot is responding to Plato's insistence in the *Republic* that the

political requirements of the just regime necessarily call poetry into question; for his part, Blanchot turns the tables on Plato and makes the fragmentary imperative foundational for justice. Here, too, the peculiarly ethical edge of the fragmentary work clearly announces itself: in the exigency of stepping outside the opposition of philosophy and poetry. The idea of making a beginning, of setting out or stepping outside (oneself or one's assumptions), borders on the ethical; it opens onto unregulated ethical regions of life; it opens up one's capacity for stepping outside one's own world view in response to the claim of an other.

*Irony: Deconstructive, Romantic, and Otherwise*

Many of the issues at stake here can be traced to one of the watershed texts in the history of studies in romanticism, Paul de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality."<sup>14</sup> Now, as is well known, this essay constitutes de Man's attempt to demystify the language of presence established by Coleridge in his definition of the symbol in *The Statesman's Manual* by insisting on the radical discontinuity between words, things, and meanings. "This is a structure shared," de Man argues:

by irony and allegory in that, in both cases, the relationship between word and meaning is discontinuous, involving an extraneous principle that determines the point and manner in which the relationship is articulated. (209)

What de Man tries to do, using rhetorical figures such as metonymy and synecdoche, is extend the disjunctiveness of irony and allegory so that it might apply to literary language generally. "But this important structural aspect [the discontinuity between word and meaning]," contends de Man, "may well be a description of figural language in general" (209). Thus de Man replaces the continuity of word and meaning, which characterizes the symbol, with the discontinuity of irony and allegory. Moreover, de Man creates an opening for an investigation such as this one, when in the second half of the essay he turns to the problem of figurative language and begins to speculate on its connection to a specific genre, in this case, the novel.

The tie between irony and the novel seems to be so strong that one feels tempted to follow Lukács in making the novel into the equivalent, in the history of literary genres, of irony itself. . . . [Nonetheless,] the

correlation between irony and the novel is far from simple. Even the superficial and empirical observation of literary history reveals this complexity. The growth of theoretical insight into irony around 1800 bears a by no means obvious relationship to the growth of the nineteenth-century novel. . . . It could be argued that the greatest ironists of the nineteenth century generally are not novelists: they often tend toward novelistic forms and devices—one thinks of Kierkegaard, Hoffmann, Mallarmé, or Nietzsche—but they show a prevalent tendency toward aphoristic, rapid, and brief texts (which are incompatible with the duration that is the basis of the novel), as if there were something in the nature of irony that did not allow for sustained movements. (210–11)

Here de Man opens a window onto the question of the genre of romanticism or romantic poetry without choosing to climb through it. Instead, he develops a theory of poetic discourse as rhetoric (in Nietzsche's sense) which will dominate his later career. But de Man's reflection on the difficulty of identifying irony with a genre bears directly on the origin of what Schlegel calls romantic poetry. Already present in de Man's speculations is the ambiguity of the generic form of the romantic work: its tendency to refuse settlement in either a purely narrative or lyrical literary space and to shuttle back and forth between autobiographical indulgence in English-speaking writers and more theoretically motivated self-effacement in Danish-, French-, and German-speaking writers. So de Man identifies something remarkable about the wit and irony of romantic poetry that puzzles him from the outset: its characteristic back-and-forth or reciprocal interplay between theory and practice.

The critical debate during the 1980s between Anne Mellor and Jerome McGann emerged in part as a dispute concerning their different responses to de Man, to this essay in particular and, more generally, to de Man's project as a whole. Though both Mellor and McGann question de Man's method, their views on what might count as an alternative initially remained far, even worlds, apart. Mellor initiated the exchange by opening her controversial study, *English Romantic Irony*, with remarks explicitly critical of de Man.<sup>15</sup> In her book, Mellor argues that de Man focuses too exclusively on the destructive energies of romantic-era discourse at the expense of its creative energies. By contrast, she insists on a balance:

In this sense, the romantic ironist must be sharply distinguished from modern deconstructors. A radical demystifier like Paul de Man subjects all linguistic discourse to skeptical analysis and rejects poetic symbolism . . .