

a review of

*Romantic Poetry*

*and the Fragmentary Imperative*

by Camelia Elias

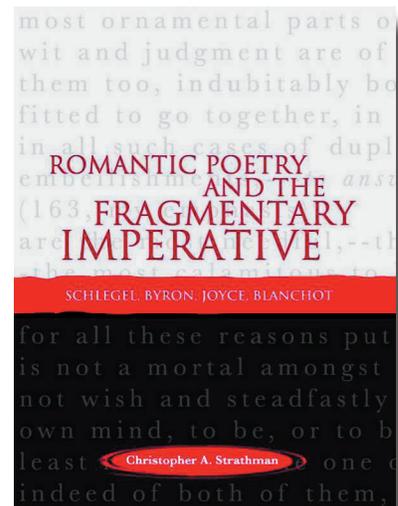
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# Romantic Poetry

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# and the Fragmentary Imperative in Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot



***Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative:***

***Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot***

**Christopher A. Strathman**

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**A**pproaching the fragment means not only engaging with shifting points of view, but also with half points of view, or fragmented ones. If the fragment demands anything, it is that the reader supplies the other half, but only by 'halves,' as it were, as a reading by 'wholes' would go against the intent, or the imperative of the fragment. This is what makes the fragment interesting, and this is also the reason why we talk about the fragment in terms of its having agency. There is thus a "fragmentary imperative," a "fragmentary demand," a "fragmentary urgency," and so on. Whenever I approach the fragment through other writers on the fragment, I always anticipate seeing that authors, besides offering a synthesis—if it is an academic work that I am reading—also perform through the fragment—in spite of the academic more descriptive than performative constraints. The fragment calls, offers itself in parts, and demands not undivided but divided attention. This is yet another interesting feature of the fragment.

I am writing a review of Christopher A. Strathman's book *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative: Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot* (2006), and the idea that first I have to present a chronological structure of what he is doing in his book, and then synthesize his thought, resists me. It goes against the intent of the fragment. So I don't start with summarizing dutifully the gist of Strathman's arguments chapter by chapter. Not yet. There is something else that the materiality of the book I'm leafing through demands that I pay attention to. First, there is the title: too long, yet in spite of its tedious descriptiveness, it manages to work, as it is placed against the background of some random writing on the cover. This writing *sous rature* is not only superimposed by Strathman's title, but it is also a fragment divided by a color scheme: in the upper part the writing is gray on white; in the bottom part, gray on black. The words that don't spill over the margin of the cover and which I can read are ornamental parts; and judgment; too, indubitably; to go together; all such cases of; embellishments; all these reasons; a mortal; wish and steadfast. The random words can even be said to make some sense, at least if one is looking for sense. The desire to make these words cohere is somewhat enforced by the fact that Strathman's own name is encircled by a red orbiting-like bubble. So, there is a certain circularity at work in the aesthetics of Strathman's book. I open the book and I am pleased to see that the first writing is also a fragment in the form of an epigraph whose content clearly conspires with the cover to seduce. Strathman's epigraph is unusually long, but particularly the first and the last sentence from Foucault are worth quoting. I leave the middle out. "It is a widely held belief that modern literature is characterized by a doubling-back that enables it to designate itself [...] The subject of literature (what speaks in it and what it speaks about) is less language in its positivity than the

void language takes as its space when it articulates itself in the nakedness of 'I speak'." Here is Foucault, expressing a point of view about the ability language has to occupy a void, get undressed, and address, not only its own nakedness, but also that of others. The subject who speaks is always a fragment in context, insofar as it speaks through other fragments. The context of the fragment, in other words, here and now in Strathman's book, is dialogue.

Christopher Strathman's fabulous achievement in his book is to point not only to the fragment's ability to create and rely on dialogue but also to subvert dialogue. The operative argument in Strathman's book is the notion that Romantic poetry, by articulating a demand for fragmentary exigency and by making a case for the fragmentary imperative through irony, at the same time consolidates and subverts the tension between narrative and lyrical forms of expression. What makes Strathman's book engaging from the beginning is the fact that one has the possibility to follow with him the consequences of tearing narrative apart and letting the lyrical mode take over. Although Strathman never mentions the word, it is clear that the figure of the prophet informs the smashing of rules in the four authors he writes about: Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot. Schlegel's notion of *romantische Poesie*, which can also be formulated as a slogan à la 'death to narrative' is traced through Byron's don Quixotic/don Juanism where the dialogue between the two dons can be perceived as a duel, a funeral, and an exhumation of bodies. Between madness and love is a fragment of prophetic literariness. The fragment will come, and the last kingdom of narrative order and linearity will be replaced by dismemberment. Quite literally, Strathman's Socratic echo, "philosophy [...] teaches one how to die," (75) leads the reader to consider the bizarre circumstances surrounding Byron's own death and particularly the incident regarding the exhumation of his body. In 1938, Byron's tomb was opened in the presence of 40 witnesses, though only 4 got a close glimpse at his dead body. In the report of A. E. Houldsworth, the church warden, on what they saw, we notice a focus on the seemingly inexplicable detachment of Byron's leg from the rest of the body:

“

...we were able to see Lord Byron's body which was in an excellent state of preservation. No decomposition had taken place and the head, torso, and limbs were quite solid. The only parts skeletonised were the forearms, hands, lower shins, ankles and feet, though his right foot was not seen in the coffin. [Houldsworth later wrote biographer Elizabeth Longford: 'His right foot was detached from his leg and lay at the bottom of the coffin.'] The hair on his head, body and limbs was intact, though grey. His sexual organ showed quite abnormal

development. There was a hole in his breast and at the back of his head, where his heart and brains had been removed. These are placed in a large urn near the coffin. (D. Wallechinsky & I. Wallace, *People's Almanach*, 1875-1981)

This fragment of trivia serves here to illustrate the relation between narrative (I'm telling a story) and its lyrical effect (Wow!). What interests Strathman throughout his book is tracing the value of Wow, which in Joyce is translated as Woa! Fragments have 'values,' which is to say that fragments situate themselves between primary linguistic articulation and eloquent narrative formulation. As he puts it in his analysis of Joyce: "narrative is a function of the more primordial condition of language; as spontaneous lyrical outburst or even a scream; from this standpoint, the narrative is lyricism subdued or brought under rational control" (131).

What informs Strathman's next chapter, his analysis of Joyce's works (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the focus is primarily on Stephen Dedalus's dealing with the fact that his mother is "beastly dead"; *Ulysses*, where the focus is on "erection *in articulo mortis per diminutionem capitis*," or the Jew, Leopold Bloom, who is neither Apollo, nor Dionysus, or else he is both at once; *Finnegans Wake*, where the focus is on being in the "unbewised again," or being at the dead foot of the text demanding: "Text: open thy mouth and put thy foot in"), is Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. There is already irony at work here, in Strathman's choice of a Nietzschean text which has in its title the notion of birth, rather than death, death being something that he is more interested in. Following Schlegel's injunction against traditional modes of narrative—in his formulation of an antigeneric genre which allows the freedom of the poetic language to situate itself outside narrative—Strathman points to the ironic way in which Joyce in *Ulysses* is obviously concerned with testing the limits of Romantic poetry by exhuming the already dead. Says Strathman: "One of the most notable (even alarming) qualities of the "Sirens" is the way in which the language of the episode embarks on a many-sided mimicry of the one-sided narrative voice, as though the narrator loses control and the bottom of language falls out (in a vaguely Nietzschean way) while individual words, phrases, scraps of songs, and fragments begin to display the buried life they secretly tender beneath the flattening effect of narrative" (136). Strathman's pun on the word alarming, here parenthetically inserted, is an attempt at showing the effects of tampering with the "lilting side of language." If in the first two chapters the dialogue between Schlegel's buffoon narrator and Byron's fool narrator occurs through trafficking language by evading the narrative police, the Joyce chapter sounds out the potential robbers waiting by the road to highjack language. As every writer falls prey to the slipping of his tongue, Strathman frequently uses particularly these two verbs: to traffic

and to lilt, thus indirectly suggesting that the literariness of *romantische Poesie* shoots through sound patterns without paying attention to traffic lights. Woa! Joyce not only roams the limits of Romantic poetry, but he also extends its poetics. Says Strathman again on Joyce's thought that informs both Schlegel and Byron's work: "the fragmentary forms often entail not only a formal experimentation leading to what one might call indeterminacy or openness, but that such forms also embody a quasi-ethical imperative: that to think and to write in such a way is to remain responsive to what remains unthought in thinking" (106). The fact that Strathman does not pursue the implications of a potentially full fledged ethical demand shows that he is aware of the fact that where the fragment is concerned, there are only quasi and half viewpoints that can express anything worth expressing about the space of literature. As he makes clear, Joyce's text "provides the stimulus of the enigmatic for his reader in the form of thousands of fragments and endless shifts in point of view, compelling her to become a more active coworker in the production of what one could (loosely) call meaning." (148)

In his last chapter on Blanchot, the Romantic enigmatic, loose, amateur, fool, incompetent, or wanderer ironist engages fully in what interests Strathman from the outset: the "transversal" and "horizontal" moves that do not "fall vertically" outside meaning and its place in literature. Transversal moves indicate a concern with passages, as the name of his chapter also suggests: "Blanchot and the Quest for the Passage to the Outside." If traffic, pilgrimage, and lilt are the operative verbs and nouns in the previous chapters, in the analysis of Blanchot, Strathman is interested in litter, or remains. Blanchot is not a radical prophet of the same caliber as Schlegel, Byron, or Joyce, but a prophet nonetheless. Whereas for the latter three the fragment in itself is radical, insofar as it suggests that its condition is contingent on a break from some imaginary or otherwise whole, Blanchot is a prophet of inflection. The fragment, for Blanchot, is not broken off from some totality but bent. There is totality and what spills over. It is in this sense that the fragment must be thought of as being not merely a ruin but also a remains which takes issue with what remains to be thought: excess. Whereas ruin suggests death, there is also always a potentiality at work in the fragment as ruin: something new might be born out of the ashes. In this sense, both death and birth can be said to be the most common forms of excess, thus what remains; remains as excess and excess as remains. In his *Visions of Excess* (selected fragments 1927-1939), Bataille posits that there is a symmetry between excess and remains as a strategy to gain personal sovereignty. You are only at the mercy of narrative as long as autopoiesis enacts itself as mercy. Thus the fragment of self that one tells oneself about oneself is bound to be a radical one. Literally the most radical form of fragmentation must be the kind that usurps voice and talks things to death. Joyce understood that. And so did Blanchot.

Whereas Strathman does not make a clear distinction between degrees of

radicalism and what creates them in the authors he discusses, he does say that where Blanchot is concerned, the fragment for him is “a more radical kind of writing, thinking and living” (152), thus supplementing writing with two more elements: thinking and living. By way of pointing to the importance of Nietzsche’s writings for Blanchot, Strathman shows that the Romantic idea of a fragment’s forever becoming comes short of accounting for the topography of poetics and literariness. The Romantics’ commitment to the celestial sublime in their theory of the fragment is crushed down by Blanchot’s notion of “disaster,” which puts into play the space of literature as it is created by exigency and imperative. At this point we can recall Joyce’s imperative, which can also be taken as an affirmation of the fact that Text is, first and then: “Text: open thy mouth and put thy foot in.”

Blanchot, I suggest, is a latter day Zarathustra, a radical prophet of radicalizing repetition—the repetition of the authority of “I speak” (as in Foucault). What we have in Blanchot is not only an engagement with binary opposites, Apollo vs. Dionysus, part vs. whole, hollow vs. holy, but a formulation for a model of knowledge which relies on what lies outside. Blanchot’s trope for the outside, the idea of “disaster” as a vehicle for the outside, can be explained through the observation that disaster is beyond our reach. The effects of disaster, what remains, enters in a circuitous repetition of the question—Blanchot’s question: “is man capable of a radical interrogation?” (155). Strathman inadvertently suggests an attitude towards this question by referring to Blanchot’s discussion of Herman Melville’s short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” In this story disaster occurs at the moment when the protagonist, Bartleby, creates confusion and crisis at the office where he works, by repeating a formulaic line whenever he is given a task to perform: “I prefer not to.” I suggest that this line becomes Bartleby’s Text, which opens its mouth, but only to enunciate a renunciation of “the authority to speak,” as Blanchot suggests. Bartleby’s Text puts its foot in by trampling on the task. “I prefer not to” becomes the space of literature as fragment, or Woa! As Strathman rightly remarks, the difference between the fragment and the fragmentary imperative is thus constituted not only by the opposition between narrative and lyrical modes of expression but also by “[t]he responsibility of literature [...] to hold open space for just this possibility” (175).

Strathman’s book offers a clever vision of how the Romantic fragmentary imperative calls irony into play to spill itself over the margins of totality. Lo and behold, the prophets would say, there is a fragment, step on it! Strathman philosophizes with the shoe on, leveling the point that the dialogue among Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, and Blanchot creates a vital connection between beginnings (out of nothing), their articulations (into nothing), and their performativity (beyond nothing). Where Strathman’s style is concerned, I formulate here an imperative by making a Nietzschean affirmative gesture: in a future work, can we have more puns, ruinous, disastrous, prophetic?