

# The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition: An Introduction

Ben Segal

*The fragment, the note, the idea, the aphorism even: there are many names and as many uses for such small shards of free-floating text. Typically fragments are less works than gestures, arrows pointing in the direction a person might research, meditate on or develop. Unlike paragraphs or sentences, they do not flow directly from and into their bordering text. Instead they are independent, defined by their singularity, by the white space that encases them on a page – even when they are cobbled together and marshaled into service as the contents of a book.*

*Still, though not exceedingly common, books of fragments (or notes or what-have-yous) do exist. However they are labeled, the very aloofness of disconnected micro-texts allows them certain privileges and possibilities that a writer can employ and exploit. In such instances, the book of fragments may, almost paradoxically, gain a coherence as a singular work, all the more satisfying for its fractures.*

*Two such books are Maggie Nelson's *BLUETS* and Evan Lavender-Smith's *From Old Notebooks*. We are pleased to present a series of excerpts from each of these books, a selection of 'outtakes' – fragments that did not make it into the final manuscripts – from each,<sup>1</sup> and short interviews with both Nelson and Lavender-Smith about the fragment as a literary device.<sup>2</sup>*



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1 Since this feature includes excerpts and outtakes from both *BLUETS* and *From Old Notebooks*, I chose to ask both Nelson and Lavender-Smith similar questions about working with the fragment as the building-block of a larger work. This means that the questions are, for the most part, more concerned with things like form than about specific passages from the books.

2 In both interviews, I ask a question that cites Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean Luc Nancy's *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988). It should be noted that *The Literary Absolute* is concerned with the fragment as developed and understood in the context of the Jena Romantics (the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, etc.), not necessarily the fragment in general.

## Maggie Nelson

Ben Segal (BS): “Bluet” conjures a constellation of similar words. These include Blue, Bullet, and the flower to which the word actually refers. I’m wondering if this range is intentional and if there’s anything I’m leaving out. Or, more simply, can you talk a little about the title?

Maggie Nelson (MN): I first got interested in the word BLUEETS via the painter Joan Mitchell, about whom I’d written earlier in my book on women and the New York School. LES BLUEETS is the name of one of my very favorites of all her paintings; she painted it the year I was born. Later the poet Jimmy Schuyler wrote a lovely prose poem about this painting, which I also adored, and which I’ve also written about. So the word had been in my mind for some time, as had her amazing painting (which is in several panels, so also in parts – i.e. in dialogue with questions of parts/wholes).

While it was in progress, I always called BLUEETS “The Blue Book.” But I knew I always wanted an eventual title that referred, however obliquely, to the book’s form. In this case, the form is notably PLURAL, as is BLUEETS, which seemed right. Also, I have always pronounced BLUEETS “bluettes,” which is kind of a personal joke about feminization. Like, “majorettes,” etc. It’s a joke because I think the book has a lot to do with the robustness of being a female human, so I found irony in the diminutive nature of the suffix. I also liked the fact that the word means a kind of flower, as it allowed each proposition, or whatever you might call each numbered section, to be thought of as a single flower in a bouquet. This sounds cheesy here, but I think I talk about this idea in a less cheesy way in the book itself, near the end, when I’m ruminating on its composition, and its surprising (to me) slimness, or “anemia.”

BS: I know you’ve thought (and taught) about the fragment as a mode of writing. I’m wondering how your study of the form influences the way you use it.

While writing a book, I’m influenced by things the same way I would imagine most writers are: I look for what I want to steal, then I steal it, and make my own weird stew of the goods. Often while writing I’d re-read the books by Barthes written in fragments – *A Lover’s Discourse*, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* – and see what he gained from an alphabetical, somewhat random organization, and what he couldn’t do that way. I mostly read Wittgenstein, and watched how he used numbered sections to think sequentially, and to jump, in turn. I read Shonagon’s *The Pillow Book*, and tried to keep a pillow book about blue for some time. (It didn’t last long, as an exercise, but some of the entries made it into BLUEETS.) I re-read Haneke’s *Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, which finally dissolves into fragments, after a fairly strong chronological narrative has taken him so far.

In the course I taught on the fragment, which was somewhat after the fact of writing *BLUETS*, but conceived in relation to it, we studied a kind of taxonomy of fragments: the decayed fragment (Sappho); the contemporary fragment (text messages, twitter, blog posts, etc.); the modernist fragment (T.S. Eliot; fragment as mark of psychological disintegration); Freud's fragment (dreams, slips, etc. as thruways to the unconscious; the sampled or plagiarized fragment; fragment as waste, excess, or garbage; the footnote; fragment as frame (Degas, Manet); life narrative as fragment: we can't see the whole until we're dead, and then we can't see it (pathos); fragment as psychological terror (castration, King's head); fragment as fetish, or as "organ-logic," as pornography; fragment as metonym & synecdoche; fragment as that which is preserved, or that which remains; fragment as the unfinished or the abandoned; and so on and so forth.

I think, in the back of my mind, I was aware of all these categories while writing *BLUETS*, and put them each into play as needed while writing. The book seems to me hyper-aware of the fragment as fetish, as catastrophe, as leftover, as sample or citation, as memory, and so on. Many of the anecdotes in the book (such as about the decay of blue objects I've collected, or my memory of a particularly acute shade of blue, or the recountings of dreams) perform these concepts quite directly.

BS: In *The Literary Absolute*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy write that "each fragment stands for itself and for that from which it has been detached."<sup>3</sup> They go on to explain that the fragment is both "sub-work" (in the obvious sense of being only a small piece of the Work), but also "super-work", as it stands, complete in itself, outside the work and calls up the plural potentiality of the work. What do you make of this idea and how do you understand the relation of the fragment to the Work as a whole?

MN: I like the idea of the "super-work," the fragment that indicates the whole it has been excised from. However, on a concrete level, I don't think that's really true of *BLUETS*. Some of the propositions are very much in dialogue with the ones that have come before it, acting as rebuffs, or conclusions, or swerves. To detect their motion, one has to already be in the car. Often they are as short as: "Disavowal, says the silence," or "As if we could scrape the color off the iris and still see," or "In any case, I am no longer counting the days." These don't make much sense outside of their context. Although, now that I've isolated just these few, I can see that they might gesture to the whole – but I think you'd have to know what the whole was, for the exercise to feel full.

I am interested, however, in the notion of collecting, of a collection – and how to know when to stop, when you've amassed enough. While writing

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3 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, 44.

BLUETS, I thought of Joseph Cornell as the ultimate teacher in this respect: he collected enormous amounts of junk, he “hunted” for treasures all over the city, but each box or collage or even film has a certain minimalism, each feels as if it’s been distilled to become exactly as specific as it should be. In other words, the composition emanates from the piles of junk left in its wake, but it in itself becomes perfect. It may be unfashionable, but I’m interested in this sense of perfection.

BS: Fragments collected together become a whole that gestures to dozens of other, potential wholes. How, if at all, do you think about your book in relation to the preservation of potentiality?

MN: I have to admit, I don’t entirely understand this question. Preservation of potentiality – that’s what I don’t quite understand. I will say this, though: writing a book, especially a book of this kind (i.e. I’d wanted to write a book on the color blue for my whole life), has a certain pain in it – the pain of manifestation. Every word that gets set down, every decision made – form, content, sentence structure, image – begins to define a work that previously was a kind of infinitely indeterminate mental cloud, or beautifully diffuse physical sensation. As the book comes into being, I’m often thinking, “this is it? this is all it’s going to be?” For me, I think it’s this feeling, rather than that of not having anything to say, or a terror of the blank page, that can bring a sort of writer’s block. Think of Lily Briscoe at the end of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* – after her long reverie, she eventually must make the mark on the canvas. She brings the brush down, then sighs: “There, I have had my vision.” To have made the mark, to have manifested the vision, brings with it a certain satisfaction, a certain euphoria and relief – but also a brand of pathos. Of all the possible books, you wrote this book. Of all the possible brush strokes, you made this one. How very strange!

The good news is, you’re usually so tired when you finish a book that you don’t care anymore – you’re just happy it’s finished, and that you can move on. And if you’re lucky, you may eventually marvel at the specificity of the result, feel the magic and largesse in its specificity, in its singularity. I feel this way about BLUETS.

BS: Can you talk a little about the way traditional prose standbys like character and narrative develop out of distinct and disconnected fragments? I feel like this definitely happens in *Bluets* as well as other texts that use a similar approach.

MN: BLUETS always had a specific set of dramatic personae, and also a sort of narrative arc. It begins by saying, “Suppose I were to begin,” which places the whole book, at least for me, in the realm of the novelistic, or at least the speculative. That freedom was important to me while writing. I have a lot of issues, for lack of a better word, with narrative, but I also have no problem

with trying to structure a work so that it acts as a page-turner. I wanted there to be a lot of momentum in this book, as well as plenty of opportunities for eddying out into cul-de-sacs. That was the tension – how to make some chains of propositions that pull you forward, and then allow for some to bring you so far afield that you might find yourself wondering, “why are we talking about this here?” before remembering how you got there, and why it might matter.

While some of the fragments may seem disconnected or distinct, the truth is that they each had to fall into one of the book’s major categories, which included love, language, sex, divinity, alcohol, pain, death, and problems of veracity/perception. If I truly couldn’t tether an anecdote or factoid to the thread, it eventually had to go. I also spaced out the distinct threads fairly methodically, and had the characters reappear at a fairly regular rate. There’s even a kind of “where are they now?” section at the end, announced by my injured friend’s letter to her friends, in which she tells them how her spinal cord injury has affected her life, and how she feels today.

I’m sure one could write a book of very disconnected fragments that didn’t so overtly weave into a whole – I’ve read many of them – but it’s also true that the mind will always work overtime to put disparate things together; the Surrealists mined that tendency for all it was worth. I think that’s a cool approach, to let the reader make the connections, but it’s important to me as a writer to make sure that the connections, when made, actually point toward what I want to be pointing at, rather than just reflecting the human brain’s capacity to make a bridge.

BS: To what extent does how you label your texts matter? What is the difference between notes, fragments, bluetts, and aphorisms? Basically, is taxonomy important?

MN: Taxonomy, hmm. At some point I was very compelled by issues of taxonomy, but over the years I’ve grown less interested in the question, as the notion of the “hybrid” or the “cross-genre” seems to have become its own kind of jargon or pitch. I got very excited some time ago when I was trying to subtitle my book *JANE*, and I came across Brian Evenson’s book *Dark Property: An Affliction* I thought – of course! A book can be a *condition* rather than a *genre*. So I subtitled *JANE* “A Murder,” with this concept in mind. My most recent book, *THE ART OF CRUELTY*, I subtitled “a reckoning,” using the same logic. This has been one means of skirting the whole genre issue.

On the other hand, I don’t really like it when people called *BLUETS* “notes” or “aphorisms,” or “fragments,” because it’s not really any of those things. Aphoristic philosophy – which was one of this book’s inspirations – is not made up of just aphorisms per se. There may be great aphorisms to be found in Nietzsche or Wittgenstein, for example, but neither is writing a series of one-liners. Their projects are bigger than that. They are in dialogue with argumentation as much as with impression. Likewise, I don’t really see

BLUETS as poetry. I mean, I don't care if someone wants to call it that – if they do, it happily expands the notion of poetry – but I've written enough poetry to have a lot of respect for its particular tools, which include the line break, and forms of logic unavailable to prose. BLUETS thinks in prose; it is written in prose. It sometimes thinks in images, and sometimes in sound, but essentially it is about sentences, and about trains of prose logic and their limits. But if someone wants to call it poetry, I wouldn't go to the mat about it.

BS: Are there other texts (of or about fragments) that you'd like to recommend?

MN: Texts about fragments to recommend: Here are the ones that come immediately to mind: *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert*; Anne Carson's *If Not, Winter*; Stevie Smith, "The Person from Porlock"; the poetry of Lorine Niedecker, Lucille Clifton, and Paul Celan; Tom Phillips's *A Humument*; Ann Lauterbach's essay on "the whole fragment"; Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces*; Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look*; Heather McHugh, *Poetry and Partiality*. And the drawings of David Shrigley.

BS: And finally, is there anything you wish I would have asked? Please ask/answer if so.

MN: No, I'm happy with these questions!



### The Beginning of Maggie Nelson's *BLUETS*

1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkins as we spoke. *It began slowly. An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious. Then* (looking into an empty teacup, its bottom stained with thin brown excrement coiled into the shape of a sea horse) *it became somehow personal.*
2. And so I fell in love with a color – in this case, the color blue – as if falling under a spell, a spell I fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns.
3. Well, and what of it? A voluntary delusion, you might say. That each blue object could be a kind of burning bush, a secret code meant for a single agent, an X on a map too diffuse ever to be unfolded in entirety but that contains the knowable universe. How could all the shreds of blue garbage bags stuck in brambles, or the bright blue tarps flapping over ever shanty and fish stand in the world, be, in essence, the fingerprints of God? *I will try to explain this.*

4. I admit that I may have been lonely. I know that loneliness can produce bolts of hot pain, a pain which, if it stays hot enough for long enough, can begin to stimulate, or to provoke – take your pick – an apprehension of the divine. (*This ought to arouse our suspicions.*)

5. But first, let us consider a sort of case in reverse. In 1867, after a long bout of solitude, the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé wrote to his friend Henri Cazalis: “These last months have been terrifying. My Thought has thought itself through and reached a Pure Idea. What the rest of me has suffered during that long agony, is indescribable.” Mallarmé described this agony as a battle that took place on God’s “boney wing.” “I struggled with that creature of ancient and evil plumage – God – whom I fortunately defeated and threw to earth,” he told Cazalis with exhausted satisfaction. Eventually Mallarmé began replacing “le ciel” with “l’Azur” in his poems, in an effort to rinse references to the sky of religious connotations. “Fortunately,” he wrote Cazalis, “I am quite dead now.”

6. The half-circle of blinding turquoise ocean is this love’s primal scene. That this blue exists makes my life a remarkable one, just to have seen it. To have seen such beautiful things. To find oneself placed in their midst. Choiceless. I returned there yesterday and stood again upon the mountain.

7. But what kind of love is it, really? Don’t fool yourself and call it sublimity. Admit that you have stood in front of a little pile of ultramarine pigment in a glass cup at a museum and felt stinging desire. But to do what? Liberate it? Purchase it? Ingest it? There is so little blue food in nature – in fact blue in the wild tends to mark food to avoid (mold, poisonous berries) – that culinary advisers generally recommend against blue light, blue paint, and blue plates when and where serving food. But while the color may sap appetite in the most literal sense, it feeds it in others. You might want to reach out and disturb the pile of pigment, for example, first staining your fingers with it, then staining the world. You might want to dilute it and swim in it, you might want to rouge your nipples with it, you might want to paint a virgins robe with it. But you still wouldn’t be accessing the blue of it. Not exactly.

8. Do not, however, make the mistake of thinking that all desire is yearning. “We love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it,” wrote Goethe, and perhaps he is right. But I am not interested in longing to live in a world in which I already live. I don’t want to yearn for blue things, and God forbid, for any “blueness.” Above all, I want to stop missing you.

9. So please do not write to tell me about any more beautiful blue things. To be fair, this book will not tell you about any, either. It will not say, *Isn’t x beautiful?* Such demands are murderous to beauty.

10. The most I want to do is show you the end of my index finger. Its muteness.



### Bluets that did not make the final version of *BLUETS*

We think of a glowing chunk of sapphire, for instance, or a pane of Chartres stained glass, as luminous, and God knows they are. But such luminosity doesn't necessarily have anything to do with *clarity*.

To call something a false idol is to elevate it to the company of deities, even if one eventually casts it down (cf. Milton giving Lucifer the best speeches).

For the truth is that I have never really understood what *love* and *will* have to do with each other. Following the blue, as if tracking a trail of decomposing crumbs left in the woods by a benevolent or absentminded stranger, is, at times, the best I can do.

Joan Mitchell: so beautiful and athletic when young; so craggy and indomitable as she aged – in both cases, *without vanity* – like my Swedish grandparents, whom I barely knew, but whom I remember as being tan and fair at the same time, prematurely decimated by morning vodka with OJ and an endless boil of cigarettes.

Do not think, however, that this is a scrapbook in which blue is the star and I its delirious fan. For it is a mistake to think of blue as separate from us. It is the bulge of the carotid against the bracket of your skin. It is the matrix of veins that enlaces your heart.

At one point during this period, Klein – no stranger to grandiosity – “signed the sky.” He also arranged performances at which he dipped naked women from head to toe in IKB blue, rolled an enormous canvas out on the floor, and instructed the women to drag each other around on top of it while a string quartet played nearby. He called the women “human paintbrushes.”

In both cases, I have arguably been nothing more than a child of illusion.

Beethoven felt differently. “Can you lend me the *Theory of Colours* for a few weeks?” he wrote to a friend in 1820. “It is an important work. His last things are insipid.”

There would seem to be a lesson here, but I am not prepared to describe it.



“They feel as though if you fell into them you would be trapped and unable to breathe, choked and suffocated by the powdery pigment,” wrote Berger of Klein’s IKB monochromes.

At times I look forward to this ravaging, if only because it represents all that I am supposed to fear, and because, if one manages to live long enough, it seems something of an inevitability, and looking forward to an inevitability seems at least an approximation of spiritual wisdom.

In the far-off blue places, one finds oneself face to face with one’s stupidity. The cradle of it. It is a tremendous relief. Instead of sputtering forth a gargle, a howl, or an assertoric proposition, one can remain silent, stupefied. It is as if one’s tongue had been sewn, at long last, into its den.

For one does not just seek oblivion. One can also find it. Sometimes one can even purchase it.

Of the oblivion seekers themselves, Eberhardt says simply: “They are people who like their pleasure.”

Caravaggio is a serious painter. He does not use blue. Neither does Goya, nor Velasquez. They are *tenebrists*, not denizens of the carnival. The blues of Picasso and Matisse, even in their most melancholy applications, do not strike me as altogether serious. The blues of Joseph Cornell, Hiroshige, Fra Angelico, and Cézanne, on the other hand, strike me as quite serious. The blue of Vermeer is simply too painful to discuss here. Let us leave the woman in blue alone with her letter. Let us leave her transfixed, standing on the bright edge of the earth, about to fall.

In the Middle Ages, it was commonly thought that the most powerful mordant was a drunk man’s piss: yet another instance in which alcohol *fastens* the blue. But one can, I think, feel similarly bound, without the spirit.

And when Cornell made *Rose Hobart*, he had to snip away 57½ minutes of the original film in order to showcase the object of his desire. Love, too, can sometimes be a *condensery*.

On the other hand, speaking through the voice of the Egyptian god Thamus, Socrates comes down fairly forcefully for *poison*: “This discovery of yours [i.e. writing] will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth.”

But what has a soul to do with memory? I admit that here I run out of ideas; I must again consult the Encyclopedia. "Much of our moral life depends on the peculiar ways in which we are embedded in time." This has the aura of truth, but really it takes us no further. For what has morality to do with memory, or with a soul?

Instead of a roving dialogue unfolding under the shade of a plane tree, this is more like a coarse talk show taking place in a hall of mirrors: no guests, one host.

To do: make a list of people who seem to have found some dignity in their loneliness, and consult it when I feel constitutionally incapable of abiding my own.

"Frequent tears have run the colours from my life" (Elizabeth Barrett Browning).

Does it follow, in spiritual matters, that one's doubt is surrounded by a plateau of certainty? "Whosoever unceasingly strives upward, him can we save," wrote Goethe. But who is to say that faith isn't the abyss, and doubt the surrounding peaks?

For while we may have learned the names for these things, articulation is still a form of accommodation. We stutter to each other in a sort of shorthand, at times carving out shapely analogies. But we cannot be sure that we are talking about the same things, or that we are employing the same code.

– But now you are talking as if you were drowning, your lungs swollen with expired air. Why not just give up the dive? In which case you could start swimming along the surface: a cold spot here, a warm patch there. Same pond.

Remember: the knights pure enough to enter the presence of the Holy Grail never return. It is only those who have been "incompletely transformed" who come back to tell the tale. And some seekers don't come back from the wilderness as shamans, but rather as brain-damaged vegetables whose musculature now resembles gelatin.

Remember this if someone appears in a field of chollas, hands you a loin-cloth and a tab of pure blotter acid with one hand, and keeps the other out of sight.

We might here note that Andy Warhol was also, for a time, riveted by blue pussy. His blue pussy was a beatific cat, gazing upward from the last page of his 1954 book of watercolors, *25 Cats Name Sam and One Blue Pussy*, look-

ing as if he were happily anticipating “pussy heaven,” as Warhol elsewhere termed the feline afterlife.

Perhaps, then, the mistake is to look for a vividness, or a sweetness, *apart* from illusion. In which case we waste much precious time warding off the specter of the *mirage*.

In such moments, death itself may appear a light-hearted occurrence.



### Evan Lavender-Smith

BS: Do you consider *From Old Notebooks* to be a kind of constraint writing? I guess it would have been more of a constraint if you'd only culled things from your notes instead of writing pieces specifically for/relating to *From Old Notebooks*.

Evan Lavender-Smith (ELS): I certainly think that the book shares something important with constraint writing, as I think it does with conceptual writing, although I don't know that it fits neatly into either of these categories. Perhaps it's a kind of faux constraint or conceptual writing. The book's primary constraint – only things written in notebooks are allowed – sort of collapses under the weight of its own self-reflexivity; as you say, the entries become about the book itself, which I think ends up undermining or subjugating the austerity we associate with a more typical constraint-based writing. I suppose there's also a secondary constraint associated with the structure of the book and the ordering of the entries, this zany process whereby I classified entries according to a number (1 through 12, I think) referencing subject/theme, then deleted all of the entries leaving only their reference numbers, then arranged the numbers in something resembling sonata form, then plugged all the entries back into their placeholders. But that's a very secret, Roussel-type constraint, one that perhaps does not do much to create a noticeable intensity of constraint. And also I ended up making many revisions to the order of the entries that broke with the output of my secret formula. So yes, I think something like “sham constraint” writing is probably a more appropriate designation.

BS: *From Old Notebooks* is very often self-reflective, often feels as if it is struggling to pin itself down. I'm wondering if the form (disjointed notes) allows for that kind of reflection to creep in repeatedly without weighing down the whole book. Does the ability to ask a question and then immediately head off in a totally different direction free you to be self-doubting without wallowing? Does this question make sense? Maybe I should

ask more generally what kinds of content does this form afford that more traditionally structured work might not?

ELS: I am hopeful that the self-reflexivity is less cloying in this book than I find it to be in other highly self-reflexive texts on account of what you mention, the ability of the book to veer off in another direction nearly every time an instance of explicit self-reflexivity occurs. I would say this is also the case with respect to the book's many instances of pathos and sentiment or even bathos and sentimentality: whenever the book broaches sentimentality in an entry, it is followed by another entry about something totally different, which can serve to undercut the sentiment of the previous entry. And this is probably also the case with the book's movement toward and immediately away from entries/fragments dealing with specific literary or philosophical texts/authors with which some readers may be unfamiliar, insofar as one entry might concern Kant's transcendental idealism and the next entry the color of my infant son's poo. The book is quite contrapuntal, in this respect, which is one of the things that original structuring scheme was meant to effect.

As to alternative or unusual kinds of content afforded by the book's form, I'd like to think they are many, but I have always been most excited by what I perceive to be the book's presentation of a kind of form-becoming-content, this process by which the reader is engaged with form as he might otherwise be with character, or with setting, or with plot – part of what's driving the reading experience may be the reader's sense of an evolving form, a form that begins somewhat expositively, that becomes somewhat conflicted and tense, and that finally achieves a kind of resolution. But, from another perspective, the book's form remains exactly the same from the first to the last page. My reading of the book would posit or project a kind of talk-to/talk-back relationship between form and content; each is strongly influencing our vision of the other, and perhaps, over the course of the book, they become difficult to distinguish.

BS: In *The Literary Absolute*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy write that "each fragment stands for itself and for that from which it has been detached."<sup>4</sup> They go on to explain that the fragment is both "sub-work" (in the obvious sense of being only a small piece of the Work), but also "super-work", as it stands, complete in itself, outside the work and calls up the plural potentiality of the work. What do you make of this idea and how do you understand the relation of the fragment to the Work as a whole?

ELS: I like this idea, but I may have some reservations about generalizing it too far beyond Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's intended historical context. In my book, there are perhaps some entries/fragments that possess a sort of

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4 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, 44.

immanent intensity – entries seemingly able to “speak for themselves,” so to speak – but there are also very many that do not. I think that the book itself would argue – in fact, I believe it explicitly does so – against this notion that any one of its constituent parts could be removed from the whole and still remain “meaningful” or “true.” I imagine the parts of the whole, in this book, not as cogs in relation to some whole mechanics or machine, say, but instead as mechanical movement itself; perhaps the most important thing about any given entry is not what it says so much as the fact that it begins and ends. The book seems to me to be always moving forward in time and space; once a fragment has happened, the book is done with it; there’s no turning back, no looking over the shoulder. There’s an entry somewhere that goes something like “This book is nothing more than the trash can of my imagination,” a potential interpretative model that has become something of a guiding light in my understanding of the book’s form: the entries/fragments do certainly accrue, as trash accrues, but we don’t necessarily feel compelled to go picking through this heap of trash.

BS: Fragments collected together become a whole that gestures to dozens of other, potential wholes. How, if at all, do you think about your book in relation to the preservation of potentiality?

ELS: Of course I think about this mostly in relation to the fragments/entries concerning specific potential works, the entries that begin “Story about” or “Novel about,” etc. As I continue to work to see many of the ideas in the book realized, even today – and as I will likely continue to do for a long time – I remain in a sort of dialogue with the book. So I find myself still writing the book, in some sense, even though the book is already written. One of my favorite things about *From Old Notebooks* is how it opens its own amorphous and evolving prefatory engagement with my future writing. I believe the book references the claim of some critics that *Ulysses* was written in such a way to make it appear as if it were presaged by passages in the New Testament, just as some have claimed that passages in the New Testament were written to create the appearance of having been forecasted by passages in the Old Testament (I believe there is a specific poetic figure denoting this kind of retroactive foreshadowing that I’m now failing to recall). I’ve always really loved that idea and perhaps still hold out hope that my future writing will serve to indirectly modify *From Old Notebooks* in these types of sly and tricky ways.

Also, in relation to the above-mentioned trash-can model as one of many such potential models for the book’s form, there’s a way in which the book regularly returns to a reading of itself, always trying to understand how it is working and always coming up with new strategies for its own analysis. So it seems to me, with respect to the preservation of potentiality, that the book is also intent on preserving its own “infinite hermeneutics” (or at least an illusion thereof).

BS: Can you talk a little about the way traditional prose standbys like character and narrative develop out of distinct and disconnected fragments? I feel like this definitely happens in *From Old Notebooks* as well as other texts that use a similar approach.

ELS: I think it's important to address the burden placed on the reader vis-à-vis development when considering narratological staples like character and plot in relation to highly fragmented narratives. In my own reading experience of books in which neat narrative progression is supplanted by a fragmentary or elliptical progression, the reader oftentimes must begin committing to processes of projection and transference in order to eke out that amount of development she would require of narrative. I especially like this possibility for two reasons. The first is that in the absence of stable or "full" development, we may feel inclined, as readers, to fill in the blanks with manifestations of our own, consciousness-specific desire for coherence, which can create a sort of personalized Möbius strip out of reading and writing, artistic creation and reception becoming tangled, distinctions and distances between these categories becoming blurred. The second, which may follow from the first for the more theoretically inclined reader, is that this process may serve to expose our own prejudices about what narrative is supposed to do or achieve, thereby leading us to an anxious readerly condition in which we are forced to confront the poverty of our own understanding regarding the first principles of narrative art. These two effects: 1, tangling the reading/writing experience; and 2, forcing the reader's reconsideration of artistic rule – are, to my thinking, among the most powerful effects available to writing.

BS: To what extent does how you label your texts matter? What is the difference between *notes*, *fragments*, *thoughts*, and *aphorisms*? Basically, is taxonomy important? Supplementary question: In *From Old Notebooks*, there is a passage: "Why am I so averse to classifying *From Old Notebooks* as poetry – because poetry doesn't sell." If you want, this might be a good place to talk about genre classifications as well.

ELS: This answer will surely seem coy or naïve to some people, but the fact is that my own tedious and protracted grappling with the strictures and arbitrariness of generic classification has finally given way to a vision of an imaginative writing largely unfettered by those academic or commercial or cultural pressures which have served to delimit the typological boundaries of art and language. That seems to be a goal for me, anyway, to work to maintain a position of restless and relentless searching in relation to form, and to resist, as best I can, pressures associated with the commodification or canonization of language and form. Of course that position is itself probably overdetermined by pressures both within and beyond my comprehension – e.g. it is very reactionary; very Modernist, in a sense – and it also strikes me

to be of a piece with a rather antiquated and distasteful image of artistic creation and the “author-function,” but nonetheless it’s what I seem to prefer.

BS: Are there other texts (of or about fragments) that you’d like to recommend?

ELS: Here are some things I’ve recently read and enjoyed in which I felt the fragment was the text’s dominant or near-dominant mode of engagement with narrative/poetic/philosophical development and progression: *Mean Free Path*, Ben Lerner; *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson; *Varieties of Disturbance*, Lydia Davis; *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel*, Evan S. Connell; *AVA*, Carole Maso; *Reader’s Block*, David Markson; *Deepstep Come Shining*, C.D. Wright; *The Passion According to G.H.*, Clarice Lispector; *The Crab Nebula*, Éric Chevillard; *The Book of Questions*, Edmond Jabès; *Monsieur Teste*, Paul Valéry; *Mourning Diary*, Roland Barthes; *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin; *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein; “Diapsalmata,” from *Either/Or*, Søren Kierkegaard

Unfortunately, I haven’t read much theory discussing the fragment as a narratological device, although I did enjoy the Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe book you mention above.

BS: And finally, is there anything you wish I would have asked? Please ask/answer if so.

No, but I might mention that *From Old Notebooks* has recently been reprinted by Dzanc Books.



### *From Old Notebooks Excerpts*<sup>5</sup>

#### Excerpt 1:

Short story about a church on the ocean floor. Congregation in scuba gear.

Memoir in which narrator struggles to describe her childhood – offering two or more contrary accounts of the same event – having been raised by divorced parents with unresolved anger toward each other such that discrepancies between parents’ accounts of each other’s involvement in her childhood have damaged narrator’s memory beyond repair.

Academic essay entitled “Cute Title: Serious Subtitle: On the Preponderance of Precious Subtitling in Academic Essays.”

.....  
5 The first excerpt covers the first few pages of the book. The second covers pages 16 and 17. These excerpts show how *From Old Notebooks* develops from a series of ideas for texts to a more varied series of notes that further reveal the character, preoccupations, and desires of the writer.

Novel in chapters, each chapter spanning one year, 1977–2006. In lieu of chapter number, photograph of Tom Cruise’s face from that year.

Story about a garbage man who cannot fathom how anyone might be content living a life not wholly dedicated to being a garbage man.

**Excerpt 2:**

Something entitled “From Old Notebooks,” simply a transcription of entries from these notebooks.

Story involving a couple whose divorce proceedings center upon the allocation of the books contained in the family library.

Living off-campus on the outskirts of a city where I knew no one, in a studio apartment the size of a large walk-in closet, I would occupy myself in the evenings with an obsessive study of the shadows of my hands against the wall as I faux-conducted piano concertos; and later, after having taken three Ambien, intimate conversations with bits of magma crawling across the carpet that had detached from the glowing wires on my electric space heater. That same year, in a fit of manic loneliness, I invited a raccoon into my apartment with a trail of cracker crumbs.

Do not let Jackson and Sofia live off-campus as undergraduates.

Cached auto-complete entry options that appear when I type the letter e into the search field in the toolbar of my internet browser:

*evan lavender-smith*  
*“evan lavender-smith”*  
*“evan lavender smith”*  
*evan + “lavender-smith”*  
*evan + “lavender smith”*  
*evan + lavender + smith*

The letter f:

*fear of death*

Contemporary authors who construct a thick barrier between themselves and their readers such that *authorial vulnerability* is revealed negatively, i.e., via the construction of the barrier.

If Team USA had a mascot, it would be God.

Character who refers to Wellbutrin as his muse.

“I hope to one day storm out on Terry Gross during an interview because I am that kind of eccentric famous author.”





## Notes that were cut from *From Old Notebooks*

Short story about literary executors sifting through the Gmail account of a recently deceased author.

It would better suit me to drive a hybrid hearse.

First line of a story: "The MFA in creative writing was the degree Shontiqua had her sights set on."

Story/mock-essay: conflation of the obnoxious languages of USA patriotism and MFA workshops.

The flag at half-mast because the market's way down today.

Awakened from dream ... saw figure in arrangement of stars ... closed eyes ... dream changed ....

The smile is perhaps the human equivalent to the dog's wagging tail, with an important caveat: the human can fake a smile.

Can a man fake an erection?

To *do* philosophy, *Back then I was doing some philosophy* – what a ridiculous usage. It is thanks to the proud philosopher who, attempting to justify his existence, humbles himself to a position of activity.

The greatest act of fraud on the part of philosophy is that it attempts to exist *outside of time*, the word of the philosopher presented to us as the Word. This is what Derrida means to criticize when he praises Nietzsche's pluralism, or Levi-Strauss's mythopoetics: Philosophy cannot pretend to be above or beyond the form of the book.

The question of being *flashes through us*, mind and body.

The *corporealization* of the question of being.

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must – write?

The proliferation of MFA programs in creative writing has given rise to the whirlpool of conservatism which is contemporary American literature.

Surely it's no coincidence that I began *From Old Notebooks* shortly after I stopped seeing my therapist.

Somewhere I read Edmund Wilson refer to Beckett's late style as *terminal*. I understand why he would say so, but I would prefer to reserve that term for David Markson's late style.

Random House settles out of court to pay \$2.35 million in genre-damages made by James Frey against his readers. What if the publisher of *From Old Notebooks* markets the book as a novel, and it later comes to light that the book was in fact a *memoir*...?

That the problem of death has been *outmoded* is the grand illusion of philosophy after Heidegger. The modern philosopher says, "Death is not my problem. *Being* is my problem." The modern philosopher might call death an *adolescent problem*, and being an *adult problem*. But what he fails to recognize is that the concept of being is merely an abstraction of the concept of death. (He forgets that being is *incidental* to non-being, and that the latter is *only conceivable by way of analogy to death*.) The modern philosopher wants to pretend that death is irrelevant to his project, but it is the impetus for his project.

Surely the reason I lash out against it is that I am *jealous* of poetry. Surely contemporary poetry does not deserve my *wrath*.

Someone could read the book with an almanac in hand and point to certain entries which suggest the concurrence of public events (e.g., terror, war, football), thereby assigning dates to those entries.

As if.

Do people auction their personal diaries on eBay? I might consider auctioning these notebooks if the book is ever published, in keeping with the spirit of the book, that is, the spirit of facile self-disclosure.

The poem is dead. Long live the poem!

The *ending* of *From Old Notebooks* might contain the *beginning* of the next book – a sequel entitled *Work-In-Progress*. *From Old Notebooks* might blur into *Work-In-Progress*. The point of physical distinction between the two books would be arbitrary.

*Work-In-Progress* would be written in the same form as *From Old Notebooks*, but it would be also written in an entirely different form, as the (conception of the) form of the book "*From Old Notebooks + Work-In-Progress*" is an *evolving* (conception of) form, a (conception of) form that is always becoming another (conception of) form.

No matter how much I want to force *From Old Notebooks* to become something called *Work-In-Progress*, I won't be able to: any contrived becoming of that sort would represent a violence on the form of the book. I'm going to have to take a leap at some point, though, a leap out of the book, like a leap from a burning building.

"The Voidhood of the Void; or, An Archaeology of Nothing."

Rather than enact the high drama of self-reflexivity, the new writing will accept self-reflexivity as *status quo* – metafiction's birthday is passed, no need to keep celebrating – in the tradition of the documentary film, the reality TV show, and the internet blog. Such a writing must, by definition, be genreless, or make the question of genre irrelevant: hence, the *post-generic*.

Perhaps my next novel will be a one-page poem.