

Reading, Writing, Living, and Feeling: an Interview With Olivia Dresher on the Literary Fragment

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Abstract

This article presents a discussion of the literary fragment and introduces the work of Olivia Dresher, an American anthologist, musician, and diarist, who has adopted Twitter as support for her intimate writings as of 2009. This preamble works as background to the exclusive interview with the writer reproduced here, through which we learn about Dresher's formative years, her thoughts about the fragment, and the implications of writing on social media. The article highlights the relationship between fragmentary writing and modernity, and addresses the challenges underlying the analysis of fragments, which includes the very flexibility of these texts (which may take on a variety of forms), as well as the question of autobiography, as these productions are often of a personal, intimate nature. Olivia Dresher's writings and anthologies – *A silence of words* (2019), *In pieces: an anthology of fragmentary writing* (2006), and *Darkness and light: private writing as art* (2000) – as well as works by theorists and critics such as Gerald L. Bruns, Philip Beitchman, and Leonor Arfuch have provided support for this study and for the presentation of Olivia's thoughts in the interview.

Keywords: Literary fragment; Olivia Dresher; Interview; Modernity; Private Writing

Ler, escrever, viver e sentir: uma entrevista com Olivia Dresher sobre o fragmento literário

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta uma discussão sobre o fragmento literário e introduz a obra de Oliva Dresher, antologista, musicista e diarista norte-americana, que adotou o Twitter como suporte para seus escritos íntimos a partir de 2009. Esse preâmbulo funciona como pano de fundo para a entrevista inédita com a escritora reproduzida aqui, por meio da qual aprendemos sobre seus anos de formação, seus pensamentos sobre o fragmento e as implicações de se escrever em mídias sociais. O artigo destaca a relação entre a escrita fragmentária e a modernidade e aborda os desafios subjacentes à análise de fragmentos, o que inclui a própria flexibilidade desses textos (que podem assumir diversas formas), e a questão da autobiografia, uma vez que essas produções são frequentemente de natureza íntima e pessoal. As antologias de Olivia Dresher – *A silence of words* (2019); *In pieces: an anthology of fragmentary writing* (2006), and *Darkness and light: private writing as art* (2000) – além de trabalhos de teóricos e críticos como Gerald L. Bruns, Philip Beitchman e Leonor Arfuch forneceram o suporte para a pesquisa realizada e para a apresentação dos pensamentos de Olivia na entrevista.

Palavras-chave: Fragmento literário; Olivia Dresher; entrevista; modernidade; escrita íntima

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Fragments, all of us are fragments. Billions of human fragments on this planet and that's just a fragment of the universe. (DRESHER, Olivia, Fragnotes).¹

The literary fragment has been a subject of critical investigation since at least the late 18th century, when the German Romantics proposed to rework this modality of writing from the classics, providing it with a clear analytical purpose and highlighting its value in the process of artistic creation.² In the 19th and 20th centuries, writers as diverse as Friedrich Nietzsche, Fernando Pessoa, Walter Benjamin, and Anaïs Nin explored some of the possibilities of fragmentary writing through aphorisms, diaristic entries, random observations, and poetic pieces in consonance with a modern scenario marked by speed, immediacy, and fragmentation. As Philip Beitchman observes with regard to Blanchot's reflections on the fragment: "the fragmentary work is more in tune with the exigencies of the time we live in" (BEITHCMAN, 1983, p. 59). While fragmentary writing is an undeniable feature of 20th and 21st-century literature, we now witness the production of a myriad of writers who publish short pieces on digital platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Still, fragments remain a challenge to scholars, are rarely found in the reading lists of university syllabi, and do not enjoy the same status as do novels or short stories, for example.

Olivia Whitaker Dresher, born in Washington D.C. in 1945, "a writer, publisher and editor, anthologist, former musician, and an advocate for historic preservation" (<http://fraglit.com/od/bio>), has been seriously engaged in writing and thinking about the fragment for decades. Unfortunately, studies focused either on the anthologies she organized or on her impressive production on social media are rare. Dresher's writings and insights provide an invaluable contribution to fragmentary writing and thought. I have contacted Olivia through Twitter and she kindly agreed to give an interview in which she speaks about her formative years, her reading history, the dedication to writing fragments and journals, and the implications of writing on social media.

"I loved books as much as music. I began a diary at age 10, and I wrote in that diary while my father's music was playing in the living room. Music, reading, and writing have always been intertwined for me." This is part of Dresher's account of her early life, which she delivers as an answer to the first question in the interview reproduced here (p. 7).³ Olivia's website, oliviadresher.com, works as a guide to her life and work. *A silence of words*, a collection of her own fragmentary writings on Twitter as of 2009, was published in 2019. Before that, in 2000, she had anthologized and published *Darkness and light, private writing as art: an anthology of contemporary journals, diaries, and notebooks*, together with Victor Muñoz. In 2006, she edited *In pieces: an anthology of fragmentary writing*, a remarkable and diverse collection of fragmentary pieces by 37 writers, including Olivia Dresher herself, William Stafford, and Guy Gauthier. Finally, her contribution to a number of literary magazines, whose links are available on the aforementioned website, is not exhausting, but rather gives us an idea of the vastness of her oeuvre.

As she writes in the Introduction to *In pieces*:

Though fragmentation is a characteristic of our current times and is also reflected in modern literature, published fragments are not entirely new. The ancient writings of Sappho and Heraclitus, for example, have become classics... (*sic*) as well as such 18th and 19th century writings as

¹ Available at: <http://fraglit.com/flit/archives/category/s-2009>

² See Márcio Scheel's comprehensive study *Poética do Romantismo: Novalis e o fragmento literário*. São Paulo: Ed. UNESP, 2010. As Scheel synthesizes: "Novalis and Schlegel, from the systematic reading of the great fragmentary works of Classical Antiquity, the philosophical aphorism, the maxim, and the accounts and thoughts of the French moralists, recreate the textual fragment and expand its latent potentialities, giving rise to the literary fragment, a distinct form of critical writing, a new way of developing the theoretical thought about the act of creation". My translation: "Novalis e Schlegel recriam, a partir da leitura sistemática das grandes obras fragmentárias da Antiguidade clássica, do aforismo filosófico, das máximas, relatos e pensamentos dos moralistas franceses, o fragmento textual e ampliam suas potencialidades latentes, fazendo surgir o fragmento literário, uma forma diversa de escritura crítica, um novo modo de desenvolver o pensamento teórico sobre o ato de criação" (SCHEEL, 2010, p. 17).

³ I first contacted Olivia through Twitter. Subsequently, I sent her a set of questions by email in the form of an interview and she gladly agreed to answer them also in written form. The interview is here reproduced in its entirety.

Lichtenberg's aphorisms and Joseph Joubert's notebooks. More recently, the 20th century fragments of Fernando Pessoa, in his *The Book of Disquiet*, are fine examples of fragmentary writing. But Pessoa's fragments are more than that: they are fragmentations that he actually lived. (DRESHER, 2006, p. xi)

This excerpt shows Dresher as a reader, historian, and thinker of the fragment, roles she also assumes in several of her meta-fragments.⁴ The fragments we read in her chapter, "Moments & Confessions", not only testify to the reflexive nature of Dresher's writing, but also reveal moments of intimacy and observation, in which living, or the scene of writing, is poetically rendered in concise pieces, samples of which are offered by Dresher herself on pages 9 and 10 of this article.

Olivia's pieces, like some others in the 2006 anthology, may puzzle readers for their diversity. What exactly are the rules of fragments, we may wonder? As Gerald L. Bruns puts it in *Interruptions: the fragmentary aesthetic in modern literature*:

On the one hand, there are ruins, citations, aphorism, epigrams, paradoxes, remarks (*Bemerkungen*), notes, lists, sketches, marginalia, parentheticals, conversations, dangling participles...
On the other, there is the objectivist tradition of romantic poetics that comes down to us from (among others) Friedrich Schlegel, for whom writing is less the work of an expressive subject than an arrangement of words that cannot be contained within any genre description, or indeed within any binary relations whether between subject and object, part and whole, identity and difference, digit and system, beginning and end. (BRUNS, 2018, p. 11)

It must be noted, nevertheless, that the subjectivist, biographical impulse of fragmentary writing is present both in the writings of Dresher and in writings by other 20th and 21st-century writers. Indeed, since the death of the authors' theories have undergone reevaluation in recent decades⁵, there has been growing interest in writers' hybrid texts, such as diaries, prefaces, and letters, understood less as a repository of fixed intentions or coherent individuals and more as vehicles for the performance of identities, testimonies to the contamination between reality and the imaginary, and indexes of contextual, material or ideological configurations. Still, as Kimble James Greenwood defends in *Meditations on 25 years of journal writing* (appended to Dresher and Muñoz's *Darkness and light*):

William Saroyan once suggested that good writing was writing done by 'a good man'. It could be said, no less facetiously, that the journal-as-art is a journal written by an artist. Or – to take it to a level a little less facetious – the journal-as-art is the recording of a life *lived* as art (*sic*). (GREENWOOD, 2000, p. 322)

The idea of the journal-as-art is endorsed by Victor Muñoz in *The Journal as Art: 'Impossible Text'*: "When a literary journal is, in addition, rich in intersubjective meaning and interpretation, we may call it to some degree an instance of the journal as art" (MUÑOZ, 2006, p. 331). One of the problems of this assertion is that the definition of what is artistic or not seems insufficient. Nonetheless, this affirmation highlights the fact that there is always some kind of readership for the intimate record, even if some believe that the diary, for that matter, is written only as a self-examination or not aimed at a particular reader. To Kimble James Greenwood:

[...] I would say that everyone imagines the diary will be read. The traditional lock on the diary, the obsessive gestures of hiding it, guarding it, disguising it, writing in code – are all manifestations of the anxiety, the fantasy, that the diary will be read. To commit anything to writing is to create physical evidence – an extension of the self that, once committed, exceeds the control, guardianship or restrictions of the self. (GREENWOOD, 2000, p. 310)

⁴ See Olivia Dresher's *Fragnotes*, Available at: <http://fraglit.com/flit/archives/category/s-2009>.

⁵ See Sean Burke's *The death and return of the author*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

Further on in his essay, Greenwood adds that “[w]riting does not only give others access to what would remain unexpressed in the self, it also gives access to *oneself-as-other*” (*Sic, Ibidem*, p. 311). Olivia expresses her own take on the journal as art in the following terms:

I don't like to think of the journal or notebook as only a tool for some other form of writing; I like to think of it as the form in itself, and one can choose how much of it to reveal to an audience. (But, of course, in revealing the content of the writing, one would need to think of it as something valuable in itself rather than being used as a tool for personal growth only, for instance. (p.8 of the interview)

The interplay between ipseity and alterity is further discussed by Olivia as she answers our questions.

These are only a few of the questions that emerge each time the autobiographical element is present in a literary work. The individual voice, or the first-hand experience, has been hailed as a way to counter hegemonic discourses and the anonymity enforced by institutions of late capitalism (or by modernity itself as is often testified in Kafka's work), which includes social media with its pasteurized identities.⁶ With the proliferation of autobiographical narratives in recent years, a number of theories and concepts have been revisited. Philippe Lejeune's notion of autobiographical pact and the more recent concept of autofiction⁷ have often served as references for analyses of a wide variety of texts. In this sense, and with regard to diaristic or intimate fragmentary writing, Leonor Arfuch's elaboration on the *biographical space* has been particularly illuminating. According to the author:

[...] the notion of biographical space tries to take account of a terrain in which the classic discursive-generic forms start to cross roads and hybridize; the category of biographical value acquires a new protagonist value in the narrative imbrication which gives coherence to the life itself; and the appellation to a stable referentiality as a point of anchorage is dislocated in relation to the diverse strategies of self-representation.⁸ (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 10-11).

Arfuch's notion of biographical space is an apt approach to contemporary intimate writing such as that which we encounter in Dresher's anthologies. Arfuch's definition takes account of the variety of forms this writing can assume and allows us to read it as a poetics of the self, which is multiple, in contrast with the fixed and coherent self of the traditional autobiography (as Lejeune's systematizes it).

Thus, when it comes to fragments, the role of the reader should go far beyond the mere acceptance of an autobiographical pact. The reader must embrace the sense of interruption that fragments elicit and become acquainted with a paratactic, rather than a hypotactic economy.⁹ By extension, the experience of early 20th-century modernist avant-garde finds resonance in contemporary fragments: writers like Olivia Dresher also challenge established habits of reading, blend the frontiers between the verbal and visual arts, and give special prominence to the instant, as well as to the individual apprehension of it. The modern experience of fragmentation, be it psychic, spatial, or aesthetic, is still within the horizon of contemporary fragment writers. What remains to be understood is how this sense of fragmentation is rendered in new media and under different historical circumstances.

It is hoped that readers will be acquainted with the work of such a dedicated and prolific artist as Olivia, and be inspired by her words and thoughts on the following pages. To Brazilian readers, in particular, Olivia's books may serve as points of departure for research that focuses (comparatively

6 See also Nestor Garcia Canclini, "Quem fala e em qual lugar: sujeitos simulados e pós-construtivismo." *Diferentes, desiguais e desconectados: mapas da interculturalidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 2005. pp. 183-208.

7 See also Ana Faedrich's "O conceito de autoficção: demarcações a partir da literatura brasileira contemporânea". *Itinerários*, n. 40, jan./jul.2015, p. 45-60.

8 My translation: "[...] a noção de espaço biográfico tenta dar conta de um terreno que as formas discursivo-gênicas clássicas começam a se entrecruzar e hibridizar; a categoria do valor biográfico adquire um novo caráter de protagonista no traçado narrativo que dá coerência à própria vida; e a apelação a uma referencialidade estável como ponto de ancoragem é deslocada em relação às diversas estratégias de autorepresentação" (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 10-11).

9 See Gerald L. Bruns's *Interruptions: the fragmentary aesthetic in modern literature*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2018. p. 18.

or not) on fragmentary writing being produced in Brazil. Additionally, similar anthologies to those organized by the author could shed light upon contemporary writing in the country. As Dresher shares her experiences with us, be it through her essays, fragments, or even in the conversation that follows, she invites us to rethink our reading and writing habits, sets a model for thinking and writing about fragmentary writing in contemporaneity, and challenges the limits between *lived* life and *written* life, the real and the imaginary, modernity and post-modernity, spontaneity and artifice, thinking, living, and feeling. Olivia's example prompts us to explore new media, to express ourselves and impart our individual voices in times of anonymity, and to establish partnerships, to create bonds with other writers, communities, and cultures. Finally, her writing and teachings could stimulate young writers in our university courses, renew our belief in the power of literature, and trigger us all to share reflections, perceptions, thoughts, and affects.

Interview with Olivia Dresher

I: Interviewers

O: Olivia Dresher

I: How did writing and reading enter your life? What role did music play in your apprehension and practice of writing?

O: I'm so pleased that you've grouped together writing, reading, and music...because all three have been of primary importance in my life.

My father was an eccentric mathematician, but his most passionate love was music. There was never a moment in our house (except when we were sleeping) when music wasn't playing on the radio or record player, all kinds of music – from classical to jazz to ethnic music to rock & roll. My father died in 1992, and so I'm speaking of a time before the internet and before social media became popular and radically changed our lives.

It was with this backdrop of music that I came into the world and lived my life. The music was a soundtrack to everything I felt and thought while at home. Every night when I went to bed, I would fall asleep to whatever composition was playing on my father's radio or record player (and often I would have a hard time falling asleep). When I wasn't in the house, the sounds of nature (especially the wind) was the soundtrack. I grew up always aware of the sounds going on in the outer world.

I took music lessons from a young age, and performed in folk groups beginning when I was a young adult. I wrote my own songs. I gave music lessons, as well, and at one point (before I permanently moved away from Los Angeles in 1979) I had over 20 students of piano, cello, guitar, and voice. My younger brother, too, is musical – a composer, musician, and instrument inventor/builder. My father would follow him all over the world to hear his performances. Though he didn't play much music himself, my father was determined to make sure his two children would express the gift.

I began reading at an early age. I loved books as much as music. I began a diary at age 10, and I wrote in that diary while my father's music was playing in the living room. Music, reading, and writing have always been intertwined for me. However, I've discarded my earliest attempts at writing in diaries and journals, from age 10 to 22. I've saved all the journals and notebooks I've written since then, beginning in 1968. There are 100s of them. Generally, these days, I call what I write

“fragments” or “fragments and aphorisms,” and I write them on Twitter and also in notebooks with a pen. I often select fragments and shape them into separate compositions, and some of these I’ve put up on my website at OliviaDresher.com. I’ve also published a number of these compositions in literary journals and anthologies.

My mother played the piano and she loved literature. At our house we had many shelves filled with books. One day in the early 1960s I discovered a book of aphorisms, and that book changed my life. I fell in love with brevity as literature.

As a teenager I began to write poetry, and then in my early 20s I began to publish poems in literary journals. I published a chapbook of my poetry in 1974 titled *A Candle in the Ice* (under the name Olivia Clark). But most of my poems came from what I wrote in my notebooks. I secretly wished I could publish a collection of “Notes”. Finally, in 1990, I quit my job at the University of Washington and began to put together an anthology with the philosopher Victor Munoz, titled *Darkness and Light: Private Writing as Art*. The book is an anthology of contemporary journals, diaries, and notebooks... and we’ve included our own writings in the book. It was finally published almost ten years after we began working on it.

I don’t like to think of the journal or notebook as only a tool for some other form of writing; I like to think of it as the form in itself, and one can choose how much of it to reveal to an audience. (But, of course, in revealing the content of the writing, one would need to think of it as something valuable in itself rather than being used as a tool for personal growth only, for instance.) I can sometimes look through a complete notebook I’ve written and find only a few fragments that I want to expose or publish. Sometimes I edit the fragments I’ve written, and I love the editing process.

I would say that every fragment or journal entry that I write is done with the feeling of writing to music. I truly cannot imagine how I’d write if music had never been a big part of my life from the time I was born.

I: “Anyone can write a fragment – A saint or a criminal, a mother or a hermit.” Are there limits to the democratic promise of writing anything on social media?

O: I recognize that fragment you quoted, which I posted on Twitter. And it’s true – anyone can write a fragment. You can scribble fragments on little slips of paper that you keep in your backpack, or you can write them cleanly in a notebook. You can type them on your computer. Or you can post them on social media for thousands to read.

Twitter, being limited to only 280 characters (although it began with a 140 character limit) is the perfect place for me to write a fragment. I’ve been at Twitter since 2009 (it’s now late 2021), and everything I write there I write spontaneously. I’ve written a total of over 64,000 fragments at this point, and every time I go there to write, the fragments pour out of me. I’ve been known to spend hours and hours writing at Twitter.

In 2019 my book *A Silence of Words* was published. It consists of fragments that I chose from my earliest days at Twitter, and I had a total of 58,000 fragments to choose from at the time. I numbered every fragment I chose for the book, and included a total of 874 fragments. Some of the fragments are just a few words.

About a year ago I downloaded my complete archive at Twitter, with the help of a friend, so I have a record of everything I wrote there (although I don’t have a record of my most recent tweets). I’ve been copying by hand, into a large notebook, what I’ve posted there recently...but I’m still behind by a few months. I never know when I’m going to write something or how many tweets there will

be. My writing there is truly spontaneous. I have many boxes filled with printouts from Twitter from my early days, as well as pages and pages of handwritten tweets that I've copied from my account.

What form does my writing take at Twitter, and what sorts of things do I write about? Sometimes I write a full paragraph, sometimes I write using short line breaks. I write memories. I ask a lot of questions about life and relationships. I write about the weather, the seasons, the universe. I write about beauty and sorrow. I explore – psychologically, philosophically. Here are a few fragments from 2021 (randomly picked):

When you turn a feeling into art,
it has wings.

* * *

I love being alone especially when being alone means digesting the experiences I've had when not alone. I rarely want to be alone just for the sake of being alone.

* * *

My strengths are my vulnerabilities,
and all that I don't know is my wisdom.

* * *

What is your spiritual practice? she asked.
I cry and I laugh, I said.
My spiritual practice is being alive
in the way that I'm alive.

* * *

There has never been an autumn when I didn't feel all my longings rise up and crown themselves.

* * *

Children tell you what they feel,
adults tell you how to be.

But I don't write just anything on Twitter. And the subjects and themes I involve myself with are of a very specific sort. I write what feels personal, what feels urgent. I don't post on any other social media site (except Facebook very occasionally), but I really don't know how to use Facebook, and mostly I just read what a few people write there. I generally don't like it. I'm not attracted to the groupthink that I often see emerging there. I don't even know how to use Twitter very well, I just go there – and post my fragments. I don't actively argue or disagree with people, or engage in much conversation. I don't want to be distracted from the meanings and feelings in my posts. And, because I'm older, I'm writing from periods of time that most people haven't lived through. And I'm writing

from solitude – which is not a place most people at Twitter write from.

Social Media is a rapidly changing form. It hasn't been around very long. I'm really only familiar with Twitter. I joined it by necessity. One of the women I was going to publish in my online magazine (FragLit Magazine, www.fraglit.com) wanted me to choose some of the writing she had up on Twitter. To read her writing, I began an account, and also began to post there. This was autumn 2009, and I found that I had many followers very quickly (many were already familiar with my anthology, *In Pieces*). I began by posting fragments I had written in the past, and then I began to write new fragments spontaneously. Those were the days when only up to 140 characters were allowed on Twitter. Because so few characters were allowed per post, I had to make what I wrote very tight. I loved the process of honing in and making each tweet as short as possible, or certainly at least under 140 characters.

Do I write anything on Twitter, though? No, I don't. Why not, you might ask. I'm not really sure. I don't want to write truly explosive rhetoric. I don't swear very often in my tweets. I don't write material that's cringeworthy, at least I don't think I do. I don't very often write political posts, but I do occasionally. Or I write in more subtle ways about those things. I probably hold some views that people might dislike me for, but for the most part I avoid those topics, but not always. Why do I do this? Again, I'm not sure. It's what I'm doing right now on Twitter, and so far it's what I've been doing for over a decade. It could change in the future.

For me, personally, I feel I can write anything on Twitter. I can explore any subject that interests me, I can write about any feeling. But I know that some people are censored, which I don't agree with. I feel that people should be able to write whatever they want. Once you begin censoring, freedom is lost.

I: In your opinion, what role does fragmentary writing play in the age of social media and of pasteurized identities?

O: Social media and fragmentary writing seem to go together. And, as I've already written, I'm really only familiar with Twitter, and to a much lesser extent Facebook. There are many other social media sites out there that I know nothing about. I write to be able to explore and express my identity, quite opposite from being a pasteurized identity.

The internet is vast, social media is vast. When I think of all the websites, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, news sites, social networks, YouTube videos, and gaming sites (although I'm not a gamer) that exist, I'm overwhelmed. I used to think traditional media (radio, TV, in-print magazines & newspapers, etc.) was immense, but it is tiny compared to the internet. I don't watch TV. And now with AI on the horizon, and even in use in limited ways already, we are moving into a new world. And I didn't even mention email in all this, which I spend hours using every day. I also watch many videos that are posted at YouTube on many different subjects. Watching YouTube videos is also how I travel all over the world.

For me, fragmentary writing that is written thoughtfully is like stumbling upon fresh drinking water in the desert. I specifically look for people who are posting thoughtful fragments on Twitter.

Perhaps people these days don't even realize how much social media is influencing them. And perhaps they don't realize how much they, themselves, are writing fragments.

I: How do you see the interplay between ipseity and alterity in the journal? Is the journal to be seen mainly as a place for the self to attain affirmation?

O: If we see ipseity as self-identity, and alterity as otherness, one might ask: how does the audience shape the expression of the self in journal writing? And when the writing is private, as journal writing is considered to be, how does the audience interfere with or encourage that expression? Is even the idea of having an audience taboo when it comes to private writing?

Perhaps there is always an audience, even when the writer destroys the journal entry by throwing it away. Maybe it is thrown away because there's a sense of an audience, even if it's the writer's critical attitude toward their self.

My audience, or one of them, is myself. I'm very conscious of this. There is the self who is writing (or has a thought to be written down) and there is the self (MYself) who is contemplating what I write, who is also reading it as it's written (or afterwards). When I write, I am two people: writer and reader.

In many ways I consider Twitter to be one of my journal notebooks. And so I might ask, who is my audience when I write on Twitter? Social Media is "out there". I have a clue as to who my audience is by looking at the list of followers I've acquired. But when I'm literally writing, all that fades away, and my only relationship is with the words I'm writing and the meanings that evolve in the process of putting those words down.

Who is my audience in the journal notebook I write in with pen and paper? Is it a completely different audience than the one I have on Twitter?

What I write on Twitter or in a journal notebook is not my whole self, though. You can never write from your whole self, partly because it's always changing and there are many aspects to a person. You can only write fragments of yourself. And I certainly wouldn't call what I write on Twitter "private" writing. I'm not even sure what private writing is anymore, for to write something is to externalize yourself, even if you don't let anyone read it. Who is a journal writer writing to when their writing is private? And, why do we write at all?

I have a very large collection of published journals, diaries, and notebooks. They're kept in the upstairs front bedroom of my house, on many shelves and in bookcases. (I posted a list of the collection at www.impassioned.net, but I'm very behind in keeping up the list. In fact, I'm years behind.) Also, in this room I have a collection of memoirs, aphorisms, brief essays, and fragments (including unpublished fragmentary writings written by various people I've known). I have a collection of published letters in the hallway, philosophy and spirituality in the back bedroom, poetry books in the living room (including a large chapbook collection), and a large collection of fiction in the basement. (And that's not all the published books that I have; it's just the books that are written in the forms that are most dear to me.)

My favorite fragmentary writer is Fernando Pessoa (especially his *The Book of Disquiet*). And my favorite aphorist is Antonio Porchia. My favorite diary writer is Anais Nin, especially because she made her diaries her life work, although she also wrote fiction. But when I read her fiction, I almost feel as if I'm reading her diaries. The issue of fiction in her diaries is a hot topic among critics, but I love her writing and her struggle, and the way it comes alive in her diaries. My mother bought me Anais Nin's first published diary in 1966 for my birthday, and when I began reading it, I thought: This is what I want to do. (I had just turned 21.)

I call journals fragmentary writings. I don't think one has to write about their self directly in their fragments, but indeed everything you write is a reflection of who you are. If you write about nature, you have a particular style of writing, or attitude, that can reveal who you are. The same is true if you write philosophical fragments. The philosophy in Kierkegaard's journals, for instance, is unmistakably his philosophy.

Many writers, thinkers, and philosophers have kept journals, diaries, and notebooks...and many of these works have been published. Sylvia Plath, Thoreau, Kafka, Andre Gide, Anais Nin, Camus, Robert Musil, Hawthorne, Susan Sontag, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Merton, Sartre, Marie Bashkirtseff, Ginsberg, Elias Canetti, May Sarton, Gombrowicz, Simone de Beauvoir, just to name a few. (And I have all of their journals, diaries, and notebooks in my collection.)

I: What do you expect to find when you open a new collection of journals or intimate writing?

O: That is the most exciting thing to me as a reader – to open a new collection of writings, especially if the writing is personal and intimate. I don't think I expect to find anything truly specific in the subject matter, but I do expect to see writing within a certain form, in this case the form of journal writing and/or intimate fragments. The writings might be separated by dates or asterisks. All the rest is a surprise. The form of the writing is very visual to me. That's another reason why I'm drawn to fragments: I like the way they look on the page or screen. But if the type is too small and crowded together, or there's not enough space between the fragments, I find it difficult to read.

I recently read *Capturing the Moment by Guy Gauthier* (a travel journal) and *Trapeze: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anais Nin, 1947-1955*, and I loved both of these journals/diaries. I don't know anyone but Gauthier who can write with such enthusiasm and wonder about the smallest details of the moment, and I don't know anyone but Nin who can dive so deeply into the psychological depths of her feelings for the people she loved and struggled with. What both of these writers have in common is the intensity with which they pay attention to their lives.

Some people write long paragraphs in emails. I sometimes rewrite what someone sends me, putting in paragraph breaks, many of them, so I can contemplate what they're saying smoothly. Otherwise I find it difficult to read and it's as if they've given me a soup with 20 ingredients. When I break up the writing, I can see each ingredient of the soup. Each is a fragment, and it stands on its own. This is a very personal thing that I do, and I really don't think anyone else does it. Of course, when the long paragraphs are in a book, there's nothing that I can do. I would say, in that case, that I expected shorter paragraphs and, instead, found the opposite.

I don't see myself as a teacher of fragmentary writing, I'm more of a practitioner and appreciator. I want to convey the value of the form. It may not be for everyone, but it deserves a place in the literary world as much as any other form of writing.

As I wrote in my anthology *In Pieces* in 2002,

What are my fragments?

Parachutes that open as I fall through the night.

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