



CLOWNS OF POTENTIALITY
REPETITION AND RESOLUTION
in Gertrude Stein and Emil Cioran

CAMELIA ELIAS

Aalborg University

A writer must always try to have a philosophy and he should also have a psychology and a philology and many other things. Without a philosophy and a psychology and all these various other things he is not really worthy of being called a writer. I agree with Kant and Schopenhauer and Plato and Spinoza and that is quite enough to be called a philosophy. But then of course a philosophy is not the same thing as a style.

Gertrude STEIN

The construction of the modernist fragment follows two directions. There are writers who emphasize totality in their juxtapositions of pieces of texts, and others who break that totality by juxtaposing fragments that are incompatible. In the first case the fragment which may yet be complete in its elaboration closes itself around a certain meaning that the fragment as such proposes. In the second case, incompatibility elicits an openness which grounds meaning, not in the text, but in the wide space where the search itself for meaning becomes meaningful. Put more clearly, these two approaches to the fragment answer two different questions: whereas in the first case the question is "*what is the meaning of the fragment?*," the second case deals with "*what is the meaning of having the fragment mean anything?*". Ultimately this is what distinguishes between writing a fragment and writing fragmentarily.

Among the modernists who theorize the difference between writing a fragment and fragmented writing is the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet. Claiming affinity with writers for whom the fragment works, on the one

hand as a “contingent,” or “antitranscendent” text, such as Sartre’s *La Nausée*, and on the other hand as a “transcendent” text, such as the novels of Balzac, Robbe-Grillet points first to the aesthetic quality of incompatible fragments. He says in an interview with Tom Bishop: “the shock of seeing them together creates a kind of opening onto potential meaning” [Kritzman 294]. In other words, the modern fragment is first and foremost a construction of a text which has a calculated structure and an unpredictable content. Most notably, Gertrude Stein and Emil Cioran employ the method which renders the fragment an “opening onto potential meaning” in order to distinguish between genres: long and short texts, the fragment and the aphorism. Potentiality in fact characterizes the calculations inherent in a surrealist text which posits meaning as a latent potential extracted from the will to incompatibility. Insofar as potential is latent, it is also able to make manifest the will for repetition and resoluteness. For Stein, and Cioran, the act of defining the genre to which their writing subscribes is an act of engaging with what is potential in writing. For these writers potential writing is an actualization of a style which unfolds what is always uncertain in an idea. Their writing expresses an attempt at finding a language which is able to accommodate the fragment and at the same time be appropriate to the fragment. I argue that Stein and Cioran’s concern with style engages in a similar project on potentiality as Giorgio Agamben does, using repetition and resolution as devices for the construction of a fragment which is not a fragment, but “style in the making,” and an aphorism which is not an aphorism, but “style in the breaking.”

Giorgio Agamben’s collection of essays in the book *Potentialities* (1999) represents his systematic work over twenty years on potentiality and actuality, possibility and reality. Although my concern is not with these categories as Agamben sees them—with first distinctions between Aristotle’s *dynamis* and *energeia*, and between Plato’s *thing* and the *thing itself*—the idea that the act of defining can also exist in a state of potentiality is something that I argue applies to the way some modernists construe the fragment. For modernists such as Gertrude Stein and Emil Cioran the fragment constitutes a matter of style insofar as the act of defining the fragment shows itself not to concern itself with itself. Whereas for Stein style is expressed by the notion of the “unnecessary” in the act of defining: “Therefore a masterpiece has essentially not to be necessary” [Stein 1975, xiii], for Cioran defining finds expression in the abstractness of “simple” formulations: “A distinct idea is an idea without a future” [Cioran 1991, 58]. For both writers, writing is situated outside the domain where definitions enforce the certainty of their ideas. Both writers are engaged in a project of illustrating how ideas (that is, the “uncertain” ones, if they are to be progressive) can be articulated in a form appropriate to their uncertainty. I argue that Stein and Cioran engage in a similar project on potentiality as Agamben does, using repetition and resolution as devices for the construction of a fragment which is not a fragment, and an aphorism which is not an aphorism, but which are both functions of a specific style.

Agamben’s examinations in *Potentialities* orbit around the problem of names for which there is no definition as they form the foundation of speech. In his essay on Derrida, “Pardes,” Agamben tackles what he calls the “White Knight’s theorem” based on a Lewis Carroll proposition in *Through*

the Looking Glass: “the name of the name is not a name.” Here Agamben says:

It is worth noting that this “White Knight’s theorem” lies at the basis both of Wittgenstein’s thesis according to which “we cannot express through language what expresses *itself* in language” and Milner’s linguistic axiom, “the linguistic term has no proper name.” In each case, what is essential is that if I want to say an *intentio*, to name the name, I will no longer be able to distinguish between word and thing, concept and object, the term and its reference. [Agamben 1999, 213]

It is my contention that, as far as modernist writing is concerned, “naming the name” has to pass through different potential states in which what is actualized is the incompatible. My concern here is with examining to what extent redundancy, repetition, and resolution can be said to inform and be employed in the construction of the modernist fragment, though not as themselves but as their potentialities. I have not chosen representative modernist texts that merely exhibit fragmentation, but texts which engage with defining, where defining is a representation of its own potential. Whereas Stein uses repetition as a means to both show and represent an *intentio* in its potential to repeat itself, for Cioran, the fragment’s *intentio* shows itself as a resolute proposition on potentiality as such. Indirectly they are however concerned with *intentio secunda* which orbits around the questions: what does it mean to signify an *intentio*, what does it mean to signify fragmented writing or fragmentary writing, what does it mean for the fragment to be in a potential state of the fragmentary?

The interesting aspect of the modernist fragment lies in its dealing not with the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary but in the way this difference opens up a potentiality whose markers—redundancy, repetition and resoluteness—attempt to show whether discussing any difference is worth the while. Unlike other modernists, Stein and Cioran show a concern with the *idea* of a difference between the fragment and the fragmentary, which they then analyze, scrutinize, and dismiss with grand style. The modernist fragment, I argue, is a fragmentary representation of the image in the mirror of difference and definition. The modernist writer is a self-proclaimed literature philosopher.

Gertrude Stein and the Repetitive Potential

Gertrude Stein experiments with language and clarity in her book, *How to Write* (written between 1927 and 1931). The work is a masterpiece of theorizing on style without defining it. That is, if style appears as nothing other than a theory insofar as it can be defined, then making use of it, once defined, style itself proves unnecessary in that relation. Hence, Stein’s emphasis is not on style as such, but on the meaning of what makes style necessary. Any investigation into the necessity of style becomes an inquiry into the nature of the repetitive potential that writing exhibits independently of the writer’s calculations. Says Stein:

Clarity is of no importance because nobody listens and nobody knows what you mean no matter what you mean, nor how clearly you mean what you mean. But if you have vitality enough of knowing enough of what you mean, somebody and sometime and sometimes a great many will have to realize that you know what you mean and so they will agree that you mean what you know, what you know you mean which is as near as anybody can come to understanding anyone. [Stein 1975, xxv]

Stein's working premise stems from her desire to make writing reflect itself in a repetitive potential. Repetition, in Stein—which situates itself in the difference between a fragment and writing fragmentarily—displays a potential which consists in endowing the text with a conceptual independence that is able to distinguish between different acts: thinking and naming, action and thought. Etymologically, the word “repetition” consists of two acts: “re”—again—and “petitio”—request, or seeking. Here one could make an inference and say that repetition is about “looking twice.” The potential for understanding is registered in what one re-sees, or re-registers, in writing which opposes words to form. For Stein, standing in close proximity to understanding is an elaboration of the fragment which is there—proper to its own improper being—and whose singular presence mediates between action and thought. “It is very difficult to think twice” [27] she says, thus emphasizing the idea that first there is writing which is contained by thought, and then there is writing which is contained by writing. Proximity to understanding means for Stein working through non-sense in a very common-sensical way. The aim is not that one understand everything. Quite the contrary. “I ask you,” she says, “What is knowledge. Of course knowledge is what you know is what you do know” [Stein 1967, 60]. That is to say, one knows already that knowledge begins with a question and ends with a question. One ends up in the enlightened state of not understanding. This is the wisdom of modernism: when one knows what one knows, one does not repeat the knowing, but the potential to know.

Writing fragmentarily problematizes its own container, as it were. Insofar as the fragment contains the fragmentary, or the fragmentary contains the fragment, any devising of a catalogue that would distinguish between the container and the contained would begin with a question. As Stein herself says: “the question does not come before there is a quotation” [162]. First there is the connection and then there is the connection's potential to repeat and be repeated. The effect of repetition is not only indexical, pointing to what comes first and what comes next. Questions have styles, they are great or they are small, and they can prompt thinking: “the great question is can you think a sentence” [1975, 35].

One is tempted to ask: can you think a fragment? Can one think of a reason why we have fragments which are complete, fragments which are incomplete, *full* texts which are fragmented—intentionally or unintentionally—fragments that define a context of proximity, fragments that enclose a whole text (the intertextual fragment), fragments that precede other fragments (pretexting fragments)? The list could continue. These fragments are conventionally associated with a period's notion of completion: if the fragment is not defined as a ruin or a constructed ruin, most studies on the fragment settle with calling the fragment romantic, or

ancient depending on the period in focus.¹ These fragments almost completely rely on form, in the sense that what is manifested at the formal level is, one could say, a potentiality of circumstance. But there is more to the fragment if one shifts the focus from the form/content dichotomy to function. Here I want to argue that repetition is a function of the fragment which maintains the tension between form and content as “sameness,” yet without making “sameness” unnecessary. Insofar as the fragment is a marker of sameness, it cannot at the same time be potential. The fragment is thus repetitive. The fragment *is* as it never gets beyond the state of potentially *becoming*.

The fragment as a “paradigm of textuality,” to use David Couzens Hoy’s denomination, forms a genre which determines its subject according to the way the fragment is finally presented. Here, Hoy says of the various ways fragments are presented by their writers as independent of the framework that fragments form on their own, as it were:

If we take Nietzsche’s style seriously, and particularly the fragmentary character of his writing as we have it (both because Nietzsche intended some of it to be that way and because he could not complete the projects of the last years), we may want to consider as the paradigm of textuality not the Book, a metaphysical construct, but the fragment. [Hoy 1981, 172]

Hoy, however, engages here on the same path as other critics, for whom the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary gives itself as a moment of coercion.² My suggestion is that coercion, or other forms of deciding on this difference can be replaced by potentiality. The difference could thus be seen in another equation where it would be a kind of *intentio secunda* of representation, or “looking twice.”

Asserting redundancy—Stein’s idea of the unnecessary—opens up the space for repetition as a potential for the text which goes against its grain. The text becomes a fragmentary fragment, or a modernist aphorism. The fragment brought on a collision course with itself is necessarily governed by imagination. Imagination here means style, and as such is able to govern the aphoristic fragment’s framework. The fragment that is called fragmentary involves the question of the fragment’s literariness, which cannot be activated without the reader’s hermeneutic engagement. That is to say, whatever the fragment enunciates enters into relation with both what makes

¹ Most studies on the fragment provide definitions on the fragment from an intentional point of view. Issues such as the fragment’s function, performativity, and agency are not dealt with to the same extent as labeling the fragment according to period or genre. See Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem—A Critique of a Form*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin—Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation*, (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1981); Elisabeth Wanning Harries, *The Unfinished Manner—Essays on the Fragment in the later Eighteenth Century*, (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994).

² See Paisley Livingston, *Counting Fragments, and Frenhofer’s Paradox*, Institut for Filosofi, Skriftserie, n. 17, ed. Steen Wackerhausen (Aarhus: Aarhus University, 1998).

the parameter of that enunciation and the way the reader engages with it. When Agamben talks of the mediaeval interest in distinguishing between *intentio prima*, which designates an object, and *intentio secunda*, which designates a string of signs signifying the *intentio prima*, another sign, he claims that when signs signify signs they cannot designate an *intentio* as such, but an *intentum* [Agamben 1999, 213]. Insofar as we can talk of the fragment's parameter as *intentum*, the fragment escapes what a writer chooses to call it. Escaping nomination, as it were, makes the fragment place itself outside the question of the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary. What the "paradigm of textuality" then opens up is the creation of a text with no name other than a predicative qualification. As a predicate without a subject the fragment's name is *intriguing*. It thus falls under aesthetic evaluations and involves a degree of subjectivity. To give an example, how does one read the repetition in Gertrude Stein's "A rose is a rose is a rose"? Is the "rose" named or nominated in any of the three instances it appears in? Is the resistance to the text replaced with an identification of a double discourse that breaks apart into fragments? Is Stein's text part of a fragment in which the idea of a rose is being represented, or is it a non-sense metaphor of which we can only make sense by virtue of its intertext? Leo Stein—Gertrude Stein's brother who never quite understood his sister's style—is on the verge of theorizing the situation: "When Jesus said, 'Verily, verily,' the second verily added much to the expression. But if he said, 'Verily, verily, verily, verily, verily, verily, verily, verily,' it wouldn't have been so good" [Watson 1991, 49]. Redundancy and repetition, while the same, yet different, involve the same degree of style which cannot be measured. What *adds to the expression* is neither too much, nor too little, but exactly as much as is needed—one knows what one knows, and that becomes a repetitive framework for the organization of the space of the text.

The interesting aspect of this kind of repetition is its mnemonic quality. Stein points to the general tendency to remember anything that *goes round*, that is circular. A grammatical rule, for example, becomes less of a rule and more of a piece of memory when it is engaged in a roundabout way. Says Stein: "what is grammar when they make it round and round. As round as they are called [...] Grammar in continuity [...] A grammar of appointment. Disunion. Double-doubling" [Stein 1975, 57-63]. It is clear that the third "rose" adds something to the first, banal statement "a rose is a rose," but since it is the same, it functions as a double and thus marks a division: we can say that the repetition "is a rose," posits the first statement as ambiguous, and is therefore significant. Of course, to say that Gertrude Stein's discourse in general is ambiguous, is to say the least. However, I would claim that the lack of connectives does not minimize the significance of internal structural themes—from a stylistic point of view one might argue that significance cannot be attached to something that is missing—but rather enforces the idea that the theme is a manifestation of what is precisely unnecessary. The "rose" discourse can only be addressed imperatively and aphoristically. This insight is also offered obliquely by Nicola Goode Shaughnessy in an analysis of Stein's play *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*:

The main female presence in *Doctor Faustus* is similarly a projection of Stein, a divided self as her two pairs of names indicate: Marguerite Ida

and Helena Annabel. Paradoxically both singular and plural, her (their?) names are themselves subject to dispute: Faustus stresses that 'her name is Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel' [209], but contradicts himself in dialogue with the dog: 'She will not, says Dr Faustus, never, never, never, will her name be Mary Ida and Helena Annabel' [210]. Stein foregrounds and interrogates the practice of naming through a form of double double-take, in that the conjunction 'and' which links the names is made central, emphasizing the arbitrary and constructed nature of naming itself as a signifying practice. [Shaughnessy, 1994, 173]

Put differently, what one remembers well is the meta-dimension of the phrase. The ability to connect things in a text via memory is for Stein a way of putting into practice what is essential about repetition in order to show what the text's literary potential *means* to signify. This is to say that repetition becomes a *piece* of language which necessarily has the same value and comments on the banal first-order reality that is manifested in the statement and which everybody recognizes. Here it should also be emphasized that insofar as repetition itself is arbitrary, it cannot designate a signifying practice as such. The way Stein uses repetition is precisely as a potential, which is, of course, what makes her modernism interesting. The fact that sometimes she does go seven times around goes to show that one knows what one knows.

Gertrude Stein's modernist fragment which displays a repetitive potential consists of ensuring the text a conceptual independence that is able to distinguish between thinking and naming. Distinguishing between the fragment and the fragmentary becomes a secondary framework to the dynamics of the modernist fragment as a paradigmatic catalogue for naming and thinking. That is to say, the modernist fragment is not characterized solely by the dynamics that develops the fragmentary either in the direction of completeness or incompleteness, nor by the dynamics of the fragment that exhibits either detachment or appropriation, but by a dynamic potential to repeat in a fragment what is contained in the "vocabulary of thinking." What characterizes the modernist fragment is its potential to become the unnecessary masterpiece. Working through style as a substitute for the premises that might make ground for a masterpiece is a move away from thinking and an approach to considering stupidities. Naming them perhaps, or as Cioran puts it in his "Atrophie du Verbe," the first section of *All Gall is Divided*: "something serious about stupidity, which oriented differently, might multiply the stock of our masterpieces" [Cioran 1999, 2].

Repetitive style for Gertrude Stein is the essence of her aphorisms. These aphorisms she challenges at the formal level: they are driven by verbs rather than nouns. When she asks: "what is the difference between a sentence and words" her immediate answers relate to the impressionistic effect of sentences on words:

A sentence has been ample [...]

What is the difference between a sentence and a sewn. Pictures are important if they have been followed. Thank you for following. What is the difference between a sentence and a picture. A sentence sends it

about most. Most is more than most. Most and best. A sentence is very mainly leave known.

How can a sentence have their hope. This makes it turn around. Leave a sentence in mainly. [Stein 1975,118-19]

Turning it and us around is what makes Gertrude Stein's modernist fragment an aphoristic performance of, say, Valéry in Blanchot's mirror:

(Valéry said sometime ago that one of the errors of philosophy is to limit itself to *words* and neglect *sentences*: 'O philosophers, what should be elucidated is not words... but sentences.') But this does not resolve anything either. The privilege accorded the verb, which reduces the noun to the status of an action that has simply been congealed, leads—even if it impedes the Cratylid option, and makes etymological creation more difficult—to the same, scarcely modified problems: sentences, series of sentences, sentences being born and fading away in one language or in a plurality of languages. As soon as we write we carry these problems around with us, thinking without thinking about them. [Blanchot 1995, 96]

Emil Cioran and the resolute potential

Cioran's fragments are neither complete nor incomplete, neither total nor fragmentary. They are resolute. The modern fragment is for Cioran an autobiography of the incurable. "To be *modern* is to tinker with the Incurable" [Cioran 1999, 20], constructing the fragment around a contracted form of a biographical detail, which then becomes a textual member in Cioran's "society of the moments." Cioran's work almost always displays an alternation between perspectives on other writers and these perspectives' potential to mark a resolute moment in the constitution of a singular fragment, which is yet to be perceived as universal. Cioran's most notable example is *Exercices d'admiration* (1986) which begins with essays of admiration dedicated to such writers as Joseph de Maistre, Beckett, Fitzgerald, Borges, Fondane, etc. These essays, however, border on the fragment as Cioran's concern develops into *unfinished* aphoristic statements based on singling out overlooked details in each writer's work. These details are Cioran's working hypotheses for testing the validity of a detail's universality that is nevertheless marked by a moment of singularity. The "admiration" are then countered by anathemas in *Aveux et Anathèmes* (1987). These anathemas are fully developed aphorisms.

Cioran's own insights emerge out of a process of intercalation. Fragments are self- and pseudo-provoked. They change position and status. Cioran's fragments become the fragments of the writers with whom Cioran engages, and whose second-order fragments Cioran restores to himself. In other words, forcing any other writer's linear text or totalizing thinking in the direction of the fragment is for Cioran not an appropriation of the text's

linearity, or the thought's totality, but of the text's or the thought's ability to imagine itself as discontinuous or incomplete. Cioran's resoluteness consists in *second-guessing* his precursors. The etymology of the word *resolution* implies a double act: solving (loosening) and answering. Yet *solved again* deconstructs itself. Cioran's resolute fragment expresses a potential for the actualization of solutions which deal with what is contradictory in oppositions such as, question vs. answer, the infinite vs. the finite, writing vs. the fragment, the fragment vs. the fragmentary, form vs. genre, the aphorism vs. form.

Furthermore, Cioran's modern fragment is a very *clear* aphorism that states its own content as ambiguous. This is what distinguishes Cioran from the moralists. Cioran's work concludes itself not in the unfinished as such, but in the potential of the unfinished itself to pass a final judgement on *moral, ultimate, or done* issues. Cioran's resolute potential consists in annulling itself. As he says: "My mission is to see things as they are. Exactly the contrary of a mission" [Cioran 1991, 119], thus indicating that "the thing itself"—to use one of Agamben's examples of what a potential begins with—while incompatible with analysis, is compatible with its contrary.³ That is to say, one does not analyze, or "see the thing as in itself it really is"—to paraphrase Matthew Arnold's example of what a potential ends with;⁴ nor does one "see the thing as in itself it really is not"—to paraphrase Oscar Wilde on the trajectory of a potential;⁵ one goes for the triple movement of a potential—to be redundant, repetitive, and resolute—which closes in on itself with the enactment of its annulment. Seeing the thing "as in itself it really is seen" becomes the fragment that enters into its essential difference through the back door. In other words, the fragment is essentially different from the full text as it is able to both actualize a full text's completeness and survive that actuality in becoming a totality itself. There is nothing new under the sun. Cioran nails potentiality on its head:

Thought which liberates itself from all prejudice disintegrates, imitating the scattered incoherence of the very things it would apprehend. With 'fluid' ideas we *spread ourselves* over reality, we espouse it; we do not explicate it. Thus we pay dearly for the 'system' we have not thought.

³ Agamben's work on potentiality follows the propositional premises laid by Wittgenstein concerning the meaning of "potere" to investigate Aristotle's opposition between potentiality and actuality, *dynamis* and *energeia*; for example, what is the meaning of saying that something "can" mean anything? For Agamben potentiality begins with an actualization of impotentiality. At the same time, however, potentiality "survives actuality, and in this way, *gives itself to itself*" [184]. The implication of Agamben's study is that if something gives itself to itself, it means that something, or the thing, is seen in itself as really it is seen by itself. The thing in itself enters into a tautological difference with itself.

⁴ Matthew Arnold states in his "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1865): "the main effort, for now many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is.", in M.H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Sixth Edition Vol. I, II (New York and London: WW Norton & Company, 1993) 1389.

⁵ Oscar Wilde counters Arnold's proposition and says in his "The Critic as Artist:" "the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not." *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994) 1128.

The Real gives me asthma. [Cioran 1999, 33]

All subsequent writing on Cioran's writing, one notices, seems to follow Cioran's own method of trimming, segmenting, and styling *en abyme* a writer's thought, his self, and his fragment. The text in the salon is having a haircut. With Cioran, however, one is not interested in seeing what remains of the text's head, but what is on the floor, the pieces that have been submitted to the biographical scissors. Writing on Cioran is writing on the edge of Cioran's hypothetical questions about a context, its proximity, and its approximation. When Cioran laments: "We haven't a single letter of Shakespeare. Didn't he write any? One would have liked to hear Hamlet complain about his mail" [Cioran 1991, 193] we see Cioran's sense of style enacted in the necessary trimming of the oeuvre. Sketches bring into perspective the idea of writing that is worth the potential. Cioran's text is like a clown who makes gestures of self-dismissal. "Certainties have no style," says Cioran, thus aligning himself with Gertrude Stein whose gestural proclamations such as "definition made a hand" make style an expression of the fragment whose potential is performed by others.

Stephen Mitchelmore begins his essay, "E.M. Cioran: To Infinity and Beyond" thus:

What is there to know about Emil Cioran? He was born in Romania, in 1911, the son of a Greek orthodox priest. In adolescence, he lost his childhood in the country and was moved to the city. He also lost his religion. For years he didn't sleep—until he took up cycling. He passed sleepless nights wandering the dodgy streets of an obscure Romanian city. In 1937 he moved to Paris and wrote, producing what are generally classified as 'aphorisms,' collected together under such titles as *The Temptation to Exist*, *A Short History of Decay* and *The Trouble With Being Born*. He knew Samuel Beckett, who eventually lost sympathy with his pessimism. Late in his life he gave up writing, not wanting to 'slander the universe' anymore, and died a few years later after an encounter with an over-excited dog.

I hope none of this helps.

Cioran's sentences are of little help. That is their worth. [Mitchelmore 2001, [http](#)]

Reading Cioran is a modern experience which elicits a reading of words singular in their properties yet with a propensity to generate a generic genre which answers rhetorical questions. Cioran's modernism does not consist in formulating questions that would clarify a philosophical problem, make stylistic rhetoric significant in its redundancy or explain the will to repetition. Cioran is concerned with the subtlety of writing that raises itself above the singularity of presence. His writing becomes resolute *in* the fragment, which ultimately is an expression of Cioran himself. Cioran is the background for a game of rhetorical answering that engages critics in a project of re-inventing Cioran according to the principles of his fragment/game. That is to say, one cannot use the front door to enter Cioran's writing. First one has to pass the threshold of the back door, which is the fragment. Cioran himself writes it on the invitation to his critic whose challenge consists in grappling with the difference between Cioran's self and

Cioran's fragment. And there is no difference. Subtlety for Cioran is infinity's alter-ego.

Subtlety combined with aggression is the force of Cioran's modern fragment, which consists in figuring resolution at the n^{th} power of potential perspective. This potentiality opens the space for what critics claim is the most significant index in modernism, namely fragmentation. As John Tytell writes in his essay, "Epiphany in Chaos: Fragmentation in Modernism": "Crucial to modernist sensibility, the fragment has introduced the general public to what the critic Kenneth Burke once called 'perspective by incongruity.' Modernism plunges us into a geometry of prismatic circularity in a world without comfortable absolutes" [Tytell 1981, 14]. Cioran is however ahead and behind modernism at the same time. For Cioran, fragmentation and discontinuity are means for calculating the distance between infinity and its beyond which the absolutes traverse. "What I *know* wreaks havoc upon what I *want*" [Cioran 1991, 198] he says, thus defining the abstract concept of separation in its own abstractness.

What characterizes Cioran's contribution to the construction of the modern fragment is the resolute potential to make redundant, repetitive, and ambiguous calculations calculate themselves. Cioran is a writer who is in a constant approach to himself. It is for this reason that one cannot separate the dynamics of his writing from the principles that generate it. His aphorisms are in that sense never finished, they cannot be subscribed to the aphoristic genre as such. Cioran's aphorisms point to a typology, they are types of calculations in which the resolute fragment enforces a potential to define what is not necessary. Cioran opens the back door of the fragment to the house of separations. What illustrates writing is what separates it from thinking. Here, questioning the answer, he answers the question:

'Why fragments?' one young philosopher reproached me. 'Out of laziness, out of frivolity, out of disgust—but also for other reasons...'
And since I was finding none of these, I launched into prolix explanations that sounded serious to him and that ended by convincing him. [203]

Thus writing on Cioran means writing not *on* the fragment but writing *the* fragment, *of* and *for* those other reasons. One writes: fragment. And then one thinks: Cioran would be pleased.

Mitchelmore's infinite Cioran is not so infinite that he cannot be identified by the signposts that he leaves:

His aphorisms are unlike the smug, bourgeois exponents of the Nineteenth century. They open wounds. Still, Cioran is not studied. This is the academic orthodoxy. And that's fine. Scholars read texts like drivers read diversion signs. La Rochefoucauld 20 miles, Nietzsche 40, Existentialism, forever. Alternatively, just read the sentences. [2]

Insofar as Cioran's writing consists of 'infinity' and 'beyond,' then, what that writing must figure is a textual abstraction of which the fragment is the principle. What for Stein is a generating principle is for Cioran a principle of resoluteness. Writing posits itself as an attribute for the incurable. Writing

asserts itself as a characterization of Cioran. Hence the critics' tendency to see Cioran's work as a figure of writing's incurability which defines what lies beyond infinity. For instance, a *Washington Post* review of Cioran's work ends up describing not the work as such, but Cioran's cosmic character: "A sort of final philosopher of the Western world [...] [Cioran's] statements have the compression of poetry and the audacity of cosmic clowning." The infinite and the finite meet in Cioran's resolute concreteness of a contradictory style. That is to say, Cioran himself emerges always as a potential for the writing which is able not only to offer, but actualize solutions for what is contradictory in oppositions, the fragment vs. the self, one's potential performed by others.

Writing on Cioran then involves performing his ghost, who is performing other ghosts, as it were. One begins to wonder whether the ghost can recognize itself in the mirror... Thus the singularity of Cioran's writing emerges not through analysis but through the search for what characterizes the singularity of the beyond, namely, universality. Portraying Cioran as the *final philosopher* is suggesting that his writing is singular in its universality. Uniqueness is however no news. But uniqueness performed is. William Kluback and Michael Finkenthal write in *The Temptations of Emil Cioran*:

We wonder how to speak of Cioran without contradiction. We have a scattered Cioran. We write page after page. We come to no conclusions. They have been taken away from us. They passed away quickly. We are confused. Cioran has slipped through our fingers. His scattered soul is beyond our powers of definition. We set out again and again to find him. [Kluback and Finkenthal 1997, 2]

When Cioran emphasizes the fragment, the fragment becomes the subtle obsession of those who write on Cioran. For example, Kluback and Finkenthal end up writing fragmentarily, in contradiction with themselves, yet assertive of Cioran's own conclusions. When Cioran performatively engages the fragment in the epigraph to the English translation of *Exercices* and *Aveux et Anathèmes*, "In any book governed by the Fragment, truths and whims keep company throughout," he opens up a space for a criticism which enacts its own performance. Setting out to find Cioran is no easy task as Kluback and Finkenthal are suggesting, indirectly emphasizing the game of hide-and-seek that the fragment engages them in. The fragment hides the conclusion that one seeks. One concludes however, already at the beginning, that coming to no conclusion is for Cioran a sound conclusion. Kluback and Finkenthal continue a couple of paragraphs further down:

There is no *one* Cioran. There is no one thinker who emerges from a reading and a comprehension that belongs fatally to time and space, the destined conditions of human existence. There is in Cioran a smiling playfulness, a farcicality, a perverse enjoyment which comes with the illusion of bestowing truths on reality, truths which are never more than superficiality and arbitrariness. These are truths that make us contemptuous. These are downish truths that are serious only for those who have lost the sense of impish perversity and humor. [4]

Cioran's fragment is first and foremost not only a distinction, but a dialogue between thought and action, truth and reality. Here, the singularity

of Cioran's thought as truth—which is cynical and pessimistic in its thrust—emerges as a universal reality. By virtue of that universality what the thought ultimately expresses is an optimistic paradigm in which thought and action work together against defining. As he puts it:

To *define nothing* is among the skeptic's obligations. But what can we oppose to the swagger that follows the merest definition we happen to have found? To define is one of the most inveterate of our madnesses, and it must have been born with the first word [Cioran 1983, 163].

Cioran's modernist fragment is a complete fragment in its complexity. All Cioran's assumptions about what can be defined take into consideration the "virtual" state of things. To know that truth and action, for instance, have a virtual status and that, beyond that status, they are able to annul themselves and the distinctiveness of ideas which make them precisely truth and action, is an insight he shares with Gertrude Stein. As he pertinently says: "A distinct idea is an idea without a future. Beyond their virtual status, thought and action degrade and annul themselves: one ends up as system, the other as power: two forms of sterility and failure" [Cioran 1991, 58].

The fragment's content void of certainty is a process of intercalation, yet without being discontinuous. Insofar as the fragment annihilates potentiality, the fragment is thus resolute. The fragment's resoluteness consists in dictating for itself whether it manifests itself as being or becoming. The fragment's content then actualizes itself in the idea of defining nothing, including the fragment's form. The aphorism is a manifestation of a complete form of incompleteness. When Cioran asserts that "The Romantics were the last specialists in suicide, which has been a shambles ever since" and hence, "To improve its quality, we desperately need a new *mal de siècle*" [Cioran 1999, 8], being contrary to the *situation* emerges as the most poignant feature of the modernist fragment. Conversely, the fragmentary for Cioran is the fragment's cutting-edge style that cuts precisely between the fragment *as such*, and the fragmentary *as such*: "Models of style: the swearword, the telegram, the epitaph" [8].

In conclusion, Stein's and Cioran's most interesting contributions to the modernist fragment consist in recognizing through style not a voice that defines, or engages in defining, but a voice which develops a multifaceted take on the potential to define what is not necessary, the potential of a thought to be ghost-written in a mirror, or the potential to define what is contrary to one's mission. Redundancy becomes definable only via the reader's aesthetically cognitive potential. That is to say, through repetition. Hence, the fragmentary element in a fragment, or a whole text for that matter, is recognizable as a voice, which identifies an exigency that culminates either in "admiration" or "anathemas." An interesting situation arises when voice designates, not what is being negotiated in the text—an idea or its concrete manifestation—but the process of figuring out what aesthetic values there are in *hearing* the abstract moment in the text which is marked by the concreteness of repetition and resolution. Can we, for instance, register the point where a writer's resolution dictates when

repetition is due to stop? Abstractly hearing when the text concretely breaks off is the mark of the modernist fragment. Leo Stein's suggestion that Jesus's second "verily" adds much to the expression is thus given as repetition's abstraction, a kind of *sine qua non* redundancy. "One always simplifies out of facility—whence the attraction to the abstract" says Cioran [1991 57], further pointing to the identification of a second-order value that the reader makes. When Cioran engages in restoring the fragments that he lends to the writers he admires, he subordinates his own writing to the abstraction in the other writers' texts. His writing thus becomes by definition "anathema."

What is surprising is that although there is a proliferation of definitions and theories on the fragment, the fragmentary fragment refuses to place itself under the aegis of the validity of the fragment as a literary genre. This is partly so because it resists verification as it engages in a process of dividing itself against that which is not a fragment—in the Aristotelian sense here. On the other hand, it formulates its internal structure according to a logic of its own, which dictates either completeness or incompleteness at the expense of the writer's justification for determining when to call his supposedly *whole text* a fragment. Here, the aphorism is the progressive way which puts the modernist fragment neither in a roundabout, nor on a one-way street, but in a cul-de-sac. From here, then, all that emerges is the gnomic voice of the incurable stylist.

Stein's and Cioran's insights are representative of what is not representative as such about the modernist fragment. Intentionally placing themselves in a dead-end, as it were, their writing on style by *meaning* not to write on style emerges, not as repetitive, or resolute, but as potentially repetitive and resolute. The significance of their work for the construction of the fragment lies in their method of inquiry into the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary, though not by taking the difference as such into account, but by positing it as a stylistic potential. Whatever the difference is, it is not more important than the way one takes to get there. Defining the fragment in terms of a signpost's authority to indicate what a fragment *can* do for the *potency* of a writer's discourse is for Stein and Cioran a way of making style a signifying process for the performative effect or impression that the fragment leaves. This is the unfinished form of the modern aphorism: to effectuate an incompatible compatibility in which the fragment's potential consists in *seeing* the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary but only as an *impression* of that difference. Giving the fragment to itself, as it were, is giving the fragment the role of knowing its reader. Gertrude Stein's knowing voice merges with Cioran's, who says:

In any book governed by the Fragment, truths and whims keep company throughout. How to sift them, to decide which is conviction, which caprice? One proposition, a momentary impulse, precedes or follows another, a life's companion raised to the dignity of an obsession... It is the reader who must assign the roles, since in more than one instance, the author himself hesitates to take sides. The epigrams constitute a sequence of perplexities—in them we shall find interrogations but no answers. Moreover, what answer could there be? Had there been one, we should know it, to the great detriment of the enthusiast of stupor. [non paginated paratext]

The definition of the modernist fragment is given in the fragment's obscurity as the fragment is allowed to go round... very far round, almost the whole way round.

The modernist fragment is a statutory impossibility, a textual clown.

REFERENCES

- ABRAMS, M.H. ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Sixth Edition Vol. I, II. New York and London: WW Norton & Company, 1993
- AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *Potentialities*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, California: Stanford U.P., 1999.
- BLANCHOT, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- CIORAN, E.M. *Ceuvres*. Paris : Quarto Gallimard, 1995.
- — —. *Drawn and Quartered*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: The Arcade Cioran. Arcade Publishing, 1983.
- — —. *Anathemas and Admiration*. Trans. Richard Howard. The Arcade Cioran. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1991.
- — —. *All Gall is Divided*. Trans. Richard Howard. The Arcade Cioran New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999.
- HOY, David Couzens. "Philosophy as Rigorous Philology? Nietzsche and Poststructuralism." Ed. Lawrence Kritzman. *Fragments: Incompletion and Discontinuity*. New York: New York Literary Forum, 1981.
- KLUBACK, William & Michael FINKENTHAL. *The Temptation of Emil Cioran*. New York: Peter Lang, 1997.
- KRITZMAN, Lawrence, ed. *Fragments: Incompletion and Discontinuity*. New York: New York Literary Forum, 1981
- LIVINGSTON, Paisley. *Counting Fragments, and Frenhofer's Paradox*. Institut for Filosofi: Skriftserie No. 17. Aarhus: Aarhus University, 1998.
- MITCHELMORE, Stephen. "E.M. Cioran: To Infinity and Beyond." *Spike Magazine*, 2001. <http://www.spikemagazine.com/1197cior.php>
- SHAUGHNESSY, N.C. "'When This You See Remember Me' – Three Plays by Gertrude Stein". Ed. Gabriele Griffin. *Difference in View – Women and Modernism*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1994.
- STEIN, G. *Look at Me Now and Here I Am. Writings and Lectures 1909–45*. London: Penguin Books, 1967.
- — —. *How to Write*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1975.
- WATSON, Steven. *Strange Bedfellows – The First American Avantgarde*. New York: Cross River Press, 1991.
- WILDE, Oscar. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994.