



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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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*."¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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."¹³ 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."¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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 . . .

In so doing, de Man arbitrarily privileges one form of literary discourse, the allegorical, over another, the symbolic. In other words, modern deconstructors choose to perform only one half of the romantic-ironic operation, that of skeptical analysis and determination of the limits of human language and consciousness. But the authentic romantic ironist is as filled with enthusiasm as with skepticism. He is as much a romantic as an ironist. (5)

As an alternative, Mellor proposes the paradigm of English romantic irony, both a philosophical world-view and an informing literary mode of consciousness. Mellor claims that, unlike the downward spiral that results from the temporal predicament of ironic consciousness, English romantic irony acknowledges a more open-ended and flexible dimension of romantic-era writing. Basing her study on a paradigm derived from Schlegel, and also somewhat from Hume, Mellor counters de Man's emphasis on the destructive power of irony by offering a discussion of its more creative, liberating, and enabling energies. In doing so, Mellor makes large claims for the romantic-ironic way of knowing; she describes it as "a mode of consciousness or a way of thinking about the world that finds a corresponding literary mode [in English romantic irony]" (24). Moreover, romantic-ironic consciousness represents a way of thinking that "can potentially free individuals and even cultures from totalitarian modes of thought and behavior" (188).

Unwilling to let this go unchallenged, McGann took strong exception to Mellor's paradigm of English romantic irony.¹⁶ In some pointed remarks in *The Romantic Ideology* McGann reads Mellor's model as a recuperation of the humanistic framework famously articulated by M. H. Abrams. Mellor's interpretation of ironic romanticism, as McGann sees it, represents "a significant alteration of Abrams' position rather than an alternative to it. At the heart of both lies an emphasis upon the creative process of Romanticism, both in its forms and dominant themes" (22). For McGann, Mellor refuses to acknowledge the dark side of romanticism, the more agonizing and troubling side of irony addressed by Søren Kierkegaard. "Mellor secularizes [Abrams'] model," McGann argues,

by introducing the elements of Romantic skepticism, but she does so only to the point where such skepticism does not 'turn from celebration to desperation.' No agonies are allowed into her romantic world which is, like Abrams', a good and happy place: a place of enthusiasm, creative process, and something ever more about to be. (27)

Although McGann himself remained wary of Kierkegaardian irony, his criticism of Mellor nonetheless rings true: in her eagerness to identify a more positive dimension to romantic-era writing and move beyond the impasse of deconstruction, Mellor neglects the dark side of romantic skepticism.

Upon further reflection it becomes clear that the critical object of McGann's criticism is really de Man and, ultimately, Nietzsche, especially his critique of hide-bound historicism in the essay, "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life." Viewed in such a light, McGann's point of entry into the conversation becomes easier to understand, if no less strident and uncompromising. Moreover, he is adamant about reinforcing the importance not just of history, but more precisely, of historical difference. "Works of the past are relevant in the present," McGann writes, "precisely because of this difference [between the past and present]" (2). "[T]he past and its works," McGann adds,

should be studied by a critical mind in the full range of their pastness—in their differences and their alienations (both contemporary and historical). To foster such a view of past works of art can only serve to increase our admiration for their special achievements and our sympathy for what they created within the limits which constrained them—as it were, for their grace under pressure. (2)

However, it is hard to know what kind of sympathy McGann is talking about here, as he claims to study works of the past with "a critical mind in the full range of their pastness." My sense is that it's closer to a mourner's condolences than the sympathy or *Einfühlung* of authentic historical understanding. This is why McGann's historical method looks more like a continuation of Nietzschean suspicion than a rejection of it. From a distance, the interpreter may speak about the past but should not be effected, or effectively situated by it in Gadamer's sense of historically-effected consciousness.¹⁷ This is, as Gadamer puts it, "the consciousness effected in the course of history and determined by history, and the very consciousness of being thus effected and determined" (*TM* xxxiv). McGann seems to be of one mind with Gadamer on the question of the historicity of understanding, but what McGann misses (and Gadamer wants to explore more fully) is precisely the truth-value of the disagreement, or discrepancy, between the present and the past. That is, historical difference need not be appropriated

and used as grounds for critique so much as articulated in order to acquire a better, more balanced, understanding.

Marjorie Levinson, more or less following McGann, pursues the question of the relationship between language and history in *The Romantic Fragment Poem*. In this book, she produces a series of readings in which romantic fragment poems are situated within historical contexts of their production and reception. Levinson argues that by focusing on the romantic fragment poem she aims to advance

a corrective to the concealed and insidious formalism which reifies the conceptual aura surrounding literary works and installs that hypostasis as the essence, cause, or meaning of the work. . . . More simply, the exercise is to pry apart the poem's special maneuvers and projections from the totalizing constructs in which criticism, in great good faith and obedient to the rhetoric of the poetry, has framed them.¹⁸

Levinson argues that an insidious formalism frames romantic era writing within the false terms of idealistic humanism. This kind of criticism, Levinson says, is “downright appropriative” (11). She writes, furthermore, that “[w]hat sustained commentary there is [on “the Romantic fragment poem”] can best be described as *expressive-essentialist, or zeitgeist* critique” (8, emphasis mine). As her examples of this kind of critique, she offers book length studies by Thomas McFarland and Edward Bostetter. “The former develops the fragment as a vehicle for the symbolization of a cultural theme,” according to Levinson, “while the latter represents it as an unfortunate and extrinsically induced deformation of structural intention. The work's unfinishedness is, on the one hand, presented as the source of its poetry, meaning, and value and, on the other, as inimical to the work's formal and conceptual realization” (13). According to Levinson, what is missing from both is (a) an awareness of the material conditions obtaining at the time of the writing of these works and the production of the books or journals in which they first appeared, and (b) an appreciation of the reception history of the particular works under discussion.

McFarland, in the book Levinson mentions, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*, finds himself, like Mellor and McGann, responding to de Man's reading of romantic period poetic rhetoric. Rather than engaging in critique, however, McFarland emphasizes what he calls the diasparactive awareness of romantic-era discursive forms, particularly in Wordsworth and Coleridge.¹⁹ He couches his own readings of poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge in a sense that Heidegger's

thought affords a more effective overall framework or horizon for thinking about these sorts of fragmented modalities:

Incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin—the diasparactive triad—are at the very center of life. The phenomenological analysis of existence reveals this with special clarity. Heidegger’s twin conceptions of *Geworfenheit* (the sense of being hurled into reality, broken off) and *Verfallen* (the sense within life of its continuing ruin) are ineradicable criteria of existence. In truth, the largest contention of this book can be rendered by Heidegger’s formulation that ‘in existence there is a permanent incompleteness (*ständige Unganzheit*), which cannot be evaded.’ (5)

To the extent that he follows Heidegger’s lead in rethinking the role of the aesthetic in raising the question of truth, McFarland is certainly not indulging in expressive-essentialist criticism, as these are precisely the middle-class aesthetic values Heidegger rejects, for example, in his lectures, “The Origin of the Work of Art.” McFarland presses this thought, observing: “The cultural iconology of Wordsworth and Coleridge is mirrored in that of Romanticism itself. Incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin—*ständige Unganzheit*—not only receive special emphasis in Romanticism but also in a certain perspective seem actually to define that phenomenon” (7).

Allow me to take up once more de Man’s essay, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” for it is here that some of the most promising hints as to the meaning of the irony of the fragmentary work of romantic poetry surface. In a brilliant rhetorical move, de Man turns from Schlegel to Baudelaire in his discussion of irony and ironic consciousness; from this turn, everything else he has to say about irony arguably follows.

Thus freed from the necessity of respecting historical chronology, we can take Baudelaire’s text, “*De l’essence du rire*” [“On the Essence of Laughter,”] as a starting point. Among the various examples of [laughter-provoking] ridicule cited and analyzed, it is the simplest situation of all that best reveals the predominant traits of an ironic consciousness: the spectacle of a man tripping and falling into the street. (211)

Here de Man draws attention to the notion of “*dédoublement* as the characteristic that sets apart a reflective activity” and notes the “reflective disjunction” of ironic consciousness that then follows (212–13). But what de Man deems most important for his critical discussion, and what he will never allow the reader to forget, is that irony is a special

sort of existential or ontological falling. “More important still,” de Man writes:

in Baudelaire’s description the division of the subject into a multiple consciousness takes place in immediate connection with a fall. The element of falling introduces the specifically comical and ironic ingredient. At the moment that the artistic or philosophical, that is, the language-determined, man laughs at himself falling, he is laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself. . . . As a being that stands upright . . . man comes to believe that he dominates nature, just as he can, at times, dominate others or watch others dominate him. This is, of course, a major mystification. The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds him of the purely instrumental, reified character of his relationship to nature (213–14).

de Man constructs a remarkable context within which to review the question of the central importance of irony and the fragment for modern literature. It is a passage that demands to be studied more closely, but for now let us attend to de Man’s use of the trope of falling to describe ironic or fragmentary consciousness. Such a consciousness is characterized by its inevitable slippage, by virtue of its dependence upon language and its exposure to temporality, into a state of inauthenticity.

What is most striking about McFarland’s invocation of Heidegger is the light it sheds on de Man’s understanding of Heidegger’s conception of *verfallen* or, literally, decay, ruin, decline or dilapidation, a difficult-to-translate concept found throughout his philosophical work, *Being and Time*.²⁰ On the surface, it means simply to fall or to be falling. This is evidently how de Man understands it: even to an extreme, as though one is forever falling down the empty elevator shaft of temporality. But what complicates things is that there is already a German word for falling: *fallen*. Macquarrie and Robinson include several footnotes in their translation that are instructive. First, they observe that “[t]hough we shall usually translate [*verfallen*] simply as ‘fall’, it has the connotation of deteriorating, collapsing, or falling down. Neither our ‘fall back upon’ nor our ‘falls prey to’ is quite right: but ‘fall upon’ and ‘fall on to’, which are more literal, would be misleading for ‘*an . . . zu verfallen*’; and though ‘falls to the lot of’ and ‘devolves upon’ would do well for ‘*verfällt*’ with the dative and other contexts, they will not do so well here” (*BT* 42 n.2). Second, in a note to Heidegger’s discussion of “a kind of Being which we interpret as falling,” Macquarrie

and Robinson confess that “[w]hile we shall ordinarily reserve the word ‘falling’ for ‘*Verfallen*’ . . . in this sentence it represents first ‘*Verfallen*’ and then ‘*Fallen*’, the usual German word for ‘falling’. ‘*Fallen*’ and ‘*Verfallen*’ are by no means strictly synonymous; the latter generally has the further connotation of ‘decay’ or ‘deterioration’, though Heidegger will take pains to point out that in his own usage it ‘does not express any negative evaluation’ ” (*BT* 172 n1). A third note, in connection with Heidegger’s discussion of *verfallen* and *geworfenheit* also seems germane to the discussion: “While we follow English idioms by translating ‘*an die “Welt”*’ as ‘into the “world” ’ in contexts such as this, the preposition ‘into’ is hardly the correct one. The idea is rather that of falling at the world or collapsing against it” (*BT* 220 n1). Finally, a note in connection with Heidegger’s discussion of Hegel’s conception of time: “Through this section it will be convenient to translate Hegel’s verb ‘fallen’ by ‘fall’, though elsewhere we have largely pre-empted this for Heidegger’s ‘*verfallen*’ ” (*BT* 480 n1). Taken together, these notes suggest there is considerable connotative latitude, or play, in the word *verfallen* that de Man’s usage in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” collapses into a single “fall.” Moreover, *verfallen* finally suggests more of an ontological or existential mood that obtains in general, rather than a discrete or specific event which might result in a fall. *Verfallen* is, understood this way, a sort of ontological context or horizon for existence.

By contrast, Joan Stambaugh renders *verfallen* as both falling prey and entanglement. In an endnote to her translation of *Being and Time*, she observes, “*Verfallen*, is, so to speak, a kind of “movement” that does not get anywhere” (*JS* 403). This suggests, rather than a literal falling down, a kind of way-making that prefigures and is much more consistent with Heidegger’s usage in the later writings on language and poetry to describe a kind of thinking that is “on the way [*unterweg*].” What kind of progress is this? de Man reads it consistently in a negative or unfavorable way, as slipping or falling—even though Heidegger insists explicitly that *verfallen* “does not express any negative value judgment” (*SZ* 174; *JS* 164). Reading McFarland’s introductory commentary with de Man’s essay in mind, one senses that de Man reads (or thinks with) Heidegger too much in English or, perhaps better to say, forecloses his understanding of *verfallen* on a single meaning of the word (which one is tempted to call *fallen*) and thereby restricts its connotative resonances within Heidegger’s original text.²¹ The German word *verfallen* doesn’t so much indicate falling as fragmentation, dilapidation, ruination or decay, which McFarland rightly picks up

on in his introduction, translating it as “the sense within life of its continuing ruin.” This “sense within life of its continuing ruin,” like Blake’s invisible worm, remains in the work to be thought through.

Here one might usefully invoke Walter Benjamin’s writings on art, technology, language and history to mediate between de Man and McGann and to build on McFarland’s account of the forms of ruin within romanticism. A happy coincidence is that Benjamin’s writings became deeply important to de Man at exactly the time of his writing of “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” Particularly in his early study, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin develops the apparatus of allegory and the critique of the symbolic de Man later borrows for use in his well-known essay. In this astonishing work, Benjamin investigates the mourning-play as the forerunner of romantic era fragmentation and ruin: “It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol . . . than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of allegorical script. In it the baroque reveals itself to be the sovereign opposite of classicism, as which hitherto, only romanticism has been acknowledged. . . . Both, romanticism as much as baroque, are concerned not so much with providing a corrective to classicism, as to art itself.”²² At the same time, Benjamin understands the mourning-play not as a weakening or corruption of, but as an inventive modernist break from, classical Greek tragedy.

Additionally, in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” written during the late 1930s but only published posthumously, Benjamin gestures toward a notion of history which accommodates features of both McGann’s and Levinson’s views without succumbing to their assumptions concerning historical progress—the idea, for example, that we need to shake off a romantic ideology in favor of a new and improved ideological present. In the “Theses,” Benjamin unceremoniously criticizes this naive faith in historical progress: “The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.”²³ Heidegger’s discussion of temporality in *Being and Time* is an obvious point of reference here; a neo-Marxist notion of historical progress, that is, getting ourselves beyond the false ideologies of the past, is only possible within a naive understanding of the concept of time. In any case, the epigraph from the very next fragmentary thesis comes from Karl Kraus which, turning history on its ear, reads, “Origin is the goal.” “History,” Benjamin writes, “is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous,

empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (261). Furthermore:

to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the times of the now, which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past. This jump, however, takes place in the arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution. (261)

One would like to know the extent to which Benjamin's idea of a tiger's leap parallels Heidegger's notion of the origin of the work of art. It's an intriguing possibility. The work of art unsettles the past and originates something new. It finds a new origin or opening in the past by means of the work of the work of art. Geoffrey Hartman's recent essay on Benjamin, "Walter Benjamin in Hope," underlines this more complex dimension in Benjamin's view of history: "[Benjamin]," Hartman says, "refuses to place hope exclusively in the future, or to proceed as if the past were transcended—nothing but inert, ruined choirs. He talks less of faith or love than of that more revolutionary virtue, hope, which refuses to leave even the dead undisturbed. Like Scholem, who restored the neglected Kabbalah to high profile, the true historical thinker addresses the past—or has the past address us, like the dead at Thermopylae from whom Demosthenes kindles an eloquent adjuration."²⁴ Here I follow Hartman in reading Benjamin as a thinker who refuses to proceed as if the past were transcended, as if the past had nothing more to teach us than the fatuous lesson of the superior perspective of the present.

As it turns out, McGann comes round to a version of this idea. The epigraph from his subsequent book, *The Beauty of Inflections*, is borrowed from Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," and it presumably takes a step beyond a more or less naive historical materialism. Moreover, in one of the most interesting essays on the question of literary history to appear in recent years, "History, Herstory, Theirstory, Ourstory," McGann specifically addresses the problematic intersection of irony and historical understanding.²⁵ In this remarkable piece, McGann steps back from critique to acknowledge poetry's capacity to unsettle material, historical determinations of truth and meaning. In a provocative shift, McGann situates poetry's work against the rhetorical or contextual power traditionally ascribed to hermeneutics but more

recently appropriated by historical materialism: “These poetical orders,” McGann writes:

increase one’s sense of the incommensurability of facts, events, and the networks of such things. . . . Poetry, in this view of the matter, does not work to extend one’s explanatory control over complex human materials (an operation which, as we know, purchases its control by delimiting the field of view); rather, poetry’s function is to “open the doors of perception,” and thereby to reestablish incommensurability as the framework of everything we do and know. In this sense poetry is a criticism of our standard forms of criticism. (201–02)

McGann acknowledges poetry’s unsettling force with respect to its historical contexts or material conditions, and he identifies poetry with a self-critical impulse that places it firmly alongside the kind of writing that the romantics describe. More to the point, such a description of poetry comes remarkably close to Blanchot’s articulation of what he calls the worklessness [*désœuvrement*] of the work or art. For Blanchot, this means that the work of art refuses assimilation into the world of cause and effect, means and ends, and remains other with respect to the productive logic of labor and discourse. This sense of the work as an unsettling overture asks to be read in at least three overlapping senses: (1) as an introductory but unfinished sketch in which a work first appears; (2) as an opening marking the fascinating threshold of the in-between; and (3) as an obligation issued on behalf of what remains for thinking. In other words, Blanchot is attempting to mediate between the well-known fragmentary work of the romantics and the impossible claim of the Other traced by Lévinas over the course of his reassessment of the Greek philosophical impulse in the light of Jewish scriptural tradition.²⁶

The Essential Ambiguity of the Fragmentary Work

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy go a long way toward mediating continental thought for English-speaking readers of romantic poetry; their use of Heidegger, Benjamin and Blanchot to articulate an argument concerning the German romantic theory of literature offers the promise of a more generic way of reading romantic-era texts in the wake of the huge influence Derrida, de Man, and Foucault had on literary study. In a sense, it opens up the possibility of thinking about romanticism as de Man thought of it, but without his commitment to Nietzsche’s rhetoric of signs.²⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe and

Nancy step back from Nietzsche's understanding of rhetoric as a system of signs in order to maintain that:

romanticism implies something new, the *production* of something entirely new. The romantics never really succeed in naming this something: they speak of poetry, of the work, of the novel, or . . . of romanticism. In the end, they decide to call it—all things considered—*literature*. . . . They, in any case, will approach it explicitly as a new *genre*, beyond the divisions of classical (or modern) poetics and capable of resolving the inherent (“generic”) divisions of the written thing. Beyond divisions and all de-finition, this *genre* is thus programmed in romanticism as *the genre of literature*: the genericity, so to speak, and the generativity of literature, grasping and producing themselves in an entirely new, infinitely new Work. The *absolute*, therefore, of literature. (*LA* 11)

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy insist that the fragmentary exigency represents something different from the instrumentality of Aristotelian poetics, something new on the literary-cultural horizon—namely, the invention of a new kind of writing, call it literature, or literature-as-such (literature as self-determined, apart from what philosophers would like to make [of] it). Recall that romanticism, according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy:

inaugurates another “model” of the “work.” Or rather, to be more precise, it sets the work to work in a different mode. This does not mean that romanticism is the “literary” moment, aspect, or register of “philosophical” idealism, or that the inverse would be correct. The difference in the setting-to-work—or, as one could just as well say, the difference in *operation*—between Schelling and the [romantics] . . . does not amount to the difference between the philosophical and the literary. Rather, it makes this difference possible. It is itself the internal difference that, in this moment of *crisis*, affects the thought of the “work” in general (moral, political, or religious as well as artistic or theoretical). (*LA* 39)

Romanticism thus alters the very mode of being of the work of art, its very identity, one might even say. That is, it doesn't just reflect (i.e., mimetically) the difference between philosophy and poetry, but rather, “it makes this difference [in the setting-to-work between philosophy and poetry] possible.” At stake in the work is no longer the work's reflection of the world it represents but rather the very nature of representation, the nature of the work of art, itself.²⁸

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's influential reading of the fragmentary

work of *romantische Poesie* builds decisively on Blanchot's critical work on the early German romantics and on Nietzsche, and on fragmentary writing generally. In fact, Blanchot's critical conversations with Bataille, Lévinas, and others get to the heart of what this study is about: the question of whether romantic poetry and fragmentary writing retreat into some kind of transhistorical linguistic idealism, or whether by contrast, their linguistic density is better understood to offer a kind of passage (or, even more explicitly, *pas-sage*) outside the dualism of self and other and into an unsettled and unsettling region Blanchot by turns calls the outside or the neutral. For Blanchot, this neutral zone is precisely a space that remains undetermined by the oppositions of self and other, philosophy and poetry, identity and difference, male and female, idealism and materialism, and conservative and radical. It is a space of non-self-identical exteriority where what counts for thinking is less the capacity for making apodictic judgments, either for or against, than the requirement to keep oneself open and moving on. One can think of the outside or the neutral as an unmapped region beyond the grasp of traditional metaphysics opened, or just indicated, by romantic poetry and its not-so-distant cousin, fragmentary writing. The attraction of the region of the neutral is in maintaining the possibility of another kind of relation, a not yet determined relation or a relation to be determined later, a relation without relation that hints at forms of subjectivity other than those determined by what has so often been construed as the opposition between subject and object.

Consider once more de Man's insistence on the relentless falling structure of ironic consciousness. By contrast, Blanchot finds in early German romanticism, and in the fragmentary imperative generally, something very different, something more akin to what the mythic poet Orpheus experienced standing on a precarious ledge between the contiguous realms of being and non-being as he watched his beloved Eurydice slowly move away from him back down into the darkness of the underworld. In the essay, "The Athenaeum," Blanchot writes about early German romantics as though they are the long lost children of Orpheus:

One can indeed say that in these texts we find expressed the non-romantic essence of romanticism, as well as all the principal questions that the night of language will contribute to producing in the light of day: that to write is to make (of) speech (a) work, but that this work [*oeuvre*] is an unworking [*désoeuvrement*]; that 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 . . . (*EI* 524; *IC* 357)

Blanchot describes a work that is also an unworking or workless work; a work that speaks but then withdraws itself from the world leaving only a trace of its truth behind in what has been said. Such a description throws our attention back onto the “I” of the poet who speaks. Blanchot writes:

The “I” of the poet, finally, is what alone is important: no longer the poetic work, but poetic activity, always superior to the real work, and only creative when it knows itself able to evoke and at the same time to revoke the work in the sovereign play of irony. As a result, poetry will be taken over not only by life, but even by biography: hence the desire to live romantically and to make even one’s character poetic—that character called “romantic,” which, moreover, is extremely alluring inasmuch as character is precisely what is lacking in that it is nothing other than the impossibility of being anything determined, fixed, or sure. (*EI* 524; *IC* 357)

Blanchot, like de Man, is concerned with working toward an understanding of the role of language within the modern, fragmentary work of art, and also the question of subjectivity vis-à-vis this connection between language and work. As Blanchot notes, for romanticism the infinitely productive subjectivity of the poet is what now matters: “no longer the poetic work, but poetic activity, always superior to the real work, and only creative when it knows itself able to evoke and at the same time to revoke the work in the sovereign play of irony.”

But, unlike de Man, who construes romantic-era discourse in terms of falling within the horizon of temporality, Blanchot construes the movement of romantic-era writing laterally or horizontally, as way-making or traversal. In “Wittgenstein’s Problem,” Blanchot focuses on just this aspect of poetic discourse, calling it “the enigma of language as it is written, the paradox of a direct speech . . . bent by the essential detour, the perversion of writing” (*EI* 487; *IC* 332). That is, what the fragmentary exigency suggests is not so much vertigo or slippage into an abyss of inauthentic existence, as an irregular and unpredictable horizontal traversal from one place to another. Blanchot elaborates:

For in its passage from description to explanation and then, within this explanation, to a narrative account that, though scarcely begun, opens

[*s'ouvre*] so as to give rise to a new enigma that must in turn be described and then in its turn explained (something that cannot be done without the enigma of a new narrative account), Roussel's work—through this series of intervals perpetually opening out one from another in a coldly concerted, and for this reason all the more vertiginous, manner—represents the infinite navigation from one language to another; a movement in which there momentarily appears in outline, and then endlessly dissipates, the affirmation of the Other [*Autre*] that is no longer the inexpressible depth but the play of manoeuvres or mechanisms destined to avert it. (*EI* 496; *IC* 338)

What Blanchot sees in Roussel's writing resembles the discursive structure of *Tristram Shandy*, with its apparently infinite appetite for interruption. Jean-Luc Nancy affirms this thought:

Neither a pure genesis nor a pure event, *Witz* is continually born and reborn like its hero, Tristram Shandy, whose identity is the identity of a *Witz*: although born from the normal generative process, Tristram owes his birth to an accident—his mother disturbing his father at the crucial moment by reminding him to wind the clock.²⁹

The question of genre has been reframed within modernity as the question of narrative disclosure versus lyrical concealment, wit versus irony, philosophy versus poetry. It marks an attempt to recover something of the spirit of both the *Odyssey* and the *Symposium*.

In a way, it is the lesson of *Witz*; the uncontrolled and uncontrollable birth, the jumbling of genres, or of what one is tempted to call *the Western genre*, literature and philosophy, neither literature nor philosophy, literature or philosophy. In short, literary dissolution—where “literary” means the domain of letters, or writing in general. (255)

One can think of the exigency of the fragmentary work as a claim the work exerts on us which calls us outside the simple opposition between poetry and philosophy, art and criticism, seriousness and playfulness, and on to what remains for thinking.

Blanchot, again in his essay on “The Athenaeum,” points the reader to a key difference between the romantic and postmodern versions of the fragmentary work of art: in a word, Nietzsche. In the closing paragraph of this essay, Blanchot reflects on the shortcomings of the romantic kind of fragment written by the Schlegel circle:

In truth, and particularly in the case of Friedrich Schlegel, the fragment often seems a means for complacently abandoning oneself to the self rather than an attempt to elaborate a more rigorous mode of writing. Then to write fragmentarily is simply to welcome one's own disorder, to close up upon one's own self in a contented isolation, and thus to refuse the opening that the fragmentary exigency represents: an exigency that does not exclude totality, but goes beyond it. . . . It remains nonetheless true that literature, beginning to become manifest to itself through the romantic declaration, will from now on bear in itself this question of discontinuity or difference as a question of form—a question and a task German romanticism, and in particular that of *The Athenaeum*, not only sensed but already clearly proposed—before consigning them to Nietzsche and, beyond Nietzsche, to the future. (*EI* 527; *IC* 359)

Blanchot acknowledges the inadvertent character of so much irony and fragmentation within what we have come to call romanticism, the result of a failure of nerve or will, one is tempted to argue, as opposed to the more rigorous practice of writing prescribed by the Nietzschean or postromantic fragment. It is as though, for Blanchot, writing, in order to be what he calls fragmentary writing, must be purified of the excessive self-awareness or -consciousness that inhabits romantic poetry; the subject or the ego must be obliterated or burned off so that the writing of the fragment, as fragmentary writing, can begin. To write. To work through what remains unthought in thinking.³⁰

The Fragmentary Imperative as a Double Imperative

As I have already intimated, for Schlegel, the exemplary instance of this kind of fragmentary work is Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne's "ceaselessly interrupted and deferred story," as one critic puts it, "begins with an interrupted act of coitus, setting the scene for the coexistence of creativity and interruption that characterizes the whole novel."³¹ In a moment almost typical of the work, from volume I, chapter 4, the narrator turns aside to implore someone (who?) to "Shut the door."

To such, however, as do not choose to go so far back into these things, I can give no better advice, than that they skip over the remaining part of this Chapter, for I declare before hand, 'tis wrote only for the curious and inquisitive.

—————Shut the door—————

I was begot in the night, betwixt the first *Sunday* and the first *Monday* in the month of *March*, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighteen. I am positive I was—But how I came to be so very particular in my account of a thing which happened before I was born, is owing to another small anecdote known only in our own family, but now made public for the better clearing up this point. (*TS* 8)

Who exactly does the narrator ask to “Shut the door”? And, more important, what kind of an appeal is this? It’s hard to say, exactly. But the tension in the book between the need to tell one’s story to another person and the almost absurd inevitability of comic interruption is one of the main plot lines, to call it that, of the book. Sterne is obviously no longer working with plot and character in the traditional sense; but, in what sense is he working with these conventions?

One way to think of *Tristram Shandy* is to view it as Sterne’s idiosyncratic interpretation of Socratic dialogue, his version of what it is like to give birth to, or serve as midwife during the birthing of, the truth in beauty. A brief look at Plato’s *Symposium* reinforces such an impression. In the dialogue, Socrates and some friends gather at Agathon’s house and decide to discuss the nature of love. Following several extraordinary speeches, Socrates recounts an experience he had with the prophetess Diotima in which she convinced him of the truth of the view he now holds. The prophetess told him that “Love is the desire of generation [and production] in the beautiful, both with relation to the body and the soul” (206b). “For the mortal nature,’ she insists, ‘seeks, so far as it is able, to become deathless and eternal. But it can only accomplish this desire by generation, which for ever leaves another new in place of the old’” (207d). Obviously Diotima has just defined philosophy. However, as soon as Socrates finishes his speech, Alcibiades enters in a drunken stupor bringing the party back to earth with a tale of unrequited love—for Socrates! As David O’Connor points out, the *Symposium* is charged with the interplay of divine and human loves, delight and grief, and everyday speech and the speech of the heart.³² It is also an allegory of the unsettling relationship between philosophy and poetry. *Tristram Shandy*, too, revels in the intersection of the sacred and the profane, the sublime and the ridiculous, philosophy and poetry, and very much in the spirit of the *Symposium* serves as a tribute to the consequences of a single, poorly timed interruption.

This interpretation Bakhtin has put to ingenious use; for Bakhtin, the novel is marked not so much by its capacity for storytelling as by

its insertion of the spirit of Socratic dialogue into its discourse. In fact one might take Bakhtin's locution of "novelistic discourse" as a loose translation of *romantische Poesie*. In any case, as Jean-Luc Nancy says, speaking of wit:

We about to examine a subject that has been virtually neglected in the history of literature and philosophy, a subject that up to this point has never really been given its due in either of these histories, namely Wit, or in German, the language to which it belongs (while English literature, from Sterne to Joyce, is its favorite playing field), *Witz*. *Witz* is barely, or only tangentially, a part of literature: it is neither genre nor style, nor even a figure of rhetoric. Nor does it belong to philosophy, being neither concept, nor judgment, nor argument. It could nonetheless play all these roles, but in a derisive manner. (248)

This insight more or less lays out the parameters of the present study. On Sterne's and the German romantics' view, the truth of what is at stake does not emerge from an isolated reflection on a world of objects but from the encounter between wit and irony, philosophy and poetry. In this sense, there is an internal connection between what Schlegel calls Socratic irony and romantic poetry: romantic poetry can be understood as Socratic irony translated into the idiom of modern art. For Schlegel, this need for encounter, or commerce, between philosophy and poetry characterizes Plato's dialogues. Schlegel's favorite is the *Symposium*, with its concluding (though by no means conclusive) exchange between Socrates and Alcibiades and its movement into the torpor of the early morning-after—Plato's version, perhaps, of Blanchot's outside or neutral. The dialogue concludes in a space of exhaustion or indifference, with everyone except Socrates and one or two listeners having drifted off to sleep.

What is fascinating about Schlegel's view of dialogue, however, is the extent to which he reads it through the lens of parody, farce, irony, and satire; as though dialogue is inherently serio-comical or generically unstable. This is an important point and one that bears repeated emphasis: "This fragmentary essence of dialogue," Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write, "has at least one consequence (among several others that we cannot explore here), namely that the dialogue, similar in this to the fragment, does not properly speaking belong to 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" (*LA* 85). The romantic kind of poetry, far from being determinable as another genre, or even the genre

of genres, refuses Aristotle's efforts to determine poetry against the standard of tragedy and opens onto a more unsettled and unsettling region that waits at the limits of the opposition between tragedy and comedy, philosophy and poetry. In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot articulates his hope for such a passage:

And is there poetry because the one who would have seen being (the absence of being through the mortifying gaze of Orpheus) will also, when he speaks, be able to hold onto its presence, or simply make remembrance of it, or keep open through poetic speech the hope for what opens on the hither side of speech, hidden and revealed in it, exposed and set down by it? (*EI* 53; *IC* 38)

The aim of this book is to sketch a genealogy of fragmentary work from romanticism to Joyce and, with important qualifications, Blanchot. What complicates this task is that the fragmentary work seems at times to exhibit the narrative expansiveness of the epic or novel, while at other times it exemplifies the lyrical brevity of the aphorism or fragment. Here one has only to consider the radically different senses in which Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*; Novalis', Schlegel's, and the Schlegels' contributions to the *Athenäum*, and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Triumph of Life*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or, indeed, Keats' two *Hyperion* poems can be said to be fragmentary works. Or consider, for example, the differing senses of the fragmentary embodied in Joyce's *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*, on the one hand, and Beckett's *How It Is* or Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* or Blanchot's *The Step (Not) Beyond* and *The Writing of the Disaster*, on the other. One construes this state of affairs as demonstrating the tension between (after the example of Nietzsche) narrative and lyrical dimensions of the fragmentary work. One might begin to think of this back-and-forth movement of romantic poetry as a reflection of the romantic-era consciousness of a deep-seated tension between self-indulgence and self-effacement, summarized in Keats's description of the poet as being simultaneously everything and nothing. With this difficulty in mind, I wish to keep this question—the question of the worklessness of the work—open by addressing ways in which the fragmentary exigency inhabits both the more expansive work of Byron and Joyce, and the more strictly aphoristic work of Schlegel

and Blanchot. This suggests that there remains both a decidedly worldly and earthly dimension to the fragmentary work of romantic poetry. Efforts to collapse this tension into a single aesthetic or poetic tend to do violence to the variability and complexity of the modern work of art.

Such interpretations of dialogue raise provocative questions concerning the nature of the modern work of art. For example, what role does *Tristram Shandy* play in reviving, for German romantics, the idea (embedded within Plato's dialogues) of the fragmentary work of dialogue? To what extent does Byron's *Don Juan* exemplify this kind of work within the context of British romanticism? In what sense does Joyce's *Ulysses* constitute a modernist fulfillment of it? How does *Finnegans Wake* gesture beyond it toward what Blanchot (following Nietzsche) calls fragmentary writing? Finally, where does the fragmentary exigency leave us? These are some of the questions addressed in this study of the emergence of the fragmentary imperative from the fragmentary work.³³