

infusoria and animal life (267-272). From infusoria as an indifference point, a bifurcated series of life-forms replaces the traditional model of a single and continuous series of life-forms (272-274). Berger understands Schelling as an immanent rationalist who is concerned with the logic of origination (279) rather than historical transformation. “In What Sense is Nature a Scale of Degrees? Schelling and Hegel on ‘Degrees’ in Nature” pursues these questions. Victor Béguin reads the hierarchy of *Potenzen* in Schelling’s identity philosophy as the universalization of stages in nature toward levels of being in general (285-286). Hegel criticizes the scalar ontology of nature, either as a temporal series (evolution), or as a spatial series (emanation). For him, the proper use of *Stufe* is limited to the stages of spirit, which is capable of development and self-production (289-292).

This collection of essays makes a significant contribution to the ever-burgeoning field of classical German *Naturphilosophie*. The volume offers numerous intriguing and new perspectives and textual details that help us understand the complex relationship between nature philosophy and the idealist positions.

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**Luke Fischer, *Philosophical Fragments as the Poetry of Thinking: Romanticism and the Living Present*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, xiv + 135pp. ISBN 9781350270091**

This is a slim volume from a practicing poet whose works include *A Personal History of Vision* (2017), *The Poet as Phenomenologist: Rilke and the ‘New Poems’* (2015) and a collection of bedtime stories, *The Blue Forest* (2015). It treats the romantic fragment not as a piece of literary or philosophical history, but as a living option for the poet’s voice that is perennially on a quest to speak the novel or true word (‘the living present’) to a world where singular insight and agency lie suffocated beneath the pseudo-universality of everyday speech and the cultural idols of relativism, materialism, and scientism. Modeling his practice on the Schlegels’ *Athenaeum* fragments, Novalis’s *Pollen*, and the clues to the self-transformative structure of nature provided by Goethe’s *Metamorphosis of Plants*, Fischer presents us with a collection of some five hundred “poetological fragments” followed by an essay “The Fragment as

Philosophical Poem.” The fragments accumulated organically in notebooks spanning some twenty-years but were focused by his reading of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis as a philosophy undergraduate. Refining his journal entries as any writer might, Fischer discovered the similarity between the “kairotic moment” shared by thinker and poet: the thinker’s “living moment of conception” and “impulse or spark” of the poet’s speech. Poet and thinker stand as hermenteuts, or perhaps priests and prophets, of a shifted time whose historical figure is still vague or fresh—the very antithesis of mass marketing or internet influencers whose goal is to make what is already the same even more homogeneous.

The salient feature of this thin volume is that the collection of fragments and the essay on fragment as philosophical poem are separate yet reflect each other. The reader is given no instruction on how to construe these dimensionally mismatched mirror images, for the whole is given in the part and the integrity of intellectual vision hidden in the discursive treatise or essay. But both fragment and treatise are ‘essays’ or attempts in the original significance of the term, attempts to find the shape of the living situation. For Fischer, this living situation is the unbounded expanse that late 18<sup>th</sup> century romantic writers and systematic thinkers alike surveyed in attempting to unlock the essence of Greek antiquity, promote the freedom that revolution promised, and secure the expanse of science. He does not hesitate to use old language to designate the absolute or the spiritual nor does he hide from the task of speaking ultimate truth in the singular voice (William James’s *mystical religion*).

The fragments are grouped under five headings: poetry and language; philosophy and freedom; the alchemical transmutation of philosophy and poetry; art, music and nature; and practical aesthetics and society. The first collects observations about the ‘magic’ of original speech; I can but offer a few examples:

What is original springs from an origin. Originality bears the trace of the identity between being and thinking—the living presence of awareness that founds itself. (5)

The poet is the magical interpreter of the world—poetic translation as transfiguration (Novalis). (14)

The second heading collects reflections on the ‘fundamentalisms’ of modern life: agnosticism, scientism, materialism, and empiricism, and contrasts their flat sameness to the recursive freedom of historically grounded philosophical thin-king:

While we tend to think of seasons and much else in cyclical terms, the idea of evolution brings development into these cycles. . .

Winter = idealism. Spring = empiricism. Summer = pantheism. Autumn = hermeneutics.

Winter = Fichte. Spring = Goethe. Summer = Schelling. Autumn = Hegel.

Truth = the movement through all the seasons – the comprehension of their metamorphoses. (36)

A third collection moves from an initial contrast between the abstractness of philosophical language and the liveliness of poetic speech to advocating the practice of attentive receptivity:

Philosophy is death. Its nothingness inhabits the philosopher, stimulates wakefulness, self-consciousness.

Death inhabits the poet too, but poetry gently arches over the Styx. (37)

We must learn a thinking that is at once gentle and dynamic = poetic thinking.

Thinking is an active listening with the spirit. Poetic vision is also a form of listening, even when mediated by sight. Both bear the same gesture of attentive receptivity. (38)

Romanticism is an attempt to recreate the holism of ancient Greece—the pre-divided unity of art, science, myth and philosophy – through the individual will. It seeks to reunite in self-conscious form the historically separated disciplines. (53)

A fourth group of fragments looks at the individual character of the artistic creator and contrasts the specificity of her character and creation with the frozen imagination of the flatscreen image and its simulacrum of intelligence in disembodied speech:

To a large extent Simone Weil is right that the highest art stems from the impersonal rather than the personal. Though for conceptual reasons I prefer Steiner's terminology in his related point that art has its source in the super-personal (*das Über-persönliche*) as this suggests the transformation of personality rather than its elimination. (61)

Interactive virtual worlds. A new phenomenon. Simulacra that no longer reflect or reveal the world (in contrast to art) . . . The complete severance of the bond – the magical tie – between imagination and being. Imaginal solipsism.

Virtual subjects—monads without windows. (65)

A final grouping resumes prior reflections on the psychology and ethics of individualism versus groupthink and makes an explicit connection to the romantic fragment:

Genuine individuality embodies the whole in its unique way.

The fragment exemplifies that the individual can be a whole without subordinating itself to a ‘greater whole.’

The fragment is a synecdoche of an individual spirit. An individual person is a synecdoche of the whole of society.

The fragment as a clue for the development of a genuine democracy in which the individual is not subsumed by the collective or the State. (77)

The five-part essay that Fischer places after his fragments is an extended reflection on *synecdoche* or the *pars pro toto* interchange of terms. The ‘fragment’ is a piece of the whole that rather than being detached from the whole comes to represent the whole in its very singularity. The fragment is emblematic, suggestive, proleptic of a totality of meaning that is yet to be revealed. It refers to a totality that is for now unsayable or vaguely present as a horizon of meaning, but to understand the fragment is to tacitly expand what it says to that systematic horizon. The romantic fragment is the image of what Socrates playfully requires as the wise man’s ability to speak concisely or extensively as the occasion demands in contrast to the sophists’ practice of extensive, unfocused commentary (*Protagoras* 334D-336B). What is of philosophical interest in this slim work is the twin focus of the romantics’ fragment and the systems of the idealist philosophers on the possibility of philosophical unity-in-totality that has been discussed in the last three decades by scholars such as Manfred Frank, Frederick Beiser, Andrew Bowie, and Dalia Nassar. Fischer defers explicit discussion of systematicity and instead speaks of the treatise or essay which in its original sense connotes an origin in personal insight.

Fischer’s central discussion of the romantic fragment starts with his decision to place his essay after his fragments. The latter lacks context and leaves it to the reader to fill in the white space that surrounds the isolated text. While the former brings in more context, both start from and preserve a personal insight or creative advance. The totality of the philosophic system, by contrast, obscures the particularity and situated historicity of the author and her time, unless as Hegel insists that whole is nothing other than the

recital of particularity in all its detail as the lifeless past of historical consciousness. Uninterested in the synoptic museum of Minerva's owl, Fischer looks to Novalis and Schelling for hints of a perspective that would capture the evolving and inexhaustible nature of the absolute. Novalis speaks of a highest principle that is at the same time the highest paradox as a ceaseless incitement to activity, a virtual catnip for spirits, not a post-historical nap. And Schelling who produced a cascade of systems attuned to solving disparate problems seemed allergic to the idea of an absolute that would bring a dead conclusiveness to every issue. From the poet's perspective "the ultimate philosophical system would also have to possess the qualities of the fragment, to stimulate the thinking of the highest paradoxes . . . and stir us to creative activity and spiritual *life* (as in the supposition of spirits contemplating Divinity)" [83]. Fischer recalls Friedrich Schlegel's invocation of the ideal of an 'open system' displayed in musical harmonies and biological organisms. Open systematicity is the antithesis of the aphorisms as viewed by some 20<sup>th</sup> century critics who point to Nietzsche, Beckett, or Blanchot as practitioners of nihilistic deferral of meaning, discord, and rupture from the whole. The romantic crafters of fragments, by contrast, understood that meaning and truth must be understood holistically in a body of interconnection or a hermeneutical horizon. The rubble of Gaza is simply trash and negativity. As Novalis implored in his collection *Pollen* (seeds): "Friends, the earth is barren; we must sew ample seeds that only a modest harvest prospers for us." A seed is a concentrated part derived from a living being and capable of reconstituting life. Says Fischer, "The romantic fragment is a potent and living synecdoche—a part that embodies and conveys a living whole—the beginning of life rather than its end and disintegration into lifeless parts" (88). The incompleteness of the fragment is what permits its evocative power. While the philosophical system may invite the reader to follow a path or participate in an archaeological dig, the fragment invites the reader to go off road and take liberties in thinking. Fischer's discussion is replete with examples from the plastic arts that mimic the fragment's power to communicate: Cezanne's deployment of color in space or the way Michelangelo's *David* serves us as the emblem of Renaissance humanism. To close this section of the essay that in its own fragmentary way offers many paths but no clear highway into its subject matter, Fischer looks to Hegel's critique of F. Schlegel's concept of irony that he perceives to be imbued with a subjectivism suggested by Fichte. In that view, artistic self-consciousness stands apart and above its products rather than nourishing itself on art's substantial themes and concerns. While Hegel shares with the romantics the view that spirit's inwardness or infinity outweighs the finite objectivity of the work, he finds

the romantic practice to be an empty formalism that hurriedly flits through all objective forms only to find its self-satisfaction. Fischer replies that recent literary and philosophical assessments of Jena romanticism find it much closer to the systematic intent of absolute transcendental systems than the subjectivism of Kant and his immediate successors.

A second section of the essay centers on an idea of Heraclitus: “The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals but gives a sign.” In an entry in *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, Novalis points to the essence of language as a pointing beyond itself from the audible to the inaudible or the visible to the indivisible. His view that “language is Delphi” means that language itself is fragmentary, that in pointing to something that is partial and incomplete it speaks from a horizon of unsayable fullness. This stands in contrast to all technical attempts to restrict language’s semantics and range of application to favored conventional but pseudo-universal uses. “The fullness of language depends on its incompleteness, its fragmentary character” (99). The less said, the more there is to be said. The hermeneutic tradition from Dilthey and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Gadamer, Ricœur, and Derrida is of one voice in finding that the speaker always says more than what she consciously intends or surrounded by banks of retrospective and anticipatory meanings. The solo voice speaks to a chorus, present or virtual, the statement awaits confirmation, the prophecy its fulfilment or lack thereof.

A third section considers the function of a fragment or poem in a collection. It starts with a recollection of Hegel’s use of aphorism as either introductory to or summation of a discursive exposition. Fischer invokes the structure of tragedy (reversal of expected meaning and recognition of the unanticipated) to describe the philosopher’s intuition of a perspective and its subsequent elaboration and defense. Unless there is some new seeing and naming, there is nothing to talk about. There is a unique constellation of the moment and the acts of thinking and will that make the poetic fragment visionary. “The poet tends to have a notebook ready to hand, so as to light the wick in the steel lantern of words with the flaring match of thought before it dies (105).” The simile seems a bit overwrought, but Fischer goes on to quote Aquinas on the difference between the discursive human intellect and the immediacy of angelic intuition. Fischer recalls his younger self’s pride in finding the poet closer to the angelic than the philosopher, but now he finds the fragment to be the middle-ground and mediator of the two.

A fourth section explicates Fischer’s saying, “The fragment reflects a flash of eternity” (27). While the directness of its pithy message seems to suggest a haste necessitated by the penumbra of mortality, sudden reversals

of perspective effect a leap into the here and now that the writer with a contemplative intent uses to transcend the everyday or horizontal aspect of meaning and intimate a ‘vertical dimension’ beyond natural necessity and causal explanation. Fischer cites the Russian philosopher Solovyov’s version of mystical idealism influenced by Schelling wherein in a single experience cognitive spiritual cognition is seen as a prolongation of an intuitive intellection that is instantaneous, novel, and revelatory of the absolute or Sophia. Though Solovyov started with a definitive personal experience, his philosophical writings can be seen as a dwelling in noetic insight akin to what generally happens when a thinker grasps onto a new idea. To make this claim is not to simply transpose Aquinas’s discursive and angelic intellects. A writer like Solovyov works from a deep historical tradition of mediation on *sophia*—Platonic, Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Kabbalistic, and Theosophical. Reflective discursive elaboration of an idea is just getting clear about what one actually thinks. “Logical reasoning is a charcoal drawing that serves as a mnemonic device of, and substitute for, what dazzles our everyday sight” (113).

Fischer closes his essay with a meditation on the “ambiguity or metaphoricality of being” (63). Language is the business of making connections, promiscuous or precise, factual or imaginative, among the indifferent potentials of myriad words, as was Novalis’s practice in *The Universal Notebook* or ‘romantic encyclopedia’. Philosophers like Nietzsche and Derrida have noted the fabricated nature of language, suggesting that “all we have [of truth] are metaphorically inflected perspectives on the world which can never reach reality as it is” (115). Fischer observes that philosophers are more likely to speak in architectural or geometrical terms of structures, foundations, horizons and planes than at locating such entities. This is to project a coherence of thought and an interdependence of things more solid than the intuitive, metaphorical leaps that motivate thinking. Typical romantic themes such as the homology of music and mathematics and that of the progressive unfolding of biological life in plants and spiritual life in thinking beings moved Novalis to see in them a mathematical process of *potentiation* (raising a base to a higher exponent or form of expression) or *logarithmization* (lowering the exponent to the base). To the poet, such expressions of the metaphorical systematicity of the cosmos as underpin the intuition of a ‘great chain of being’ are not to be subordinated to a pre-given totality or system but are to be seen as actualizations of “an open, developing individuated whole” (123). The poet concludes with a concatenation of metaphors that might be found in a bedtime story: “The fragment is vertical, The treatise horizontal. The fragment is the warp. The treatise the weft. The fragment the

point of concentration—the compression of a sphere. The treatise a plane or circle. The treatise is the letter. The fragment the spirit” (*ibid.*).

In comparing the fragment and the treatise rather than fragment and system Fischer has simplified his task and certainly shortened his book. Both fragment and treatise originate in personal insight and an individuality clings to them no matter how moving or convincing their insight. But system touches on the possibility of public truth, the possibility of deception (and self-deception), and the health of cultural (i.e., conventional) standards that underpin the practice of politics and science that were the achievements of the Enlightenment. The world could use a dose of the Athenian multi-tasking that the Jena romantics so much admired.

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**Karl Ameriks, *Kantian Dignity & Its Difficulties*. Oxford: OUP, 2024, 226pp. ISBN: 9780198917625**

It seems standard for reviewers in their opening remarks to provide a brief overview of the problem at large, as if they are the expert, before turning to describe their interpretation of what the book under review aims to achieve. That would only serve me with a defeating endeavor, as Karl Ameriks in lucid and poignant fashion lays out the various intricacies related to Kant’s theory of human dignity. Throughout the book, Ameriks speculates on the historical reception of Kant’s theory, indicating its many turns in history, some of which are less than genuine. But *Kantian Dignity & Its Difficulties* is no simple and straightforward affair, as Ameriks posits challenging and thoroughly thought-provoking questions—some of which have no real answer, but must be asked anyway. Why didn’t Kant—the champion of reason and enlightenment, the philosopher of human dignity and rights—say anything about the Declaration of Independence with its demand to fulfill universal equality and to promote the pursuit of happiness? Why did subsequent generations of Germans not carry on the Kantian project of dignity and instead dive headlong into obsessions with art and anti-democratic values? These are some of the heavy questions that Ameriks will deal with in the book and, I believe, he offers satisfying and sound responses.

In his introduction, Ameriks describes the many approaches to Kant’s moral theory by other commentators, insisting himself on the moral realism standpoint in defense of Kant’s commitments. Along the way, Ameriks