What is a Fragment?

I bought this book as part of a reading project on the relation between very long forms of fiction (thousand-page novels, or at least five-hundred page ones, like this one, which are dense with citations, marginal notes, and multiple voices) and very short forms (such as aphorisms, including Chamfort's, Rochefoucauld's, Nietzsche's, and Lichtenberg's, and also Ben Lerner's poems on Lichtenberg, and Alexander Kluge's text on Lerner's text on Lichtenberg).

This is a complex book, with about 150 short chapters, each titled, arranged in several sequences. Actual aphorisms by Lichtenberg are in the text and in the margins, always identified by number:

"[J 1842] I must write in order to learn to appreciate on my own the extent of the chaos within me." (p. 76, margin)

The body text presents itself as a narrative about the life and reception of Lichtenberg. Most chapters are written by an unnamed narrator; a couple, headed "Lichtenberg speaks," are presented as if written by Lichtenberg.

1. Why the book is not an historical novel

In Michael Orthofer's words, the book is

"difficult to categorize. Dalkey Archive Press (accurately) presents the English translation as 'Fiction' (in its 'French Literature Series'), but its Dewey class identification number (838.609) will lead dutiful librarians to shelve it somewhere in Goethe's vicinity, on the historical literature shelves; the Library of Congress classification (PT2423.L4 Z91313) puts it similarly deep in German-literature territory, rather than in the contemporary French literature section -- subject-matter apparently prevailing over form." (from The Complete Review, www.complete-review.com)

But it is hardly true, as Orthofer concludes, that "the picture of Lichtenberg readers are left with is likely a more complete one of the man and his work than
can be found in any traditional (or other fictional) biography." And it's hardly the case that the material is "mined to its very ends."

Lichtenberg published five books and a number of essays in his lifetime, and almost none of that is in Senges's book, with the exception of some traces of Lichtenberg's text on Hogarth. Lichtenberg's science is alluded to many times, but also basically not described. Senges used a French translation of the aphorisms, and he seems to have very little interest in Lichtenberg's science or his other interests. It's not a book to read if you're hoping to learn about Lichtenberg. "Fiction" is the correct classification.

Most of the novel is a succession of stories, all invented, about people who tried to assemble the fragments in his "Waste Books," believing they were the remains of a "Grand Novel." Senges imagines two centuries' worth of work, a study center, and a half-dozen individual scholars (Leonid Pliachine, Zoltan Kiforgat, Christina Walser, Mary Mulligan), and he tells us at length about their theories. Those scholars and their hypothetical books are the real characters in "Fragments of Lichtenberg."

2. Fragment and whole in "Fragments of Lichtenberg"

I was hoping, I suppose, for a meditation on the difference between Lichtenberg's notes (he did not call them aphorisms) and the clearly encyclopedic ambitions of Senges's narrative. But Senges has a simple notion of both the aphorism that prevents any real engagement. He only quotes about 200 of Lichtenberg's thousands of notes. There are about 10,000 in all (see the German Wikipedia for Sudelbücher), and according to the translator, Senges used a French translation that has about 2,000. They range from sentence fragments to longer notes, but Senges prefers them all the same size, about the length of the one I quoted.

The conceit of the book is that Lichtenbergians thought that they were the remains of an enormous novel, and in particular that Lichtenberg had burned the novel, leaving only 1/10 of it in the form of his notes, which he then collected. (It's ridiculously improbable, given that almost none of the notes read as fragments of a novel -- there's no dialogue, for example, and no characters -- and that Lichtenberg himself kept his notebooks, one for each letter of the alphabet, so he would have had to write a novel, burn it, collect the fragments, and assemble them into supposedly chronological notebooks.)

That conceit permits Senges to imagine books that Lichtenberg might have written, and it allows him to tell, in a fragmented way, the stories of Lichtenberg's self-appointed editors over the centuries. In other words many of the 150 or so short chapters in "Fragments of Lichtenberg" are themselves fragments of about a half-dozen stories about the scholars. But that sort of fragmentation is really only division and rearrangement: it isn't a cutting, across the grain of grammar and sense, as in the best of Lichtenberg's aphorisms. Senges has one of his characters propose that Lichtenberg's fragments are like islands in an
archipelago, and the oceanic spaces between are the lost texts: it's a metaphor very much in line with the original Sudelbücher, but not at all in line with "Fragments of Lichtenberg," which is continuous and uniformly expressive and comprehensible despite its 150 chapters. (p. 65)

The narrative runs in a fluid, fluent fashion, without any letup, for all of the book's 500 pages, and the result is a strong contrast between the dense, obdurate quotations from Lichtenberg and the author's watery prose. Here is an example among hundreds. Two of Lichtenberg's fragments are insert in a sentence that runs blithely on past them:

"...the foreheads of the Lichtenbergians are all nicely wrinkled: between [Lichtenberg's aphorism] 'One of our ancestors must have read the forbidden book' [D 339] and [his aphorism] 'Flies have mated in the hollow of my ear' [L 555], there might [have originally have been] a hundred and twenty pages of shipwreck, capture, and salvation, filled with duels and stampedes, a pastor's monologue, and the complaints of a chambermaid..." (p. 45)

Senges can't help himself: he needs to list every Baroque possibility he can, and the result is a cavalcade of supposedly learned, superficially "encyclopedic" information. But the happy torrent of Senges's references is at stark odds with the weirdness and seriousness of Lichtenberg's thoughts. Aphorisms are embedded in this book like ugly spiders frozen in floods of amber.

"Fragments of Lichtenberg" evades the more interesting problem of the disjunction between Lichtenberg's 10,000 unattachable, irrecoverable fragments, and Senges's superficially fragmented but actually quite well-ordered book. As I read I went through a phase of skipping ahead to read Lichtenberg (his fragments are always in italics in the translation, and often in the margins), because I was getting less and less from Senges's prose, but I was always rewarded by the strangeness of Lichtenberg's thoughts. It only makes matters worse that Senges sometimes ends his brief chapters with lines that he must think function like aphorisms. A chapter called "Lichtenberg speaks" (one of several in his voice) ends: "in fact, sometimes it's my hump that does the dictating." (Lichtenberg was hunch-backed.) (p. 71). That pales next to the Lichtenberg aphorism that's quoted in the margin of the facing page:

"[L 972] I believe that man is ultimately so free that his right to be what he believes himself to be cannot be disputed."

What an amazing compression of ironies, so distant from Senges's simple paraphrase of Lichtenberg's thoughts on his deformity. At one point Senges quotes Lichtenberg's fragment B 232: "Imagination and fantasy must be used with caution, like any corrosive substance." (p. 381) It seems Senges did not notice this implicit indictment of his own project: despite every attempt to let his imagination and fantasy run on, he has produced a book that is not "corrosive" at all. It's oblivious, often, to the acid in its subject's heart, to the willfulness that
resulted in 10,000 "notes" that could never be synthesized, to the attraction Lichtenberg felt toward things that do not fit, that do not exist in endless chains of trite Baroque associations (shipwrecks, pastors, chambermaids).

I don't see this as a book on Lichtenberg. I also don't see it as a book on the contrast between encyclopedic excess and aphoristic taciturnity, except inadvertently, in the continuous contrast between Lichtenberg's sharp insights and Senges's fluvial prose.

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(Incidentally, a lot of what passes as erudite allusions is, I think, more the result of Google searches. Internet-style scholarship abounds, for instance when the narrator happens to remember the sequence of pieces in a suite ["the intoxication of the prelude-allemande-courante-minuet-gigue variety"] or the number of blades in a Swiss Army knife [twenty-seven]. [p. 291]) Nor is there much engagement with the actual complexity of the real Baroque encyclopedias, which are rebarbatively intricate in comparison to the flow of stories in this book. Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy" is mentioned in passing, and so is Pierre Bayle. But actual Baroque encyclopedias are as distant from Senges's encyclopedism as he is distant from Lichtenberg. This is a firmly 21st century book, not in the sense that it has something new to say about part and whole, fragment and long form, but rather in the sense that it knows its 18th century through the internet.)