

a review of

The Fragment:

Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre

by Camelia Elias

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 3, June 2008

THE**FRAG**MENTT**HEFRAGM**
ENTT**HEFRAGMENT**T**HEFR**
RAGMENT**T**HEFRAGMENT****
T H E F R A G M E N T
T**HEFR**A**REVIEW**W**HEFRAG**
M**ENTT**THE**FRAG**M**ENTT**H
E**FRAGM**E**NTT**THE**FRAGME**
NTTTHE**FRAGMENTT**THE**FR**A
G**MENTT****HEFRAGMENTT**THE**E**
FRAGMENTTTHE**FRAGME**
NTT**HEFRAGM**E**NTT**THE**FR**
A**GMENTT**THE**FRAGMENT**

The Fragment:

Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre

Camelia Elias

Peter Lang, 2004

**by Sophie Thomas
University of Sussex**

Fragments are “the natural setting of the philosophic mind,” David Morris tells us in his book on Alexander Pope.¹ They are important tools for thinking, indeed for thinking about thinking, and for representing the way we think about thinking. It is no accident that many of the most decisive theoretical interventions of recent centuries directly engage either the question or the form of the fragment—from the theory of literature advanced and enacted by the *Athenaeum Fragments* of the German Romantics to poststructuralism’s endorsement of rupture and discontinuity as one of the defining, and inescapable, features of textuality. Nor that so many writers have been fascinated by the signifying possibilities of the fragment, to the extent that, as Friedrich Schlegel claimed, “Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written” (*Athenaeum Fragment* 24).² On the one hand, the fragment is identifiable—a thing, as its etymology suggests, that has been broken into pieces. On the other, fragments (slipping into the plural) are disturbing entities. They play upon the imagination by promising or at least suggesting more than what they are, while reminding the viewer or reader that this putative “more” can never be recovered or fully experienced. Fragments thus simultaneously raise and resist the possibility of totality and wholeness, exhibiting a presentational force that can never be exhausted. And in this sense the *conceptual* problem that the fragment represents never really goes away.

On the face of it, the absence until very recently of a systematic study of the fragment in the Anglo-American context suggests that these dilemmas are nevertheless not a leading cultural preoccupation. In English literary criticism, there have been important studies of the fragment within a particular period (such as Marjorie Levinson and Thomas McFarland’s work on the fragment in Romanticism), and work on related forms such as the ruin and the unfinished, alongside the occasional collection of essays (such as that edited by Lawrence Kritzman for New York Literary Forum in the 1980s). In France and Germany, by contrast, numerous studies have tackled the fragment more systematically, often addressing both visual and textual material. Perhaps this relates to the importance of the fragment in the continental philosophical tradition (Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Benjamin) and more pointedly to the investment in the fragment by such writers as Barthes and Blanchot. Elias’s study can thus lay claim to being the first of its kind to be published in English, and in its focus on the fragment as such, it is both ambitious and inclusive (its chapters cover material from antiquity to postmodernity, from Heraclitus to Derrida, though clearly it is heavily weighted towards the twentieth century). Since its publication, three further works of interest related to the

¹ *Alexander Pope: The Genius of Sense* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 165.

² *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow, foreword by Rodolphe Gasché (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 21.

fragment have appeared: Christopher Strathman's *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative* (SUNY, 2006), a study that considers the genealogy of an ironic Romantic poetics of the fragment from Schlegel and Byron through Joyce and Blanchot (reviewed by Camelia Elias on this site in October 2007); *Fragments: Architecture and the Unfinished*, an extensive volume of essays dedicated to Robin Middleton, covering the fragment in theory, landscape, architectural history, and modernity more generally (Thames & Hudson, 2006); and Daniel Watt's *Fragmentary Futures: Blanchot, Beckett, Coetzee* (Inkermen Press, 2007), which investigates the "recasting" of the Romantic fragment, principally through Blanchot, in contemporary writing.

Elias's study of the fragment is based on what is perhaps an inescapable paradox. She brings out with great care the nature of the fragment as something dynamic, shifting, subversive—a relation or a *force*, rather than a thing to be categorized. And yet, her book is structured around a complex categorization of the fragment, into 10 types. This urge to taxonomize has been a feature of nearly every study of the fragment. Marjorie Levinson's *The Romantic Fragment Poem*, for example, distinguished between the true, the deliberate, the completed, and the dependent fragment. Elizabeth Wanning Harries's *The Unfinished Manner* addressed explicitly the difference between works planned and presented as fragments, and those that become fragments for other reasons. Interestingly, taxonomies and distinctions speak for a certainty about what fragments might be that the fragment itself disavows, as Elias herself notes when she comments that much of the appeal of the fragment actually "relies on the fact that one can never be sure of what exactly constitutes a fragment" (2). Can the fragment be categorized, one might ask, without becoming categorical?

The taxonomy of the fragment that Elias devises, however, is strategic, as the emphasis is not so much on what a fragment *is*, as upon what it *does*, though as the book demonstrates these facets of the fragment are really inseparable. Elias distinguishes further between the fragment as text, as a "form" existing in all periods, and the critical discourse "on" the fragment that, from roughly 1800 onwards, has considered it as embedded in acts of writing and reading. In either case, the fragment is a "text" in its own right, but arguably what interests her more is the fragment as "meta-text," which is to say that while her study does not entirely neglect the literary history of the fragment, she is more interested in the place of the fragment in the "metatextual" discourse in which it so frequently participates. What is at stake here is, Elias claims, a shift of emphasis, from understanding the fragment in relation to the dichotomies of form/content or part/whole to seeing it "pragmatically" as functional, as *performative*, in a variety of identifiable ways. She asks: "what is a fragment when it is not a matter of form or content but a question of function, a philosophical concept, a manifestation of a theory, or a self-labelled 'thought'?" (4).

Elias offers 10 different types of fragment that operate, from a functional perspective at least, generically (the question of genre is one I shall return to below). These fall into two broad categories, which structure the book around two parts, according to a distinction between *being* and *becoming*. In the former state, the fragment exists as text, and manifests a certain agency: these types are labelled coercive, consensual, redundant, repetitive, and resolute. In the latter, the fragment is taken up by an agency outside itself and becomes what it is through a process of theorization in (critical) discourse. The five types of fragment identified here are ekphrastic, epigrammatic, epigraphic, emblematic, and epitaphic. They point, Elias suggests, not to how a fragment is historically constituted but to its representational functions. The overall distinction is important to Elias because it enables her to take into account the slippage between the fragmentary text and the critical discourse that “mimics” it (where overlap is inevitable), and to advance the idea that the fragment is inherently performative. That is, it only acquires a name when it is performed; “the fragment is only when it is something else” (63). Moreover, the dichotomy between *being* and *becoming* is not meant to be a rigid one but is deployed in order to elaborate a poetics of the fragment that is “a poetics of intersection *par excellence*” (353).

Those historically constituted fragments addressed in the first part of the book, as only latently performative, cover instances from the ancient world (principally Heraclitus), Romanticism and Modernism. With the fragments of Heraclitus, Elias attends, in the absence of a theory of the fragment, to their rhetoric and their later reception. These fragments privilege philosophical content, which “coerces” its readers, who in turn “coerce the fragments into displaying incompleteness as a formal trait” (22). With the Romantic fragment, represented principally by Schlegel, we observe the first full-blown theory of the fragment, which Elias discusses alongside emerging theories of interpretation. His fragments are deemed “consensual” insofar as “wit mediates between authorship and form” (73); they reveal the fragment to be a function of writing, which, through *Witz*, consents to interpretation. By engaging with, indeed producing their own theory, the fragments of Schlegel and the Jena Romantics inaugurated, as many have argued (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Literary Absolute* is a key text here), a theoretical discourse that casts its shadow over all subsequent theorizations of the fragment. In her chapter on the modernist period, Elias examines how Gertrude Stein, Louis Aragon, and Emile Cioran *stylistically* orient the fragment towards theory: in their work, style constitutes its own form and function—by fragmentary means. The fragment, though calculated and constructed, opens onto potential meaning, a potentiality marked by repetition (in Stein), redundancy (in Aragon) and resoluteness (Cioran). These three are singled out from other modernist writers because they are concerned “with the *idea* of a difference between the fragment and the fragmentary, which they then

analyze, scrutinize, and dismiss with grand style” (121).

In the second part of the book, where the focus is on fragments that enact themselves formally in the critical discourse of which they are also the object, Elias moves toward articulating a poetics of genre. Using examples drawn from postmodern and poststructural contexts, the fragments in question here are *manifestly* performative. Genres such as ekphrasis, epigram, epigraph, emblem, and epitaph are seen to mediate actively between the fragment’s state or mode as both fragment (“being”) and fragmentary (“becoming”). The first kind she identifies is the ekphrastic fragment. Examined largely through Mark Taylor’s *Deconstructing Theology*, the ekphrastic fragment functions as the verbal representation of its own graphic representation—where graphic is understood as implying visuality and/or “intertextual correspondence” (161). It is further subdivided into three types (the fold, the syllogism, the portrait) that are seen as traces of the baroque operative in the postmodern. By grounding the fragment in “both the deconstructed text and the verbalized image of theology,” Elias argues that Taylor articulates a relationship between theology and deconstruction (162).

The epigrammatic, epigraphic, and emblematic fragment are all treated together in one long chapter that hinges on an “aesthetics of *kenosis*,” which principally involves a process of emptying out and re-connection. Here, the fragment exceeds performativity by taking on the characteristics of an event (30), but the central question Elias wishes to ask is, “is the aesthetic of the fragment compatible with the effect that the fragment produces as an event?” And moreover, “how does authorial representation negate its own (dis)claiming?” (209). The epigrammatic fragment operates like an impresario in Marcel Bénabou’s *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*, by performing the question of beginning (to write). Elias argues that if one reads “for the epigram” instead of for the plot, the ontology of the work, in the form of a “nonbook,” is disclosed (213). The overall problem of how both postmodern writers and literary theorists use fragments to speak about the fragmentary is taken forward into discussions of the work of Gordon Lish (*Epigraph*) and Derrida (*The Postcard*), whose works are considered epigraphic because, enacted paratextually (perhaps even a-textually), their fragments perform *en-abyme*. Elias observes: “the fragment contains the fragmentary, the fragment explains the fragmentary, while the fragment itself remains outside definition” (243). What we begin to perceive is “a theory of the philosophy of the fragment” (272), which is further developed through the motif of the emblem.

Elias’s “emblematic” fragments are explicitly poised between literature and philosophy, and her key examples, Avital Ronell’s *The Telephone Book* and Nicole Brossard’s *Picture Theory*, are situated “within the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary” (273). Ronell’s book is a work of theory that nevertheless contains pointedly literary elements, whereas Brossard’s

“novel” broaches Wittgensteinian philosophy (Brossard, whose work receives less attention than it deserves, is a distinguished master of the theory-novel). Both texts are concerned with theoretical representation (one could take that both ways), and the emblem is interposed here by Elias because of its capacity to represent *and* interpret, describe *and* explain (299). *Picture Theory* is held to work insofar as it both represents and enacts its fragments, which in turn, operating emblematically, configure the distance between object and meaning—chiefly, it would seem, by breaking open reality, and exposing it to fiction. *The Telephone Book*, by contrast, is held to theorize connectivity, to call (fragmentarily) for completion through emblems of continuity and flow.

Elias’s “categories” of fragment are in fact quite difficult to summarize succinctly. It is not always clear how her analyses at the microlevel, which are often deft and detailed, really support the larger project; relations between the two can seem arbitrary and forced. While the imaginative aspects of the typology do enable fresh perspectives on the fragment and make it possible to ask questions not thought of before, one also wants to ask, for example, why Brossard’s fragments in *Picture Theory* are not also ekphrastic (a possibility Elias only briefly concedes), or why *The Telephone Book* isn’t also epigrammatic; do these categories not blur at the borders? Elias’s amusing suggestion that the fragment is a kind of *flâneur*, wandering between these categories while also constituted by them, is intriguing in this regard. But returning, late in the book, to the question “what is a fragment?,” she argues that it cannot exist apart from its predicate: ekphrastic, epigrammatic, etc., “*ad predicam*.” The modifier, rather than the fragment, is the constant; “what the fragment does is necessarily make things fragmentary” (301). The relationship between the fragment and the fragmentary, one of the central questions of the book, is summarized thus: “the constant modifier mediates modification constantly, in order that the fragment receives a name which can defend the fragment’s inherent autonomy and sovereignty” (301). And so, put in a marginally more straightforward manner: “the fragment is what it is because it aspires to definition in a potential mode” (302).

The inherent contradictions of the book are, if not resolved, at least played out more persuasively in the final chapter, which proposes a further form of performative fragment, the “epitaphic”—fitting indeed for a conclusion. The epitaphic fragment describes that moment in all texts when it announces its truth, a moment that always stands out and apart in its address to the reader. From an insightful reading of *Titus Andronicus*, to a consideration of David Markson’s novels (from *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* to *This is Not a Novel*), Elias explores the “graveyard of genre,” a place where the text (for Markson at least) is allowed to look at itself “as a dead text” (349). The fragment here is epitaphic, and functions in relation to its text in a manner akin to what in medieval times was called allegory, or in the Romantic period, ideation: since it is “made to emerge from the text that encompasses it because it

³ *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 63.

⁴ *Interruptions*, translated with an introduction by Georgia Albert (State University of New York Press, 1996), x.

exhibits a unique trait which reveals not the text's truth but the idea of truth and the question behind it, [it] is also that text's epitaph" (309). When we read epitaphic fragments such as Markson's we read "a topos, a graveyard of genre" (350). Writing about the "truth" of such fragments surely introduces further levels of complexity, for, as Karen Mills-Courts puts it in her book *Poetry as Epitaph*, "criticism becomes the epitaph of epitaphs" (344); but this, perhaps wisely, is not something Elias pursues in relation to her own project.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, writing in *The Literary Absolute* about Schlegel's fragmentary "Ideas," comment rather aptly that "while the history of fragmentation undeniably moves toward a certain deepening, it is not at all certain that it proceeds in the sense of a clarification."³ This points to a fascinating aspect of the fragment that all those who write about it face: its dynamic, ambivalent effects make a mockery of acts of containment, while also leading one into a conceptual cul-de-sac, a point of exhaustion (one feature of the fragment's affinity with the sublime). Writers who tackle the fragment are often self-conscious about how their own performance shapes, shadows, and even negates the force they wish to convey. Hans-Jost Frey, in *Interruptions* (one of the very few studies of the fragment Elias neglects to mention) goes so far as to assert the fundamental incompatibility of the fragment and any form of literary scholarship. The fragment, as that which interrupts meaning, and whose structure is an "inexplicable interruption," destabilizes distinctions that criticism depends on, such as a clear sense of the limits and borders of texts—of what is inside or outside a text, of what marks it off for the purposes of study.⁴ The encounter between the fragment and scholarship, then, is inherently paradoxical—and generally comes at the expense of the fragment. Understanding the fragment "is precisely the suppression of fragmentariness, since it creates context where every relation breaks off" (26).

Elias's own fragment-rhetoric is engaging in this context. Happily, she avoids the self-conscious performativity of Frey's "criticism," although there are times when her writing is unduly entangled in the conceptual subtleties of its subject. Put positively, however, assertions that can be maddeningly opaque also function epigrammatically and may be seen (or heard) to strike key thematic notes that reverberate throughout the work. In this, aspects of the study participate actively in its larger subject—extending the question of performativity, if occasionally at the expense of clarity, to the study as a whole. Moreover, the relationship between "theory" and "literature" is one that the book handles particularly well, and the strength of the material in the second part, where Elias is markedly more relaxed and witty, suggests that she is more at home with postmodern literature and theory. Inevitably, perhaps, this concentration of the book in the theoretical and literary concerns of the

twentieth century does have the effect of undermining its claim to provide a history as well as a poetics of the fragment. It must be said that for all their variety and nuance, the detailed readings in this book do not engage with the materiality of the fragment, nor at any length with its “functions” on an historical, political, or cultural level (with the exception perhaps of the suggestive argument for a link between the baroque and postmodernity). Although Elias’s study does have implications for art history, philology, theology, and the history of ideas, it is not in fact overtly interdisciplinary: its material is exclusively textual, and its real—and very substantial—contribution to the field of “fragment studies” is primarily as a work of literary theory.

Just as Elias ends with a set of fragmentary theses that re-present, in inverted prefaces, the thrust of each main fragment type identified in her study—a set of theses she immediately repeats in expanded form—I too shall end epigrammatically:

“

For fragments, destined partly to the blank that separates them, find in this gap not what ends them, but what prolongs them, or what makes them await their prolongation—what has already prolonged them, causing them to persist on account of their incompleteness. And thus they are always ready to let themselves be worked upon by indefatigable reason, instead of remaining as fallen utterances, left aside, the secret void of mystery which no elaboration could ever fill.

(Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*)